

Stressors Which Affect Learning: A Case Study of Learners in A Further  
Education College in The East of England

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Health Studies

School of Health and Social Care

University of Essex

November 2020



Giving up should no more be an option in learning

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this PhD thesis to my father, Mr Clemence Kwasi Togoh, Consecrated Chief Presbyterian of the Global Evangelical Church, Ghana and Retired Senior Superintendent of Education of the Ghana Education Service. I also dedicate it to my mother, Mrs Victoria Abla Amevinya-Togoh, Church Mother, Global Evangelical Church, Ghana and Retired Nursing Officer and Midwife of the Ghana Health Service. They have imparted wisdom and knowledge to me in raising me up and their labour of love put into action through the many sacrifices they have had to make in order to educate me to university level has not been in vain. They have taught me lessons and theories that are not in any book. They believed in me and prayed for my success in all that I do. At this point in my life, I have a special deep sense of gratitude to them. I could not have reached here without their input in life.

I also dedicate this thesis to my dear wife and co-pilot in life, Mrs Vanessa Aidoo Togoh and my children, Olive and Emmanuel, for the many sacrifices they had to make and the pain they had to endure while going through this process. I am so grateful for their love, prayers, encouragement and telling me, *“You will do it! You will finish!”* They have been my number one cheerleader in this process.

This work is also dedicated to the ministry of Dr Abiodun Obisesan, Assistant Provincial Pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), UK, and Senior Pastor, RCCG Stillwaters Parish, Colchester, for his spiritual oversight, motivation, direction, prayers and intercession along the journey, especially during the very difficult and trying times when I felt like giving up.

I dedicate this thesis to the prophetic ministry of my Elder Brother in the Faith, Apostle John Ashun, Head Pastor of Christian Faith Church International, Ghana, through whom this vision was confirmed and birthed into reality. The word has become flesh so to speak. His continuous encouragement, prayers and moral support cannot be understated.

Finally, I also dedicated it to all FE learners and FE Practitioners who are important people and play a special role in the UK learning and skills educational sector, offering hope, skill and talent to our current and future societies through the various contributions we all make day in day out as part of work and learning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr Mark Francis-Wright and Professor Jo Jackson for taking me on board right from the start and providing guidance and supervision that is parallel to none. The reading, conversations, critical comments, questioning, reflection and encouragement they provided me is amazing. I cannot forget to mention the extra patience they had for me during some 'rocky' times during this PhD process. I am ever so grateful to Professor Jackson for solely taking me on board during the last throes of this work and bearing with me countless times when unforeseen circumstances caused serious delay in completing.

I will like to thank the two institutions I approached to conduct this research for all the input they have made, most importantly the second institution for granting me access to conduct the case study. I thank all the learners and staff who participated in the case study as well as those who in diverse ways supported me during the conduct of the study. I particularly wish to thank Mrs Alicia Smith who voluntarily agreed and was trained by me, and worked for me free of charge as a Chaperone during the data collection phase of this case study.

My special thanks go to the School of Health and Social Care for allowing me to conduct this research and to the Graduate Administrators for all the support and administrative arrangements they had to do. I truly appreciate their effort.

Finally, I wish to thank Mrs Debbie Williams at the finance office for her understanding and support.

# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled, “STRESSORS WHICH AFFECT LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF LEARNERS IN A FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGE IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND” is a bona fide and genuine research work carried out by me under the supervision of Dr Mark Francis- Wright and Professor Jo Jackson.

Signed:

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.

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## SUMMARY

Stressors which affect learning have seldom been studied in further education in England despite interest in lived experiences of learning in further education.

Stressors which affect learning have been categorised into academic stressors and external stressors in studies carried out in higher education in the UK and internationally using students on health professional courses as subjects.

This intrinsic qualitative single case study follows the typology of Thomas (2011) and the case study protocol was designed to explore stressors which affect learning of BTEC Level 3 learners in an FE college in England using in depth unstructured interviews and documentary analysis of pertinent learner records. Purposive sampling was used to recruit study participants and a total of ten (10) interviews were conducted. Data was analysed using the Framework Method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) and facilitated by the use computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo 11 Pro.

Three categories of stressors which affect learning have been reported and largely agree with other findings; academic stressors, personal stressors and social stressors. Coping strategies and support systems utilised by the participants were found to be both internal and external to the educational institution. Implications for FE practitioner heuristics have been drawn and a model of learner stress to help in supporting learners to effectively cope with stress, ensure good health and well-being as well as focus on individual learning outcomes have been suggested. The need for the learner teacher relationship to be caring, learner focused, needs led, holistic and humanistic in approach as opposed to the culture of performativity in the FE sector has also been discussed. Involvement of relevant external agencies to provide support, advice



and guidance to learners to cope with stressors which affect as well as the need for change in teacher pedagogy in FE have also been highlighted.



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## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

BERA British Educational and Research Association

BIS Department of Business, Innovations and Skills

BTEC Business and Technology Education Council

CLANS College Lifestyle and Attitudinal National Survey

CSA Clinical Skills Assessment

DfES Department for Education and Skills

DfEE Department for Education and Employment

FE General Further Education

FRSPH Fellow, Royal Society for Public Health

GAS General Adaptation Syndrome

GHQ General Health Questionnaire

HE Higher Education

HSC Health and Social Care

ILO Independent Learning Observation

ILP Individual Learning Plan

LLS Lifelong Learning Sector

LLUK Lifelong Learning UK

L2L Learning to Learn

LSC Learning and Skills Council

MSET Member, Society for Education and Training

NAO National Audit Office

NEET Not in Education Employment or Training

Ofqual Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

Ofsted Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

3-P Presage, Process, Product

PGCE Professional Graduate Certificate in Education

QTLS Qualified Teacher, Learning and Skills

REP Research Ethics Panel

SAR Self-Assessment Report

SFA Skills Funding Agency

SMLT Senior Leadership and Management Team

SNSI Student Nurse Stress Inventory

SPQ Stress Prevention Questionnaire

TLC Transformational Learning Centre

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8. Participant Information Sheet
9. Consent Form
10. Framework Matrix for ICP and ECI

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

This study is focussed on learners who are 16 years plus on a vocational education programme in a general further education (FE) college. The further education sector includes various types of institutions such as general further education colleges, sixth form colleges, specialist colleges, tertiary colleges and private providers most of which are independent learning organisations. Further education providers vary in their focus of education provision. General further education (FE) colleges, offer a wide array of academic and vocational education to learners aged 16 and above. Other types of colleges such as sixth form colleges provide academic education, A levels, pre-university, general further education specialist colleges provide specialist education in agriculture for example and other independent colleges provide training and education to learners with various special needs and disabilities. Some higher education institutions also provide further education in addition to their main mission of higher education or university education. In some secure units with offenders, offender learning is provided through various institutions under contract. The sector is also inclusive of miscellaneous providers either state funded or independent training providers, private and third sector including voluntary organisations deliver 19-plus learning. The FE sector is seen as having a key role in helping provide the skills needed by employers to support the country's economic growth as well as helping learners develop a successful career. Over 1,000 different providers, mainly further education colleges or independent providers deliver FE. FE colleges are independent bodies that are in charge of

determining the range of education they offer, and allocate resources towards achieving their mission and making funding choices (National Audit Office [NAO], 2011).

The type of establishment in which the study was conducted is a General Further Education (FE) college establishment based in a busy town centre in the East of England. Most of the students enrolled at the college are between ages 16-18 years and come from the local and surrounding rural areas. Educational achievement on entry to the college is below average for East England and below the national average for England. More than half of the learners enrolled at the college did not achieve five or more GCSEs at grade C or above or equivalent qualification. This mimics educational achievement in the locality where the college is situated. The number of people educated to Level 3 in the locality is below the average for the region of East Anglia and across England as a whole. The college offers education and training in thirteen different curriculum areas from Entry Level to Level 3 qualifications. The college provides education and training to about 2254 study programme learners, 1000 adult learners, 208 learners have high needs and 500 apprentices. Learners at the college value the help and support they receive from their teachers, staff and peers as well as the professional experience and subject knowledge of their teachers (Ofsted, 2019).

The FE College offers a curriculum aimed at enabling learners to discover and develop their talents, fulfil their potential and achieve success. The college places inspiring learners, preparing them for employment opportunities, further studies and general contribution to society at the centre of its curriculum. The

focus is of the college is on developing resilient learners to become responsible citizens (FE College, 2020).

According to NAO (2011), there are about 225 similar FE providers in England. FE colleges support the nation's economic growth by providing education and skills training to learners, and aiding them to develop successful careers in England. They provide training in nearly half of the skills needed by employers in industry. FE colleges help employers obtain the skills needed in industry. FE colleges are funded for vocational as well as the academic education they provide for adolescents aged between 16-18 years and learners who are 19 years plus. Some FE colleges provide higher education in association with a university. Education provision for 16-18-year olds is funded by the Young People's Learning Agency, while the Skills Funding Agency provide funding for learners aged 19-plus totalling around £4.0 billion (NAO, 2011). Several government bodies are responsible for the FE sector. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills sets strategy, policy and investment in 19-plus education and provides funding through the Skills Funding Agency while the Department of Education sets the strategy, policy and investment for the education of 16-18-year olds and provides funding through the Young People's Learning Agency. Local Authorities are also involved in securing sufficient and suitable education including opportunities for training geared towards meeting the needs of young people. Various other bodies interact with further education provision such as the Data Service, Department of Work and Pensions, Information Authority, Learning and Skills Improvement Service, National Apprenticeships Service, Professional Associations and Sector Skills Councils, making FE provision a very complex endeavour influenced by myriad factors of which socio-political and economic factors dominate. The FE sector has seen subjected to several changes geared towards making the sector instrumental in delivering skills for

sustainable growth by removing central government bodies, simplifying systems and procedures and removing certain legal requirements on colleges.

LLUK (2007) lay emphasis on the learning and professionalization of teaching in the lifelong sector and spelt out extended roles of pastoral care in which personal tutorship should address learner welfare and progress on courses with individual learning plans drafted with learners to support them achieve their maximum potential. The FE teacher and other practitioners need to demonstrate as part of their professional role that individual learner needs have been considered. These actions would need to be within a cohort of learners, and within the context of personalised learning, and provide the necessary pastoral care and tutorial support to meet the needs of learners. Additionally, the roles would enhance the individual learner experience, signposting and referral of learners to specialist services, working in partnership with other colleagues and appropriate others within and outside the College, with a singular goal, to support learners deal effectively with stressors, enhance learning and by extension learner achievement. However, the sector is bereted with policy and regulatory changes, which could threaten the effective delivery of the curriculum, as well as improvements in teaching and learning. More importantly, it could affect ways in which learners could be supported to achieve their goals for learning. This is because bureaucracy, “managerialism”, performativity and accountability (Hodkinson et al, 2005, Gleeson and Knights, 2008) are likely to overshadow education provision and individual teacher’s philosophy of education. The needs of the FE learner, which have to be at the centre of education provision, may be lost in attempts to meet other competing needs with a potential resultant effect of learning falling short of the individual learner’s optimum best. In view of the new conceptions of FE through the “*managerialist*” perspective, and radical reform through a host of policy dictates

((DfES, 2006; Foster, 2005; Leitch, 2006), it is important that teachers and other FE practitioners do not to lose sight of the learning outcomes for the individual learner. Efforts need to be made by FE teachers and practitioners to understand from their learners' perspective, the ways in which their learning is affected throughout their educational quest so as to ensure that all necessary support is provided to enable optimal learning to occur. In this way, learning goals would be achieved and learners' progress towards their chosen career or higher educational trajectories realised. The fast-changing policy situation (which can be best described as a political mayhem), could have an impact on teachers and other FE practitioners. Therefore, it is important that learner needs are not neglected. The relationship between teachers and learners in which learners are supported holistically, with a focus on learning enhancement and achievement based on individual learner needs and professional practice has to remain at the heart of FE provision. While attempting to enact the 'new discourse' of FE; improved leadership, improvements in teacher education, workforce reform, 14-19 curriculum, learning and professional development, coupled with developing employment skills (Leitch, 2006; DFES, 2004, 2005, 2006; LSC, 2005), meeting individual learner needs would have to be the central focus of FE teachers and practitioners. Coffield et al. (2005) and Hodkinson et al. (2005) found that the major thrust of FE reform remains rhetorical and restricted by the audit and target-driven framework, major features of the "*managerialism*" and accountability culture that has engulfed the sector.

The FE sector in England is diverse in educational provision about subjects and levels being taught, age and background of learners and teachers. It principally serves learners between ages 16-19 and offers pre-degree level of education among a host of other courses. The quality of education provision in the compulsory sector; primary and secondary schools as well as higher education

sector in England has seen considerable depth of scrutiny for a long time (Johnes et al, 2012), the FE sector has only been relatively recently being subjected to the pressure and rigorous quality checks. The FE sector has since been subject to performance indicators (The Forster Report, 2005; The White Paper, 2006). Performance indicators such as advocated by the White Paper (2006); learner success rate and retention rate allow a clearer and meaningful comparison to be made between FE providers, regarding learner achievement and progression. These performance indicators are tied to sector funding. Efficiency is determined by way of key inputs, such as professional practice of teachers judged by independent learning observations (ILO). There is a need for teacher adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness of teaching pedagogy to meet varying and changing learner needs to achieve differentiation, the effective use of individual learning plans (ILP) to personalise learning, pastoral care and support of learners among other inputs to achieve desired outputs such as learner success and retention rates. The Forster Report (2005) and the White Paper (2006) iterated the need to use performance indicators such as learner achievement and learner progression to determine the quality and efficiency of education provision in FE.

The Foster Report (2005), sets out the vision for FE in a forward-thinking manner to make it realise its potential and outlines various benefits for FE stakeholders, chiefly FE learners, and the wider economy, business and public sectors. The report incorporates FE learner voice and has continuing relevance in shaping FE towards realising its future potential and making hopeful contributions to significantly improve the lives of learners, most importantly in areas where there is underachievement. The report also stresses the importance of FE needing to focus on meeting learner needs and going beyond performativity, management accountability, inspection and financial matters.

Another significance of this report is the incorporation the views of learners consulted on how they envisage the future of FE for FE learners. A culture of learning that places emphasis on meeting learner needs, developing vocational and teaching pedagogy, ensuring social inclusion, and addressing the issue of underachievement in FE is still relevant to FE practice. The White Paper (2006) focuses on raising skills and improving life chances as the business of FE. As such, learner focused strategies are crucial and relevant in ensuring that learners achieve their maximum potential through education and training to gain relevant knowledge and skills, which will also help in filling the skills gap in the business and public sector and raise the needed human capital for economic prosperity. The potential supplier of skilful individuals in the workforce partially depend on individual learner achievement and there is also a place for developing skilled and professional reflective FE teachers who place emphasis on individual learner achievement.

The proportion of learners achieving a qualification (learner success or pass rate) and retention rates are linked to funding. In the FE college where the study was conducted the recent figures from the Education and Training Overall Institution Achievement Rates table indicated that in the academic year 2017-18, overall achievement rate for learners of all ages was 80.9%, retention rate was 91.7% and pass rate was 88.2%. The learner group, which participated in the study, was drawn from the Level 3 Business Studies course and the achievement rate for similar learners in the subject area in same period was 85.4% with a retention rate of 99.0% and a pass rate of 86.3% (Gov.UK, 2020). Variations in FE provision exist and efficiency efforts need to be made to support learners entering the FE sector to remain, achieve and progress instead of left to become at risk of dropping out when faced with stressors, which affect learning and perhaps join the NEET group as a result. FE Teachers in



professional practice would need to have flexible pedagogies to meet the various differentiation needs of learners (some of whom may be experiencing stressors, which affect learning). This will contribute to learners optimally engage in learning. Pastoral care and learning support may extend beyond dealing with only curriculum related stressors. Having a systematic method would be necessary to help support learners cope effectively with stressors which affect learning. Government policy is to change the age of completing compulsory education to 18 years by 2015 and this will have a huge economic impact on FE colleges as funding follows the learner. Challenges seen are in FE recruitment, retention, achievement and progression of learners. FE provision for NEETs in the 16 to 19-year group implies FE teachers and significant others have to deal with difficult and challenging circumstances, which can be potential stressors, which affect their learning due to the widening participation agenda of FE provision. Out of the FE providers in England, General FE and Tertiary Colleges are the large institutions, which offer a broad range of vocational and academic subjects at various levels attended by young people (16-19 years old) and some adults. Funding allocation to most colleges like the one in which the study is focused comes from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) based on a formula which encompasses learner achievement and taking learners from specified disadvantaged backgrounds (with its associated stressors) (Johnes et al, 2012). It is therefore pertinent that strategies to enable learners cope with stressors, which affect learning, to engage in meaningful learning are found to enhance learning, improve achievement and retention rates and minimise the dropout rate among FE learners. To this end, this study seeks to investigate the stressors, which affect learning, and suggest strategies that can help support learners to cope effectively. In the FE sector, General and Tertiary FE Colleges

are reported to be the worst performers on the achievement and retention rate relative to sixth form and specialist colleges (Johnes et al, 2012).

Various factors can affect learner achievement, retention and success or pass rates in FE. These factors may include; the gender of the learner; the learner's socio-economic background; the environmental or socio-demographic characteristics of the locality which the FE provider is located. Additional factors could be; the socio-demographic composition of the learner population; unemployment rates; the nature and quality of the learner-teacher relationship; learner-teacher ratio; as well as the size of the FE College. Furthermore; the quality, age, experience and ethnic background of staff; and the nature of the subject being studied could also affect these outcomes (Andrews et al, 2001; Bradley and Lenton, 2007; Bradley and Taylor, 2004; Schofield and Dismore, 2010; Dee, 2005; Johnes et al, 2012). It will be expedient to explore the nature of the learner – teacher relationship, the provision of pastoral care, and the exercise of professional judgement of FE teachers and their willingness to adapt or make teacher pedagogy flexible and responsive to meet learner needs. How differentiation is achieved, and effects of stressors which affect learning are mitigated to support learners to cope effectively are also worth exploring.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009)'s work on understanding young people who do not participate in education or training at 16 and 17 gives an indication of some of the challenges faced by some young people. Statistical data on participation in education, training and employment by 16 to 18-year olds in England (DfE, 2019) and Powell (2018)'s briefing paper on NEET further explicates the issues surrounding the challenges faced by some young people in England. These papers reveal that some young people are experiencing complex social, cultural and economic challenges, which perhaps

prevent the making of rational decisions about their futures in education or career. Some of these challenges may persist while young people enrol onto a college course or emerge during the tenure of the course of study. Since some young people are likely to enter college education through the widening participation agenda with these challenges, once enrolled, it is in the professional and financial interest of colleges to ensure that they are adequately supported to achieve the qualifications they enrol on and do not out. Salisbury et al (2008) noted that the flexible range of FE provision in England and Wales is meant to widen participation, foster social inclusion, and to address the basic skills deficits in the population. Thus, this makes FE colleges to be perceived as providing a second chance for learners of all ages who may have left school with few or no qualification or have inconsistent school or learning histories (Roberts et al., 2006).

Improvements in learning, teaching and management are not driven per se by the nature of learning, professionalism in teaching, educational philosophy or the reasons for which teachers wanted to be teachers. Rather, they are driven by externally perceived pressure linked to several combinations of factors such as unstable funding, a rigid audit regime, focus on targets, achievement and Ofsted inspection standards. Learner needs, teacher pedagogy, personal theories of learning, educational philosophy of the teacher or the FE establishment does not seem to be the main driver for improving teaching and or enhancing learning (Hodkinson et al, 2005; Salisbury et al, 2009). Wang and Sarbo (2004) wrote about educational philosophy, role of educators and learning and offer deep insights into the value of the educational philosophical orientation of the educator in enhancing learning. Borrowing from their thoughts and relating that to FE learners, one can see the conceptualising of learning in FE to be an inter-play of myriad factors including learner factors,

teacher pedagogy and curriculum related factors, policy influence, institutional factors and variance in the learning process. Learner needs, learning styles, learning experiences, learning approaches, motivation to learn and learning goals would undoubtedly influence the quality of learning which occurs in FE. As such the context of learning would invariably need to be taken into consideration by FE teachers and adaptations of pedagogic practice, methods of delivery, mode of communication strategies made as necessary based on FE teachers' practical knowledge among others to achieve the learning objectives for both the FE learner and the FE teacher. Given the fact that learners have different learning styles, different learning goals and different personalities, as well as different and external situations and circumstances to deal with aside the formal curriculum, there is the need for FE practitioners to assimilate a contextual philosophy of education. This contextual philosophy of education would help FE practitioners adopt the most appropriate roles in response to different contexts of the learner, to help the learner achieve in education. This can be achieved through changing one's belief system about educational purpose, approach to teaching, delivery methods, modes of communicating, curriculum planning, how assessments are carried out among other educational initiatives – analogous to the cliché of differentiation in FE terms. Embracing such a philosophy may be paramount in adopting the necessary pedagogic reflexivity and flexibility that would enhance learning in spite of stressors, which affect learning. Adopting a humanistic approach emphasised by Rogers (1969) and Knowles et al (1998) [in andragogy] in FE could contribute delivery of a progressive education in which the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning. The essence of the humanistic philosophical perspective of education in which lies the role of education as enhancing personal growth and effectiveness seems akin to supporting learners to cope with stressors which affect learning. This

would support achieving individual learning outcomes rather than the radical perspective in which further education seems to be positioned to provide human capital solutions to fill the skills gap and bring about the fundamental changes in the social, political and economic changes in society. It can be argued that the latter is exemplified by the widening participation agenda, inclusivity approaches, addressing the NEET problem, the myriad policy and regulation changes, which have berefted the sector and more recently the extension of the age of compulsory education, which is prone to have dire funding consequences for FE sector provision. An understanding therefore of stressors which affect learning and how these are managed in the contexts in which they arise, particularly from the learners' perspective could contribute to the FE teacher's general knowledge of the complexity of factors, which affect learning and how they are managed. It would also offer a particular horizon of experiential and practical knowledge with which different FE teachers may identify with at different times in similar or near similar contexts. They could draw parallels with this type of knowledge in their efforts to find supportive strategies and motivational techniques to help their learners manage stressors which affect their learning, continue to engage with learning and improve retention rates through their understanding of how particular cases were effectively or ineffectively addressed. Wang (2003) noted that teachers' understanding of the complexity of their learners is as crucial as their knowledge of the subject matter, which they teach. FE teachers' understanding of the complexity of factors which can affect learning including stressors which affect learning and differing learner support needs would enable teachers to adopt and adapt the right mix of approaches to support their learners. They would be better placed to facilitate, help and collaborate with learners in the learning process. This calls for adopting a humanistic perspective towards learner success in FE

evidenced by achievement, retention and progression. Varied approaches may be adopted through coaching, facilitating, guiding, motivating, discussing and organising learning activities and other support of essence to learners. Adopting this human and caring educational approach, would help shift focus from the “*checklist mentality*” of what the FE teacher thinks managers’ expectation of a teacher is to what is happening with each individual learner. The FE teacher would be in a better position to help and support the individual learner to optimally engage with the learning process. Based on Roger's tenets, “*every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center*” and “*the organism reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived*” (Rogers, 1951, p. 1441). Through understanding the changing world of the FE learner, and how this affect his or her learning, and seeking to support the learner to manage any stressors would inadvertently serve to enhance learning. It would also provide motivation to arouse interest and new impetus in the performance of learning tasks and consequently improve learner achievement and educational progression leading ultimately to the learner’s personal growth and effectiveness. Thus, through assisting learners to deal with their psycho-emotional needs in the form of stressors impinging on their learning, teachers would be contributing to the achievement of personal growth and effectiveness of their learners as seen through the humanistic perspective in education. This approach to FE is professionally desirable. Currently, the teaching and learning agenda in FE seem to be hugely socio-political and economic in nature to solve perceived social and moral problems among the youth, address the issue of unemployment and provide sufficient skill levels to meet the global economic competitive needs of the nation while remaining cost-effective in the process (Hodkinson et al, 2005). According to (Gleeson and Knights, 2008), “*managerialism*” in FE has brought about division between senior managers and

teachers. FE teachers feel '*deprofessionalized*' resulting in '*resistance and compliance*' around the issues of professional values with tensions and trade-offs involved in FE teachers' effort to balance professional and pedagogic judgement with the '*business*' of FE (Briggs, 2005; Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Randle & Brady, 1997; Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Colley et al., 2005). In the balancing act of the FE teacher, the fear is that learner needs which need addressing through pastoral care may be potentially ignored inadvertently, especially stressors which affect learning and which are not necessarily expressed by the learner. This would not order well for the health and well-being of the learner. It is pertinent to build the necessary supportive relationship with the learner, pay attention to learner needs and support them adequately to achieve personal growth and effectiveness, remain motivated and continue to engage with learning.

Humanistic and constructivist learning theories emphasise learner-centred approaches and advocates for a learner-teacher relationship which focuses on learner variables which affect the learning process as critical to positive learner outcomes and thus optimal learning (American Psychological Association, 1997; Lambert and McCombs, 1998). Cornelius-White (2007) noted that for learning effectiveness and personal teacher professional development, understanding and operating on learner-centred beliefs about learning heuristically rather than non-learner –centred beliefs is of more relational value, beneficial to both the learner and the teacher and prone to a more positive outcome in efforts geared at appropriately supporting learners towards optimal learning. As such, for FE teachers and FE practitioners to enhance learning, they would need to actively elicit and hear the views of learners in order to gain a clear understanding of the learning needs as well as factors, which affect learning including stressors to ascertain their appropriate support needs. Since most FE learners are

adolescents, who may not always have a developed capacity for making decisions, including appraising stressors and making choices regarding coping strategies effectively to best serve their learning needs, they may need assistance and or guidance stemming from professional responsibility of the teacher or other FE staff, who have the duty of care in some respects. The FE teacher through pastoral care may challenge the learner and encourage him or her to consider alternative coping strategies for example or signpost to resources, which the learner hitherto may not have been aware of their existence. Embracing learner perspectives in this manner in an empathic, non-judgemental, respectful and supportive manner may contribute to learner growth, empowerment and support to cope with stressors, which affect or may potentially affect learning. In a situation where a balancing act exists between FE teacher professionalism, pedagogic practice and FE business, pastoral care practice element of teaching may be less prioritised in favour of classroom teaching and delivery of the curriculum with a potential detrimental effect of potential stressors, which affect learning especially outside the curriculum risking not being identified early. This may have potential prolonged negative learning outcomes for the learner until categorised as being at risk of dropping out or non-achievement. Use of individual tutorial time risks being so focussed on drafting individual learning plans with curriculum related objectives in a culture of “*managerialism*” and accountability without due attention being paid to the general caring nature of the learner-teacher relationship. Significant social, health, emotional and behavioural needs of learners could be explored within the context of a caring learner-teacher relationship to identify stressors, which affect learning or could potentially affect learning. The teacher could make suggestions where necessary, intervene through liaison with other professionals and significant others in order for the learner to receive



appropriate support to cope effectively and potentially avoid the internalisation or externalisation of behaviours, which could be signs of learner stress. For example, absenteeism, sickness, non-submission of coursework, poor performance, lack of motivation, disengagement with learning activities, dropping out of the course, challenging behaviour, criminal behaviour, exacerbation of health problems, intensification of mental health symptoms, substance misuse among others.

The cultivation of a pastoral care relationship in the context of a holistic caring learner-teacher relationship, where there is regular interaction a planned discussion between teacher and learner based on understanding, genuine concern, trust and mutual respect is vital. The learner-teacher relationship would need to encompass learner needs external to the curriculum as a necessary adjunct to the educational needs and learning objectives of the learner. The FE teacher would need to do what is in the best interest of the learner's welfare, considering the developmental level and all associated needs. The learner-teacher relationship needs to be a desirable medium through which a strong mechanism for guiding and supporting learners to cope with stressors, which affect their learning, occurs. This would foster socio-emotional, behavioural academic growth as well as personal growth and effectiveness and thus the pastoral care relationship would need to adopt a theoretical stance of motivation instead of attachment (Davis, 2003) and rest on the values intimated by Rogers (2009:115) '*understanding, caring and genuineness*'. In this context, care could be seen from the point of view of Noddings (2005) as a moral ethic that supports the need of another through acknowledgement of that need, how the other feels and determining what specific attention is required to meet the need. Research confirms that motivation through a positive learner-teacher relationship promotes learning and achievement (Burchina et al, 2002; Deci,

1995; Dweck and Leggett, 2000). In as much as learning does not occur in isolation, and is influenced by complex factors, the learner-teacher relationship needs to evolve towards being caring and holistic in nature and not only centred on curriculum content and its related issues. As such, exploring stressors which affect learning would contribute the FE teacher in their professional relationship with the learner to play situationally cogent supportive role in supporting learners to effectively deal stressors which affect their learning. Increasing awareness and practice of positive learner-centred relationships, in which issues such as stressors which affect learning can be discovered and learners supported are of key pedagogic importance in FE, where majority of learners are adolescents going through a transitional phase in their development lifespan.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) alluded that many facets of life need consideration in tandem when seeking an understanding of how one facet influence human development. Adolescence is a phase of human development characterised by some psychosocial turbulences as the adolescent seeks to navigate his or her way towards adulthood from childhood. In where formal learning is also occurring at the same time, chances are that issues of adolescence (mainly social issues) as one facet of life may influence learning as another in the adolescent's developmental journey (both human and learning development). The social environment as well as the social life of the learners extend beyond the classroom and the placement organisations where curriculum activities take place and to have a holistic understanding of the stressors which affect their learning, all that constitutes their social ecology would have to be explored and considered as they may harbour potential stressors which affect their learning. For example, financial need may prompt adolescents into working while learning and may cause inappropriate balance between work and studies, which may

negatively affect learning, achievement and progression. The world of work harbours both positive and negative qualities and experiences. These may positively or negatively affect the adolescent learner. The challenge of juggling college work and self-directed learning, writing of assignments, social activities with family and friends may be potential sources of stress for the adolescent learner at work as opposed to the adult worker who may have the maturity, training, and psychological capacity to adjust to these situations.

Conversely, the experience of work could be hugely beneficial in developing and enhancing self-management and other useful vocational skills, which would benefit the adolescent learner in their college learning. For example, assuming responsibility, confidence, time management skills, self-esteem, work ethics, commitment and motivation among other positive benefits of work may serve as catalysts for effectively engaging with learning in college. Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer (2006) in their review of adolescent work, vocational development and achievement noted that adolescents' use of agency could enhance their development and educational achievement. They further remarked that their social context as well as social support might foster the knowledge and skills that are essential in the pursuance of vocational education and have a positive impact on the ability of adolescent learners to cope with challenges and interact with their environment towards accomplishment of their vocational goals in adulthood. The concern however in FE would be about striking the appropriate balance between work and studies where adolescent learners are engaged in employment while attending college fulltime. Inappropriate balance may negatively affect the adolescent learner's health, social relationships, college attendance, and academic performance and lead perhaps to dropping out of the course.

In the FE college where this study was conducted, learners are required to achieve 90% attendance on the Level 3 Business Studies course coupled with timely submission of course work. These might not be achieved by all learners owing to lack of time for devotion to learning or performing learning tasks and activities. The curriculum of the Level 3 Business Studies course also requires significant devotion of time to self-directed learning outside of the classroom. As such, there is a potential risk of dropping out of college due to the pressures of work (Warren and Lee, 2003). Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer (2006) emphasised the need to consider how the social context, including the various environment (social ecology) adolescent learners find themselves when conducting vocational education related studies. This is because social ecological factors may enhance or limit educational development (learning), vocational interest, vocational choices, vocational motivation and the adolescent learners' vocational goal pursuit as well as their responses to the challenges. In the quest to explore stressors, which affect learning in FE, it would therefore be expedient to explore the stressors in the entire social ecology of the adolescent learner and not just focus on stressors related to the curriculum and its delivery.

The quality and nature of the pastoral care being received by FE learners to help cope with the demands made on them educationally or otherwise is hardly documented in the literature. The availability and utility of institutional support systems to mitigate the effects of stressors, which affect learning in FE and their efficacy, is also not documented in literature. Despite the spate of FE policy and drastic sector changes of one kind or another, the fact remains that learners need to achieve learning aims and since FE teachers and other staff have a professional duty towards FE learners, it is imperative that learner issues such as those which affect their learning takes professional eminence in practice.

It is in this vane, that the researcher investigated stressors, which affect learning in an FE College by focusing on learners' perception, reaction and experiences of stressors, which affect learning. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) observed the politicisation of learning in further education and post compulsory education and training in England. They also acknowledged the individualistic nature of learning (CBI, 1998 and DfEE, 1998) in spite literature, which abounds to stress the contextual and situational influences on learning. In their study of 50 young people over a 4-year period, they discovered that institutional culture affects individual learners' attitude towards learning. Effective learning is paramount to the development of essential skills needed in the UK for economic growth and development in the widest sense. As such, efforts should be made to ensure that optimal learning could occur (Ball, 1991; Dearing, 1996; DfEE, 1998). Exploring the contextual and the situational factors such as stressors, which affect learning therefore, can only enhance learning where the individual learner is supported to manage these stressors well (that is if stressors are existent prior to commencement of a course of study or emerge during study). In addition to teaching pedagogy, meeting individual learner needs is implicit in the work of colleges of further education to retain learners and support them to achieve or attain desired learning targets (Dearing, 1996; FEFC, 1998; Martinez, 1997; Reisenberger and Crowther, 1997). Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) conducted a case study and interviewed 12 learners using a semi-structured interview, which was recorded and transcribed in a case study to compare the effect of culture on learning. High attendance levels and positive attitudes to learning were attributed to motivation given to learners by teachers. In addition, open, friendly and positive relationship with the teachers was cited as contributing factors to the enthusiasm of the learners. Collaboration, trust and a focus on learning was identified by Stoll (1994) as the requirements for a

positive learning culture. Quicke (1996) criticised the narrow view adopted by some theoretical approaches to learning which did not cover the social and cultural factors, which affect learning, some of which has been unearthed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999). The issue of investigating stressors which affect learning is important and the evidence need to be uncovered as stress could well form a subset of external factors which affect how learners engage with the curriculum and respond to teacher pedagogy.

Stress as a concept can be approached as a cause and effect phenomenon. Inferences can be drawn from the presence of anxiety and or worry to indicate the presence of stressors or the experience of stress. Putwain (2007) refers to the anxiety aspect as the subjective experience of the individual borrowing from Eysenck (1992) who defined anxiety as the subjective experience of fear and apprehension accompanied by a state of physiological arousal where the heart rate increases, palms become sweaty and so forth. Worry on the other hand specifically captures or reflects the 'cognitive interferences' of the experience of anxiety as explained by Putwain (2007) to include intrusive preoccupying thoughts due to a heightened state of vulnerability imposed by anxiety provoking stimuli. Worry thus is the outcome or cumulative effect of such stimuli. The experience of stress therefore can only be subjective, contextual and situational with a wide array of variance between individual learners based on their resilience and coping abilities or strategies borrowing from the original adaptation theory of stress as a mechanistic concept (Selye, 1956). The surveys conducted by Kyriacou and Butcher (1993) and Gallagher and Millar (1996) defined stress as an effect where the presence of worry in a learner was referred to as the subjective experience of stress by the learner. In this study, stress would be defined as the presence of worry and the cause of that stress would be labelled as the stressor. It would be assumed that the degree of the stressor

would need to reach an arbitrary level to induce or cause stress, thus the experience of worry in a learner. Although Reber (1995) refers to stress as either cause or an effect, in this study, stress is viewed as the result of a cause (stimulus) termed the stressor and the study adopts the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) as a theoretical perspective.

Putwain (2007) explored academic stress among students and its negative effect on learners' emotional and general health as well as their academic performance. According to Putwain (2007), the work learners or students do as part of the curriculum is viewed as a greater source of stress than other potential concerns. All these sources of curriculum related work are therefore grouped together under the general term: 'academic stress'. However, most of the research into academic stress is focussed on the compulsory education (school) setting. He acknowledged that there was a lack of precision in the definition of stress. The terms 'stress', 'anxiety' and 'worry' are used interchangeably in the literature to refer to the same phenomenon. He also pointed out a quantification bias in the studies that have been done on the subject. As such, this study is planned as a qualitative exploratory case study to investigate stressors, which affect learning and offer a narrative account of a group of FE learners as internal case participants (ICP) and FE teachers and other significant staff as external case informants (ECI).

Stress has been extensively studied and the literature on its causes, coping strategies, its effects on health and well-being abounds in the field of health psychology and organisational psychology (Pollock, 1998; Putwain, 2007). Lowe et al., (2000) and Vedhara and Nott (1996) have documented the negative health outcomes of examination stress. The performance outcome (or in further education terms the achievement and success rates of learners) because of

academic stress has been investigated by Struthers et al. (2000) who found lower achievement levels to be associated with high academic stress among Canadian undergraduates. Similar findings in Australia by Akgun and Ciarrochi (2003) reported lower grades in situations of higher stress. In the field of educational psychology, academic stress related to schoolwork has been documented in literature as the overarching worry of students. Studies of this nature were hardly done on FE learners in England. This calls into question, the issue of cultural transferability, examination of parallels in other studies in terms of types of stressors and general commonalities in terms of the human response to stressors and the coping strategies employed to overcome stressors. Notwithstanding the varying methodological, cultural and other educational and different contexts in which stressors were experienced in the studies carried out in the available literature on the topic, one can be draw on these studies, even from international studies to inform the background theory on which to conduct learner stress research in FE.

According to Gallagher and Millar (1996), studied students aged 13-18 from Northern Ireland, to find out what sort of things they worry about most, based on a questionnaire of various items such as personal and social worries, including home life, school life, money, relationships with the opposite sex and so forth. Schoolwork emerged the top ranked worry for the respondents, followed by the consequences of failing examinations for future employment. Kyriacou and Butcher (1993) also studied Year 11 schoolchildren to examine sources of stress in the school environment as part of a case study. He found out just as in the Gallagher and Millar (1996) that examinations were the most commonly reported source of stress, followed by deadlines for assessed work and revision as second and third most commonly reported sources of stress. These findings are echoed in the literature and remain a source of worry and



stress for secondary school students globally according to replicated studies from Australia, South Africa and the Republic of Ireland (Jegede et al., 1996; Hodge et al., 1997; Aherne, 2001; Kouzma and Kennedy, 2004). Connor (2001, 2003) and Hall (2004) echo the same sentiments from their studies of stress and anxiety in primary school settings. Connor (2003) was emphatic about how a 7-year-old child can experience stress. Putwain (2007) intimated the need to study stress in schoolchildren given the potential detrimental effects it can have on their health, emotional and educational outcomes. Keogh, Bond and Flaxman (2007) and Borrill (2005) have indicated the attempts made in stress management or reduction by schools in England and thus demonstrated that with the adequate support systems being in place stress can be managed or reduced albeit their findings relate to schoolchildren and not further education learners. It would be of utmost value to learner success in FE to explore what the case is for FE learners.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

There is a dearth of literature on stressors, which affect learning in FE, while there is a growing emphasis on improving teaching and learning, professionalization of FE teachers, accountability for learning and new extended roles of pastoral care for FE teachers. There is also a social, economic, political and financial need for FE colleges to widen participation and support learners to achieve qualifications. Most learners in FE are going through a developmental transition phase of adolescence and come from various socioeconomic and socio-demographic backgrounds including some from the NEET group with many potential personal, social and health issues among others, which may affect their learning. Stressors which affect learning may put them at risk of non-achievement with the concomitant effect of FE colleges

running the risk of poor performance based on the key indicators of learner achievement, learner retention and learner success or pass rates for the sector and individual learner goals, hopes and aspirations associated with college enrolment thwarted. For FE learners to truly have individualised learning plans which seek to support them to achieve their individual learning outcomes, and eventually their qualifications, stressors which affect their learning need to be investigated to seek a holistic understanding. These findings would offer an additional and new horizon of knowledge for FE teachers, FE practitioners, appropriate others, and serve in heuristic applications in their practice in supporting learners. This would contribute to helping FE practitioners to appropriately help and support FE learners to manage or cope with stressors, which may affect their learning to prevent early dropout. Thus, reduce dropout rates, improve retention rates, and ensure engagement with learning activities, optimal learning, achievement of learning goals and subsequent improvement in learner success rates.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Study

There is the serious absence of studies that examine how stressors affect learning in further education. Therefore, the major purpose motivating this study is to explore the perception of stressors, which affect learning among Further Education BTEC Level 3 Business learners. More specifically, this study is motivated to investigate how they interpret what they perceive as stressors affecting their learning, how they respond to stressors including coping strategies which are employed and how they are deemed as effective or ineffective, to obtain depth and detail on the subjective significance of stressors on learning and how stressors affect learning. It further hopes to explore how pastoral care, learner-teacher relationship and other institutional support

systems available to learners influence their perception and experience of stressors.

#### 1.4 Rationale for the Study

There is a growing interest in exploring lived experiences of FE learning (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; James and Biesta 2007; Tedder and Biesta 2007; Gorard et al. 1999; Gorard and Rees 2002). The interest is not only in learner participation in FE but also the nature of engagement with learning and how life issues outside college affects engagement with learning (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001; Colley et al. 2003; Atkins 2008; Quinn et al. 2008). Research evidence indicates that learner participation in FE is linked to other complex socioeconomic issues and that learning does not always go smoothly (Ball et al. 2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; Salisbury 2004; Hodkinson et al. 1996; Foskett and Helmsley-Brown 2001), however how learning is affected by the psychosocial ecologies of learners are hardly researched in FE. Investigating stressors, which affect learning in FE, flows partly from this interest as well as from the considerations of a 'contextual-progressive' educational philosophy based on the human aspects of learning rather than a radical educational philosophy, which adopts a product view of learning. There is the need to understand stress and coping from the perspective of FE learners in order to effectively support them to deal with stress effectively. This is important in view of the overwhelming neurobiological and physiological evidence of the effect of stress on learning and memory related tasks in cognitive psychology as well as the impact of stress on health and well-being served as motivation for the study. Furthermore, the ever-changing policy landscape and the changes affecting FE provision such as the widening participation agenda to include NEET group of young people in FE and the changing of the age of compulsory education to 18

since 2015 contributed to the need for studying stressors, which affect learning. Other motivators for conducting the study is to draw attention to the need to depart from the audit culture, “*managerialism*”, performativity and accountability of learning which is plaguing the FE sector and turn towards the personalisation of learning and the professionalization of teaching in FE to include provision of pastoral care to learners. The worrying NEET statistics; variance in the technical efficiency of FE colleges in England; as well as the clear need to identify ways of improving achievement, retention and success rates of BTEC Level 3 Business Studies course in the college where the study was conducted also served as the rationale for conducting the study.

### 1.5 Relevance of the Study

The case study was designed as an intensive rather than extensive study in that it obtained rich subjective detail on the topic from the participants to inform and contribute to the deepening understanding of the psychological concepts of stress and coping and the influences stressors have on learning in FE. This study contributes to a deepening understanding of stressors, which affect learning by offering a pragmatist and realist view of stress and learning in an FE college by using a qualitative case study research approach. The study design allowed for systematic combining of empirical data with theory to allow confrontation of theory with empirical finding, which enabled the development of a model for both reflective and reflexive practice of FE teachers and other staff in managing learner stress effectively. The study explored stressors affect learning in FE to help to inform FE teachers and other stakeholders to find appropriate support for learners to cope effectively with these stressors in a bid to enhance their learning.

The relevance of this study is seen in the potential usefulness of its findings in informing local policy initiatives or directives aimed at improving efficiency of FE provision and improving learning through supporting learners to effectively cope with stressors, which affect their learning. The relevance of the study is further seen in contributing towards improving, achievement and retention rates of learners (16-19 plus) in General FE College, thus enhancing the efficiency of service provision in FE. The findings will also inform and potentially contribute to the tacit knowledge of FE teachers by enhancing their pedagogical and pastoral care strategies to positively develop the learner-teacher relationship. They also have the potential to prompt changes in curriculum delivery in FE to bring about a positive and successful vocational education in the FE sector and could contribute to wider policy practice initiatives, which seek to support learners, cope with stressors through individualised learning and learning support.

The findings would also encourage individual FE teachers and staff to make necessary adjustments to pedagogy and re-examine how their pastoral care roles meets the needs of learners whose learning affected by stressors. FE teachers and practitioners who work with learners have a shared responsibility to improve learning for learners. In so doing, an understanding of the stressors, which affect learning from the learner's perspective, how learners cope with these stressors, how the learning process is affected and the institutional structures in place to help mitigate the effects of stressors would be of value in further understanding the complexity of learning in general. It will also heuristically inform the practice of FE Teachers and other significant staff by offering another horizon of knowledge from which experiential parallels could be drawn in similar cases through reflection on the findings. This would particularly be poignant where FE practitioners have "*a connect*" with learners,

are empathetic, and have a desire to help them cope with stressors which affect their learning to facilitate their personal growth and learning, as well as retention and achievement rates. The findings of the study and its dissemination would also contribute to the body of research in the FE sector and start a new conversation on FE learner stress. It would also particularly stir up further research aimed at understanding the learner perspective, ensuring health and well-being, enhancing learning, improving achievement, retention and success rates and thereby minimising the chances of learners dropping out and perhaps forming part of the NEET statistics.

## 1.6 Outline of Case Study Chapters

The next chapter, initial literature review, chronicles studies that have been carried out on learner stress in the UK and internationally. These studies are mostly carried out in higher education institutions and related to health professionals. Some international studies are also included. The gaps in the literature on learner stress are identified and the boundaries of the case as well as its particularity are clearly stated.

In the ensuing chapter, research methodology, reasons for using a qualitative research approach, and how the case and its particularity changed during the case study design phase owing to the ethical challenges faced are discussed. Detailed examination of the ethical challenges and how these were overcome are included as well as the case study protocol. The ethically approved case study protocol was designed as an intrinsic qualitative single case study following the typology of Thomas (2011) to explore stressors, which affect learning of BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma learners as a group in a further education college in the East of England. The case design includes having both internal case participants, who are learners, as well as external case informants, who are FE

learning practitioners comprising course lecturer, personal tutor and student services advisors. In-depth unstructured interviews of both internal case participants and external case informants, documentary analysis of pertinent learner records were the research methods employed in this case study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit both internal and external case participants and a total of ten (10) in depth interviews were conducted.

The data analysis chapter follows on and makes clear how data was analysed using the Framework Method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) and how all the case study data was treated as a 'whole' or holistic set in exploring the stressors which affect learning the perspectives of both the internal case participants and the external case informants. The data analysis process involved various layers of analysis; transcription of data, provision of opportunity for member checking, coding from individual transcripts in an inductive manner, generating a thematic code framework, documentary review of salient individual learner records, and the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo 11 Pro to perform framework analysis. The documentary review informed the participant characteristics.

In the findings chapter, emerging themes from the data are expounded in these generally indicated that apart from stressors which affect learning, learning barriers, student support advice and guidance as well as the learner-teacher relationships have major influences on learning as well as the health and wellbeing of learners in Further Education (FE).

The discussion chapter examined the main findings from the coding framework, which emerged from the study in light of other findings on learner stress and relevant literature on psychological stress, health and well-being. A marked contribution to the literature made by this study is the understanding of

learning to the FE learner, and their perception of stressors, which affect learning. Three categories of stressors, which affect learning emerged from this study and largely agree with other findings. These are academic stressors, personal stressors and social stressors. Coping strategies and support systems utilised by the participants were both internal and external to the FE institution. Following the discussion, outcomes drawn for both FE practitioners and learners includes a suggested model of learner stress to help FE practitioners support learners to effectively cope with stress and ensure good health and well-being as well as focus on individual learning outcomes. The need for the learner-teacher relationship to be caring, learner focused, needs led, holistic and humanistic in approach as opposed to the culture of performativity, which is procedural and mechanical to the detriment of not focussing on individual learner outcomes has also been discussed. Suggestions are also made on the need to adopt a whole systems approach and to make every contact with the learner count towards providing support, advice and guidance to wards dealing with stressors, which affect learning. A hierarchical representation of the nature of interventions that could be advanced towards the learners by FE staff and other relevant parties have been suggested to inform practice. It is also suggested that the whole systems approach should embrace joint working, good liaison with healthcare professionals and relevant external agencies to ensure that the support, advice and guidance given to learners (the interventions) to assist them to cope with stressors, which affect learning, are timely, effective and successful. The need for change in teacher pedagogy and curriculum development in FE in light of the findings of this study has also been recommended.

In the conclusion chapter, the summary of the main findings and other findings of this study are presented and limitations of the case study discussed.



Implications for FE practitioner heuristics in both academic and student support practice to ensure learner health and well-being are made clear as well as recommendations for future research.

# INITIAL LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a narrative review of studies on stress and learning which informed the case study. It includes a description of the search strategy used to identify peer reviewed and published academic journal articles used in this literature review. The literature review examines stressors which affect learning from the point of view of learners. An overview of theoretical perspectives on stress, psychological stress, transactional model of stress and coping, and effect of stress on learning is also provided. There are no studies carried out on stressors which affect learning in FE learners in the UK, and no literature was found on stress and learning in FE in the UK. As such, the literature on stress and learning from studies carried out with students in other educational sectors such as higher education (HE) and secondary schools in the UK and internationally, were used to explore the topic; stressors which affect learning. Areas explored include sources and types of stressors, coping strategies, meaning of learning, how learning is affected and support systems utilised by the participants and are detailed in this chapter. Furthermore, the chapter also includes a summary of the studies reviewed and presents key themes emerging from these reviews which informed some of the areas explored with the case study participants. The literature review concludes with a clear identification of the gap in previous studies and provides an academic justification for conducting this particular case study.

## 2.2 Search Strategy

The search strategy used in this review was inspired by preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) (Liberati et al, 2009). In conducting this narrative review, the bibliographic databases; Academic Search Elite, CINAHL, MEDLINE, ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Psych ARTICLES, British Education Index, EBSCO Host Discovery were electronically systematically searched in 2012 to identify published studies on stressors which affect learning. Unpublished literature was also searched using ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. The search terms used in searching the databases include key words and a combination of key words such as: “*stressors*”, “*stressors and learning*”, “*stressors which affect learning in further education*”, “*stress and learning*”, “*stress or stressors and learning*”, “*stressors which affect learning*”, “*stressors which affect learning UK*”, “*stress and coping strategies*”, “*stressors and reaction to stressors*”, “*stress and students*”, “*learning and further education*”, “*learning and further education UK*”, “*learning styles and stressors*”, “*learning approaches and learning performance*”. The search was narrowed by introducing limiting inclusion and exclusion criteria. The search parameters were limited to studies in English language, published between 2002 and 2012 in peer reviewed academic journals with full text articles available to me the researcher. In order to limit the results of the searches to be as close and relevant to the research topic, “*Stressors Which Affect Learning*” as far as possible, filters were applied to the search results where available in the databases being searched. The filters applied include limiting the search results to studies focusing on; “*psychological stress*”, “*psychology of learning*”, “*anxiety*”, “*college students*”, “*teenagers*”, “*education*”, “*learning*”, “*students*”, “*adolescents*”, “*academic achievement*”, “*stress management*”, “*postsecondary*”, “*post compulsory*”, and “*undergraduates*”. The reference list of articles from the

search result were also reviewed in order to identify additional articles relevant to the study topic for potential inclusion. Owing to the dearth of research articles on the topic in the FE sector, the initial ten-year range was extended to 15 years instead of the original 10-year period, hence studies selected for the review were within the year range of 1997 to 2012. The result of the systematic search of the literature for studies on stress and learning are illustrated in the PRISMA in Table 2.1.

### 2.3 Study Selection

A funnel approach (Bowling, 2009) was used to select articles for the narrative review on stress and learning. The title of articles in the search results were read and possible articles for inclusion in the review were selected following de-duplication. Abstracts of selected studies were read and screened against an established inclusion and exclusion criteria, and articles that met the inclusion criteria were then identified for inclusion in the review. The full text articles were thoroughly examined against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and care was taken at this juncture, to ensure that only the most relevant articles that shed light on stressors, coping and learning were included and irrelevant articles were excluded. The abstract and full text screening were carried out after closely reading them twice in order to judge their relevance and whether they meet the inclusion criteria. The selected articles are from the UK, as well as internationally, and involves research carried out on different types of learners at different levels of education. However, where there was a lot of articles involving research carried out on learners predominantly from a particular study background which has also been researched in the UK, a decision was made not to include all of these international studies. This was purely due to concerns about cultural and environmental variation and

appropriateness to do with interpretation of stressors on the part of the participants. In addition to systematic searching of relevant studies on stress and learning within the time limit set, some old and specifically relevant articles and seminal works deemed important are also included. This was to ensure that the literature review also includes relevant work and theoretical perspectives that would enhance the understanding of stressors which affect learning. The final selection or rejection of articles for the study was based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria in 2.4 and 2.5 respectively.

## 2.4 Inclusion Criteria

1. Primary research studies irrespective of whether qualitative or quantitative or mixed methodology was used, as long as the focus is on stressors, coping and or learning involving learners in any educational setting or level of education in the UK or internationally.
2. Unpublished dissertation and theses on stressors, coping and learning involving learners of any educational level or setting in the UK or internationally.
3. Literature review where the focus is purely on research on stressors, coping and learning irrespective of the level of education or type of learners involved.
4. Studies published between 1997 and 2012. Seminal literature on stress, stressors, coping and learning falling outside this date range
5. Studies focused on at least one of the following three main aspects being explored; stressors, coping and learning, as long as there is a detailed focus on any of these three aspects involving learners especially learners in the further education sector in the UK.
6. Relevant studies on learning in FE.

7. Studies were selected irrespective of the research methods used, type of data analysis employed and whether a theoretical framework of stressor appraisal or coping was adopted or stated by the authors or not.
8. Studies that are published in English Language.
9. Studies that are from English speaking countries except where findings are judged to add unique material

## 2.5 Exclusion Criteria

1. Studies that are not published in English language
2. Studies that are not from English speaking countries
3. Studies that are not focused on stressors, coping and learning
4. Studies that are not focused on learners

## 2.6 Overview of Literature on Stress and Learning

An extensive search of the literature on “stressors which affect learning in FE” yielded no result. No articles were found on stressors which affect learning in FE in the UK. A significant number of articles found related to other learners at different educational levels and settings, particularly higher education, such as student healthcare professionals predominantly medical students, and nursing students and dental students in the UK and internationally. The search identified a gap in the literature on stressors which affect learning in FE and strongly suggests that research in this area is needed. To this effect, and to provide a context and evidence base for the case study on stressors which affect learning in FE, the literature on learners from other educational levels and settings, mainly HE and health professional students was explored owing to the lack of literature focus on learners in FE in the UK. Similarly, research conducted outside the UK, internationally was used owing to the limited nature of literature available on FE learners. Research from English speaking countries

and particularly western countries such as USA and Australia were prioritised in this regard. Where the researcher felt a particular type of learner and level of education has been adequately covered by research from the UK, USA and Australia, for example, medical students, nursing and other healthcare students, studies on similar learners especially from non-English speaking countries were not included for two reasons; ensuring cultural and environmental appropriateness in interpretation of stressors and also the studies excluded were also too focused on the program of instruction, and group differences, rather than stressors, coping and learning which are the import of this study. Studies from non-English speaking countries were summarily excluded owing to concerns of potential difficulties these studies may present in terms of their limitations in transferability to the UK FE context in terms of varying cultural, and environmental differences. There were three exceptions to the exclusion criterion, studies from non-English speaking countries (Mahat 1998 and Hammaideh 2011 and 2012). This is because these studies offer a unique perspective to “learning styles and academic performance” and “stressors and reaction to stressors” respectively. As the literature review was conducted to establish the research evidence base and identify existing gaps in the literature to inform the case study, caution was taken to select studies that are useful and have practical utility for the researcher to establish the evidence base for this study. Hence, the drawing of such inclusion and exclusion criteria to guide the screening and scrutiny of identified studies for inclusion in the literature review.

This approach to the literature review helped to understand stressors which affect learning theoretically and details of the type of stressors learners experienced generally, coping strategies they employ to cope and the support systems that are available to learners. The literature also helped to understand

the conception and approaches to learning among learners in FE in particular. Themes from the studies reviewed informed the areas explored with case study participants in this study and helped in exploring the stressors which affect learning in FE learners. In so doing, cognisance was taken of the fact that most of the studies in the literature reviewed focused on different learners, mostly in HE and are health professional students. I was also aware that some of the studies are not from the UK and there are cultural and environmental variations in how stressors are perceived or interpreted by the study participants. Owing to the above material facts about the studies selected for this narrative review, and the difference in the learner population of this case study, comparisons on a like to like basis could not be directly made. The differences in learning experiences, academic lifestyle, curriculum content, educational level, pedagogy, learning goals, culture and environment were borne in mind while articulating the usefulness of these studies and the applicability of their wider findings to FE learners, who are the focus of this study. The studies selected used various methods and their selection was purely based on the relatedness of their findings and key themes espoused to the research topic. A judgement of how relevant the individual studies are in forming the background data of this current study was made and key themes identified from the studies selected to inform the study design. Every effort was made to use UK based studies and those from westernised countries due to cultural similarity. However, other relevant international studies were selected based on how related their content was to the research topic. As such, each study selected was critically examined to explicate the current understanding of the research topic and make clear its import and bearing on the study.



2.7 Table 2.1 Search Strategy Based on PRISMA (Liberati et al, 2009)

DATABASE	Academic Search Elite – CINAHL, MEDLINE, ERIC	JSTOR	Google Scholar	Psych-ARTICLES	British Education Index	Grey Literature ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database
<i>IDENTIFICATION: Number of studies identified through the search strategy-retrieved following application of filters and title review</i>	254	12	22	0	1	2
<i>SCREENING: Number of studies remaining after de-duplication from all databases and title review</i>	60					
<i>ELIGIBILITY: Number of studies selected after abstract review from all databases</i>	58					
<i>INCLUDED IN REVIEW: Number of studies selected after full text review using inclusion criteria to inform the study from all databases</i>	18					

## 2.8 Studies on Stress and Learning

de Anda et al (1997) found that gender differences existed among the levels of stress and the behavioural and emotional response to stress. Females reported higher levels of stress compared to males and various behavioural and emotional responses to stress. School-related stressors (academic stressors) were highly reported followed by siblings and fathers (family sources of stress).

The academic stressors found were; the number of things to do (64.8%), homework (61.1%), teachers (59.3%) and school or school work (57.4%). The coping strategies employed by the study sample were used infrequently with less success. Adaptive coping strategies such as seeking help, relaxation, distraction, cognitive control and affective release were the most often used. The study participants were asked to complete two self-report measures, the Adolescent Stress, Stressor, and Coping Measure and the State Trait Anxiety Inventory (Form Y) (Spielberger et al., 1983) with 143 closed-ended questions which examined the degree of stress experienced, and how often specific coping strategies were utilised alongside how the participants perceived their effectiveness. It would be expedient to explore how learning is affected by the learners' experience of stress and identify which stressors affect learning, progression and achievement. In addition, the nature of academic stressors revealed by the study has implications for teaching pedagogy and learners' approach to learning. The study's orientation was on examining the perceptions of the adolescents regarding their experience of stress, identification of stressors and the evaluation of their coping strategies. The study adopted the phenomenological approach consistent with the self-appraisal of stress through self-reporting to obtain data on the experiences of the study sample based on their perceptions of stress and lived experiences. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theoretical model of stress, where stress is defined as a relational phenomenon as opposed to a generalised response to stimuli in the environment by Selye (1974, 1975) was supported by the findings of the study. The study described the structure and function of the school where the study population attended and emphasises problem-solving methods and the need to determine factors, which contribute to learner stress, identifying what works to change or alleviate the stressors paramount in creating a "health-enhancing learning

environment". Inefficient and unsuccessful use of coping strategies found by the study echoed findings from previous research (de Anda et al, 1991, 1992). Recommendations were made for stakeholders including teachers to enable adolescent learners to adopt a systematic approach to handling stressors and associated concomitant stress rather than the haphazard trial-and-error mode of coping, which was shown by the study to be ineffective with over 60% of the sample. The study suggested that learners need to be provided with coping skills instructions, advice and appropriate reinforcement in dealing with their stressors. The researchers coming from a Social Work background were keen to point out through their work the rate at which adolescent students experience stress and the numbers at risk of psychological ill-health who might need professional intervention and gave insights to how such interventions could be tailored to meet the needs of the study population.

In the FE sector, most of the learners are adolescents and young adults and therefore de Anda et al's (1997) study is insightful in understanding the pressures adolescent learners could be going through and how they attempt to cope with them. Understanding stressors experienced and described by learners, identifying how learners cope with their identified stressors, and exploring the support systems available to learners to mediate the effect of stressors, including pastoral care is pertinent in efforts directed at improving learner achievement. Studying stressors which affect learning in adolescent learners is important for educational achievement. Sznitman et al (2011) found out that the state of adolescents' emotional well-being is a strong predictor of educational achievement and need not be neglected in terms of educational achievement policies and initiatives. Kolb (1984) also identified feelings or emotions and thinking as forces that may affect learning style of individuals.

In investigating the relationship between learning styles and academic success, Suliman (2010) in a convenience sample of Higher Education (HE) learners, reported no significant relationship between learning styles and academic success. However, understanding the stressors which affect learning and learning styles preferred by learners would place teachers in a vantage position to adopt pedagogic practices that support various learning styles.

Mayya et al (2004) conducted quantitative research to explore learning approaches, learning difficulties and academic performance of undergraduate students of physiotherapy (HE) and showed that academic performance has a significant negative correlation with surface approach to learning and various problems (academic and non-academic) encountered by the students which could be construed as stressors. There was positive correlation between various problems of learners and surface approach to learning and deep approaches led to improved academic achievement. Mayya et al's (2004) study shows that stressors can affect learning and academic performance. Although this finding seems on the surface to contrast with Suliman (2010), the later did not investigate approaches to learning and their effect on academic performance. Mayya et al's (2004) study appears to suggest that learners in the face of problems whether academic or non-academic will revert to surface approach to learning reflecting poor engagement with the curriculum and associated activities with the consequential result of poor academic performance. Snelgrove (2004) just like Mayya et al (2004) found that assessment scores (academic performance) positively correlated with deep approaches to learning when in a quantitative study, the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) was used to evaluate 300 student nurses learning styles in a Welsh Higher Education (HE) institution. Perhaps if learner problems (stressors) are addressed effectively, learners would be more likely to adopt deep approaches rather than surface

approaches to learning. Exploring how the stressors faced by learners affect their learning and suggesting strategies to effectively and systematically assist learners to cope with their stressors by enhancing their pastoral care as well as pedagogical approaches is thus expedient.

Hamaideh (2012) examined gender differences in stressors and reaction to stressors among Jordanian university students and just like de Anda et al (1997), despite the huge cultural, age and learning variations between adolescent students in an American middle school and adult university students in Jordan. Female students reported higher perception of stressors as well as emotional reactions to stressors than males. The study additionally found that the perception of general health and stress level in general were predictors of stress of both male and female students. Although Hamaideh's (2012) study was conducted on HE students, it has common theoretical features to the de Anda et al's (1997) study of middle school adolescent students as their approach to the phenomena of stress could best be explained by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress. Self-appraisal and interaction with stressor and mediating factors are cogent to the experience of stressors as opposed to the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) theory of Selye (1975). Adopting the theoretical perspective of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping in this study lends itself to FE lecturers and other support structures available to learners having the propensity to mediate the stressors learners experience and help towards minimising learner stress and fostering optimal learning.

In another study, Hamaideh (2011) found that the highest group of stressors experienced by students were "*self-imposed*" followed by "*pressures*" and most of the study sample experienced cognitive responses to stressors rather than

emotional responses. Stress management, assertiveness skills, time management and counselling sessions were suggested as effective means of reducing learner stress. Given that the study population were adults and are in HE, their cognitive response to stressors mainly is not surprising. In the FE sector, where the learners are predominantly adolescents, it would be appropriate to describe their stressors, find out how they cope with their stressors, identify ineffective coping strategies in the proposed research and explore how their stressors affect learning so that their lecturers who provide them with pastoral care could be made aware and equipped with strategies which are more likely to mediate learner stress and enhance individual optimal learning.

Timmins et al (2011) reported the following stressors which affect learning in mental health nursing university students; studies in general, placement issues, exams, pressure of work outside college, financial issues, family issues, relationship issues and circle of friends. Many of the study population experienced stressors to do with the course such as examinations, assignments and studies in general. More than a third of the reported stressors were found to be related to relationships the students had with staff and placement expectations. The coping mechanisms reported by the students included talking to friends of their own age, friends who are older than them, their parents as well as their relatives. The study also found that students at times would not want to talk to anyone. They tried to deal with their stressors alone using coping actions such as trying to take their mind off their stressors, finding useful information and praying. Other coping actions reported include taking drugs, drinking and getting drunk, talking to a doctor, going to the GP, counsellor or going to a health centre. Only few students, 8.1% of the study sample talked to their lecturers about their stressors. The researchers

concluded that the support and encouragement of healthy coping mechanisms among nursing students is paramount to ensure a healthy nursing workforce for the future as they support other people's mental and physical health. A call for nurturing and supporting the mental health of nursing students was made to be crucial to the future of the profession.

Just like the student nurses studied, FE learners are being prepared for employment in the long run and as such will also benefit from having their mental health and general health and well-being nurtured and supported as rightly suggested by Timmins et al (2011) to be done for student nurses. In the FE sector, the health and well-being of learners would also need to be priority in addition to the expanding roles of lecturers to encompass pastoral care of learners. There is the ever-growing need for encouraging dialogue between lecturers and learners to routinely explore in tutorials and other relevant contact opportunities with learners, stressors which affect learning. FE staff in general would need to be equipped with stress management skills to nurture and support their learners' mental health and general health and well-being. There is the need to investigate the stressors which the learners experience, the stressors which affect their learning, identify their coping strategies, examine the support systems in place in the FE College setting and explore how learning is affected in order to determine how best to enhance pastoral care and teaching pedagogy to mediate the stressors FE learners experience.

Prymachuck and Richards (2007) in a cross-sectional survey research to determine what factors predict stress in pre-registration university nursing students gave a clear indication of the prevalence of stressors and stress among the study sample. Their findings contrasted with earlier findings which alluded to student nurses experiencing academic stressors and stressors to do with

clinical concerns. Their study revealed that among the student nurse population studied; there is a preference for task over emotion – oriented approaches to coping with stressors. The participants tended to focus on the problem at hand and this was found to be consistent with findings in other studies (Brown and Edelman, 2000; Hamill, 1995 and Mahat, 1995).

Pryjmachuck and Richards (2007) were of the view that since emotional support is something that students seek support for from family and friends (Brown and Edelman, 2000; Carter, 1992; Hamill, 1995; Lo, 2002, Mahat, 1996, 1998 and University of Leicester, 2002), personal tutors should use active listening principles to take in the *'implied as well as the spoken'* and respond to students' problems in a manner which would assist them in solving them. A suggestion was made to have students complete a self-assessment of their personal circumstances as a form of risk assessment to aid the process of unearthing personal or social problems outside course work. Openness and opportunities to express feelings were recommended to form the key feature of the student-personal tutor relationship with the personal tutor taking the student's feelings where expressed seriously.

The findings of this study have implications for the preparation of FE learners cope effectively with their stressors during their learning in the FE stage prior to entry into HE programmes of professional instructions or employment. The researchers were emphatic about the role personal tutors need to play in supporting students through *"active listening"* especially when students self-report high levels of stress and personal or social problems are evident. They also speculated that stress management training focussed on coping skills may be of immense benefits to students.



Lo (2002) in a descriptive longitudinal case study of higher education student nurses in the same cohort, examined perceived level of stress, coping and self-esteem over their three-year nursing education programme. 120 students were involved in the first year, 112 in the second year and 101 in the final year. It was found that major stressors experienced by students were academic (81.2%), financial (61.4%), family related (48.5%) and health related (36.6%) in nature. Students in every study cohort experienced stress; 44.2% in Year 1; 28.4% in Year 2 and 21.8% in Year 3. Travelling to university was deemed as stressful (10%). The findings somewhat mirror Kirkland's (1998) study of female African American nurses where 37.5% prioritised academic studies, 21. % environmental issues such as housing, 17.2% finances, 12.5% interpersonal and 10.9% personal sources of stress as key stressors. The coping strategies identified in the study include problem solving, recreation and sport, social support and tension reduction strategies which are like Mahat's (1998) study where students coped by using problem solving, seeking social support, tension reduction and avoidance. Further, in Kirkland's (1998) study, coping strategies used to cope with academic, environmental, financial, interpersonal and personal stressors include active coping, seeking social support for instrumental and emotional reasons. Lo (2002) found that the support systems mainly used by the students were their family, spouse or partner. It was also found that although there were lecturers, counsellors and doctors on campus, the students did not seek much support from them during stressful times. In the FE sector, the learners being mostly adolescents and young adults need to know whom to turn to when in need for counselling and guidance and the lecturer, personal tutor or course leader would most probably be the first port of call. Their adequate knowledge of the support systems available to support learners cope with their stressors is vital in their pastoral care role, a mere

awareness would not substitute for purposes of being effective and decisive when it comes to having to utilise these systems. Their ability to further spot and help mediate the stressors imposed on their learners would undoubtedly enhance their pastoral care role and be of immense support to the learners on their learning journey. Adopting the whole-person's approach to teaching and learning and instituting fluid teaching pedagogies which acknowledges individual needs of each learner and is orientated to supporting learners deal effectively with stressors which affect learning is desirable. Lo (2002) concluded by advocating for stress management training to be introduced into the nurse training curricula for students to be armed with effective methods of reducing their stress levels. In the FE setting, one would wish all FE staff who have an interaction with learners to be acquainted with stress management and counselling skills as part of a compulsory continuous professional development activity or rather have a module in the teacher training education curricula for the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) where stress management and counselling skills are taught and assessed as part of the teaching qualification as it would be of huge benefit to the learner group served by LLS Teachers. Psychoeducation and stress awareness and management could be built into the curriculum in FE as an adjunct to help develop resilience in the FE learner.

The impact of multiple stressors on students during the period of their education was ascertained by this study albeit how they affect learning has not been investigated. The researchers noted that more could be done to facilitate students through their courses. There is the need for FE practitioners to be able to provide and suggest mediating actions which support learners in coping with their stressors, alleviating their stress and concomitantly facilitate effective learning on their courses through enhanced pastoral care in personal tutorship

as well as altering teaching pedagogy towards a more individual learner-centred approach.

Radcliffe and Lester (2008) in a qualitative study of 21 medical students in higher education using semi-structured interviews, found that the pressure of work, particularly preparation for examinations, acquisition of professional knowledge, skills and attitudes were the most stressful aspects of the students' studies. A perceived lack of support from staff was found to compound the students' stress. This was further clarified to include neglect of individual welfare issues and academic requirements by individual tutors and the medical school as learning objectives and depth of knowledge were perceived as unclear. Furthermore, many participants felt that no-one cared about them during the course and the onus was rather on them as students to both identify their tutor (personal tutor) and contact them when in difficulty without any reciprocal arrangement. Most participants reported that they found team spirit, turning to friends on the course for support, socialisation into the professional role helpful in reducing stress. Providing greater levels of guidance and support from staff during transition periods (or targeted at transition periods) was speculated as mediational actions which can alleviate learner stress without offering a clear explanation of what constitutes such greater levels of guidance or support. The researchers were of the view that aspects of professional socialisation which imposes stress on the participants needed addressing to minimise the levels of stress associated with medical training for future students. Changes in the students' learning environment as well as teaching styles when they began clinical training as an apprentice doctor (thus vocational experience) in the practice setting were cited as particularly stressful transition period. Participants described feelings of uselessness, inability to contribute to patient care due to lack of sufficient knowledge or skills to play an active role

and being in a state of 'limbo'; having to wait for something to happen in the practice area instead of performing a function as features of their stressful experience. An additional stressful issue during the students' vocational experience was that they felt they were not learning to just pass examinations but also learning for the future health of their patients.

This study although conducted in a higher education setting with medical students as participants has implications for the further education setting. Firstly, the study adds to the body of evidence that research into learner stress in the further education sector is almost non-existent. Other issues that emerged from the study point towards looking at teaching and learning (teaching pedagogy and learning approaches in the classroom, and work placement areas and in terms of how to support the development of professionalism in learners. FE learners also benefit from vocational experience where the curriculum expectation is that they develop some core competencies including professional behaviour in preparation for entry into employment or further studies in the higher education sector. Finding out the perception of stressors which affect learning among FE learners and the support learners receive from FE staff is pertinent in informing practice development.

In a critical review of previous studies into student stress in higher education, Robotham (2008) indicated that the effect of maturity on learner stress and how they cope with stress needs consideration in further research on learner stress. Further in his review of the literature on stress among higher education students, he found that there have been a concentration of studies using the quantitative research approach with a narrow focus on the type of student participants (the learners who participated in the studies he reviewed). He noted that the '*subjective, anecdotal and impressionistic information*' on the topic of

learner stress might have been perhaps rejected by the nature of the quantitative data that was captured in these studies. As such, there may be limited insight into why learner stress exists. He advocated for a more subjective explanation of learner stress to study the experience of stress through in-depth interviews with individuals with a widening focus on the student groups who participates in research pertaining to learner stress (the perception of stress, experience of stress and how a learner cope with stress).

While Robotham (2008) offered a review of stress research among higher education students, he lamented on the atheoretical nature of such research. He noted the lack of empirical work which examines the coping strategies used by learners and the lack of a clear distinction between the stressors resulting from being in an educational institution or stressors which were present prior to entry into an educational institution. He further posed the question as to whether the quasi-quantitative measures employed in the studies reviewed were tantamount to adherence to a research practice that seldom produces any new knowledge or propose new concepts or hypotheses. He questions whether researcher concentration was only on research instruments could measure and thus limiting their investigative prowess? Doubts were expressed as to whether there was in the uncritical attempt to quantify the level of stress in the research participants who may react negatively by potentially concealing their honest/~~true~~ views. Following from his review, there is the need to ponder over whether stress as a concept based on the individual's perception of threat and available resources at the individual's disposal to counteract the effect of the perceived stressor can be truly measured with standardised research instruments. Also, the possibility of participants not being totally honest in their responses may be an attempt to perhaps avoid negative labels inherent in the research instruments. This thus calls their trustworthiness into question

and could be a cue to pursue a more subjective qualitative in-depth interview-based studies to unearth the views of participant which could not have been otherwise measured using quantitative stress measures.

The FE sector is hugely under-researched in the area of learner stress. There are currently no similar studies in the FE sector, which is anecdotally bereft with myriad issues affecting learner achievement, retention and progression and put learners at risk of non-achievement and dropping out, due to the nature of its clientele and due to economic, social, political, policy and professional reasons. Hence, investigating stressors which affect learning among FE learners, and paying attention to the influences their developmental life stage factors/~~issues~~ may have on their perception, experience and coping with stress among other concerns raised by Robotham (2008) could contribute to the understanding and/~~or~~ explanation of learner stress. This will help find suitable ways of effectively supporting learners to cope with stressors which affect learning and thus enhance learning the principal objective of pursuing further education. Robotham's (2008) review identified academic stressors (striving to meet assessment deadlines, feeling overwhelmed with workload, the fear of failure, time management issues, lack of sleep, individual's attitude towards learning, examination stress) and personal stressors (adjustment to college life, forming new social networks, absence of usual support systems including social support, being in a different country, financial difficulty) as the stressors which affect learners. Response to stress was categorised into emotional (fear, anxiety, worry, guilt, grief, or depression), cognitive (appraisal of stressful situations and strategies), behavioural (crying, abuse of self or others, smoking and irritability) and physiological reactions (sweating, trembling, shivering, headaches, weight loss or gain, body aches) with the individuals experiencing high stress levels more likely to engage in behaviours which were unhealthy and self-reported that

they were less satisfied with their health and life factors which contributes to self-esteem without a clear explanation of how the experience of stress lowers an individual's self-esteem. Despite other negative outcomes found to be associated with learner stress in Robotham's (2008) review such as increased alcohol consumption, smoking and a tendency to commit suicide, for many learners, the most significant response to stress was declining academic performance. The mechanism of which stressors eventually affect academic performance (in FE parlance would be achievement or gaining a qualification) could possibly be through how it affects learning. An understanding of stressors which affect learning in FE is therefore an important area of research investigation to find ways of enhancing learning where learners are faced with stressors by mediating the effects of such stressors through adopting a flexible yet responsive teaching pedagogy as well as an informative and supportive pastoral care and support system which is sensitive to individual learner needs. Robotham's (2008) review revealed different conceptualisations of stress intervention; the level at which the intervention occurs; the scope of the intervention; the focus of the intervention (contextual and individualistic nature of intervention); the expected outcomes and the general philosophy on which the intervention is based. The effectiveness of stress interventions rests in the individualistic nature of the intervention and the specificity of the stressor it addresses in that the individual is assisted to cope with the specific stress(or). Stress intervention from the individual perspective is centred on the development and enhancement of coping strategies which enables the individual to eliminate or reduce stressors in their environment, change their appraisal of potential threat thus harmfulness of these stressors or reduce the impact of stressors. Robotham (2008) highlighted the key role for institutions of higher education in relation to learner stress is to provide appropriate

resources to enable the individual learner deal with stress as numerous studies concluded that coping behaviour and social support structures can be beneficial in mediating the effects of stress on individuals. Attempts at making changes in the environment (problem focused coping) as well as making changes to the meaning that individuals attach to stressors (emotion focused coping) have also been highlighted as means of coping with learner stress. Attitudes towards seeking formal help as in professional help from a counsellor or referral to health professionals and informal help as in support from friends and family were noted to vary among learners and may have some gender influences. The challenges to effective stress intervention or management of learners were attributed to whether learners are adept enough at recognising that they are experiencing stress or whether they are 'suffering in silence' at the detriment of their health and well-being for fear of possible adverse effects seeking support especially formal help may have on their studies. Also, lack of information on institutional support services learners can benefit from and the stigma associated with the use of such services if seen by others as seeking help serve as barriers to effective stress intervention for learners. A significant discrepancy between learner perception of stress and teacher perception of stress was noted to exist and could potentially hamper efforts at signposting or providing guidance on stress management amidst limited resources available to provide such support.

In relating to the issues pointed out in Robotham's (2008) review from an FE sector perspective, stress intervention at the individual level could be practised by personal tutors, course tutors, curriculum managers, subject teachers, learning support staff and student services staff. It would be helpful in contributing to the understanding of learner stress in FE to find out what is done at the individual learner level by staff involved with the learners



experiencing stress. Teacher perception of learner stress would also need to be compared with learners' perception of stress as a mismatch may be detrimental to efforts aimed at supporting learners to effectively cope with stress. How learners cope with their stress; what actions they take, what they do about it, what works and what does not work and why they think they work or do not work would clarify learner stress and coping in FE. Finally, exploring ways in which the pastoral care system can be made to be responsive to individual learner needs when experiencing stress to avoid the negative effects of being at risk of dropping out and potential non-achievement of qualifications.

Towler et al (2011) reported in a learning to learn project (L2L) in FE that despite contextual differences, there seem to be a consensus on how teachers made references to low expectations that learners have of themselves on entry into college, pertaining to their responsibilities towards learning which were captured in the teacher interviews. A total of 16 teachers were interviewed. Learners were deemed to have the expectation to be "*spoon fed*" and learners "*were not well equipped to think for themselves*" (Towler et al. 2011, p.508). The curriculum was blamed by teachers for being didactic in nature and a contributory factor to a perceived ambivalence of learners towards their learning role. Towler et al (2011) intimated that there needs to be a shift from "*a qualification-driven delivery model of teaching*" which fosters the notion of the passivity seen in learners as being "*co-constructed by learners and teachers alike, albeit reluctantly on the part of teachers*" (Towler et al. 2011, p.509). The findings from the teacher interviews of the project also revealed a recognition that a shift from the delivery models of teaching practice would bring about challenges for teachers in terms of pedagogic knowledge. This is because the role of the teacher in the L2L project was "*becoming more complex and reflective, with tacit knowledge on student capability being used to inform finely tuned*

*judgements on practice*” (Towler et al, 2011, p.509). In other words, teacher perception in the initial stages of the L2L project is indicative of a call for a flexible, reflective, responsive and expansive teacher pedagogy that guides practice based on supporting learners within their capabilities. This undoubtedly would be associated with identification of individual learner needs and attempting to meet these needs in conjunction with the learner, bearing in mind the individual learner’s capability). Practitioner enquiry was reportedly perceived as important in the L2L project with teachers seeing research as the initiative that will create the necessary conversations, which can inform meaningful transition or a shift from the delivery mode of teaching. A teacher participant in the L2L study put it this way, *“this means that practice can develop to reflect a growing understanding of how students learn rather than made to fit accepted norms and rules”* (Towler et al 2011, p. 510).

Towler et al (2011) conducted face to face mediated interviews with 64 learners. The findings from the learner interviews show that learners in the initial stage of the L2L project placed high importance on surface-level conceptions of learning such as practising, remembering and, particularly listening, with less emphasis on the ideal definitions of leaning such as putting together what you know and seeing something new. Towler et al (2011) observed a surprising level of consistency in the comments of learners from both FE colleges involved despite the differences in the learner participant groups and the catchment area of the two colleges involved in the project. Both group of learner participants rated listening as most important followed by remembering, practising and adding new knowledge as the second most important. There was the perception that vocational routes of education seldom allow younger learners to apply new knowledge early on in their studies whereas older learners or those en route into higher education courses seem to be able to connect learning with experiences

more easily. Towler et al (2011) found that there was no unequivocally clear contrast between the priorities for the learning promoted by the college and those that the learners valued in terms of their lifelong learning agenda. There was also some degree of wilful compliance with the delivery model of teaching on the part of the vocational learners as it fits in with their motivation to come into college in the first place, which is to gain knowledge and skills which enhances employability. Also, the stage at which learners are on their courses was thought of as having influence on how they perceive the importance of the learning. For example, knowledge had to be gained first before practice and for those at the beginning of a new course listening is essential irrespective of prior knowledge and expertise. Towler et al (2011) also noted that across both colleges, it appears the learners' conception of learning is about attaining a qualification. The only dissenting voices to this kind of perception were noted to come from older students or those opting for routes into higher education. Towler et al (2011) argued that they may have developed their own personal theories of how learning unfolds and are guided by these rather than the structure of the course they are studying. The fact that the learner interviews were mediated by means of a ranking exercise using predetermine descriptors from Hadar (2009) might have influenced the responses given by majority of the learners to synchronise with responses expected by the college, rather than offering their actual thoughts and personal construct, which could have well been outside the boundaries of the descriptors they had to choose from.

A striking finding is the match between teacher participants' view of how learners are passive when it comes to learning and the learner participants' response which lay great emphasis on being on the receiving end through listening rather than thinking and attempting to understand. Towler et al (2011) attributed this observation to the co-constructed culture of

performativity in FE and the didactic pedagogy imposed by the stipulations of qualification routes on which teacher participants taught. Towler et al (2011) argued that this naturally narrows the scope for learning that the teaching participants' practice affords their learners. Furthermore, the authors deemed the learner participants as lacking a personal model of learning and development and have adopted the qualification stipulations as a substitute to the detriment of 'ideal' and individual learning conceptions. Learner-Teacher interacting identities within the college were blamed by the authors as producing a resultant discourse devoid of critical thinking and deep understanding in spite of differing abilities and dispositions (which may also contribute to the same). Towler et al (2011) concluded by advocating for teachers in FE to enhance their pedagogical strategies rather than allowing it to subvert and scaffold the development of learning for life. It was suggested that management, staff and learners in FE co-construct a learning culture whereby the practising of skills and remembering of information is predominant but the mastery of 'ideal' learning concepts which appears to be abrogated or left to chance can be addressed. The FE learners' definition of learning and what learning means to FE learners, and the learner-teacher relationship and influences of the curriculum and teaching pedagogy therefore are crucial to understanding the learner perspective on stressors which affect learning.

Hodkinson et al (2007) examined the nature of learning cultures in English Further Education out of the Transforming Learning Cultures in FE (TLC) research project and described four characteristics generic to FE learning culture as follows:

1. The significance of learning cultures in every site
2. The significance of the FE teacher in influencing site learning cultures

3. The negative impact of policy and management approaches

4. The issue of course status

Judgements were made about the value of learning and the effectiveness of learning separately and learning value was found to be varied from site to site. The researchers' objective was to identify whether their assumptions of what influenced learning in FE were correct or incorrect. Their assumptions were that the position, disposition and actions of learners and FE teachers, the location and resources of learning site enable some approaches and attitudes, and constrain or prevent others. Also, they further assumed that the course specification, assessment and qualification specifications; time FE teachers and learners spent together, the learner-teacher relationship, the range of other learning sites learners are engaged with; issues of college management and procedures, together with funding and inspection body procedures and regulations; wider vocational and academic cultures inclusive of learning; wider social and cultural values and practices such as issues of social class, gender, ethnicity, nature of employment opportunities, social and family life and the perceived status of the FE sector influenced learning in FE.

Their starting assumptions were confirmed and resonated with the large variation in learning provision in FE documented by Huddleston and Unwin (2002). Evidence of emotional labour was found where FE teachers were attempting to solve learner problems for them (Colley et al. 2003). Hochschild (1983) described how individuals invest large amount of effort to emotionally present an acceptable emotional side, which is in keeping with organisational expectations externally, although internally they true emotional feelings are in conflict with this expectation. FE teachers in attempting to solve learner problems would still have to meet the expectations of their employing

organisations and have to emotionally, continuously bear with not being recognised or supported by their employers. This can potentially create emotional dissonance among FE teachers and eventually affect their pedagogy, personal effectiveness and performance both in terms of learning delivery and pastoral care. FE teachers were deemed to be prioritising learner needs that were not recognised and supported by their employing FE colleges to maximise learner achievement. Learning in FE was found to be highly dependent on the FE teacher with unreasonable demands being made on the FE teacher which are seldom recognised or supported by their FE colleges. The work of FE teachers was described as constrained by another major part of the FE learning culture found in the plethora of national policy, college policy and the business of FE practice. Learning was deemed to be damaged by these impacts owing to the pressures of inadequate financial resourcing and funding of FE that fluctuate wildly year after year and FE college funding being more poorly funded than provision in schools or higher education. Improvement in teaching was seen as the application of better developed techniques, whereas learning supposedly entail identification of learner needs and meeting them within resource constraints with success measured by a combination of retention rates, formal assessment achievement and external inspection criteria (Coffield et al., 2005). FE teachers were deemed to be put in a “*straitjacket*” because of these pressures which were deemed by the FE teachers not to be conducive to good teaching and learning. A major element in FE learning culture which was identified is the issue of status where FE learners predominantly come from the lower levels of the English social class system and emphasis is placed on the provision for those who are seen by others or see themselves as having failed at learning. The researchers identified that FE teachers were constantly working to mediate the learning culture through constructing, reconstructing and

preserving synergies that promote the learning culture desired and though beneficial for their learners and teaching and pedagogy was viewed as a cultural mediation rather than the predominant technicist view in FE teaching standards.

They concluded that learning is much more facilitated and improved when the learning culture is synergistic, thus when different factors pull or push in the same way broadly with reinforcing forces acting largely together in analogous terms with Brown et al's (1989) authentic learning situation. The researchers descriptive work pulls together some of the main findings of the TLC's empirical findings but did not address individual learner issues which may affect their learning. A broader context of learning in FE was offered and a 'wholistic' approach to defining learning cultures. However, the influence of the individual FE teacher in improving learning albeit limited in many contextual ways beyond the teacher's control was clearly intimated by Hodkinson et al (2007). Their findings further support the viewpoint that for improvements in learning to be made the FE sector, teacher's intervention has a central role which is accorded by the teacher's professionalism and understanding of factors which affect learning from the perspective of learners. This should undeniably be one of the new concepts of teacher pedagogical thinking and should be adopted in FE teaching practice and development.

Salisbury and Jephcote (2008) found that learners aged 17 years and above were positive and optimistic about learning in FE. Their reasons for coming into college include returning to learn and 'up skill' after parenting full time, working in a boring job, or a period of unemployment and criticisms of schools and problems with schools were also offered as reasons for seeking FE in college. Reports of bad experiences including being bullied, feeling victimised, ignored

or unrecognised by former teachers at school as well as how their own life stories and outside school lives affected their capability to study. Reasons given for unsuccessful attempts at earlier college education (dropping out of FE) include not giving college education a proper thought and simply drifting from school to college, inability to make friends and long-distance travel, inconsistent attendance due to family difficulties including parental divorce, not being ready to study, wanting to just have fun, financial hardship, travel costs. Other reasons given by the learners include wanting money, a job, being uninterested in study, choosing the wrong course and getting into the wrong crowd. These findings were largely in agreement with Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) suggestions that learning for young people in FE is not a smooth straightforward undeviating process. The researchers noted that certain priorities for learners such as economic survival, living independently and supporting a family sometimes are offset against learners' goal of obtaining qualifications and a good job. Some of the participants made disclosures of a personal and intimate nature revealing tragic and difficult circumstances such as health problems, difficult family situations, need to prove themselves to significant others in their families and wider lives. The study participants indicated that FE teacher's qualities of empathy, patience and approachability matter to learners in developing a positive learner-teacher relationship. The way in which learners perceive the FE teacher's availability, approachability and ability to understand learner's various situations and their needs as learners and people with lives outside college and beyond college emerged as a core theme in the interviews. There is the need to support FE learners to deal effectively with stressors which affect learning both inside and outside college.



## 2.9 Theoretical Perspectives

The research strategy adopted in this case study is that of search and discovery, where the discovering of meaning and seeking understanding of experience from the case study participants' perspectives is key. The philosophical orientation of the study is constructivism-interpretivism which is based on the premise that multiple realities and meanings exist, and this depends on and can be co-created by the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 2011; Yin 2014). The position adopted is that reality is viewed as multiple and subjective and based on meaning and understanding that is attributed to it. This philosophical orientation guided the design and conduct of the case study (Stewart 2014; Yin 2014). Stake (1995) emphasised the discovery of meaning and seeking understanding of experience in the context it occurs, as well as the role and involvement of the researcher in knowledge production is seen as critical (Harrison et al, 2017). Stake (1995, 2006) also emphasised the researcher's interpretive role and is closely aligned to the constructivist-interpretivist philosophical orientation position adopted in the study. This case study leans toward Stakes (1995) single case study and uses the typology of Thomas (2011) as a framework to explore and analyse the case. The single case study design is helpful in enabling a holistic description of the participants involved and allowed a singular focus on exploring stressors which affect learning from the perspectives of the participants. in a specific FE college among a specific learner group. The case study was designed as an intrinsic single qualitative case study (Thomas, 2011) to explore stressors which affect learning, where the discovering of meaning and seeking understanding of experience was the guiding light. However, the theoretical perspectives contemplated towards a definition of 'learner stress' in FE are as follows.

## 2.9.1 Stress

According to Lazarus (1999), historically, the term was used in the 14th century to refer to adversity, straits, hardship or affliction in a non-technical sense. It began to see technical formulation in the late 17th century when its basic concepts of load, stress and strain was derived from the field of mechanical engineering where the terms stress and strain suffered by man-made structures like bridges under the duress of a load formed the fundamental basic concepts of stress and has transcended into psychology, where the terms stress stimulus (stressor) and the stress response or reaction to stressors are now used in terms of stress and coping. According to Lazarus (1999), stress is an umbrella term for the causes and emotional consequences that result from the struggle to manage everyday pressures. Numerous studies have been done on the concept of stress and coping in the social and biological sciences including health studies. However, in FE, how stressors affect learning have been hardly researched. Although a considerable number of studies have been carried out in HE, especially on various healthcare students which have implications for the FE sector, how stressors which impact on learners affect their learning have been hitherto researched. Learners in FE are mostly adolescents and young adults and thus need support from their lecturers through pastoral care and pedagogies that take their stressors into consideration to consequentially enhance learning through the much-advocated learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

Stress could be addressed from three approaches depending on the school of thought and academic leaning of the researcher. Balonna (1996) and Lazarus (1999) distinguished three disciplinary approach to stress; physiological, psychological and sociological approaches which treat stress differently although essentially, they are all interrelated. For the purposes of this study,

the psychological approach seems to be well suited to form the basis on which to investigate which stressors affect learning in FE learners as a case study in an intensive rather than extensive manner to obtain depth and detail of the subjective significance and effect of stressors on learning. This approach is helpful in ascertaining what makes learners perceive stressors the way they do. It is also useful in finding out how they interpret what they perceive as stressors and what coping strategies they employed as well as what the mediating factors were. It also enabled how stressors affect learning to be studied through a deep examination of psychological stress theory through systematically combining of findings from the study with theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A deeper understanding of the process of how the stressors affect learning is allowed and a model is suggested to serve as a foundation on which to make recommendations for policy and practice development in FE aimed at supporting learners to effectively manage their stressors to enhance optimal learning.

### 2.9.2 Psychological Stress

Lazarus and Folkman (1984:19) defined psychological stress as follows: "*A particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being*". This definition leaves the individual to interpret (make meaning of) how any impending stressor could affect their daily life (including learning) and consider the resources available to him to avert, alter, minimise or avoid (cope) with the stressor(s). This definition also supports a subjective and experiential inquiry in that it allows the perception of the subject and consideration of the resources available to the subject and how supportive the resources are in mediating the effects of stressors to be revealed. It will also

allow the subject to weigh which part of the subject's daily life could be impacted thus how it could be affected because of the stressor and any mediating or remedial action that would be required to return to the 'pre-stressor' status quo. In terms of learning, the learner is able to explain how learning is affected or could be affected when faced with an impending stressor that the learner deems to affect learning (actual or potential). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) definition encapsulates the individualistic and subjective nature of stress as well as recognises that many factors are in play (the individual's interaction with the environment). Here the environment can be broadly defined to include anywhere that stressors originate or can originate from such as the classroom, placement, college, home, socio-economic background and culture among others.

### 2.9.3 The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

The transactional phenomenon of stress lies in the premise that the experience of stress is perceptual and depends upon the meaning the perceiver attaches to a stimulus or stressor. This will vary from one individual to another although they may experience the same or similar stressors (Lazarus, 1966, Antonovsky, 1979). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) provides a framework which can be utilised to evaluate the process of coping with stressors. Emphasis of the model lies in the individual's perception and evaluation (appraisal) of the potential impact of stressors (harm imposed by events). When the individual's believed ability to cope is exceeded by the demands made on him by stressors, threat is perceived resulting in an imbalanced psychological state giving rise to the experience of stress and associated negative emotional response. There could be many response variables to the events triggering the stress (stressors). Psychological stress

thus results from the transaction between the perceiver (the individual) and the environment (stressor). Interpretation of stressors impacting on an individual and the sufficiency or adequacy of coping capability (or resources to foster this) is the fundamental determinant of whether an individual experiences psychological stress or not. The assumption here is that this process of interpretation which informs the individual's perception of stressors may or may not be an accurate assessment of the individual's relationship with his environment (Cohen, Kessler and Gordon, 1997). Thus, the impact of a stressor may be mediated by the individual's appraisal of the stressor and the resources at his disposal (psychological, social and cultural) to cope with it (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977). An individual faced with a stressor would evaluate potential threats or harm which could eventuate (primary appraisal) followed by the individual's ability to avert the looming or impending situation and effectively manage any associated negative emotional reactions (secondary appraisal). The coping strategies which the individual then use to solve problems and regulate negative emotions would lead to a positive outcome of coping which safeguards psychological well-being and the ability to function normally [in terms of this study, without learning being affected in any way by the stressor (s)]. Where inadequate resources do not exist, are inadequate, insufficient or appraised as such and renders the individual to be incapable of effectively employing any useful coping strategies, a negative outcome of coping may manifest as psychological distress, poor functioning or inability to function normally [thus learning becomes affected by the stressor].

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) theorises that if stressors are perceived as positive or challenging rather than negative, crippling and thus a threat, and if the individual is confident that he has sufficient (adaptive) rather than insufficient (maladaptive) coping strategies,

the individual will not experience stress when faced with stressor(s). Coping strategies can be categorised into emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. The former is about how individuals try to process their emotions through acting and thinking and the latter is about how they change the situation what was caused by the stressor or harness their available resources to manage the situation to avert the potential harm that the stressor can induce. The outcome of the coping process is adaptive where the individual can positively cope with their stressors and maladaptive if they are negatively coping. The propositions of the model dictate that individuals can be assisted to change their perception of stressors and provided with effective coping strategies and enhancing their self-confidence (or self-belief) in their ability to cope (through enhancing and or using the coping resources available to them. In brief, the psychological stress theory which dictates that an individual interacts with his environment and appraises stressors in the light of his available coping resources will form the theoretical foundation of this study with the focus being on how learners perceive the potential stress arising from the stressors impacting on them and how the stressors which give rise to stress affect their learning. The coping strategies employed by the learners whether adaptive or maladaptive would be identified in addition to the support structures available to learners to mediate their stressors.

There are various models of stress which is an attempt to explain the phenomenon of stress from the psychological, physiological and the social approaches to stress. However, it appears that each approach is not entirely distinct on its own and therefore the approaches to understanding stress are not divorced but rather related although one approach may seem to fit more with the explanation of the sources, causes, experience, mediators and effects of the stress phenomenon depending on the interest or the focus of stress

research (thus seeing stress as a stimuli, stress as a response, stress as a dynamic state or stress as a result of the failure to cope with stressors among others). Without extensively covering all available theoretical models of stress, it is pertinent to highlight the range of competing stress models aside that of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), one of the theoretical underpinnings of this study. These models vary from the physiologically based demand-response model of stress (Selye, 1975), the complex interactional nature of stress (Cox, 1978) and the coping and control factor-based explanations of stress such as Freeman (1986) and Fisher (1986), and Wolff and Goodall (1968) who conceptualised stress as a dynamic state of the individual, a resultant outcome of the transactions between the individual and the perceived environmental demands on the individual's life. The transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) is supportive of the study because it allows a conceptualisation of stress in which the perceived source of threat (the stressor) can be identified and allow for the planning of coping strategies. The meaning of the stressor can be made explicit by the individual and so can any relationship between the stressor and coping (abilities, strategies or resources) and thus it is enabling the individual to be able to be assisted to overcome the stressor (or gain control over it). It also affords the individual and others associated with the individual the opportunity to analyse the stressors (actual or potential situations adjudged as threatening or making taxing demands on the individual) to gain a deeper insight into the nature or characteristics of stressors and plan or develop appropriate coping strategies (actual or potential). More importantly, the model paves way for the evaluation of the effectiveness of coping strategies employed in managing stressors. Individual differences and variation in the perception, experience and coping with stress are also accommodated in the model due to its subjective nature. For the purposes of

this study, the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) seemed more akin to the researchers aim of exploring stressors which affect learning in that stress is considered to be purely what the individual learner considers it to be (thus it is phenomenological in nature and dependent on the individual learner's experience and interpretation of stressors; their appraisal and the meanings they attribute to them).

In exploring the extent to which stressors affect learning, it is expedient to investigate the external environmental demands or threats (within the college and outside of college) and the internal demands or threats such as personal health and well-being, range of coping strategies utilised, the different types, nature, availability, accessibility, sufficiency and utility of support participants can receive or do receive or have received to bolster their individual feelings of having control or the ability or confidence (thus being in a cognitive position or having the mindfulness) to avert the negative impact of stressors on their learning. In terms of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), these would form the repertoire of resources at the individual's disposal to assist in overcoming potential threat or harm resulting from a potential stressor that the individual may contemplate during secondary appraisal and consequently influence the meaning the individual attaches to the stressor. These resources geared towards mediating the effects of stressors are considered key in establishing the extent to which stressors may affect the individual's learning through the effects of stress on the individual learner's physical and emotional well-being. Also, the area of stress management of learners by staff (teachers, lecturers, course leaders, curriculum managers, learning support staff, student services staff) would need to be explored as part of learners' responses to stress and as part of the plausible resources at the disposal of learners. This is because poorly managed stress has the potential to affect the effectiveness of learning since the



physiological, emotional, behavioural and cognitive effects of stress in the individual can result in myriad challenges for educationalists including poor concentration, withdrawal, challenging behaviour, irritability, tearfulness, aggression, acting out, lack of motivation, sickness and absenteeism among others (Sharp and Thompson, 1992). In attempting to investigate the stressors which affect learning, it is paramount to also question *whether 'shared meaning' is attained on the nature of stressors which affect learning between staff and learners. A mutual understanding of what the stressors are and the individual learner needs associated with them (shared meaning) is considered fundamental to any meaningful work aimed at assisting learners to cope effectively with stressors or stress and to avert any negative effect on learning (and by extension retention, achievement and progression). Learner stress is considered in this study as the perception of stressors, potential stressors, experience of stress and the associated coping efforts of the learner during a period of learning (for example while undertaking an educational course) (Timmins et al, 2011).*

#### 2.9.4 Effects of Stress on Learning

To be in a position to investigate how stressors affect learning [considered in this study to be a complex and highly contextual human endeavour involving motivation, attention, communication, experience, perception, cognitive processing, memory, social interaction, personality, personal growth, attitudinal and behaviour change which can occur through formal and informal means which cannot be exhaustively explained by any one learning theory](Darling-Hammond et al, 2020)], it is important to consider key theories on the effects stress can have on learning as well as the approaches to learning.

The works of Marton and Saljo (1976) (Surface and Deep approaches to learning), Biggs (1985)-(adding a third approach; the Achieving approach which is context dependent and can serve a dual purpose through combination with either the Surface or the Deep approach) and Biggs (1989) 3-P model of learning (Presage, Process, Product) are being considered to inform the study and help guide a qualitative inquiry as well as offer a descriptive framework through which to coherently detail the findings of the study respectively. The rationale being that learner perspective is paramount in this investigation of learner stress in FE in as much as contextual issues are also pertinent, to have a holistic understanding of the stressors which affect learning. In FE colleges, several types of learning activities involving such as peer learning, collaborative learning, didactic, self-directed learning, virtual learning, practical learning, practice-based learning, activity-based learning, individual work and group works are employed by lecturers and trainers to meet different learning needs, encourage the use of different learning styles and learning approaches with emphasis on learner achievement of learning outcomes. It is therefore prudent to explore how learning is affected by stressors to find strategies to support learners effectively cope with stressors which affect their learning.

Although the study is not focussed on the physiological response to stress which is the domain of neurobiology and physiological psychology, consideration is given to research evidence on how physiological effects of stress particularly the release of stress hormones affects the regions of the brain involved with memory, cognitive processing, attention and emotion and subsequently affects learning as psychological stress and physiological stress response is deemed inextricable. According to Bisaz et al (2009), high stress levels whether induced by cognitive challenges such as learning (intrinsic demands) or induced by

situations which are totally non-related to a cognitive task (extrinsic demands) are “deleterious” to processing information and thus negatively affect learning. This view is also echoed by Sandi and Pinelo-Nava (2007) in their review of the effects of stress on memory and learning when they stated that “stress is a potent modulator of learning and memory processes”. They emphasised the importance of distinguishing between acute and chronic stress because of their difference in the impact each have on memory and learning. The latter was noted to have a “general deleterious effect” on learning. They identified the following five factors as being crucial to the understanding of how stress affect memory functions and learning; sources of stress, stressor duration, stressor intensity and stressor timing. They further highlighted the hippocampus, amygdala and the prefrontal cortex as the critical regions of the brain involved in mediating the effects of stress and known to cause cognitive disturbances because of stress which in turn negatively affect learning (McEwen, 2005).

Research by Scwabe and Wolf (2010) in cognitive psychology has indicated that learning while stressed is unproductive despite what is being learnt and the degree to which learning is affected by stress depends on both stressor-related and non-stressor related factors. They demonstrated that memory can be impaired in individuals who attempts to learn while stressed because they focus their attention on the stressor and its qualities including what could help cope with stress rather than any other learning material. Stress was described as affecting the “attentional state” of the individual by creating “divided attention and a general attention deficit” which inhibits learning (cognitive processing). Scwabe and Wolf (2010) noted that the prefrontal cortex is involved in “attention processes”, and stress hormones such as noradrenaline and dopamine which are released in response to stress can disrupt both the structure and function of the prefrontal cortex with the resultant effect of stress potentially impairing

the “attention processes” regulated by the prefrontal cortex. Suggestions were made that hippocampal inactivity eventuates because of stress and in turn affect the cognitive encoding process in learning as observed by Pruessner et al (2008). Gerwitz and Radke (2010) laid emphasis on both the nature of the stressor and the learning task as significant contributory factors in determining the effect of stress on learning. Aberg et al (2012) were of the view that the influence of stress on learning and memory is diverse and depend on the emotional baggage and impact of the stressor. It is therefore pertinent to conduct a study which describes the stressors which affect learning in further education, how learning is affected, the meaning learners attach to the stressors, how they respond and cope with these stressors as well as the support available and utilised by them in coping with their stressors.

Further theoretical underpinning knowledge which is being borne in mind in the conduct of this study include theories which postulate how the emotional effects of stress such as moderate or severe anxiety affects learning performance negatively such as Saranson’s Cognitive Interference Theory (Saranson et al, 1996), Eysenck’s Processing Efficiency Theory (Eysenck, 1979), Spielberger’s Trait State Anxiety Theory (Spielberger, 1966), and Easterbrook’s Hypothesis of Selective Attention (1959). Motivational theories such as Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1961) and the role of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 2002; Lauder et al., 2006; Woodhall, 1997) and Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1990; Paxton, 1999; Bourdieu, 1986) in education was also considered in addition to evidence that social support buffers learners’ psychological distress and contributes to learners’ well-being (Ben-Zur, 2009; Lundberg et al, 2008; Solberg and Villareal, 1997; Wang and Castaneda-Sound, 2008). The study was designed set out to explore stressors which affect the learning of BTEC Level 3 Business learners in an FE College in the East of

England with a focus on learners' perception of stressors, coping strategies, support systems available and used by learners, the nature, quality and role of pastoral care and teacher pedagogy in mitigating the effect of stressors on learners. The study adopted the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

2.10 Table 2.2: Emerging Themes from Previous Studies

Theme	Source
Perception of Stress	<i>de Anda et al (1997), Hamaideh (2012), Lo (2002), Robotham (2008)</i>
Experience of Stress	<i>de Anda et al (1997), Hamaideh (2012), Prymachuck et al (2007), Radcliffe and Leister (2003)</i>
Stressors	<i>de Anda et al (1997), Hamaideh (2012), Prymachuck et al (2007), Mayya (2004), Hamaideh (2011), Timmins et al (2011), Radcliffe and Leicester (2003)</i>
Coping	<i>de Anda et al (1997), Hamaideh (2012), Timmins et al (2011), Prymachuck et al (2007), Lo (2002), Robotham (2008)</i>
Learning style	<i>Suliman (2010)</i>
Academic Performance	<i>Suliman (2010), Mayya (2004), de Anda (1997), Timmins et al (2011), Prymachuck et al (2007), Radcliffe and Leister (2003), Robotham (2008)</i>
Deep and Surface Learning	<i>Mayya (2004), Towler et al (2011)</i>
Stress Management	<i>Hamaideh (2011), Prymachuck and Richards (2007), Robotham (2008)</i>
Support systems	<i>Timmins et al (2011), Prymachuck and Richards (2007), Lo (2002)</i>
Learner-teacher relationship	<i>Towler et al (2011), Hodgkinson et al (2007), Salisbury and Jephcote (2008), Prymachuck and Richards (2007), Mayya (2004), Radcliffe and Leister (2003), Timmins et al (2011), Hamaideh (2012).</i>

## 2.11 Gaps in Previous Studies

Majority of previous studies into stress and learning have been concentrated in the higher education sector with little attention paid to the FE sector. The FE sector however, is bereft with learners who are in a turbulent phase of their developmental lifespan and may be laden with issues of varying emotional weights that could affect their learning and consequently their retention, achievement and progression. Many of the previous studies are positivist in nature adopting a quantitative research approach and investigated mostly stressors emanating from being on a course of study or related to academic performance without enough attention being paid to stressors external of the educational curricula or the institution. Qualitative research focused on obtaining depth and detail from learners' perspective on what the nature of stressors which affect learning are limited. Studies are mainly limited to examining stressors experienced as a result of being enrolled on a course of study alone and seldom looks beyond the educational institution and the course of study into the social ecology of the learner prior to and during the time of studying is absent in the literature. This is tantamount to a neglect of learner voice regarding their experience of stressors which affect their learning. There is a call for alternative approaches in investigating learner stress. However, following a positivist research approach would need to be large-scale in order to yield statistically significant patterns and correlations which can be generalised to other learners or demonstrate to FE practitioners and policy makers what works. This would be misguided based on the studies reviewed in seeking to give a voice to FE learners in the stress and learning literature. Educational research focussed on learner issues using a qualitative research approach to generate evidence that will help improve learning from a humanistic perspective centred on the learner and the learner-teacher relationship is missing in the

studies so far reviewed. Findings from learning research in the FE sector emphasises the learner-teacher relationship as an inherent value in learning conception and learner success, the extent to which this relationship ameliorates stressors experienced by FE learners is hardly researched in FE. As such, this study follows on the various investigations which are mainly quantitative in nature on stress and learning, to do with mainly academic performance on professional health related higher education courses. The implications from previous studies for FE educational practice are considered in investigating the unique and novel field of stressors which affect learning among a group of FE learners to add the literature on the phenomenon of stress, coping and learning.

## 2.12 Research Aims and Objectives

The aim of the study is to gain an understanding of BTEC Level 3 Business learners' perception of stressors which influence their learning.

### 2.12.1 Research Objectives

1. Describe stressors which affect learning among the learner group
2. Explore how learners cope with stressors which affect learning
3. Identify the available institutional support systems in place to help learners mitigate stressors which affect learning
4. Explore how the learner-teacher relationship influences the learning experience
5. Examine how stressors affect the experience of learning

## 2.13 The Case and Its Particularity

The study was designed as a single case study of BTEC Level 3 Business Studies course in an FE college in the East of England to explore stressors which affect their learning. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and used in-

depth interviews with internal and external key informants as well as documentary reviews to gather data so as to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic and build a theoretical framework for reflective and or reflexive practice of FE practitioners. The case study followed the typology of Thomas (2011) in which the subject studied is 'stressors which affect learning' and the object is 'BTEC Level 3 Business Studies learners as a group' through whose experiences the subject was studied. It is therefore an insider case study which is intrinsic and exploratory in nature.

FE Level 3 learners on the BTEC Level 3 Business Studies course, a pre-degree vocational educational qualification offered in the FE College where the study was conducted is also an essentially the vocational route to admission onto degree level studies in Business and related fields in higher education as well as a route to employment, were studied as a group. This is a particular case to study because the course is one of the courses which needs to make improvements in learner success rates. I, the researcher, also worked in another department in the College and therefore had internal knowledge and had ready access to both the internal and external informants of the case as well as the necessary documents needed to obtain as many data sets as possible. By virtue of working within the College, I was able to probe deeply into the subject through the objects experience while conducting this insider case study.

Furthermore, FE learners are unusual learners in that they are mostly adolescents pursuing a vocational route instead of academic route and come from various socio-demographic backgrounds including the NEET group and may have various challenges including motivational challenges when experiencing stressors which could affect their learning. Most of the learners



are somewhat educationally disadvantaged and are perceived as having poor social outcomes due to negative public perception and expectation because of being underachievers at school (Banerjee et al, 2016) among their peers who pursue an academic route of education in sixth form colleges. They could also be prone to an array of emotional and social difficulties owing to previous negative experience of education and upbringing, abusive and neglectful childhood, bullying and dysfunctional families. Some of the learners may even be looked after children coming from backgrounds of adversity (Wolke et al 2013; Sethi et al, 2013).

Additionally, the difficulties in the transition phase between adolescence and adulthood implies that learners would follow individual trajectories in their psychosocial development. Hence, a qualitative exploratory study that appreciates and investigates the involvement or influences social interstices or ecology of the FE learner which may particularly make them vulnerable and likely to experience potential stressors which may affect their learning is an appropriate study. This is particularly important as the passage through the adolescent developmental phase would undoubtedly evoke the interplay of personal agency and social structures of which their educational experience forms an undeniable and notable part. The unique individual experiences of stressors which adolescent FE learners might have could only be properly elucidated through reliance on their narrative accounts to understand how stressors affect their learning. The next chapter explains how this case study was designed, the case study protocol agreed and how the study was conducted.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, a clear gap was identified in the literature to do with research carried out in further education in the UK. It shows that research on learner stress is non-existent in the literature and other studies encompassing learner stress within the UK and internationally, mainly in the higher education sector, and focused on health professional students' experience of stressors which affect their learning, have tended to be quantitative rather than qualitative. In this chapter, why and how a qualitative research methodology; the case study approach is used to explore stressors which affect learning of BTEC Level 3 Business Studies learners instead of the originally intended learner participant group in another Further Education College in East Anglia, a different participant group in a different college is explained. An explanation of how the study was designed and conducted is also given. This chapter also looks intently at the purpose of the research and the research questions as well as the particularity of the topic being studied to provide a justification for using qualitative research methodology in the form of a case study to explore this new research area in further education in the UK. The theoretical underpinnings of the study's methodological standing have been carefully espoused. The study design is explained and justified as well as a description of how the study was conducted is provided in detail. It also includes the ethical challenges faced and how these were resolved and the institutional approval and ethical process undertaken in carrying out the study. A detailed description of the data collection procedures and an explanation of the approach to data analysis

adopted is intended to continue and conclude the chapter. This chapter therefore chronicles and analyses the practical research work undertaken to answer the research questions and highlights the theoretical approach and philosophical paradigm which guided the conduct of the study.

### 3.2 Qualitative Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology and the case study approach was chosen because it was compatible with the research aims and objectives (Patton, 2002). The aims and objectives related to understanding stressors which affect learning from the perspective of Level 3 FE Business Learners and FE staff who participated in this study. This choice of research design enabled the researcher to explore issues that pertained to stressors which affect learning, such as learners' conceptions of learning, stressors which they deem affects learning, response to stressors, coping actions, support available, accessible and deemed useful as well the learner-teacher relationship from the FE learner as internal case informants and the FE staff as external case informants' perspective (Patton, 2002). As such, the qualitative research methodology provided a means of reaching an understanding of these issues (Creswell, 1998; Marshall and Rossman 2006).

Information gathered from using the qualitative methodology in this case study was based on the participants meaning and understanding of stressors which affect learning (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative methodology of the case study made it possible to interact with the FE learners and FE staff at the college where the study was situated to obtain their perspective on stressors which affect learning (Creswell, 2003).

This study was conducted at an FE college in the East of England with Level 3 Business Studies learners and FE staff; lecturers, personal tutor and student

support advisors as participants. The focus of the study is on understanding stressors which affect learning. Therefore, a research design that would allow data to be collected from the participants' point of view was essential (Creswell, 2003 and Patton, 2002). Qualitative research according to Creswell (2003), allows the researcher to use multiple methods to interact with the participants in a humanistic way. Individual unstructured interviews were mainly used to collect data from the research participants and this was supplemented with document analysis, data extracted from learners individual learning plan (ILP). According to Creswell (1998), an understanding of the intent of qualitative research and its rationale is key to grasping the depth and breadth of the phenomenon being investigated (Glesne 2006; Patton 2002). Qualitative research enables the researcher to integrate all the information gathered in the research investigation to convince the reader about the importance of the phenomenon under study (Johnson and Christensen, 2008). Using this research methodology allowed the researcher to gather explicit data from the participants of the study; the learners and who were the internal and external case informants respectively. The data collected from the participants may not be representative of other FE learners in the same college or other colleges, however, the research aims and objectives provided a tool through which the phenomenon under investigation, stressors which affect learning in FE, were refracted through the lens of the case study participants to obtain their perspectives which was thoroughly informative (Patton 2002; Thomas 2011).

The research purpose, aims and objectives and the research significance were the determining factors in the choice of research methodology in this study. The purpose of this study is exploratory in nature following from the review of relevant literature that there is a serious absence of studies that examine stressors which affect learning in further education. The study gained

motivation from the extant literature on the topic to explore a relatively niche or virgin research area in FE. The study sought to understand from the perspective of learners and their learning experiences, what they perceive as stressors which affect their learning, their responses to these, coping strategies employed and how they are deemed effective or ineffective. In view of this, the choice of a qualitative research methodology supports the purpose of the study.

The research aims and objectives lend themselves to a qualitative research approach to enable the researcher to explore in depth and elicit narrative responses from the study participants to obtain rich detail and context to participants' responses and follow through any issue of interest to the research topic as it emerges in the study. In studies where participants' experiences are explored, qualitative methodology is preferable. Evidence abounds in studies exploring lived experiences of learning in FE (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000; James and Biesta 2007; Tedder and Biesta 2007; Gorard et al. 1999; Gorard and Rees 2002) on topics such as learner participation in learning and the nature of learning engagement (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001; Colley et al. 2003; Atkins 2008; Quinn et al. 2008). The methodological approaches used in the above studies are mainly qualitative owing to their exploratory nature and lends credence to the decision of the researcher to use a qualitative methodology as the study is being done in a setting which is natural and devoid of any specifically identified variables which needs to be tested or proven. Furthermore, a choice of the qualitative research approach is made to suit the contextual-progressive educational philosophical leaning of the study to enable a deeper level of exploration of the topic. This research approach would allow for flexibility in the research process, it would empower learners to place their voice in the research agenda formally, grant allowance for varying responses, and cater for unpredictability and reactions to changes as experienced in real

human lives and interactions. Situational and contextual issues which is varying for various individuals can be deeply explored using the qualitative research approach.

On reviewing the literature, the study leans on the theoretical perspective of the transactional nature of stress and coping and the humanistic model of learning. These perspectives are necessary to frame the study, inform questioning and demarcate arbitrary boundaries for the study as various things can be deemed as stressors. Stressors which affect learning therefore can be better explored using qualitative research methodology in the pursuance of an understanding of the meanings attached by a particular group of learners to various things from the reality of their learning experiences that affect their learning. A qualitative research approach enabled a deep understanding of the research topic and allow room for subjective detail which is necessary for participants to freely express themselves as individuals and in their own words and articulate their perceptions, feelings, emotions and reactions about the things in their psychosocial and other ecologies which they deem as a source of stress, worry or anxiety and is affecting their learning. Choosing the qualitative research approach enabled the subjective reality of how stressors affect learning, a phenomenon which is experienced differently by each individual participant to be elicited and elucidated in a holistic manner. The phenomenon under study cannot be isolated into multiple variables which can be independently studied as one objective truth (Vishnevsky and Beanlands, 2004). The approach enabled individual experiences to be explored in depth as the phenomenon is abstract and could be perceived differently by different individuals or the same individuals in varying circumstances (Polit and Beck, 2006).

Methodology of stress related research in education has tended mostly to measure and quantify results and use standardised instruments to collect data (Gallagher and Millar's, 1996; Akgun and Ciarrochi, 2003; Kyriacou and Butcher, 1993; Struthers et al., 2000; Spielberger and Krasner, 1988). However, this study has chosen deliberately to depart from this pattern and use a qualitative research methodology to explore the study topic. Jones and Kinman (2001), Hart (1998), Arhene (2001), Nash (2005), Jongserl and Dennis (2009) among others are supportive of the qualitative methodology in stress related research in education and advocate for it. There is a need for rich subjective detail that is intensive rather than extensive to answer the research questions and achieve the research purpose. The case for using qualitative research methodology is further augmented by understanding the varying nature in which stress is perceived by different people. This is highly individual, subjective, contextual and situational in nature and there is variance in the perception and experience of stress as well as in individual resilience to stress and coping abilities. Furthermore, to ruling out any potential quantification bias, the study was designed as a qualitative exploratory case study to investigate stressors which affect learning and offer a narrative account of a group of FE learners as internal case informants and FE teachers and other significant staff as external case informants.

### 3.3 Theoretical Position: Intrinsic Qualitative Single Case Study

The case study approach was chosen as the means to conduct this study because it is well suited to allow the exploration and understanding of complex issues. Learning is undoubtedly a complex issue and particularly in this case, the stressors which affect learning from the viewpoint of a specific group of learners and practitioners who work in FE. The case study research approach

was chosen because it appears to the researcher to be the most appropriate method which could help answer the research questions.

### 3.3.1 Case Study Definition

Yin (1984:23) defines the case study research method as:

*“an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”.*

Anthony and Jack (2009:1172) defined it as:

*“...a research methodology grounded in an interpretive, constructivist paradigm, which guides inquiry of a contemporary phenomenon within inseparable real-life contexts”.*

Thus, exploration is the main thrust of the case study and this makes it more suitable for this study as it is making a foray into a novel and practice orientated area in FE riddled with uncertainties which need exploration. Yin (1989) and Yin (2003) observed that research questions are definable in terms of the questions; who, what, where, how, and why? The case study approach is more suited to these questions which are exploratory in nature. It is also a systematic and organised way to produce information about a topic, especially activities and experiences of those involved in the study (Stake, 2000) and it allows a blend of qualitative and action research to enable a detailed focus on a phenomenon of interest and its effect on a case (Woodside, 2009). It is also beneficial in understanding situations of uncertainty and instability and helpful in reaching an analysis of what actions are practical and rational in these situations (Cooper and Morgan, 2008). As such, utilising the case study approach in this study is deemed helpful to achieve the research purpose of aiding heuristic FE practitioners in their work with learners geared towards learning improvement.



The case study approach has been used where a holistic and an in-depth study is required in various academic fields including education, health, management, politics, medicine and law (Gulsecen and Kubat, 2006; Lovell, 2006; Taylor and Berridge, 2006; Grassel and Schirmer, 2006). The case study approach allows a researcher to explore a phenomenon within a context to further its understanding from the perspectives of the study participants. This approach enables a detailed explanation of the process and outcome of a phenomenon using various data collection techniques and collecting data from various sources to inform analysis and evaluation of cases under study (Tellis, 1997). Gummesson (2000) explained that case studies are generally suitable for undertaking research inquiries where the researcher need to look at a whole situation and attempt to explain relationships between events and factors. The conduct of the case study, however, need to be based on the study of one or more cases on a given phenomenon to reach an understanding of a general nature regarding the effect of the phenomenon on the case. Woodside and Wilson (2003) added that case study research is inquiry focused on describing, understanding and controlling a case. They simply described the approach as a 'sense making' process created by the study sample. According to Van Maanen (1979), a case study is well-suited for gaining an in-depth understanding of phenomena from the participants' perspective and the case findings can have implications for set of cases of the same general type (Gerring, 2007). Stressors which affect the learning of learners in FE is not documented in literature. The case study approach was adopted because this research inquiry is focal in nature on a defined group of people as the case participants in to explore and describe the stressors which affect learning and answer the research questions. Furthermore, the case study gave the researcher liberty to use various methods to collect data and closely examine data within a specific context. This study is

novel in the sense that it explored a virgin research area in learning in FE. As such it used a methodology which would enable it to collect data from limited number of individuals located within a specific course in a selected college as the objects of the case study through whose narrative experiences, the subject of the case study; stressors which affect learning was studied.

### 3.3.2 Case Study Categories

According to Yin (1984) three categories of case studies exist; exploratory, descriptive and explanatory case studies. Exploratory case studies explore any phenomenon in the data which serves as a point of interest to the researcher. It serves as ground work leading to further examination of the phenomenon observed. Prior to fieldwork a small-scale data collection is advised prior to generating research questions, defining the boundaries of the study and thus preparing a framework of the study which determines the case study protocol (Yin, 1984, McDonough and McDonough, 1997). Descriptive case studies describe naturally occurring phenomenon within the data and the researcher describes the data in a narrative form. A descriptive theory is essential in supporting the description of the phenomenon. Data elicited from several sources can be compared and hypotheses formulated where a descriptive theory is used to examine the depth and scope of the case under study. Explanatory case studies look at the data closely and uses both surface and deep level approaches to examine the data and explain the phenomenon in the data by asking questions as to why the phenomenon is observed, form a theory and test the theory based on the data (McDonough and McDonough, 1997). It is mostly used where pattern- matching can be used to investigate complex and multivariate cases. Also, rival theories have been proposed by Yin and Moore (1987) to investigate such cases; knowledge-driven theory, a problem-solving

theory and a social-interaction theory as a means of explaining complex and multivariate cases. Knowledge-driven theory specifies that eventually products are the results of ideas and discoveries from basic research. Problem-solving theory asserts that products are derived from external sources rather than from research. Social-interaction theory however suggests that there is an overlapping professional network which causes researchers and users to communicate frequently with each other (Yin and Moore, 1987).

Various categories of case study are also mentioned by McDonough and McDonough (1997): interpretive and evaluative; Stake (1995): intrinsic, instrumental and collective; and Thomas (2011); where classification depends on the purpose and the research approach adopted. In interpretive case study, the researcher undertakes interpretation of data through development of conceptual categories and supporting or challenging assumptions made regarding them whereas in evaluative case studies there is an additional element where the researcher adds their judgement to the phenomena found in the data. Stake (1995) defines intrinsic case study as one in which the researcher examines the case for no other reason but for its own sake. Instrumental case study involves a selection of a small group of subjects to examine a certain phenomenon while the collective case study involves the researcher coordinating data from several different sources. Both instrumental and collective case studies allow generalisation of findings to a bigger population unlike the intrinsic case which set out to solve specific problems of an individual case. Thomas (2011) drew a distinction between the 'subject' of the study, the case itself and the 'object', the analytical frame or theory through which the case is studied. Classification of the case study is by means of its purpose and the research approach adopted. Following the distinctions made by Thomas (2011), this study is an intrinsic qualitative single case study as its purpose is to use

the insights obtained to aid FE practitioners in their effort to offer solutions to specific and individual learner problems they may encounter during their practice.

### 3.3.3 Case Study Advantages

The case study approach has several advantages. It may combine both quantitative and qualitative methods as it allows for multiple sources of data to be used. The examination of case study data is carried out in the context within which it is used (Yin, 1984). This thus allow for a situational and contextual consideration of data in making meaning of or understanding the phenomenon being observed or studied. The various categories of the case study approach offer the researcher a choice of a research approach which fits the purpose of the research and optimise the chances of answering the research questions in as much detail and comprehensively as practicable where categorical responses of individual subjects are being sought. Furthermore, a case study can either be a triangulation, purely qualitative or based entirely on quantitative methods (Yin, 1984). In this case study, qualitative methods were mainly utilised and use is made of only descriptive statistics as deemed necessary to represent certain aspects of data and documentary analysis undertaken to inform the study. The detailed qualitative descriptive accounts given throughout the study is advantageous in that the researcher can explore the topic through various ways of questioning data and explain the complexities of learning in real-life situations which may not be captured when standardised scales or scoring instruments are used in quantitative research on topics related to learning stress and coping.

### 3.3.4 Case Study Disadvantages

Yin (1984) noted that the case study researcher can be careless and allow ambiguous evidence or biased views to influence the direction of findings and conclusions and thus lacks rigour. Another criticism of the case study is that because only a small number of subjects are involved in the study, there is very little scientific basis for generalisation to whole populations (Tellis, 1997; Yin (1984). Yin (1984:21) posed the question; “*How can you generalise from a single case?*” Yin (1993) labelled the case study as ‘*microscopic*’ due to often limited sampling cases making generalisation difficult. Conducting case study research is bemoaned as being laborious, difficult to conduct and that it produces large amounts of documentation. Data management in terms of how it is organised systematically can be a challenging (Yin, 1984).

Despite the disadvantages and accusations hurled at the case study that there is a lack of clarity as to what constitutes the case study approach and makes it a scientific process and the researcher is aware that the case study does not fully fit the post-modern philosophy of scientific research (Kvale, 1995), it is deemed an appropriate research design (Bergen and White, 2000) and a valid research method (Jones and Lyons, 2004) as well as an appropriate research strategy (Yin, 2003). The case study approach is deemed appropriate for conducting this study within the context of various approaches to learning, the individual nature of learning, various influences on learning from various and multiple ecologies, variations in individual circumstances and interpretation of stressors, experience of stress, resilience and coping abilities among others. A consideration of the evolutionary extending roles of the of FE practitioners and the ever-changing FE policy landscape with emphasis on learning and accountability of learning, need for ongoing professional development of FE practitioners was also made in reaching the decision to use this approach in

other to get detailed and in-depth information on the topic under research. Where lack of generalisability is an issue, it is deemed by the researcher that setting the parameters of the case, establishing clearly the object of the study (Yin, 1994; Hamel et al (1993) and noting the particularity of the case to be studied far outweighs the issue of generalisability. In this study, the particularity of the case study, how it is framed based on relevant research reviewed in the initial literature review on the topic, how links are made to a theoretical perspective, as well as how a clear rationale of the study's relevance in contributing to heuristic practice in FE, maintaining health and well-being and potential learning improvement is given outweighs any criticism of generalisability as that is not the purpose of the study.

### 3.3.5 Case Study Design

There are two main types of case study design. A single-case or multiple-case study can be designed depending on the nature of the research question. In cases where replication is possible, a multiple-case design is recommended (Yin, 1984). The study is designed for that matter as a single-case study to focus on only BTEC Level 3 Business Studies learners experience of stressors which affect learning as a single case in a specific institution in one academic year of study. This choice of case study design is imperative as a multi-case design is uncalled for and the purpose of the study is exploratory rather than confirmatory. Also, time constraints on the research and the daunting process that was followed to gain access to an institution and research participants would have made a multi-case designed almost impossible to undertake at the time.

Thomas (2011) case study typology offered a framework to explore the case and determine clear units of analysis. Thus, provided a framework for categorising

and analysing the case study. The case study is phenomenological in nature. The case study research approach from the definition of Yin (1984) is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context, as such the phenomenon cannot be replicated in another setting as the boundaries of the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1984). As such the phenomenon is existent in its natural setting and is not subject to replication in another setting to be better understood. Stake (1995) sees the case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p.xi). This view of the case study flows from the interpretivist paradigm unlike Yin's which tend to lean towards the positivist paradigm (Bassegy 2009). This case study is intentionally designed to depart from the trend observed in the literature in studies which tend to rely heavily on quantitative measurements. The philosophical position adopted in this study is that of the constructivist-interpretivist tradition, laced with a realist and pragmatic epistemological orientation with development of praxis at its heart. As such, it is an eclectic, complimentary and inclusive approach (Howe 2003; Guba and Lincoln, 2008) and fits well with Stake (1995) description of the case study which focusses on the study of a single case with its particularity and complexity, to understand its activity within important circumstances. The flexibility afforded by the case study research approach in accommodating various philosophical positions without being aligned to any in particular deemed an important in allowing a research design tailored categorically at achieving the aims and objectives of this study.

Yin (1984) classifies case study research into exploratory, descriptive and explanatory case studies. Exploratory case studies lead to other studies or research questions, descriptive studies provide narrative accounts and

explanatory studies test theories. Stenhouse (1985) categorised case study research into ethnographic, evaluative, educational and action research case studies. Evaluative case studies were described by Stenhouse (1985) as a single case or collection of cases studied in depth to provide educational actors or decision makers with information to aid their judgement of the merit and worth of policies, programmes and institutions. Educational case studies, according to Stenhouse (1985), involves the researcher using case study methods but not necessarily concerned with social theory nor evaluative judgement but rather concerned with understanding educational action, to enrich thinking and scholarship as well as discourse among educators. This can be achieved through reflective documentation of evidence.

In deciding to use the case study as a research strategy, Yin (2002)'s description of the necessary conditions for selecting case studies as a research methodology was examined. Selection of case studies is supported by Yin (2002) when the type of research question being asked is "How" and "why" questions. These questions are more explanatory and favour the use of case studies. However, the aims and objectives of this case study is exploratory in nature and not explanatory. The second and third condition of Yin (2002) was looked at; the extent of control over and access to actual behavioural events as well as focus on contemporary events. The participants' perception of stressors, how stressors affect learning, how they react to stressors as well as coping behaviour cannot be manipulated. Also, stressors which affect learning can be deemed a contemporary phenomenon as the case study sought to examine what is currently happening among the study participants. However, because the study is exploratory rather than explanatory, Yin (2002) was not used as a singular definition to inform this case study.



Definitions of case study research vary and there is no single definition (Gustafsson, 2017). Cronin (2014) stated that defining case study research remains problematic, owing to the various terms that are in use, however, there is a clear focus on 'specific situations', resulting in a description of individual or multiple cases. A case study is seen as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit (Gustafsson, 2017). It is also described as being a systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other form of unit, where the researcher carries out an in-depth examination of data relating to various variables (Woods and Calanzaro, 1980) of a complex phenomenon in a natural setting, so as to further understand them (Hamel, 1993 and Yin 2003). Walsh et al (2000) also emphasised the systematic nature of case study research and how it has to be conducted over a period of time to obtain in-depth data. According to Burns and Groves (1997) and Yin (2009), there are large number of variables to do with the phenomenon under investigation.

This case study utilises in the main, Stakes (1995) single case study and uses the typology of Thomas (2011) as a framework to explore and analyse the case. The single case study design is helpful in enabling a holistic description of participants who are involved in a specific organisational setting and the single case study enabled a singular focus on exploring stressors which affect learning in a specific FE college among a specific learner group. It afforded me the researcher to carry out an organised, prolonged and intensive study of stressors which affect learning in FE (Litchman, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In carrying out this single case study, the complications of the phenomena of stress were able to be reduced to enable a clearer understanding of stressors which affect learning using unstructured interview method mainly informed by key themes from findings of related studies and the theoretical framework of

Lazarus and Folkman 1984 transactional model of psychological stress. The case study research approach also allowed discovering of patterns and themes in participants' narratives, and summarising the ESSENCE of the experiences of the study participants in the FE college, where the study was carried out (Creswell 2014, Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This research design further allowed flexibility in a purposeful selection of case study participants and focusing on individual in depth interviews with the case study participants about their conceptions of learning, the things which affect learning, coping strategies utilised, support available and accessible and how effective they deemed these. The nature of the learner-teacher relationship was also explored to reach a holistic understanding of stressors which affect learning in FE. Use was also made of documentary evidence from the learners, the internal participants' ILP to inform the study. The case study approach enabled a collection of rich and detailed data required to meet the research aims and objectives and lends itself to the phenomenological nature of the study having to do with psychological stress as explained in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping as well as Fletcher et al's (2006) meta model of psychological stress.

The case study approach was chosen as a suitable research strategy as it is deemed to be helpful in in-depth exploration of one or more individuals (Creswell, 2003). According to Stake (2000), this approach was an inquiry of stressors which affect learning in a further education college in the East of England and the FE learner perspective. The case study unit included all Level 3 BTEC Business learners and FE staff, located in the FE college in the East of England, who consented to participate in the study as internal and external case participants respectively, in as much as they contributed to the study by sharing their perspectives. The complexities and particularities of the above FE

learners and FE staff was undertaken to explore how stressors affect learning in FE (Stake, 1995). Detailed descriptive data was collected as far as possible (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) to enable an understanding of how the participants perceive stressors which affect learning in FE (Merriam, 1998) as well as response to stressors, coping actions, support systems available and accessible to learners, the learner-teacher relationship and the effectiveness of support received. The phenomenon under investigation was stressors which affect learning, and through the use of interviews (Marshall and Rossman, 1995), researchers can gain insight into the perspectives of the participants. Miller and Salkind (2002) described the procedures for collecting case study data and these include:

1. Provide an in-depth study of a bounded system, where the researcher is interested in developing an in-depth discussion and analysis of a bounded system. The researcher determines the type of case that will best yield information about the issue or determine if the case is important in itself to be studied. In this regard, Level 3 BTEC Business FE learners and FE staff in the same FE college in the East of England were selected to obtain their perspective on stressors which affect learning in FE.
2. Ask questions about the issue or phenomenon being examined or about the details of the case that is of unusual interest, thus asking research questions that addresses either an issue or problem or case. In this case study, various questions were asked of both the internal and external case participants that addressed FE learner construction of learning, stressors which affect learning, response to stressors, coping actions, learner-teacher relationship, effectiveness of support available and accessible to FE learners. These questions were posed to consenting participants using unstructured interview as the main method of

research (Stake 1995, Thomas, 2011) to explore the phenomenon under investigation. The use of this research method was helpful in obtaining detail and in-depth information as the focus of the case study was on exploring stressors which affect learning to gain an insight from the perspectives of the participants.

3. Gather multiple forms of data in order to develop in-depth understanding. Unstructured interviews were carried out with a total of ten consenting case study participants; five internal case participants and five external case participants. A total of ten digital audio recordings, ten transcriptions of interviews and five individual learner records were the data gathered and analysed using thematic analysis within case and cross-case analysis based on Ritchie and Spencer (1994) framework method.

4. Describe the case in detail, providing analysis of the themes that emerge. The researcher would need to develop a detailed description of the case through analysing within each case participant's narrative for themes and across all case participants' narratives for both common and different themes. The FE learners and FE staff who consented to participate in the study at the FE college were the case study unit explored by this study to gain insight into stressors which affect learning in FE from their perspective.

5. Describing and developing themes or issues in a case study, where the researcher needs to situate the case within its context. The researcher needs to relate the case description and themes to specific activities and situations involved in the case that emerged. The nature and purpose of the case study were explained in detail to all potential participants, so they are aware of what is being explored with them to gain insight into their perspective on stressors which affect learning. The case description relates to themes associated with

stressors which affect learning, a key specific activity within the case study unit. Description of data was done in terms of themes that emerge from the study inductively. These descriptions included themes that emerged from interviews with internal and external case participants to gain insight into their perspectives on the subject. These perspectives would undoubtedly have been influenced by the social ecologies in which they live and operate as well as the general FE context. As such these are also included in the case study.

6. Make an interpretation of the meaning of case; where the researcher interprets the meaning of the case either through learning about the issue of the case or any unusual situation. This case study is unusual as it represents the FE learner voice which is unusual in the literature. As such, the unusual situation of FE learners' perception of stressors which affect learning is espoused by this case study. The introduction and findings chapters of this case study addressed the FE context to include the social ecologies of the participants as well as provide background information and details of both internal and external participants perception of stressors which affect learning. Furthermore, being an exploratory case study, details of stressors which affect learning as perceived by the participants, the issues these raises and their examination through the application of theoretical perspectives and relevant wider literature are presented in the discussions chapter.

Using the case study research approach allowed me to take a broad and complex topic, stress, and narrow it down to manageable research aims and objectives (Heale and Twycross, 2018) and gained more insight into stressors which affect learning in FE as well as address the holistic nature of the phenomenon of stress. Sandelowski (1995) suggests that using case studies in research implies the holistic nature of a phenomenon can be addressed.

The case study approach enabled me, the researcher, to use the unstructured interview method to interview both internal and external case participants in the FE college where the study is situated to explore stressors which affect learning. Merriam (1988) deem the case study as a means of investigating complex social units where multiple variables of potential significance may be inherent to the understanding of a phenomenon. As such, being based in a real-life situation (Merriam, 1988), "a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon", in this case, stressors which affect learning, as perceived by the participants was obtained. My responsibilities as a researcher was to maintain accuracy and detail, and transparency in collecting, transcribing, analysing the rich and thick descriptions obtained from the case study participants as well as reporting accurately the data that emerged from this study pertaining to the research aim and objectives.

A single case or phenomenon can be studied using the case study research design (Cronin, 2014) and the researcher is at liberty when using case study research design to investigate 'everything' in that situation. This can be individuals, groups, activities or a specific phenomenon. This case study focuses on the phenomenon of stress and examines stressors which affect learning from the perspective of a particular group of FE learners, five Level 3 BTEC Business Studies learners in a particular college in the East of England as a single case. These learners constitute the internal case participants and five FE staff, in different job roles, which involves working with FE learners; Personal Tutor, Course Lecturer, Student Support Advisor, constitute the external case participants. All the learners were in the final year of a two-year study programme.

### 3.3.6 Case Study Unit of Analysis

In this case study, the unit of analysis was a group of FE learners as internal case informants and FE staff as external case participants. Cronin (2014) stated that the goal of case study research is to create a description of the case as accurately as possible. The spotlight, in this matter, referring to Hakim (1987) and Cronin (2014)'s description of the focus of the study, is on stressors which affect learning from the perspectives of the five FE learners and the five FE staff who participated in this study. Their perspectives on stressors which affect learning was elicited through unstructured in-depth interviews as the main method in this case study.

Thomas (2011, p 513) defined case studies as “analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will be an instance of a class of phenomena that provides an analytical frame—an object—within which the study is conducted and which the case illuminates and explicates.” The aim of the study was to explore stressors which affect learning in FE. This is the 'subject' which was refracted through the perspectives of FE learners and FE staff who participated in the study as the 'object', in terms of the typology offered by Thomas (2011), which provided a framework to study, the unit of analysis. Thomas (2011) sees the phenomenon under study as the subject of the case and the unit of analysis, the case study participants' perspectives as the object of the case. Thomas (2011) suggested three ways of selecting the subject of a case study as follows; it can be based on the researcher's familiarity with it, which is beneficial for practitioners and student researchers and this familiarity can also stem from the researcher's place of work, where opportunities exist for developing intimate knowledge and informed in-depth analysis. The second way of selecting a subject is the

intrinsic interest of the case and the third way is how the case may shed more light on the object because it is different. The subject of this case study was chosen based on the researcher's familiarity of the subject based on practice experiences, which necessitated a focussed and detail investigation into the subject. The object of the case provides an analytical focus and lies at the heart of the study and offers a means of interpretation and putting the study in context (Thomas, 2011). The purpose, approach and process of the case study is deemed important in organisation of the case study. In keeping with Thomas (2011)'s typology, this study is a single intrinsic qualitative case study which is exploratory. Thomas (2011) typology of case study therefore provided a roadmap, a guide, to explore and analyse this case.

The phenomenon under study, stressors which affect learning, being rooted in the perception of the case study participants are rooted in their everyday, real life learning and life experiences, including their social ecologies, has the propensity to make understanding the phenomenon difficult. The nature and sources of stressors are unpredictable, so are the reactions of different individuals to stressors, including how stressors are appraised, as well as the coping resources, support systems, available and accessible to individuals. The variables are many. Jones and Lyons (2004) pointed out that case studies tend to be focused on one or two issues that foster understanding of what is being studied. As such, the voice of the FE learners, the internal participants, was considered alongside the perspectives of the FE staff, the external case participants, documentary evidence from the learners ILPs were also gleaned to inform the study, as well as the context of FE including the social ecology of FE learners.



Overall, the strengths of using the case study research approach to achieve the aims and objectives of this study far outweighs its perceived limitations and hence the case study was adopted as the research approach in this study. In choosing the case study research approach, I the researcher was aware of its varied uses, applications and approaches and the fact that it has been deemed to be a pragmatic and flexible research approach (Harrison et al, 2017). Also, there are various approaches to case study research design, and this depends on individual researcher preferences and perspective on case study research as well as their ontological and epistemological orientation. The case study research design has been used to answer a wide range of research questions in various disciplines including health, social sciences, education, business and law (Harrison et al 2017).

Furthermore, although how case study research is defined and described is varied in the literature and can lead to potential confusion, the two-part definition of Yin (2014) puts emphasis on the scope, process and the methodological characteristics of case study research. Emphasis is laid how case study research is an empirical enquiry and the context of the case is deemed important. Stake (1995) puts the focus of case study research on the particularity and complexity of a single case in order to understand its activity within important circumstances. Stake (1995)'s definition presents a flexible and yet a rigorous approach in the processes undertaken in the case study focusing on what is being studied, thus the case rather than how it is studied, thus the method. Researchers who use the case study research design differ in their approaches, and this is reflected in the different elements that are emphasised in their research design, which adds to the diversity of approaches, definition and description of case study research....

In this case study, Stake's (1995) definition which allows a flexible approach and a focus on what is being studied and maintaining rigour in the processes followed was the underpinning definition adopted by the researcher. The particularity of the case is noted as the object of the case, which is level three business students studying in a further education college in the East of England, and the complexity of this case includes the social ecology of the learners. The approach adopted involved studying the FE learners who consented to participate in the study as internal cases participants, and consenting selected FE staff as external case participants, to understand stressors which affect learning in FE from their perspective. Merriam (2009) supports Stake (1995) in what is being studied, and the important circumstances of what is being studied as the object of the study and stressed the fact that case study research focuses on a particular thing, which in this case, is the stressors which affect learning from the perspectives of the case study participants. Merriam (2009) goes further to state that case study research should be descriptive and heuristic in nature. The heuristic import of this case study has been emphasised as helpful in informing FE practitioners in making decisions that will support learners to effectively cope with stressors which affect learning, and by so doing improve individual learning outcomes of the learners and learning achievement overall.

The choice of the case study research approach enabled me the researcher to conduct the study for the following reasons. It allowed exploration of a 'real-life' phenomenon, in this case, stressors which affect learning in an FE college. The case study approach was used to facilitate the investigation and interpretation of the perceptions of FE learners and FE staff who were the internal and external participants of this case study on stressors which affect learning. Additionally, the phenomenon of stressors being studied is not separable from the context in

which it occurs and cannot always be distinguished (Yin, 1984). The social ecologies of FE learners, their social environment and the various backgrounds from which FE learners come as well as the psychological stage of development, adolescent life stage, cannot be extricated from the stressors and provides a context in which this case study was conducted.

### 3.4 Ontology and Epistemology

According to Mason (2002), the position adopted by a researcher epistemologically and ontologically need to be made clear and identified to guide methodological decisions. Creswell (1998) as well as Polit and Beck (2006) deem the research process as underpinned and categorised by ontology, epistemology and methodology and these jointly guide the research approach adopted. Ontology deals with what reality is, its nature, and what there is to be known about the world, and epistemology is concerned with how we come to arrive at this knowledge, thus how we learn about the social world and what constitutes our knowledge base (Mason, 2002).

Different philosophical paradigms have emerged out of academic debates on ontology and epistemology. There are various positions that a researcher can take epistemologically and ontologically, depending on whether reality is seen as dependent or independent of our belief and understanding (Patton 2002 and Ritchie et al 2014). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) noted that various methodological preferences are associated with different philosophical paradigms, for example, interpretivism, positivism and realism. The epistemological and ontological approach adopted in this case study developed from how I the researcher have been shaped by the academic literature as well as the aim to ensure the different stages of the research process, the research methodology, method of data

collection and data analysis appropriate to the case study are aligned to my academic convictions ontologically and epistemologically.

There are various conceptions of knowledge, and epistemology, the conception of knowledge has in modern times (Bernstein 1976; Hanfling 1981 and Rosenau 1992) in essence been thought of to be a product of utilisation of reason to advance civilisation, direct and regulate human progress through innovation and change in spite of the existence of various epistemological traditions (Bell, 1974). Modernism, which is one of the traditions hold the belief that humans can reach agreement through common sense of ordinary discourse based on the existence of reality outside human thought (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). In investigating reality therefore, modernists need to distance themselves from their viewpoints in order to discover, decipher or know and obtain truth from the objective world (Raelin, 2007).

Modernism have many branches, however, positivism, also termed logical empiricism, is mostly associated with the view of facts being based on "positive" data and experience with reality is described and explained as a result of manipulation of theoretical propositions using formal logic (Lee, 1991). Knowledge in this modernist tradition, is objectified and regarded as more "truer" and more valid, because it is seen as having undergone rigorous methods of theory testing (Raelin, 2007). Knowledge is expressed through logical relationships usually defined through the use of mathematical expressions and language. Knowledge gained this way is thus reformulated, retested and has its precepts and procedures subjected to public scrutiny (Hoshmand and Polkinghorne, 1992). Positivists regard knowledge acquired through science to be superior to knowledge gained from values, feelings or untested experience owing to keeping to objective and unbiased methods. As such theory that lends

itself to testing proposition is relegated to the thought realm to serve purposes such as establishing connections between ideas and determining causal relationships that exists among phenomenon (Sutton and Staw, 1995). There is an assumption of knowledge permanence and tangibility which is accessed through reason and intellect rather than through practice, reflection and discourse (Leitiche and Van Hattem, 2000); Dewey, 1938 and Damasio, 1994). In this sense, knowledge is thought of something that is fixed and not fluid and contributions from practice-based evidence and reflection on experience that could enable its revolution are not acknowledged (Styhre, 2003).

However, social theory brought in the use of language in knowledge production by means of transference of one mind to another. The hermeunetic school as well as discourse theory demonstrated that reflection on practice and experience can expand knowledge and improve practice (Bergson, 1968; Lyotard, 1997). The work of Henri Bergson, Antonio Gramsci and Pierre Bourdieu which has led to the concept of *duree*, common sense, and *habitus* demonstrated that a recursive relationship exist between structure and agency. The people being shaped by the world, can also shape the world at the same time the world is shaping them. Bergson's conception of lived time in the concept of *duree* shows people as being in a constant state of becoming. The case is thus made for knowledge as something which is not just rooted or based on past thinking or cognitive activity of learning, but as phenomenologically composed of real experiences in the present as well as the anticipated future (Bergson, 2001).

Health research according to Burns and Grove (2001) was dominated by positivism, which recognises knowledge as being either empirical or logical with importance attached to empirical knowledge (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Empirical knowledge underpins the natural sciences and logical knowledge has

to do with logic and mathematics. Positivism sees human behaviour as objective, observable and quantifiable and uses research methods of observation and experiment. Williams and May (1996) noted the research quest in this paradigm is that of objectivity and distance between the researcher and those being studied. A hypothesis is usually developed before the commencement of a research study in the positivist approach which is developed from a theoretical perspective. Causal relationships are sought and the focus is on predictions and control (Myer 2009; Williams and May, 1996).

The positivist approach is criticised by qualitative researchers for not being able to capture the in-depth understanding of an experience or phenomenon being researched. Additionally, its perceptions of the social world are treated in this approach as objective or absolute according to Burns and Grove (2001). The position adopted by the positivists is that there is a social reality that exists outside individuals and this is separate from the individuals being studied (Morse and Field, 1996). There are arguments that different ways of knowing about the world exist other than direct observation and experiment and also that perceptions also relate to the senses and human interpretations of what the senses are communicating (Kant, 1781; Ritchie et al 2014). According to Bowling (2014), the interpretivist approach is gaining ground in the field of health research owing to the need for an in-depth understanding of the reasons behind the existence of variables as the links between variables are being studied. Lincoln and Guba (1990) sees Kant's original view as influential in the criticisms levelled at positivism leading to a shift in paradigm among social researchers resulting in the use of interpretivism.

Interpretivism, which is rooted in philosophy and human sciences is about making sense of the subjective reality and the meaning we humans attached to

it, with emphasis laid on understanding and studying peoples' lived experiences within a social context (Balikie 2009; Delanty and Strydom 2003, Hollis 1994 and Ritchie et al 2014). Dilthey contributed heavily to the development of interpretivism and argues that self-determination and creativity are key in guiding human action. As such it is pertinent for research to explore lived experiences of people participating in a study to reveal the connections between different aspects of peoples' lives and the context in which their actions take place (Blaikie 2009; Ritchie et al 2014; Myer 2009).

Other philosophical paradigms such as constructionism and constructivism exist. The constructionist approach to empiricism is seen as follows; questioning the value of empirical data; a priori processes; and cognitive structures independent of human perception and social experience. Knowledge is built from scratch in this wise, depending on the availability of new information, and new realities are created out of social interactions (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Daft and Weick, 1984). In constructionism, social constructs are selected and pinned to time and space to particular cultures and so are not intrinsic to nature or acts of divine will. The constructionists hold that theories we hold of the world cannot only be known outside of reality but can also be nearer the very reality on which they are constructed. There is a refutation of an unconditioned objective foundation of knowledge by the postmodernist, who embraces the notion that our theories are organically embedded in our culture and therefore conditioned by our view points. As such knowledge is based on perspective, thus it is perspectival, in the absence of a transcendental approach to ultimate reality, comparison of worldviews can be undertaken as if the world exists independently of our views (Clark, 1993).

However, constructivism takes varied forms, and its arguments philosophically flow from a rational foundation for knowledge (Schanddt,1998). Constructivism is common to interpretivism in sharing the belief that interpretation has a place in understanding the world and as such shares an overarching framework with interpretivism in human inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Differences however exists the approaches adopted in both paradigms (Schwandt, 1998; Delanty and Strydom, 2003). The distinctiveness of human inquiry, choice and individualism make qualitative researchers to widely adopt the interpretivist approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

The aims of this case study, which is to explore stressors which affect learning in FE, based on the perceptions of the FE learners and FE staff, the internal and external case study participants respectively, the effectiveness of the support systems available and accessible to learners and the coping methods adopted fits in well with the interpretivist paradigm. The concepts of stress and coping although explored in different learning environments, most of them have been in the higher education sector and mostly utilised a positivist thus quantitative approach. There is a dearth in the literature of studies carried out in FE, and the positivist, quantitative approaches, utilised lacks in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Hence adopting an interpretivist approach in this case study allowed a different interpretation of stressors which affect learning in FE to be explored. The subjective reality of individual participant's experience was captured and attests to the argument that stress and coping does not mean the same thing to everybody (Aldwin, 2009). Adopting the interpretivist approach allowed for the different realities of individual case study participants to be explored. The choice of interpretivism was made as the underpinning philosophical paradigm with the goal of understanding the meaning of a social situation from the perspectives of the case study



participants who live in the situation as opposed to an approach that would explain reality based on generalised facts.

The interpretivist paradigm is of the view that all reality is socially constructed, as such people create their own mental construction of reality (Robson 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Interpretivist researchers therefore accept an epistemology and ontological belief that reality is socially constructed and makes understanding of the meaning of social actions using appropriate methods of inquiry to study the social world, which is mediated through meanings and individual perceptions (Ritchie et al 2014). Qualitative methodologies are underpinned by a philosophical paradigm referred to as constructive-interpretive (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) who deemed the constructionist and interpretive paradigm as compatible. According to Ritchie et al (2014), interpretivism and Max Weber's *Verstehen*, thus understanding approach are linked, and one has to gain access to the experiences of people in order to gain understanding of them. Methods such as listening to people and observing them are deemed as appropriate means of achieving this understanding instead of using numerically determined probability and other mathematical manipulations to explain human behaviour and actions (Myer 2009). Reality in the interpretive approach is achieved via social constructions in the form of consciousness and shared meanings (Myer, 2009), making interpretivism taking on a constructionist angle, which recognises that the world is created and recreated through social construction where people act consciously in doing so and grasping the meaning of the individual's experience becomes the concern of human scientists (Williams and May, 1996). As such understanding of individuals' subjective interpretations can be achieved through the individual's use of language and symbols (Williams and May, 1996). The use of language helps in describing our world as well as how we construct

the world we perceive (Burr 2003). In the light of the philosophical paradigms above, the constructivist-interpretivist approach lends itself very well to the use of the case study research design.

### 3.4.1 Case Study Philosophical Stance

In this case study, the philosophical orientation of constructivism-interpretivism was adopted on the premise that multiple realities and meanings exist, and this depends on and can be co-created by the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 2011; Yin 2014). This philosophical orientation enabled the researcher to use the opportunity afforded by this philosophical orientation to decide how to conduct the case study (Stewart 2014; Yin 2014). Stake (1995)'s definition is closely aligned to this constructivist-interpretivist philosophical orientation, where the discovering of meaning and seeking understanding of experience in the context it occurs is key, and the role and involvement of the researcher in knowledge production is seen as critical (Harrison, 2017). Stake (1995, 2006) also emphasised the researcher's interpretive role. The position adopted is that reality is viewed as multiple and subjective and based on meaning and understanding that is attributed to it. In this case study, the meaning and understanding that the study participants; the FE learners and FE staff attach to stressors which affect learning in FE. According to Stake (1995), the knowledge that is generated is relative to time and context of the study and the researcher has an interactive and participative role in the study (Harrison et al 2017).

Epistemologically, situational analysis according to Stake (1995) is paramount as he believes the situation shapes activity, experience and one's interpretation of the case. Stake (19995) argues that the context in which activity and experience occur is important epistemologically to understanding the case. This

implies that understanding the context in which the case occurs and a particular situation in which a case occurs is important. Thus, in studying the case situationally, there is the need for an examination of the system or the interrelated system in which the case occurs. As such, a case is selected for what it can reveal about the topic of interest. In this case study, the topic of interest is stressors which affect learning in FE. Stake (2006) posit that cases selected because of how one can facilitate understanding or because it is interesting in itself and also because it is key in providing insight into a topic area. The internal and external case participants were selected exactly for this purpose to allow the researcher to gain insight from their perspectives on stressors which affect learning in FE. Stake (1995) is of the view that multiple sources of methods of data collection and analysis can be used, but interviews and observations are preferred and are dominant as data collection methods. In this case study, the unstructured interview method was used to obtain in-depth data from the study participants as well as documentary analysis of the individual learning plans of the internal case participants. According to Harrison (2017), the researcher is a participant or partner in the discovery and generation of knowledge. Direct interpretations and categorical grouping of findings were used in this case study. Thematic analysis within case and across the case were used based on Ritchie and Spencer's (1984) framework analysis. Illustrations including participants' description were used to convey findings in support of the constructivist-interpretivist approach to case study research.

While the interpretivist position is deemed suitable for the case study research approach, consideration was also given to the philosophy of praxis (Gramsci, 1973) which shares commonalities with the constructionist-interpretivist philosophical paradigm, in that it has as its bedrock, knowledge creation from the real experiences of individuals and fosters understanding. The construction

of knowledge based on real experiences is in line with the philosophy of praxis (Gramsci, 1973), which is essential in that it allows stock to be taken to find out the rules and norms governing momentary and collective understanding (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001). The use of language in such focused activity allows bridging between theory and practice. Also, engaging in discourse and reflection is pertinent in enhancing self-understanding and praxis as well as generating knowledge which can be shared through communication (Raelin, 2007).

Epistemologically, the postmodern view is more suited to practice development as it appreciates the value of knowledge and its utilisation to the practitioner (Raelin, 2007) without particular attention to generalisability. Attention is instead focussed on the specific practical knowledge of a subject matter in a specific situation, and the subjective experience of the practitioner is recognised. Further development of practical understanding and application of this practical knowledge to specific situations encountered in practice is thus fostered by postmodernist epistemology. According to Schon (1983), Aram and Salipante 2003; and Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), through the use of conversations with other practitioners and detailed language, practitioners are able to develop their understanding further on how to better engage with their practice tasks, making knowledge generation intrinsically social, transactional, open ended, proactively useful (Raelin, 2007) and pragmatic in nature. This case study seeks to inform current FE practice and seek to influence FE practitioners' heuristics towards supporting learners to effectively deal with stressors which affect learning.

The constructionist-interpretive philosophical approach and an epistemology rooted in pragmatic development of praxis was adopted as necessary to provide

the rigour necessary to achieve the aim and objectives of the case study, including understanding stressors which affect learning in FE, from the perspectives of the case study participants, a social phenomenon, which does not exist independently of their knowledge of it. From the discussions above, interpretivists are of the view that meanings are not fixed and are always being created, as such, the use of the interpretivist philosophical paradigm allowed me the researcher to adopt data collection methods and analysis that allowed me to capture the meanings of a phenomenon, stressors which affect learning, from individual case study participants to inform development of praxis and heuristics among FE practitioners. Hence, a qualitative methodology was adopted using the case study approach to explore the phenomenon of stressors which affect learning in FE from the perspectives of the case study participants.

The choice of the case study approach and its phenomenological nature allowed me the researcher to engage in the process of knowledge generation, based on the data of experience collected from the internal and external case study participants through the use of unstructured interview method. Epistemologically, the case study design afforded me the researcher the privilege of insight into the perceptions of the case study participants through conversations focused on understanding stressors which affect learning in FE. The perspectives shared by the participants based on their experiences are important in the development of praxis through Bourdieu's habitus, the way people internalise social structures, as there is an understanding that as social agents, irrespective of being conditioned historically in acting in a certain way, we can change our ways of perceiving and acting by using the tools of consciousness and analysis (Bourdieu, 1990). The practical application of the knowledge generated in this case study is seen in aiding FE practitioners' development of praxis and heuristics in their work in providing support, advice

and guidance to FE learners to cope effectively with stressors which affect their learning. Their current and future practice can be reinforced or changed as a result of incorporating the finding of this case study into their practice in terms of continuous professional development.

As such, the study was designed to intentionally digress from the positivist and modernist scientific philosophies as well as the methodological bias towards positivist epistemology, measurement and quantification that is prevalent in the stress related literature. The study adopts the philosophical stance of Sayer (1998) and follows a critical realist epistemological tradition of not being attuned to the positivist or post-modernist tradition. This centrist approach is believed by the researcher to be less restrictive in terms of study design and the entire research process and is necessary to allow for realism to emerge with findings that will spell out implications for FE learning practitioners. Realism and humanism in the researcher's view can mutually coexist and influence each other in impacting the work of FE practitioners to derive the utmost outcomes in learning improvement for learners. Nash (2005), Arhene (2001) and Jongserl and Dennis (2009) demonstrated these in their studies on stress and education.

The researcher is persuaded that a constructivist research perspective which views validity as knowing when specific enquiries are trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Lincoln and Guba, 2000) lends itself to a holistic exploration and elicitation of valid responses from participants' real life experiences that are trustworthy and so have the potential to offer an opportunity for the emergence of further understanding of stress and learning as well as suggest alternative strategies to inform learning improvement in FE, which is a topical issue in the sector (James and Brown, 2007; James and Biesta, 2007; Gleeson, 2005, Falchikov, 2013 and Hodkinson et al, 2007).

### 3.5 Reflexivity in Research

Reflexivity was used to make clear how I came about the research topic and made methodological decisions by using the first-person singular pronoun in aspects of my writing. I set out to explore stressors which affect learning in FE, owing to the wealth of practice experience that I have in FE on the issue and the fact that the topic is interesting in itself for development of praxis. I was well positioned as an FE practitioner to study this topic at the workplace and elucidate it, using empirical evidence based on the perspectives of FE learners and selected FE practitioners who became the internal and external case study participants. Hence, I see my background, beliefs and experience as having a positive effect and adding value to the study in terms topic selection, methodological decisions, purposeful sample choices, research methods, data collection and data analysis.

#### 3.5.1 Researcher Background and Beliefs

The bulk of my educational experience was in Ghana, West Africa. The didactic method of teaching where the teacher had to transmit information to the learner and the learner's job is to recollect, understand, apply and extend this with minimal support outside the classroom was prevalent at the time. This was the norm during my compulsory years of education from mid-1970s through to completing first degree in mid-1990s. We the learners were keen and motivated to learn as learning was a passport to a better lifestyle as it brings with it many opportunities including getting a good employment.

I came to the United Kingdom in 1997 to train as a mental health nurse and qualified in the year 2000 and worked in various positions as a mental health nurse caring for patients including adolescents who were college and university students. I have worked in inpatient care and the community and have

encountered patients who were adolescents in these settings. I had a combined experience of twelve (12) years of mental health nursing experience prior to moving into teaching. I had started teaching in clinical practice, training nurses, health care assistants and foreign trained nurses as well as supporting psychology and psychotherapy students while they are on placement. I have sat in a lot of clinical and care decision making meetings with patient relatives, independent advocates and legal representatives and have throughout my nursing practice advocated for clients in my care by representing their voice at such multidisciplinary meeting and other formal settings such as mental health review tribunal. The ethics of my training as a mental health nurse has been rooted in the best interest principle and the duty of care owed to my clients. Meeting identified patient/client care needs based on Abraham Maslow's humanistic hierarchy of needs and working collaboratively with the client and putting them at the centre of their care has been a model of care that I hugely subscribe to and utilise in my assessment, planning, intervention and evaluation of nursing care following the nursing process as a scientific tool or framework. Dorothy Orem's (1991) self-care theory and the Tidal of model of care (Barker, 2001) are key models that underpin my professional practice as a nurse. I have been a preceptor and mentor of nurses in professional practice and has occupied managerial positions in which I conduct both clinical supervision and managerial appraisals. I have tendered to use models such as Schon's 1983 reflective model and that of Moon (2004) and Flanagan's CSA consultation model as well as various eclectic amalgamation of humanistic models to underpin my practice, supervisory and managerial role. As a clinical teacher, I believe that psychomotor training as well as cognitive training is critically essential to possessing the observable skills of a nurse or healthcare worker. I also believe that reflection is key to improvement in nursing practice



and encourage this in my approach. I also believe that there is a need for time to be given to learn, and to practice what has been learnt repeatedly to master it and then begin to improve or adapt it as necessary. I also have an understanding that issues outside the domain of work such as family, health, socio-cultural including religion, immigration status, previous educational attainments and finances among others can affect the quality of work of the staff and student-professionals that I have taught and supervised.

I became heavily involved with in house teaching, research, development and marketing during my mental health nursing career in the private sector. Because of spending majority of my working time in educational activities than actual patient care, I decided to train to gain a formal teaching qualification and enrolled on a PGCE in Lifelong Learning in a Further Education College in the East of England. I was appointed to the post of Lecturer in Health and Social Care in the FE college I was studying and have been teaching for the past seven (7) years in FE. I have taught in a total of three (3) colleges, all in East Anglia. During my PGCE training and my work as a teacher in FE, I have interacted with both learners and FE practitioners such as lecturers, personal tutors, student services staff and heads of departments and have heard stories of the how learning can be a challenge for some learners owing to various things that affect their learning. These things were mentioned as sources of stress for the learners and at times the lecturers and personal tutors. However, a cursory search of the literature for personal development purposes revealed that little is known about stressors which affect learning in FE from the learners' perspective. This led to the quest to conduct a focal study primarily designed to focus on the learners I work with to unearth some of these things and give learners a voice in the literature as well as make contributions to the communities of practice to which this information would be helpful. Decision

making is encountered numerous times in the day of the FE practitioner to do with supporting a learner to learn more effectively that the heuristics of this on part of FE practitioners could potentially be improved by the awareness of similar situations. The researcher prior to the design and conduct of this study holds a belief that there are things that negatively influence learning of FE learners and this occurs because they are unable to cope with them or deal with them effectively owing to lack of awareness of available support or the absence of helpful support mechanisms. The researcher believes that the things that affect learning in this way could be things that the learner has control over or does not have control over. They could also be things that are not known to the FE practitioners working with the learners. Furthermore, the where these are known, it may still be affecting learning because nothing is done about them on the part of the learner or their significant others including FE practitioners or that these things are being dealt with ineffectively. The researcher also believes that individual differences such as perception of stress, reaction to stress, resilience, coping mechanisms and abilities and social support systems are crucial to successfully overcoming stressors which affect learning. The researcher also believes based on his humanistic convictions that it is the individual learner who is best positioned to explicate what these stressors are and FE practitioners could play a vital role in assisting the individual learner to effectively deal with these stressors to see improvements in learning. The researcher believes in the progressive philosophy of education and is of the view that learning extends beyond the classroom and for learning to be effective both individual factors and external factors which has the potential to affect it need identification individually and managed effectively to ensure good learning outcomes.

### 3.5.2 Researcher Influence

Being reflexive was also considered important in showing researcher awareness at different stages of the research process and was helpful in ensuring that the FE learner voice is heard in this study and is not overshadowed by my background or experiences. In this vane, I have stayed true to the philosophical principles guiding the study. Reflexivity is deemed important from the constructionist-interpretivist philosophical orientation and the post-modern realist epistemological tradition, where self-awareness is ensured during the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Gentles et al 2014; Polit and Beck, 2006; Parahoo, 2006). The choice of the above ontological and epistemological positions is deemed valuable to the study in putting FE learner voice at the forefront of the research and adding value to the perspectives of the case study participants. These would not have been invincible otherwise in the research study. Although criticisms exist that reflexivity does not fully account for the effects a researcher has on a study (Finlay, 2000), there is value in sharing how the researcher may have influenced the study (Gentles et al 2014). The following excerpts from my reflexive memos demonstrates how aspects of researcher influence was dealt with in the study.

### 3.5.3 Reflexive Account – Research Stage – Methodology

I set out to explore in-depth stressors which affect learning in FE from the perspectives of FE learners and FE practitioners and made a conscious decision to use the qualitative research approach. Although I entertained the idea of using a mixed methods approach, where I could have used a validated stress research instrument such as perceived stress scale (PSS) in addition to interviews, I concluded that I will only be repeating what was already mainly in the literature. I was of the mind that this approach may not yield the in-depth

data required to fulfil the aspiration that I had, which is to explore this topic in-depth, and entertained fears that it may just be a tick box exercise for some of the case study participants. I had this preconception flowing from how I have come to know how FE learners behave when it comes to completing learner surveys for instance as part of FE college quality measures. Most learners anecdotally just tick boxes and do not put much thought into it and I do not want this attitude to be extended to any research instrument, for example, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), that I could use. This pervasive culture of FE learners anecdotally not engaging with learner survey questionnaires with completion rates almost always poor made me to decide against using a mixed methods approach. Furthermore, learner stress in FE has not been explored in the literature and can be considered a niche and virgin territory, that needs an explorative study. Although I have previous qualitative research experience, I attended seminars and training workshops and develop skills in using computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). Ontologically, I adopted the constructivist-interpretivist approach as the aim of the study is to explore stressors which affect learning flowing from the believe that knowledge does not exist independent of human thoughts. I ensured in spite of this belief that my preconceived ideas are not imposed on what the case study participants are saying.

#### 3.5.4 Reflexive Account: Participant Involvement in Research Process (PIP)

I find the readiness of the learners I approached (health and social care students) to offer their views to help me develop the research questions surprising. I was surprised because of the negative “vibes” I had received earlier about how the learners I teach would not be able to disclose much to me about the sensitive topic of stressors which affect learning since they are too close to

me from a representative of a research and ethics panel, I approached. The learners readily engaged with me and told me how they would have preferred the questions to be asked and went further to say that they would participate in the research study. This experience gave me confidence to persist with negotiating access to the institution where the study was carried out. Although I had to change the learner group from health and social care to business students, to satisfy the requirements of the institution so as to gain access, I was optimistic as a result of the positive experience of the PIP that FE learners will engage with the research process.

### 3.5.5 Reflexive Account: Data Analysis

In analysing the data, a cross case and within case thematic analysis was employed using the framework method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1984), to enable patterns to emerge that is representing the case study participants voice which is paramount in this study. Since I also work in FE, have a wealth of experience I was care full to set aside my preconceptions and rather used the participants' data as a thinking tool to understand their perspective. As such within the context of data analysis, the focus remained on the contributions of the case study participants. I listened attentively during the data collection phase in the interviews and asked for clarifications, where I was unsure and checked for meaning all along. The data was also analysed inductively, with the thematic coding framework generated from within the case study participants' narratives. The value my experience of FE brought to the study was that I readily identified with most of the things that they were telling me as some of it were similar to some of the experiences I have had. Even in such situations, I doubled check for understanding.

### 3.6 Participant Involvement in Case Study Design

Prior to designing the initial case study protocol and drafting the learner participant information sheet for the study, I consulted six learners who were similar FE college students like the potential participants of this study to contribute ideas to the way questions are put to the learners in an understandable manner. These learners were in their final year of Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma Health and Social Care course and were also taught by the researcher. I discussed sample questions with them as a group and they gave useful advice and suggestions on the type of phraseology to use and made helpful contributions to enable the ease of understanding of sample questions to be asked. They also made contributions into the designing of the flyer used to recruit internal case participants of the study. When this group of learners were asked whether they themselves will be willing to participate in the study although I, the researcher, I am also their teacher, 5 out of 6 stated that they will happily participate in the study. When asked whether they will be willing to readily talk about their learning and the things which affect it freely. They responded in the affirmative that they feel comfortable to so because they feel comfortable talking to me, a person they can trust compared to someone else that they do not know. They also mentioned that the face to face nature of the interview will help learners talk as well because in their age group as they do not have time to fill forms, its 'txt, BBM and talk'. Having a conversation is so much better and they could say their 'bit'. The participant involvement in designing the initial case study protocol this way was encouraging and convincing to the researcher, in that the interactional cum conversational nature of the unstructured interview method is best suited to achieve the purpose of the study, to elicit learner views and perspectives on the stressors which affect their learning.

### 3.7 Initial Case Design – First Case Study Protocol

The study was initially designed to focus on recruiting BTEC Level 3 Health and Social Care learners as participants from an FE college where the researcher was also a lecturer at the time in the department of health and social care. The researcher applied for institutional approval and ethical clearance from this institution and faced difficulties in gaining approval to formally gain access to these learners for the purposes of the research study. There were significant delays in the institution's ethical approval process and the process was fraught with communication difficulties and the outcome was deemed by the researcher as indeterminate at best in the absence of any conclusive response from the committee. Concerns were initially raised to do with the closeness of I, the researcher to the potential participants and absolute assurances were requested from me to ensure that the study participants would not be exposed any form of psychological or emotional harm by the type of questions that I might ask due to the proposed unstructured interview method to enable full consideration of the application. Clarifications were provided and revisions were made to the initial case study protocol in view of the ethical concerns raised and requirements made by the ethics committee including allegations of potential researcher bias due to the closeness of the researcher to the potential research participants.

#### 3.7.1 Negotiating Access at First Institution

To gain access to the internal and external case study participants in a college setting, gatekeepers (Powell and Smith, 2009) needed to be approached to approve the study and allow access to the study participants. In the first instance, I approached the institution via its Research Ethics Panel (REP) while working as a member of staff at that institution. I was met with scepticism over

the data collection method of using one to one unstructured interviews of an interactional manner, and allegations of potential researcher bias and conflict of interest were levelled at the researcher. The REP and its representative particularly raised concerns about potential risk of inducing psychological harm or anxiety to internal case participants and requested that I guarantee that there will be absolutely no psychological harm or anxiety experienced by potential participants because of their participation in the study as one of the conditions to allow access. Another requirement was that I would have to contact potential research participants through a nominated college-based research supervisor, the REP representative, and notify the supervisor of all research undertakings in the institution. I responded to the REP courtesy of their representative and addressed the concerns raised nevertheless and received no acknowledgement or response.

There was a significant delay over one and half years, waiting for the REP to reach a decision on whether to allow the study to progress or not. Communication with the REP was extremely difficult as the committee took considerably long times in responding to email communications, denied receiving postal correspondence and turned down requests for a face to face appointment to discuss matters raised as concerning. There was a perceived general nervousness and unwillingness of the committee to deal with me as a researcher. Other researchers (Lacono, 2006 and Hammersley, 2009) also observed that there is a lack of goodwill from some ethics committees as they tend to be conservative and generally out of touch with current research practices (such as insider research, interactive nature of unstructured interviews, exploring sensitive topics) becomes over protective over certain sections in society with the resultant effect of silencing the voice of people in such sections unwittingly in the literature. This could perhaps explain why the



literature is extant about the participation of learners in further education. According to Lacono (2006) non-involvement in research of sections in society denied by ethics committees continue to place them in “*a too hard basket*” where ethical approval is concerned. My response to the concerns raised by the ethics committee at this institution was neither acknowledged as satisfactory to approve the study and grant access nor unsatisfactory to refuse access. The committee did not respond to all chase up methods of the researcher to find out the outcome of the committees’ decision, following the submission of a written response addressing all the areas of concern raised by the committee addressed to their nominated contact. The outcome of over one and a half years of negotiating access at the first institution could be best described as frustrating, difficult, discouraging and unwelcoming. My perceived indecision and/or lack of communication on the part of the REP coupled with the significant delay this was causing to the conduct of the study led me the researcher to approach another FE college after securing a job at that college as a Lecturer in Health Sciences to seek access to carry out the study.

### 3.7.2 Dealing with Potential Researcher Bias

This is a reflection over my responses to concerns raised by the representative of the REP at the first institution approached to seek approval and access to conduct the study in how I the issue of researcher bias is being dealt with during the study. I offered a rationale for the interactional nature of the study design and how I have elected to deal with the inextricable nature of my influence as a researcher on the study to adequately represent learner voice and make credible assertions from the study from the outset before data collection, during data collection and after data collection. I invited the REP to offer any suggestions that they would deem satisfactory to grant me access to the college to carry out

the study and received no response in this regard albeit I have the understanding that the REP is under no obligation to do so as per their own policy and has the power to prevent the study from taking place if further clarifications that I provided them were still deemed unethical or concerning.

I explained at the time of responding to them that although the study is being focussed on the interactions between the learners and myself, the researcher, a person whom some of them used to know (*I had then stopped working at the college but the study was conceived and incubated there whiles a teacher at the college and some of the potential participants may still know me*), the purpose is to give learners a voice through understanding the issue of the case from the learners' perspective and thus making the study instrumental in this endeavour. I stressed the fact that the issue being studied has been acknowledged by the learners and most FE practitioners to exist anecdotally through learners own voluntary expressions and conversations with their personal tutors, fellow learners and other FE staff. Further, it was made clear that the theoretical stance of the study agrees with the unstructured interactional nature of the interview method chosen in seeking to explore adequate representation of the multiple realities and the voices (Whitemore et al, 2001) of the clearly defined learner group, the case, to be studied. A degree of closeness to the participants in my view is based on mutual trust and the professional nature of the relationship that already exists and the face to face unstructured interviews (the interactions) are necessary to explore the issue in-depth within the context in which the case is being situated. I argued that the strength of this method lies in allowing case informants/ the participants the chance to challenge the questions being asked as well as the general research agenda/purpose of the researcher, raise new issues, ask questions back, allow the researcher to probe the meanings interviewees give to the stressors which

affect their learning, their learning behaviour, learning journey, ascertaining their motives and intentions, obtain contextual, historical, socio-cultural information as well as give the participants the opportunity to check what is meant by a question and accommodate long and complex responses. The method is also pertinent to obtaining case data because it is flexible and it is possible to change in the order of questioning, the questions asked and the topics discussed. Further probing in the form of follow-up questioning seeking clarification or further explanation will order well for the in-depth inquiry the case study aim to achieve (Hannan, 2007).

Notwithstanding the above, I indicated to the REP that I accept that scepticism may exist regarding whether participants will come out readily with answers during the interviews or their answers may not be deeply revelatory of themselves and thus affect the outcome of the study because they know me and have had prior association with me. However, the opposite is also true, because as someone that they know and trust and do have tutorials with and have disclosed several personal issues to in the past they may be more willing and readily 'open up' and made valid contributions to the study. I also acknowledged that the participants may disclose information that may be shameful, personally or professionally (Social Research Association, 2003; Brody et al, 1997; and Clark and McCann, 2005) and a risk management plan including preparedness to follow safeguarding policies where necessary and involve student support services may be necessary. I asserted the fact that there is potentially more than one way of looking at how the interaction between a researcher who is also known in another role to the participants could influence the study, and in this case, more positively (Beauchamp and Childress, 2013; Clark and McCann, 2005). I pointed out to the REP that I elected to approach the study with an affirmative view rather than a sceptical one owing to prior association with the

participants in a professional role recognising potential power issues (MacDonald, 2002) that could arise ethically and outlined ways of dealing with it based on the principle of informed and voluntary consent (Polit and Hungler, 1999; Hammersley, and Traianou, 2012; British Education and Research Association, 2011; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2002). I asserted that the potential participants are likely to feel more comfortable and potentially establish rapport quickly and potentially be more open about their responses and thus hopefully provide real answers. This view is supported by professional experience of the dynamics of learner conversations in FE, anecdotal evidence from other lecturers in FE (who their learners know but still talk to them about real issues which affects them) and a body of knowledge which adopts the affirmative view that participants can reveal more about themselves even when they know the researcher, so long as they have the understanding of what the study entails, and the research questions relate to them (LoBiondo-Wood and Haber, 1998; Moore and Miller, 1999; Williams, 2002; Polit and Hungler, 1999; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2002). Participants meaningful involvement in the developing the research proposal and its positive effects in minimising researcher bias was also conveyed to the REP. Other approaches such as using purposeful sampling with a maximum variation sample, giving the contact details of my research supervisors to the participants and any other interested party to have discussion that they feel they could not have me were also offered as part of the strategies to minimise researcher bias in addition to the researcher clearly documenting by background and beliefs held about learning prior to data collection as well as declaring any conflict of interests.

It was suggested to the REP that during data collection, researcher reflexivity and having access to question frame/guide would be part of the strategy to help

reduce bias. Lincoln and Guba (1994) noted that the degree of “*trustworthiness, authenticity and misapprehensions*” are the essential quality criteria in a research study where the researcher and ‘the researched’ are linked through interactions and the values of the researcher and others (for example the external case informants) “inevitably” influences the research study making potential findings to be arbitrated by these values. As such, declaring biases upfront by being reflexive and keeping careful notes during data collection and analysis of my personal thoughts and feelings, decisions I have made and their associated rationale is important in remaining transparent as a researcher. Also, giving a close account of myself and the journey that led me to conduct this study and the manner in which I conducted it is important to elucidate my position in respect of what the study is about, motive of conducting the study, selecting the particular case for study, my relationships with the internal and external case informants/participants and how these have influenced my reactions during the conduct of the study and the extent to which situational factors influenced the conduct of the study. This effort was suggested to the REP as necessary in helping confer on the study a high degree of trustworthiness and authenticity and remove any misapprehensions that may be associated with researcher bias.

It was clarified to the REP that the type of interview questions to be asked would be open-ended questions to provide the interviewee the opportunity to talk about their experience of learning on the course and the things which influence their learning in or outside college (thus personal and other factors in their social ecologies that are not restricted to college or curricular issues alone). To remove any ambiguity a wide array of themes from which sample questions could be asked, centring around the participant were provided to include what learning mean to the participants (their construction of learning), what they find

helpful or unhelpful to their learning, their description of the barriers to learning, motivation for learning, any support they receive towards their learning, their learning preferences, what works for them in the classroom and outside the classroom, on placement and outside college or does not work for them, resources available and used to enhance their learning or cope with any challenges, support received from personal tutors, subject lecturers, parents, peers and significant others, the nature of their college-life balance. Questions were intended to also explore the impact of other endeavours or engagements outside college on their learning, description of any worries individual participants might have about their learning on the course, how they feel the things that worry them affect their learning, what they do about these worries, how they deal with their worries what works and what does not work for them in getting relieve from their worries. A sample question frame was provided to the REP to determine how the questions could elicit information from the participants on how they think their learning is affected because of the things that worry them, how they describe what they do to improve their learning, how they learn best and the impact of any support they receive have had towards learning. The importance of having a set of questions that gets at the experience of the participants and yet leaves the researcher room to explore any specific thoughts, emotions, behaviours, problems, and confusions that the participants might have experienced in their day-to-day learning, in recounting their learning journeys, their beliefs about learning and how they cope with their stressors was emphasised to the REP as the basis of adopting the unstructured interview method.

The REP was also made aware that following the transcription of the interview recordings, each individual interview transcript, what Stake (1995: 123) referred to as "uncontested data", the transcripts would be carefully studied repeatedly

to focus on key issues to generate themes to help understand the complexity of the case. It was hoped that the themes generated would be referred for individual member checking to aid researcher objectivity and transparency. Denzin and Guba (2011) stressed the importance of credibility and confirmability in constructivist-interpretive qualitative research paradigm. As such it was planned to allow as many individual case informants and participants who are willing to check their interview transcript to review what they have said and make changes, corrections, clarifications as they wish. It was also planned that at the stage where primary themes are extracted, a member checking exercise would be undertaken again so that all individual participants can have the opportunity to check the interpretation of the data in the cross-case analysis phase of interpretation. A second layer of analysis involving identification of common themes that cut across all interview transcripts was also planned to enable an overall analysis in the context of the case (Merriam, 1998). Two forms of analysis are thus planned to be undertaken, detailed description of each case informant's story and the themes that emerge; within case analysis and thematic analysis across all case informants' narratives; a cross-case analysis. This approach is thought of as necessary to allow for the emergence of themes from the individual interview data and a cross case thematic analysis to reveal the elements of common experience and meaning held by the study participants on the stressors which affect their learning. Involvement of my academic supervisors who are experienced researchers to scrutinise how themes are developed from the data collected was also indicated to the REP. It was also explained that the documentary evidence to be collected on the learners were to be relied upon as complementary rather than a confirmatory data source in order to build a holistic picture through triangulating different data sources; internal and external case participants

interview transcripts and documents review to further strengthen the authenticity of the study.

It was also suggested that comparisons in the interactions of the learners who participated in the study would be explored and differences in the quality of the interaction and the depth of answers provided examined to unearth any disparities between those who know me and those who do not know me. I intimated my willingness to conduct the study on a different learner group or another campus of the institution where I have never worked if the REP deems it necessary to bolster more confidence and credibility in the study.

### 3.7.3 Box 3.1 Sample Questions for Internal Case Participants Submitted to REP of First Institution

*How has your experience of learning been?*

*How is your experience of learning at present?*

*What are the things that help you to learn best?*

*What are the things that stop you from learning?*

*How do you overcome these things?*

*How do your personal tutors or other lecturers help you to learn?*

*What specific experiences let you know that your learning is progressing well?*

*What exactly do you do when you are learning?*

*Describe an experience where you felt your learning is not going well.*

*Tell me about any experiences that led you to believe that your learning is not going well.*

*What sorts of support to you receive that is helpful for your learning?*

*Are there any important things about your learning that I have not asked you yet?*

### 3.8 Negotiating Access at Second Institution

A second FE college had to be approached to seek approval to conduct the study since the first college approached was generally uncooperative and significantly delayed in reaching a decision on whether to approve the study or not. In keeping to initial efforts made at the first institution to ensure that the study



meets moral, legal and professional requirements as it involves human participants (the internal and external case study informants), ethical issues evoked by the study and its design which were raised in the initial case study protocol at the first institution were made available to, considered and addressed by the second institution in the process of negotiating access at this institution. Revisions were made after the initial consideration of the gatekeepers to form the second case study protocol. The revised case study protocol finally submitted to the second institution is an intrinsic qualitative single case study based on the typology of Thomas (2011) and involves human participants as internal and external case informants. Data collection methods of unstructured interviews and documentary review of confidential information automatically raised ethical concerns. Several ethical issues are evoked such as informed consent, parental consent, power, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity and reciprocity. The main ethical issues associated with the study design that was challenging is whether the research activity could induce psychological stress or anxiety, cause harm or have negative consequences for the research participants at individual level. At organisational level, the key question raised by the institution was whether the research study and potential outcomes places the organisation and its stakeholders at risk, for example, risk of disrepute or potential litigation. Other issues considered included researcher bias, how the research study poses a risk to my health and safety as a researcher and conflicts of interest.

According to Hopf (2004), research ethics are key to any research study in that they define and shape the research process in providing practical guidance on the conduct of the research. Deontological and teleological reasons exist in the literature as to the need to ensure that research studies are ethically sound (Shamoo and Resnik, 2003). It is of paramount importance that the privacy of

human participants is not invaded, people are not put at risk, confidences are not broken and the study design and conduct as well as the researcher and the end use of the research data are not morally suspicious in any way. Teleologically, it is expedient to ensure that human participants and the researcher are not engaging in research practices which will bring to disrepute the institution involved and or open them to litigation. According to Shamoo and Resnik (2003), responsible conduct of research hinges on observing the key principles of honesty and integrity, objectivity, carefulness, openness, confidentiality, respect for intellectual property, protection of human participants, social responsibility and legality.

The second college approached relatively progressed the ethical application more quickly compared to the first and agreed in principle on the first review of the case study protocol to allow the study to be conducted subject to the researcher completing an identified action plan. All identified action plans were accomplished and revisions made to the first case study protocol to meet stipulated conditions dictated by the Senior Leadership and Management Team (SLMT) of the institution prior to obtaining official permission to carry out the study at the second institution. The Programme Leaders and the Head of School of the department where the study was conducted as well as the Director of Learning and Teaching Quality at the second institution were instrumental in making recommendations to the SLMT to approve the study and grant access to the researcher.

The process at the second institution although procedurally lengthy and involved the researcher having to educate gatekeepers (Powell and Smith, 2009) on key concepts of qualitative research ethics, the unstructured interview method, especially the interactive nature of intended interviews, its

justifications in the study design as well as what the literature says about learners' personal and academic stressors. The second institution was receptive to my ideas, suggested that a different learner group (Level 3 BTEC Business Studies learners) be used as subjects for the study instead of Health and Social Care learners to minimise researcher bias and demanded that the researcher recruit a Chaperone who is to be present in all interviews with learners. There was great co-operation, respect and validation of the import of the study at this institution and access was granted to conduct the study. A review of the institution's SAR for 2012-13 academic year, indicated that this study could be of relevance to learners on this course of instruction as well as other courses where improvements in learning and or learner achievements are being sought. Findings which emerge from the study could potentially be transferable to other learner groups (learners on different courses) by informing the heuristics and praxis of teaching and learning practitioners in making learning improvements. It is hoped that issues raised by studying this group will be applicable to other learner groups and the tacit applications of knowledge and insights gained from the study will contribute to enhancing learning improvement, learning support, pastoral care, lecturer-learner relationship, teaching pedagogy and learner engagement among others.

### 3.9 Final Case Design – The Approved Case Study Protocol

The case studied and its particularity is spelt out in the final case study design (*See Appendix 2*). It is a single case study of BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma Learners on a Business Studies course in an FE college in the East of England to explore stressors which affect their learning. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and used in-depth interviews with internal and external key informants referred to as case participants, as well as documentary review of

learner records to gather data to inform the object of the study. The objective in this case study is to reach an understanding of the stressors which affect learning through the perspectives of the study participants and contribute to building a theoretical framework to encourage reflective practice of FE practitioners as its outcome. The case study is patterned according to the typology of Thomas (2011) in which the 'subject' being studied is 'stressors which affect learning' and the 'object' through which it is studied is 'BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma Learners in Business Studies as a single learner group'. This group is made up of the internal case participants through whose combined narratives of individual learning experiences form a significant part of the case data. Data from interviews with relevant key external case participants (because they are not learners, however they have years of experience working with learners in FE) were also obtained to inform the study. This study is categorised as an insider qualitative single case study which is intrinsic in nature to explore and describe stressors which affect learning from the perspective of the study participants.

### 3.10 Ethics

Both institutional approval and university ethical clearance were obtained prior to data collection (*See Appendix 6 and 7 respectively*).

#### 3.10.1 Informed Consent

All study participants were informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study and its academic nature as well as the potential benefits that can be derived from the insights gained from the study. All participants (both internal and external case participants) signed a consent form (*See Appendix 9*) to indicate their consent to participate in the study and in the case of the internal case participants to grant access to their individual learning plan.

Ongoing participant consent was validated verbally prior to the commencement of each interview at the beginning of interview to ensure voluntary participation based on full understanding and open information about the study, its benefits, risks, how information given will be treated and used (Crow et al, 2008; Malone, 2002; Mishna et al, 2004; BERA, 2011).

The consent form for the internal case participants, the learners, included a section for parents or guardians to sign alongside their wards signature to confirm that they agree with their participation in the study where learners are under 18 years of age (BERA, 2011; British Psychological Society, 2009; Homan, 2001; Kuthner and Posada, 2004). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the age of adulthood as 18 years and the legal age of competency in the UK is 18 years (Farrimond, 2013). Despite the Gillick competency of learners who are under 18 years of age and the fact that permission has been sought from the college authorities, who can be deemed as *locos parentis* (Farrimond, 2013; Sanderson, 2010) of all learners while they are in college, Hunter and Pierscionek (2007) advised that the researcher should not be accessing Gillick competency himself to prevent a conflict of interest. This was also deemed necessary as learners may potentially reveal sensitive information about themselves, their family and other people at interview including perceived stress which may potentially necessitate follow up and parental involvement. A letter explaining the purpose of the study and the extent of participant involvement was therefore sent to parents or guardians with the consent form attached for them to sign alongside their wards signature to indicate their support where learners approached were under 18 years of age. Seeking parental consent in this way was not meant to undermine the autonomy, capacity and the right to self-determination or disempower learners below 18 years of age (Mishna et al, 2004; Vargas and Montoya, 2009; Alderson

and Morrow, 2003; Grieg et al, 2007). Rather, it is an added layer of safety and security measure to safeguard the interests of learners who fall into this category and address the ethical issue of power differences between the learners and I, the researcher (BERA, 2011; Grieg et al 2007; Mahon et al 1996; Stainton-Rodgers, 2004; Alderson and Goodey, 1996; Bloom-Di Cicco and Crabtree, 2006; Coad and Evans, 2008; Crowe et al, 2006; Howe and Moses, 1999; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Cocks, 2006).

The consent forms clearly stated that any participant can withdraw from the study at any time without explanation and advised that they are not bound to continue with the study because they have signed the consent form. Participants were also informed that they may decline to answer questions without any further explanations (BERA, 2011).

### 3.11 Sampling of Internal Case Informants

#### 3.11.1 Purposive Sampling

The internal case participants (ICP) were recruited from learners enrolled in the second year of the full time BTEC Level 3 Business Studies course. This group of learners were approached as agreed with the SLMT of the Institution to be the internal case participants. Although these learners are within the school where I the researcher also work, I do not teach them. This learner group was purposefully chosen as I have access to the staff team who teaches and tutor this group of learners. I sought recommendation from the Personal Tutor of this learner group as to which of learners I could recruit onto the study to ensure a maximum variation sample. There was one unique recommendation, a learner with complex physical health challenges, who remains motivated and strives hard to achieve good grades despite ongoing health challenges. As an insider researcher, I also approached the staff team of this course and other FE

practitioners such as student support services staff to recruit them onto the study as external case informants (ECI). Being an insider was extremely helpful as it was easy to gain access and arrange suitable meeting times with both the learners and staff to conduct the study.

Since only one recommendation was made by the personal tutor, all twenty-one (21) learners enrolled on the course were invited by letter to participate in the study through their personal tutor. The tutor arranged for me to come to a group tutorial session in which all the learners were present to introduce myself to the learners and give a 15-minute presentation on the purpose of the study and answer any questions from the learners prior to distributing the letter of invitation. The letter stated the purpose and potential benefits which can be derived from the insights their participation in study could provide. Out of the 21 learners invited, six (6) agreed to participate in the study. It took about two weeks to have all the consent forms signed and returned to me. All these 6 learners aged over 19 years comprising of five (5) males and one (1) female formed the study sample, the case, or in the terms of Thomas (2011), the 'object' of the study, through whose narrated experiences, stressors which affect learning, the 'subject', will be 'refracted' thus studied, to elucidate what the stressors which affect learning are and gain an understanding of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of these learners as a single group.

### 3.11.2 Maximum Variation Sampling

Ensuring that a maximum variation sample is recruited enables a case study to capture a wide array of views as well as key and dominant features of the group (Cohen, 2014; Mason, 2002). A non-probability sampling strategy was employed and statistical representativeness of the whole learner group was not

sought. All willing and consenting participants were recruited onto the study. Key or dominant features of the learner group were represented in the study sample includes gender, entry qualifications, state of health, learning style and learning achievement. There was no variation in age and ethnicity as all the internal case participants were over 19 years old and are White British. Despite having learners who are 16-18-year olds and learners from minority ethnic groups on the course, none consented to participate in the study. The researcher found this interesting as the unrepresented category of learners above asked the most questions during the introduction and presentation session organised by the personal tutor. It is also worth noting that none of the learners who consented to study was deemed to be at risk of non-achievement by the personal tutor. The importance of having mixed and wide-ranging characteristics or behaviours possessed or exhibited by a group being reflected in a study is highlighted by Teddlie and Yu (2007); Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009). Apart from age and ethnicity which were glaring features not represented in the study sample no learner on the course is deemed as being at risk of non-achievement. As such the maximum variation in participant characteristics that could be attained in this group voluntarily to make varied contributions to enrich the study (Yin, 2014; Newby, 2014) were achieved in the study sample by allowing all the 6 learners who consented to participate in the study. In this way, stressors which affect learning can thence be looked at from various angles in a within case analysis to gain greater insights and generate common themes evident across the sample as a group in a cross-case analysis (Lund Research, 2012). According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), the sample size in qualitative research, need to be large enough to allow 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) and rich data, but at the same time manageable enough to prevent data overload. The 6 consenting learners out of a possible 21



representing 29% of the class were considered adequate for the purposes of the study due to time restraints on the researcher, the financial limitations imposed on the study and the fact that the study is not seeking statistical representation and is mainly serving an academic purpose. There was one drop out at the interview stage after consenting without any given reasons resulting in five (5) learners, four (4) males (80%) and one (1) female (20%) to make up the internal case participants. There were four (4) females (19%) and seventeen (17) males (81%) in the class.

### 3.12 Sampling of External Case Informants

#### 3.12.1 Expert Sampling

All three (3) lecturers on the Level 3 BTEC Extended Diploma course, including the personal tutor and course co-coordinator, programme leader, learning support assistants and student services staff who work with learners on the course were initially invited by email to participate in the study as external case informants. There were four responses in total within a week of sending the invites. Two lecturers including one who is also a personal tutor, the programme leader and one learning support assistant responded affirmatively. I followed up my email invitation by making an appointment over the phone to visit the student support services office with physical invitation letters to recruit an additional three external participants. During this visit, I made a brief presentation on the study and its purpose and showed staff the ethical clearance documents from the university and the official letter of approval from the institution. A total of seven (7) FE practitioners out of the eleven (11) approached, 64%, agreed to participate in the study, however, only five (5), 46%, returned the consent forms and participated in the study as external case informants. The programme leader withdrew due to time constraints and

department pressures and the only learning support assistant resigned from the college in pursuit of an alternative employment which is not in education. The external case informants were involved in the study to allow knowledge to be gleaned from their expertise on the topic and potentially contribute new or additional areas for exploration at interview with internal case participants (Lund Research, 2014).

### 3.13 Data Collection

The case study data collected comprises ten (10) audio recordings of interviews with ten (10) case study participants, thus five (5) external case informants and five (5) internal case participants; ten (10) transcripts of the interview recording and notes made from five (5) individual learner records (ILP) holding learner records from their admission till the date notes were made. The time frame of the whole case study is shown in the Gantt Chart in Table 3.1.

### 3.14 Table 3.1 Gantt Chart of Case Study

Task Name	Start	Finish	Notes on Progress
Develop Research Proposal	20/01/12	17/06/13	Completed
Conduct Preliminary Literature Review - Background Data and Theoretical Perspectives	20/01/12	28/02/13	Completed
Review of Methodology	29/10/12	28/02/13	Completed
Design Case Study and Ethical Protocol	04/03/13	15/06/13	Completed
Seek Organisational Approval - First Organisation	17/06/13	17/03/14	Suffered significant delay and lack of co-operation and goodwill. Had to approach another organisation as the Research and Ethical Panel of this organisation was indeterminately slow in consideration of case study and ethical protocol for approval.
Seek Organisational Approval - Second Organisation	16/03/14	30/01/15	Completed all requirements.

Revise Case Study and Ethical Protocol for Second Organisation Approval	01/12/14	30/01/15	Completed necessary revisions in view of ethical challenges.
Complete Further Actions Identified for Organisation - College Approval Letter	01/12/14	30/01/15	All further actions identified for Official Letter of Approval were completed.
Obtain Official College Approval Letter	16/03/2014	22/05/2015	Official approval granting access to conduct study in the FE college obtained on 22/05/15
Complete University Ethics Approval Form	30/01/15	30/01/15	Completed ahead of Official Approval Letter from FE College to ensure Faculty deadlines and other official protocols are met to enable timely submission to Faculty to obtain Ethical Clearance document. Approval letter from FE college added on the day obtained- 22/05/15
Obtain University Ethical Clearance	30/01/2015	01/06/2015	Ethical Clearance obtained.
Commence Data Collection. Data Collection of External Case Informants (ECI) (06/15 - 07/15) Data Collection of Internal Case Participants (ICP) (09/15 - 05/16)	08/06/15	15/05/16	Completed ICP interviews in May 2016 while on intermission. Participants were final year learners and so have no opportunity to follow up for a repeat interview as they were in the second semester.
Debrief Participants and Management Team at College	28/06/16	29/07/16	This occurred in June 2016 for participants and July 2016 for representative of Management Team at college. The focus was on how the interview went and general outcomes. Gave opportunity for any further additions or clarifications by participants individually and for participants to change their mind or alter any of their responses. Inability to conduct second round of interviews were made clear.
Perform Data Analysis	14/05/16	31/01/18	Completed in January, 2018. Prolonged by intermission.
Conduct Literature Search- Based on Emergent Themes	21/11/16	28/02/18	This kept going on in the background till February, 2020 in case of any new relevant published literature.
Discuss Findings	06/03/18	30/06/18	
Writing Up and Completion	07/03/18	20/02/20	Completed February, 2020. Prolonged by intermission.
Submit Thesis	21/02/20		

### 3.15 Interview with External Case Informants

Interviews with external case informants were conducted in a meeting room booked within the college during college working hours and at a time when the

participants and the researcher timetable allowed it. The room was easily accessible to the participants from their office and they knew in advance by verbal communication the date and time of the meeting. I the researcher went to meet the participants in their respective offices about ten minutes to the time booked and we walked together to the interview room. The meeting room door was closed and it was well aerated and had comfortable seats and the general décor and physical environment were aesthetically pleasing. The door has 'see-through' glass panels which allows us to be visible to people passing by and we could not be heard outside. The meeting room was booked for an hour with the anticipation that the interviews may last between forty-five (45) minutes and one (1) hour. All external case informant interviews happened to occur in the afternoon between 2pm and 4pm.

I commenced all the interviews by thanking each participant for agreeing to take part in the study by signing and returning their consent form. I also checked if there was anything they wish to clarify from the participant information sheet which they have read and was also explained to them. None of the participants asked any question, however, I summarised the import of the study and what how their contribution would help achieve the purpose of the study. I also asked if it they are still consenting in spite of having their consent forms with me and inform them again about their right to withdraw or refuse to answer any questions without explanation. Each participant signified ongoing consent by giving verbal affirmative answer. Once validation of consent was established verbally, I began by asking them to tell me about how they will define learning and what learning meant to them to start of the interview proper.

### 3.16 Recruitment and Training of Chaperone

(Required by SLMT as part of safeguarding, Professional lecturer colleague, OT professional background)

A team of four lecturers in my department were approached at a team meeting to request for help with study in acting in a chaperone role during interviews with internal case participants per SLMT condition. One colleague, a female lecturer in Health and Social Care and Health Science with three years teaching experience in FE and about 13 years' experience as a qualified OT who has occupied senior positions in the NHS and Private Healthcare prior to appointment as lecturer volunteered. She is also trained in safeguarding both in the health sector and also by the FE college where the internal case participants were recruited. An appointment was made to brief her on the study, its purpose and the case study approach as well as the ethical concerns raised and the mitigating steps being considered and how she fits in. What I will describe as her specific training regarding this study and what I require of her occurred over 3 weeks in three separate meetings lasting about 45 minutes each. This training occurred within our own free time. Timetable clashes and other personal priorities contributed to this. The research proposal, case study protocol and the internal case participant information were used as training aids to induct her into the import of the study and what is expected of the participants. Her role as a chaperone, in being present in the meeting room during all internal participants' interview was also explained. She demonstrated understanding of the purpose of the study, the case study protocol, as well as her role as a chaperone verbally in our interactions, particularly through a question and answer method in the last session on her role as a Chaperone. She explained how she is expected to sit in the interviews, maintain confidentiality, ask no questions, take no notes of interview nor follow up any

participant. She summarised her role as being able to verify that each interview had occurred and conducted in the manner that it was stated it would be conducted in the case study protocol and be able to verify whether anything untoward or concerning transpired during the interview. Her availability was established and marched with mine and this was taken into consideration in booking the meeting room and interview sessions for internal case participants.

### 3.17 Interview with Internal Case Informants

Interviews with internal case participants were conducted in a meeting room booked in the college during college working hours. The personal tutor of the class was consulted and agreed that tutorial time can be used for the interview purposes as this will not affect the learning of the students and thus also not prevent them from having their regular breaks. As such, the interviews were deemed as not causing any disruption to the usual timetable of the class and for that matter not an interruption in the learning of the participants. The meeting room was in a classroom block nearer to the participants' timetabled classroom for easy access. The personal tutor was also made aware of the college's requirement of having a Chaperone present at all interviews and what her role will be. The consenting participants were then informed by their personal tutor ahead of the commencement of the interviews and they were agreeable to it. The allocated time was discussed with the Chaperone who made adjustment in her diary to attend the interviews.

#### 3.17.1 How Interviews Were Conducted

I went to the classroom where the learner group were scheduled for their tutorials about five minutes to 12 noon, waited for the class to settle and with their personal tutor's permission approached a consenting participant at a time to come with me to the meeting room for the purposes of the interview. They

were already informed by their personal tutor in the previous week that I will be coming to fetch them one at a time during their tutorial time to conduct the interviews and they were agreeable to that. However, no timetable was drawn as to who should go on what day. The interviews took five weeks to complete as there is only a one-hour window of opportunity each week to carry out interviews. On arrival in the meeting room, I ensured that each participant was seated and introduced the Chaperone who was already in the room. I explained to each participant verbally the need of a Chaperone as a college requirement to conduct the interviews as well as the role that the Chaperone was playing. I emphasised that their confidentiality and anonymity is assured. I took time to read the participant information sheet to each participant and checked by asking if there was any clarification needed and if they are still willing to participate in this study in spite of having each participant's signed consent form with me. Once ongoing consent was established verbally, I commenced the interview by thanking them for agreeing to participate and began by asking them about how they will define learning and what learning means to each participant. The flow and direction of the interviews were led by the responses given by the participant. All internal case participants' interviews occurred in the afternoon between 12 noon and 1pm. The meeting room was booked for an hour in anticipation of each interview lasting between 45 minutes to one hour. All the interviews were audio recorded starting from after ongoing verbal consent was established. The duration of the interview recordings among the study participants varied and the average duration of each interview is approximately forty minutes.

### 3.18 Transcription of Audio Interview Recordings

All the interview recordings were painstakingly transcribed by myself intentionally to give me a chance to immerse myself in the data. This was a tedious exercise and utmost care was taken to ensure the transcript is verbatim. The spelling of certain para-language may not be in conventional form as the spellings were aimed to making the typed words sound exactly as they were spoken at the time of the interview.

### 3.19 Case Study Data: Individual Learner Records, Audio Interview Recordings, Transcript of Interviews

The data extracted from individual learner records to inform the study consists information gleaned from all five (5) internal case participants' individual learner records (ILP) long holding learner records from their admission till the date notes were made. It was also a college requirement to grant access for me to only access these records on the college site, using college computers after obtaining written and verbal consent from the internal case participants. The information obtained from these records mostly were the internal case participants' characteristics; learning preference, college attendance, punctuality in lessons, learning support needs, tutorial attendance, assessed learning preference, age, gender, entry grades in GCSE Maths and English. For the external case informants; their age, gender, job role, and length service information were collected. The case study data collected comprise audio interview recordings of the internal case participants, the learners, audio interview recordings of experts, FE practitioners – academic and student support staff and documentary review of individual learner records.



# DATA ANALYSIS

## 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the approach to data analysis adopted is explained and how the Framework Method of Ritchie and Spencer (1984) was adapted and used is also explained. The reasons for using this form of analysis and treating research data as a holistic set to explore the topic under study; stressors which affect learning from the perspectives of both the external case informants and internal case informants are also provided. The data analysis process involved building on various layers of analysis such as transcription of data, providing opportunity for member checking, coding from individual transcripts in an inductive manner, generating a thematic code framework, documentary review of salient individual learner records, and using CAQDAS NVivo 11 Pro to perform framework analysis, generate queries in search of any emerging patterns and apparent potential influences as well as to create and designing systems of visual data representation such as tables, charts and matrices for framework analysis.

## 4.2 Framework Analysis

The Framework Method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) is part of thematic analysis family also referred to as qualitative content analysis. In thematic analysis, the common issues and differences in the qualitative data are identified before focussing on relationships between the different data parts. It is useful in helping to arrive at conclusions which are descriptive or explanatory around the

themes identified. This method has been widely used in analysing qualitative health and sociologically related research (Heath et al 2012, Elkington et al 2004, Ayatollahi et al 2010 and Murtagh et al 2006). There are key terminologies associated with this data analysis method. In this study, the researcher adopts the meaning of the key terms as defined by Gale et al (2013:1-2) in relation to the Framework Method (See Table 4.3 below).

The Framework Method is useful to the researcher by way of helping to systematically reduce the data to analyse it by each case participant and by thematic code (or theme). In using matrix output of rows to represent case participants and columns to represent themes, cells of summarised case data are generated and offers an inimitable structure to individually analyse each case participant's narrative as well as explore in-depth key themes across the whole data obtained from both the internal and external case participants. In this way, the contribution made by each individual case participant under any one theme is still linked to other aspects of their narrative account on the subject under study within the entire matrix. The method enables the comparison and contrasting of data which is vital to qualitative analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996).

In using the Framework Method this way, a holistic view is thus garnered under each theme in order to provide a descriptive overview of the entire case study data. The importance of arranging the data obtained under the same theme so as to categorise the data is a critical aspect of using this method in qualitative data analysis (Srivastava and Thomson, 2009; Gale et al, 2013). The case study design involved exploring key issues identified in the background literature review and theoretical perspective on psychology of stress and coping, as such, similar questions by and large were asked of the case participants who expressed different views and shared varied experiences in their narratives and

using this method thus allow for these experiences to be compared and contrasted (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). This method has also been obliging in analysing other textual data including documents and field notes (Gale and Sultan, 2013; Jones, 2000 and Pope et al, 2000, hence using it to analyse documentary notes such as individual learner records of the internal case participants enables a good perceptive stand to be adopted in analysing these records in tandem with the entire case study data. By using this method, the researcher's analytic choices and interpretive decisions are also made transparent and track able with each line of thought lending itself to be traced through the path from which it originates in the data as analytical and interpretive footprints are left as marks in the data in the respective rows, columns and cells. The flexibility of the Framework Method enabled themes to emerge from the data to form a serious part of the study outcome as the study is explorative and this method allowed an organised search of patterns using the constant comparative technique through review of code matrix data independently of any epistemological, philosophical or theoretical approach which could have shaped the way in which the analysis is carried out (Gale et al, 2013). For example, other qualitative analytical approaches are inclined to paying close attention to either language and how it is used in social interaction (discourse analysis and ethnomethodology) concerned with experience, meaning and language (phenomenology and narrative methods) or use a set of rules and related stages (grounded theory). Many of these approaches do subscribe to or are associated with some academic disciplines and are guided by clear philosophical ideas which can alter the analytical process (Crotty, 1998).

The research question in this study from the outset required an inductive approach to data analysis as outcome is unknown and cannot be determined or

speculated prior to data analysis and as such the framework method was found to be well suited in facilitating this inductive approach in a well organised and easy to track manner without any impinging theoretical or philosophical interference or influence as opposed to other analytical methods, few of which were mentioned earlier.

### 4.3 Procedure for Framework Analysis

According to Srivastava and Thomson (2009), data in the analysis stage need to be 'sifted, charted and sorted in accordance with key issues and themes. A five-step process is required in Framework Analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994):

1. *Familiarisation*
2. *Identifying a thematic framework*
3. *Indexing*
4. *Charting*
5. *Mapping and interpretation*

Gale et al (2013) also outlined a seven-stage procedure which can be seen as an expanded version of Ritchie and Spencer, 1994's five steps above, therefore I have chosen to stick to Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) original steps and absorb Gales procedures into these steps as it makes the procedure of analysis clearer.

### 4.4 Step 1 – Familiarisation

The first step in analysing the data involved the transcription of all digital audio recorded interviews with both the internal and external case participants. All audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself, the researcher, leaving large margins and spacing for later coding and making notes of my thoughts as I 'relived' the moments I interviewed the study participants. Transcribing all the audio digital recordings myself instead of ordering this from a transcript service as the researcher, transported me back in time to the

interview room and brought back recollections of participants' reactions, posture, emphasis on words and other paralanguage and body language communications associated with their narratives. It allowed me the researcher to immerse myself fully in the data as I listened and typed the responses the participants gave to the questions I put to them and remembered how each of them approach the questions, where they laid emphasis, the angle the saw things from and the varied way in which they shared their experience and the varied nature of those experiences began to become clear from one transcript to the other.

Transcription was followed by a period of familiarisation with the transcribed interview data. I played the interview recordings over and over and read the interview transcripts to ensure that I did not miss anything. While doing this I made analytical notes, recorded my thoughts and impressions in the margins to reflect my thoughts and rationale for asking certain questions. I repeatedly read over and over the transcripts to get a sense of what the participants are saying in response to the questions I asked during interviews on individual transcript basis noting key things that jumped at me in this process. Notes were kept as the transcripts were being reviewed by listening to the audio recordings repeatedly as well as when reading the transcripts. The contextual notes made during this process as I reflected on the contribution of each case participant in trying to make sense of the data were significant in identifying the thematic framework and recorded as researcher thoughts on the code matrix tables created during the next stage of analysis.

#### **4.5 Step 2 – Identifying a Thematic Framework**

After familiarisation with the interview data by repetitively listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcripts over and over again, a careful reading of

each transcript was done, reading it one line at a time and coding them by writing a label or tag in form of a phrase or paraphrase termed codes or themes as deemed necessary to describe what is interpreted in the passage as important. At this stage, the open coding being undertaken involved coding anything that is deemed important from as many varying perspectives as possible as the data suggests rather than applying pre-determined codes. There were no pre-determined codes as the study is inductive in nature and no theory is being tested per se, as such codes were not predefined in terms of a specific theory and so no forthright allocation of pre-determined codes was undertaken. Codes were generated in-vivo as shown in the code matrix tables below. By using open coding this way, care was being taken not to lose or miss out important aspects of the data. The aim of open coding at this stage was to be able to classify all interview data collected so that a comparison can be made systematically with other parts of the whole data set, treating all data collected as a one whole set of data with different parts to allow for an intra-case and across case analysis. Thus, a holistic approach to data analysis was pursued in this way through coding. The open coding was done entirely by the researcher and was then shared with two academic supervisors who are experienced qualitative researchers to offer alternative viewpoints and to ensure that it is not only the viewpoint of the researcher neither any potential idiosyncratic views of his dominate the analysis but rather that his thinking is rooted in the data. While coding the interview transcripts inductively, what seems to be unexpected, variant, unusual or atypical responses were keenly sought out in the process to enrich the study. Involving two academic supervisors with different perspectives in checking how the codes were generated offered great benefit in ensuring the objectivity of the data analysis process. In this way, the codes generated were subjected to scrutiny and

researcher bias was thus minimised. Also, reading through all the interview transcripts line by line in a painstaking manner so as to code openly allowed for an infinitesimal look and search of the data for fresh insight which may otherwise be indiscernible. For example, certain responses were not clearly expressed and, on the surface, seemed not to fit directly with the topic being explored through the questions asked but nevertheless have a bearing on the study objectives. The codes were initially written manually with pen and paper at this stage and later typed into a code matrix table created using Microsoft Word for each study participant's transcript (See Table 4.1 for an example).

In developing the analytical framework, the in-vivo codes were grouped into categories (categories on the code matrix table not the in-vivo codes) for the first three transcripts of the external case participants. These codes formed the main themes and were compared with each other and found to be mostly similar and so they were chosen to be applied to subsequent transcripts and led to the creation of a working analytical framework. Thus, the initial in-vivo codes of the first three transcripts were grouped into categories to form a working analytical framework. As coding continued and new categories emerge, the analytical framework kept on being revised until the last transcript was coded. These tables below show how the initial themes and sub themes were generated in the study. The tables show how initial codes and categories were identified at stage 2 of the procedure of analysis from the interview transcripts of the external case informants and internal case participants. My preliminary thoughts were also captured as the coding was in progress. CAQDAS NVivo 11 Pro was not utilised up until this point as I wanted to update knowledge in software upgrade to determine whether to use it to create framework matrices for analysis or proceed manually by using Excel spread sheet. Following

successful refresher training in NVivo 11 Pro and completion of a practice project, the software was used to conduct the rest of the data analysis.

#### 4.5.1 Table 4.1 Code Matrix for Identifying Codes and Categories for External Case Informant (ECI 1)

Interview Transcript 1	Description	Preliminary	Initial
Interview with External Case Informant 1 – Course Lecturer (ECI 1 18.6.15)	(in-vivo codes)	thoughts (what is this about)	Categories
Lines 15 ‘I think it is <b>developing knowledge and understanding</b> .....’	‘developing knowledge and understanding’ ‘developing’ ‘knowledge’ ‘understanding’ ‘developing knowledge’ ‘developing understanding’	Process of learning	Learning definition
Lines 16-18 ‘So, take that knowledge and use it elsewhere... in employment or something like that but actually to have <b>digested it enough</b> to <b>transfer it into different situations.</b> ’	‘transfer it into different situations’ ‘transfer’ ‘digested it enough’ ‘situation’ ‘employment’	Mastery, application and transferability of knowledge is a feature and outcome of learning	Learning definition:  Evidence of learning
Lines 24-25 ‘...probably the same. I <b>don’t know</b> that they would have think about <b>what learning is.</b> ’	‘...don’t know what learning is.’ ‘don’t know’ ‘know’	Uncertain about learner’s construction/un derstanding of learning	Learning definition:  Learner construction of learning
Lines 27-29 ‘...its more just that they come to college and <b>because they have to</b> and they have to <b>get</b> the <b>qualifications</b> . I think that’s more of the major face of what learning is and .... <b>probably developing skills and knowledge</b> as well.’	‘because they have to’ ‘have to’ ‘get .... qualification’ ‘qualification’ ‘developing skills and knowledge’	Views on why learners come to college  Process of learning	Learning motivation  Learning definition



	'developing'		
	'skills'		
	'knowledge'		
Line 33			
'... like a <b>tick box exercise.</b> '	'tick box exercise'	Process of learning:	Learning definition
	'exercise'		
	'tick box'	View on learners understanding of learning	
Line 36-41			
'...obviously learners are here to <b>get a qualification</b> so that	'get ... qualification'	Views on why learners come to college	Learning motivation
is predominantly the reason.....and the way obviously the	'qualification'		
<b>government is forcing people who are still 18</b> or so <b>to still be</b>	'government is forcing people who are .....18....to.....be		
<b>in education</b> and that is predominantly the reason for them	'in education'		
to be in here to get a qualification and move on into the world	'government'		
..... I think the <b>vocational</b> subjects that we teach does help	'education'		
them get a lot of <b>transferable skills</b> which they can put into	'vocational'		
the <b>employment</b> world.'	'transferable skills'		
	'transfer'		
	'skills'		
	'employment'		
Lines 44-48			
'...they really enjoy <b>active lessons</b> . They engage very well	'Active lessons'	What makes learners engage in and enjoy learning?	Learning engagement
<b>where they are participating</b> and so not the theory based	'active'		
lessons at all. And and ,yes something that is <b>explained</b> clearly	'lesson'		
to them but then they can even <b>work in groups</b> or work	'participating'		
independently to <b>actually do</b> and for example,	'explain'	Learners enjoy practical lessons where tasks are clearly explained	
eh events management, they kind of enjoy that because they	'explained clearly'		
are <b>learning through</b> their own <b>experiences</b> of running events.'	'work'		
	'actually do'		
	'work in groups'		
	'groups'		
	'independently'		
	'work independently'		
	'experience'		
	'learning through.... experience'		

	'theory'		
	'theory based'		
	'theory-based lessons'	Learners do not enjoy theory-based lessons	
Line 50			
'Doing them <b>reflective</b> accounts of how well they have done.'	'reflective'		
	'do	Self-assessment in form of reflection on learning performance	Learning engagement
Lines 53-58			
'... <b>organisational skills</b> might be key for some people,	'organisational skills'		
.....how to <b>manage</b> their <b>time effectively</b> or how to <b>organise</b>	'organisation'	Factors necessary for effective learning and making progress in learning	Learning effectiveness
<b>files on computer</b> so that they then can <b>find their resources</b> that	'skills'		
they need. <b>How to access Blackboard</b> ..... So if you don't	'manage time effectively'		
have the basics in place then you can't <b>progress</b> further.	'manage time'		
	'organise files on computer'		
	'find....resources'		
	'resources'		
	'access Blackboard'		
	'access'		
	'progress'		
Lines 64-68			
'...I think <b>role plays</b> works very well.... <b>watching it on a video</b> ,	'role play'	Mode and style of learning and teaching that learners want	Learning engagement:
so, it is the <b>visual</b> again and seeing it different <b>scenarios</b> and	'visual'		
then in that way I think when you can <b>relate it to employment</b>	'Scenarios'		Learning preference
and actually, see how that fits in to where they want to	'employment'		
get to and make it relevant for them. That helps.	'make it relevant'		
	'relevant'		
Lines 71-72			
'..... is <b>very positive</b> actually. Yes. It is a <b>very good approach</b> .	'very positive'	View on learner's attitude towards learning	Learning attitude
Everyone comes in wanting to learn and wanting to gain a	'positive'		
qualification and gain knowledge.'	'very good'		
	'good'		
	'wanting to learn'		
	'learn'		

	<p>'gain ...qualification'</p> <p>'qualification'</p> <p>'gain knowledge'</p> <p>'knowledge'</p>		
<p>Lines 77-82</p> <p>'... I don't think someone says this is a <b>barrier to me learning</b></p> <p>but I think <b>through discussions</b> you kind of work out somethings</p> <p>like it might be the <b>practical stuff</b> again, so like they don't have a computer at home or working too many hours,</p> <p>and it's quite a big barrier, some of ours work maybe</p> <p>thirty hours in a job on top of the college so that is obviously very hard for them to <b>manage their time effectively</b></p> <p>and find the time to do the course work.....'</p>	<p>'barrier to learning'</p> <p>'barrier'</p> <p>'don't have computer'</p> <p>'computer'</p> <p>'working .....hours'</p> <p>'work'</p> <p>'job on top of ...college'</p> <p>'hours'</p> <p>'discussion'</p> <p>'practical'</p> <p>'time'</p> <p>'manage.... time effectively'</p> <p>'manage time'</p>	<p>Stressors which affect learning are construed as barriers to learning</p> <p>These are not reported directly</p> <p>Has to be worked out/unearthed through discussions with learner</p>	<p>Learning barrier</p> <p>Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)</p>
<p>Lines 86-88</p> <p>'..... through <b>discussions</b> and then after you've <b>talked to them</b></p> <p>about <b>how they can manage</b> that and <b>when they could</b> they</p> <p>actually, be <b>doing coursework</b>, can they <b>reduce</b> their <b>hours</b></p> <p>at that point.</p>	<p>'discussions'</p> <p>'talk to them'</p> <p>'how they can'</p> <p>'when they could</p> <p>'manage'</p> <p>'doing coursework'</p> <p>'reduce hours'</p>	<p>Actions/Strategies used to address barriers to learning</p>	<p>Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)</p>
<p>Lines 95-101</p> <p>'... I think using resources in the learning curve.....</p> <p><b>access</b> the <b>computers</b> but also the resources of how <b>proofreading work</b> and that kind of thing,so before</p> <p>learners submit <b>work</b> they can use those resources.....</p> <p>and also, obviously then you talk to <b>them to talk</b> to their boss</p>	<p>'access computers'</p> <p>'access'</p> <p>'proofreading work'</p> <p>'work'</p> <p>'proofreading'</p> <p>'talk to them'</p> <p>'talk'</p>	<p>Nature of SAG</p>	<p>Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)</p>

and working out <b>when they can</b> and cannot work and	'when they can... work'		
<b>how</b> that will <b>fit in</b> with our <b>assessment schedules</b>	'how...fit in'		
and our plans, so <b>clarifying</b> with them when them	'fit in'		
<b>deadlines</b> are so they know when they should be quite busy and kind of <b>managing time effectively</b> .	'assessment schedules'		
	'assessment'		
	'clarifying.....deadlines'		
	'deadline'		
	'managing time effectively'		
Line 108	'emotional issue'	Type of learning barrier	Learning barrier
'..... if there is something like an <b>emotional issue</b> '	'emotional'		
	'issue'		
Lines 108-114	'refer'	Actions/Strategies used to address barriers to learning	Learning Support Advice and Guidance
'.....I will <b>refer</b> them <b>to student support</b> or take them to	'refer....to student support'		
student support myself and kind of get the <b>conversation</b>	'go to student support'	Student support staff – learner relationship	
started between student and their counsellors or them	'conversation'		
support down there. Because I do think previously they will	'build.....relationship'		
have just said I will <b>go to student support</b> and the student	'help.....for future'		
have never gone and I find that actually taking them there	'take..... initiative'		
and <b>building</b> the <b>relationship</b> to start with then you are			
kind of helping them out for the future otherwise they don't			
think they would have <b>taken</b> the <b>initiative</b> themselves.			
Lines 119-121	'familiar face'	Rapport building	Learning Support Advice and Guidance
'..... they <b>don't know</b> the people like I am a <b>familiar face</b>	'daunting'	Barriers to learner disclosure of issues affecting learning/in seeking help/support	
because I teach them and but I think it might be quite <b>daunting</b>	'don't know... people'		
to go into a room with a group of <b>people</b> you <b>don't know</b> and			
just say I have got some issues.	'people ...don't know'		
Lines 128-133	'relationship stresses'	Types of stressors	Learning barrier

<p>‘..... I think em <b>relationship stresses</b> are the main one.....</p> <p>So, they are <b>individual relationships</b> and I thought it will be more to do with <b>stress at college</b> and but that that isn’t always their main actually it is not one of their biggest issues.</p> <p>It is actually the <b>external boyfriend girlfriend relationships</b> and the kind of their <b>impact on</b> their <b>life</b> from that.</p>	<p>‘individual relationships’</p> <p>‘stress at college’</p> <p>‘external... relationships’</p> <p>‘boyfriend...relationships’</p> <p>‘girlfriend relationships’</p> <p>‘impact on ...life’</p>	<p>Barriers to learning</p> <p>Learner issues affecting learning</p>	
<p>Lines 134-139</p> <p>T: Right. Right. Okay. So, you said you thought like that it should have been the stress of college. What do you mean by that?</p> <p>The <b>stress of college</b>?</p> <p>E: Well having to get work completed to <b>deadlines</b>.</p> <p>I: Okay. Right. Academic work?</p> <p>E: Yeah.Yeah. Yeah but that that doesn’t seem to be the main issue.</p> <p>Its normally something <b>emotional</b> and <b>external</b>.’</p>	<p>‘emotional’</p> <p>‘external’</p> <p>‘stress of college’</p> <p>‘deadlines’</p>	<p>Types of stressors</p> <p>Barriers to learning</p> <p>Learner issues affecting learning</p>	<p>Learning barrier</p>
<p>Lines 144-150</p> <p>‘... I think obviously it is very wide it depends on what sorts of <b>lessons</b> we are doing. But there might be a <b>plenary</b> at the end kind of typical ok have you done this or there might be a check through the assignment but I think through <b>lesson checks</b> then it is question and answering em actually <b>peer support</b> somebody explaining what they have done to their colleague eh sorry to their class member to <b>explain</b> what they have learnt to then be able to pass it on I think that’s one of the key kind of yeah, they have definitely got it because they have been able to put it in their <b>own words</b>.</p>	<p>‘lessons’</p> <p>‘plenary’</p> <p>‘lesson checks’</p> <p>‘check through’</p> <p>‘assignment’</p> <p>‘question and answer’</p> <p>‘peer support’</p> <p>‘explain’</p> <p>‘own words’</p>	<p>What makes learning effective</p> <p>Nature of lessons and classroom actions to make learning effective</p>	<p>Learning engagement</p> <p>Learning effectiveness</p>
<p>Lines 163-168</p> <p>If I have a lesson 9 o’clock. The <b>attendance</b> aren’t always great and those who are there are still very <b>asleep</b> whereas if I am</p>	<p>‘attendance’</p> <p>‘asleep’</p> <p>‘on time’</p> <p>‘not...hungry’</p>	<p>Factors which affect learning engagement</p>	<p>Learning engagement</p> <p>Learning effectiveness</p>

<p>teaching around 11 time, then I find that they are much more</p> <p>effective and everyone is <b>on time</b> and they are much more</p> <p>engaged with the lesson and also in the afternoon as well until</p> <p>about 4 o'clock. And so, I think yeah if you lucky to have a lesson</p> <p>during that time then obviously if they are <b>not</b> too <b>hungry</b>,</p> <p>lunchtime, eh then you have got much more engaged lessons.'</p>	<p>Time of lesson seems crucial</p>	<p>Learner – Teacher Relationship (LTR)</p>
<p>Lines 171-175</p> <p>I think it is <b>professional and formal</b> but in an <b>informal way</b> as well so I gain their <b>respect</b> by <b>knowing</b> about them and <b>remembering</b> stuff so if they say eh their mum is having a baby or something then I will ask them how that is going and its kind of them realizing that I have <b>listened</b> to them and that I am <b>interested in</b> their life and then you get their respect that way I think.'</p>	<p>'professional and formal'</p> <p>'professional'</p> <p>'formal'</p> <p>'informal way'</p> <p>'informal'</p> <p>'respect'</p> <p>'know.....them'</p> <p>'remember'</p> <p>'remembering'</p> <p>'knowing'</p> <p>'know'</p> <p>'listen'</p> <p>'interest.'</p> <p>'interested in'</p>	<p>Description of learner-teacher relationship</p> <p>Positive relationship in which teacher shows care and concern, remembers learner issues and is interested in their life</p>
<p>Lines 187 -195</p> <p>'... obviously through <b>tutorials</b> or when you give them back work that is the main time that you <b>realised</b> that something is going on.</p> <p>When you have lots of work in and you realised that its not the best <b>standard</b> or something like that and then when I give them back I will just talk to them on <b>one to one</b> basis and I think they are quite responsive because it is not just giving problems back</p> <p>but actually, ok let's put some <b>plans</b> in place and how do you <b>solve</b> them. If I did just go well you haven't done that very well, then obviously they are not going to respond very well to that but it's the kind of <b>constructive feedback</b> but also what we can do to make it better in <b>future</b>. Yeah. Its quite good.'</p>	<p>tutorial'</p> <p>'time'</p> <p>'realised'</p> <p>'standard'</p> <p>'one to one'</p> <p>'work'</p> <p>'plan'</p> <p>'solve'</p> <p>'feedback'</p> <p>'constructive feedback'</p> <p>'future'</p>	<p>How teacher finds out what is affecting learners' learning</p> <p>Problem solving strategies</p>
<p>Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)</p>		

## 4.6 Step 3 - Indexing

In applying the analytical framework, all subsequent transcripts were indexed by using already established categories. Relevant sections of the transcripts which relate to already established categories were identified and coded. Coding was essentially descriptive in the sense that reasonable evidences or references in the interview transcripts were tagged as the transcripts were absorbedly read and coded using the established analytic framework or coded as new emergent categories which were later incorporated into the analytic framework until a full thematic coding framework was completed (See Table 4.2).

The coding process has been extremely taxing physical labour wise and so I changed my mind on reaching this stage of analysis and in view of the impending cross-case analysis via charting as the next step, followed by mapping and interpretation, to use CAQDAS NVivo 11 Pro to conduct the rest of the data analysis. I attended a refresher workshop on the use of Framework Analysis in CAQDAS NVivo 11 Pro and used the software to speed up the remaining analytical work which will involves a cross-case analysis, data reduction, summary and charting of the data into a framework matrix.

4.6.1 Table 4.2 Thematic Coding Framework (Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes – Cross Data)

Theme	Definition	Sub-themes
Learner-Teacher Relationship (LTR)	Interaction between learner and teacher	Influences on LTR Nature of LTR Rapport building
Learning Attitude	Seriousness learners attached to learning	Influences on learning attitude Mixed Negative

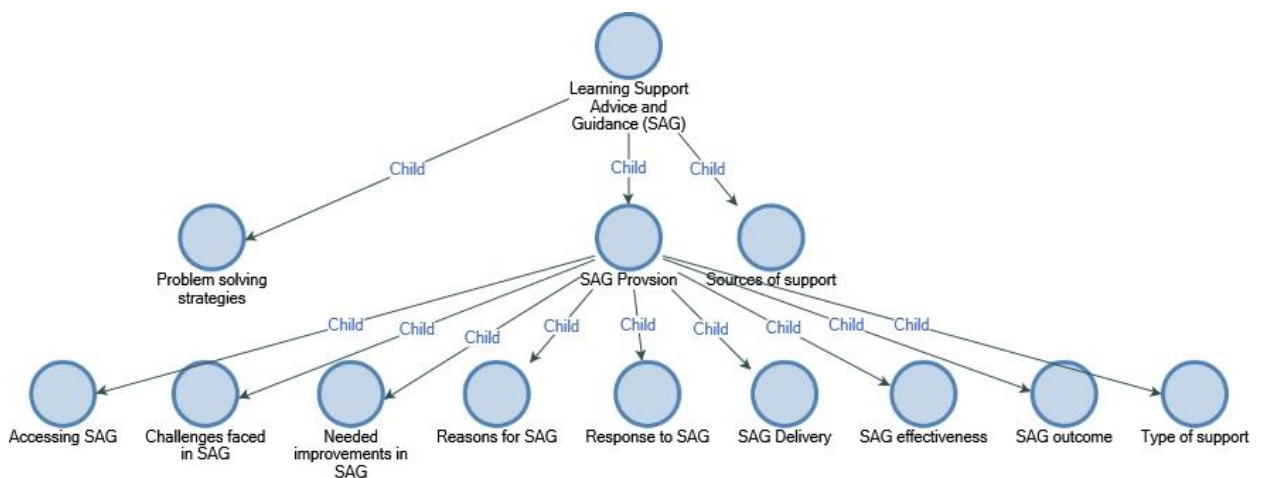
Theme	Definition	Sub-themes
		Positive
Learning Barriers	Things that get in the way of learning and has the potential to prevent learning from occurring.	Type of learning barrier Actions addressing learning barriers
Stressors which affect learning	Potential sources of stress which can affect learning	Type of stressors Response to stressors Coping with stressors
Learning Definition	Meaning of learning	Outcome Process Progress Purpose Value
Learner construction of learning	What learners say that learning is	
Learning Engagement	Involvement/participation in learning	Influences on learning engagement Learning improvement Learning motivation Learning style Teaching skills <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Delivery of learning</li> <li>2. Teaching style</li> </ol>
Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)	Support advice and guidance learners receive during their learning journeys/career	Sources of support Problem solving strategies SAG Provision <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accessing SAG</li> <li>2. Challenges faced in SAG</li> <li>3. Nature of SAG</li> <li>4. Reasons for SAG</li> <li>5. Type of support</li> <li>6. Response to SAG</li> <li>7. SAG Delivery</li> <li>8. SAG effectiveness</li> <li>9. SAG outcome</li> <li>10. Needed improvements in SAG</li> </ol>



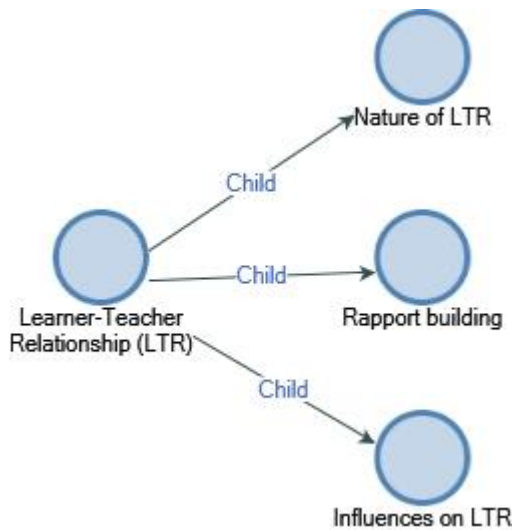
## 4.7 Step 4 – Charting

Using CAQDAS NVivo 11 Pro software expedited easy retrieval of data coded into themes, permitted data to be stored and ordered in an organised fashion to enable a concentrated, focused and deep exploration of data as well as generating different queries to inform the study. Furthermore, due to the large amount of text generated by the interview transcripts, there is the need for data to be recapitulated and condensed as part of the process of analysis in charting the data. Charting the data therefore involved rearranging the tagged and labelled text, the coded evidence, under various themes, termed nodes in NVivo into organised hierarchical node structure (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2 for examples) in order to provide a collection of all instances of evidence, expression and definition associated with each identified theme. This was extremely helpful in the process of reflecting on the body of evidence gathered under each theme to generate meaning and significance.

4.7.1 Figure 4.1 Sample hierarchical node structure created in NVivo showing theme - SAG, its categories and sub-categories

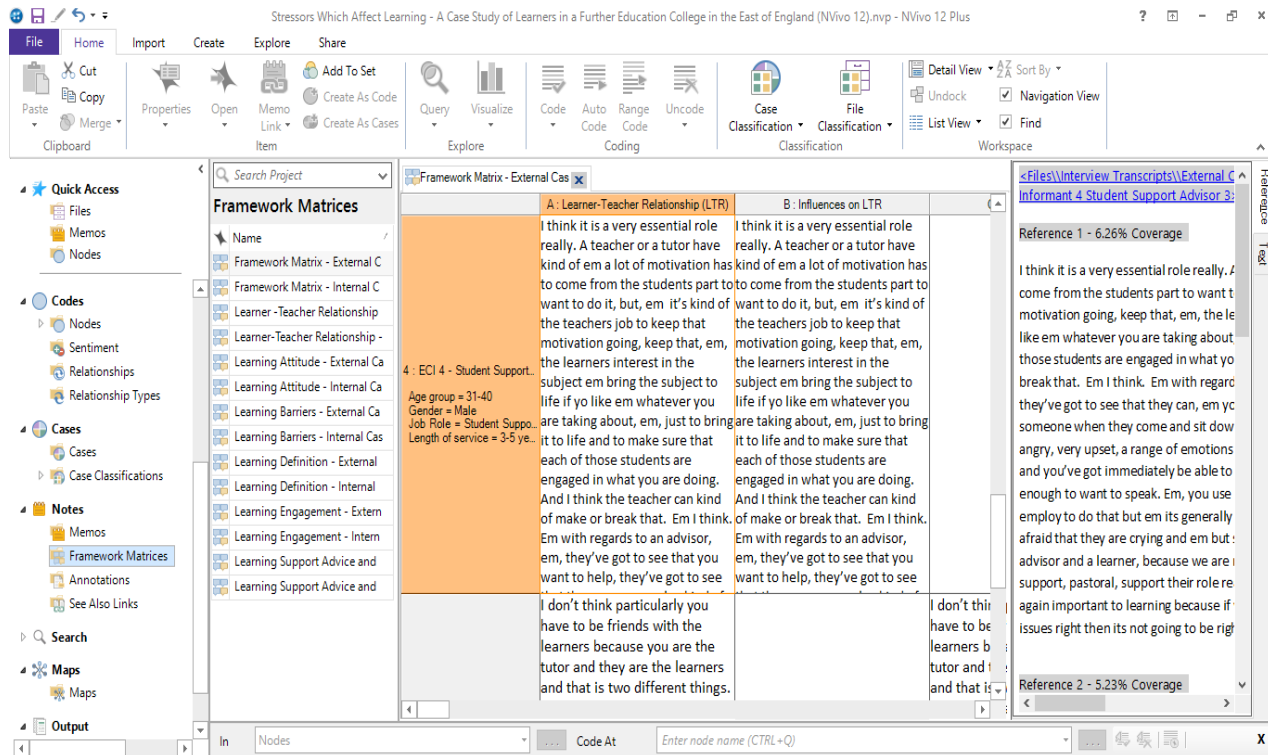


4.7.2 Figure 4.2 Sample hierarchical node structure created in NVivo showing theme – LTR and its categories

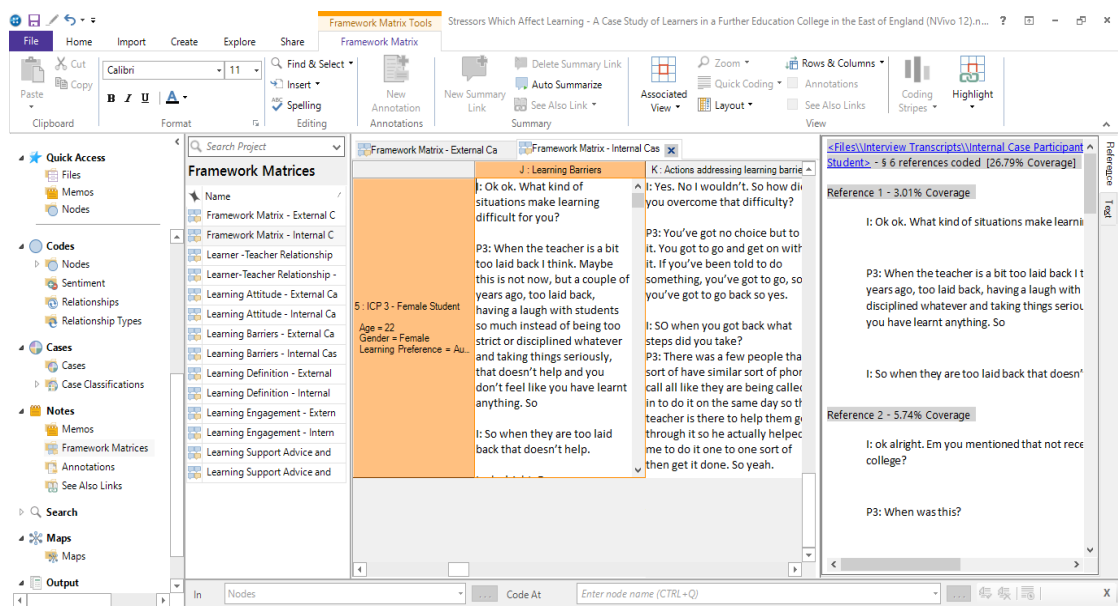


The data was summarised by category from each transcript, reducing it and yet ensuring that vital information was not lost so as not to alter any original meaning and change how the case participants chose to use words to convey the meanings that are concomitant with the topic under study. As such, extreme care was taken to preserve and not to lose any of the participants' sentences and words and remove them out of context to affect the way they used their words in the original transcript in relation to each other to convey meaning. Using NVivo 11 Pro in this charting process enabled references to be made easily and quickly to quotations from respective transcripts to illustrate and highlight key areas of interest in the analysis as it facilitated automatic tagging which was useful in managing the data and generating framework matrices in which the data was organised. Images 4.1 and 4.2 show examples of how framework matrices were generated in NVivo.

### 4.7.3 Image 4.1 Example of How a Cell in the ECI Framework Matrix was Tagged to A Particular ECI's Coded Transcript



### 4.7.4 Image 4.2 Example of How a Cell in the ICP Framework Matrix was Tagged to A Particular ICP's Coded Transcript



While charting was in progress the style of charting was checked with two academic supervisors to ensure that organising and reducing the data did not

lead to losing the meaning participants expressed in the original transcript. Also seeking alternative views on what I as a researcher think is interesting and needed quoting or good to be used for illustrative purposes in the finding sections under each theme is expedient to minimise researcher bias and strengthen consistency of data at the charting stage.

#### 4.8 Step 5 – Mapping and Interpretation

During this stage, the key characteristics of the participants, the participants' narratives under each theme in the data were linked by generating various reports and charts which permitted deep exploration of the data by focussing attention on the evidence gathered from the transcripts in seeking patterns, constructs and any emerging concepts. As a result of successfully charting the of the data in the previous stage, the information organised into the framework matrices (See Appendix 10) was easily produced into a report format in Microsoft Word which made readability and usability of the gathered evidence relatively easier than in Excel. In practical terms, it was easy to print and also jot down ideas (annotate) alongside relevant sections easily as they occurred even away from the computer.

Work at this stage of data analysis led to the development of concepts for exploration of meaning and interpretation. Use was made of concept mapping and other schematic representation tools in CAQDAS NVivo Pro 11 to depict notions in conceptual representations to help elucidate the constructs emerging from the study. Examples of exploratory diagrams created in NVivo are shown in Images 4.3 to 4.6.

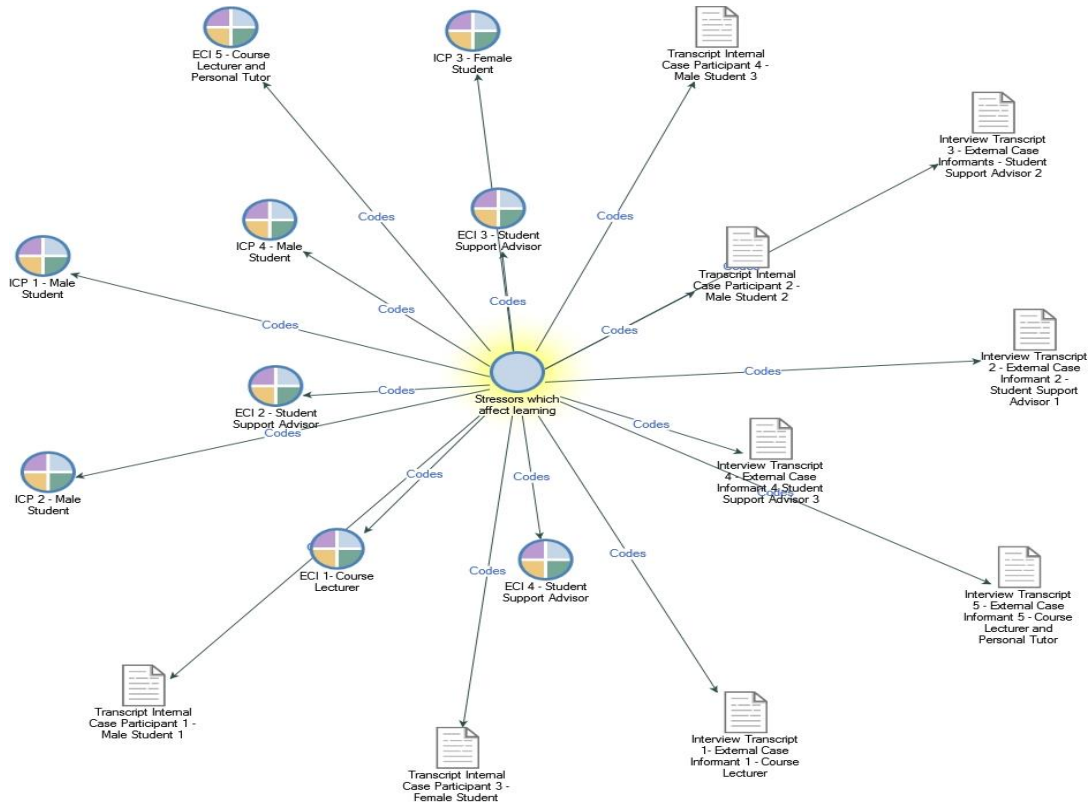
## 4.8.1 Image 4.3 Using Explore Tools in NVivo to Create Schematic Representations Focusing Analysis on SAG

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface with the 'Explore Diagram' tool active. The central node is 'Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)'. It is connected to several peripheral nodes, including 'ICP 1 - Male Student', 'ICP 2 - Male Student', 'ICP 3 - Female Student', 'ICP 4 - Male Student', 'ECI 1 - Course Lecturer', 'ECI 2 - Student Support Advisor', 'ECI 3 - Female Student', 'ECI 4 - Student Support Advisor', 'Interview Transcript 2 - External Case Informant 2 - Student Support Advisor 1', 'Interview Transcript 3 - External Case Informant 3 - Student Support Advisor 2', 'Interview Transcript 4 - External Case Informant 4 - Student Support Advisor 3', 'Interview Transcript 5 - External Case Informant 5 - Course Lecturer and Personal Tutor', and 'Transcript Internal Case Participant 1 - Male Student 1'. The connections are labeled 'Codes' or 'Relationships'.

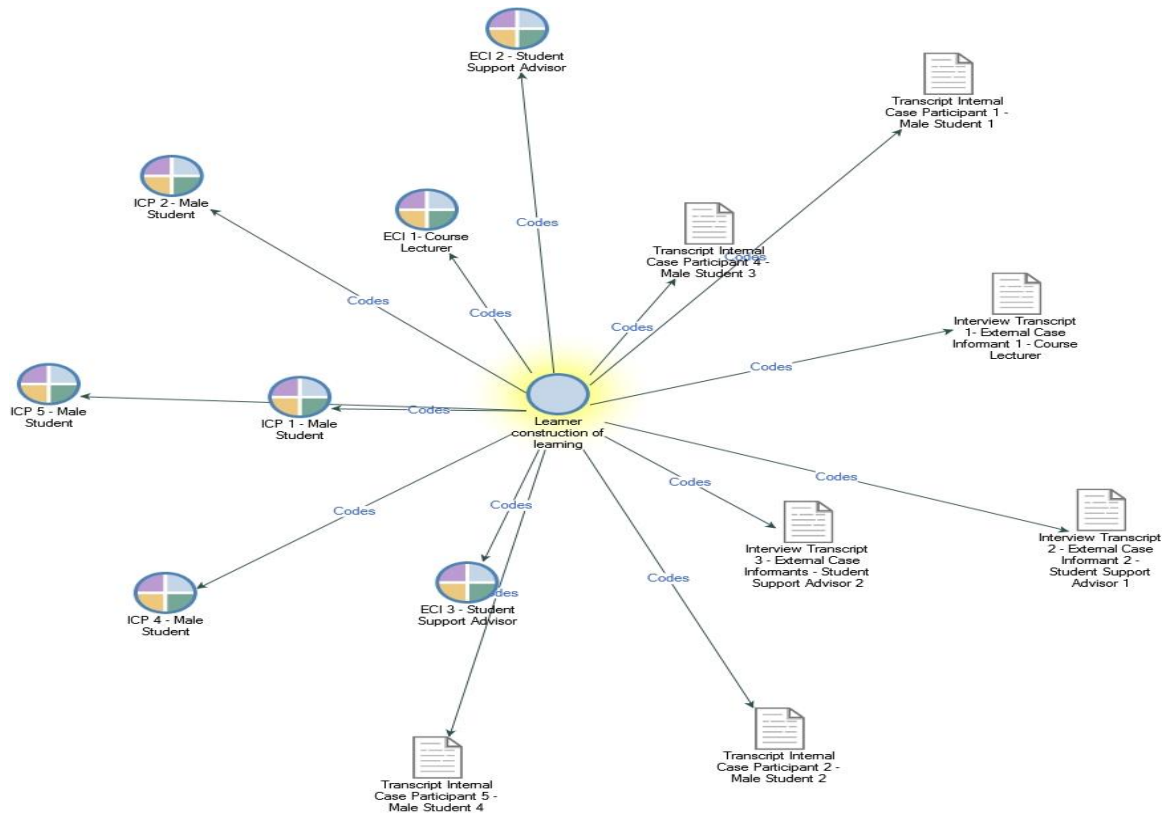
On the left, the 'Thematic Coding Framework' table is visible:

Name	Files	Referen
Learner-	6	16
Learning	9	23
Learning	9	41
Learning	9	32
Learning	9	35
Learning	9	42

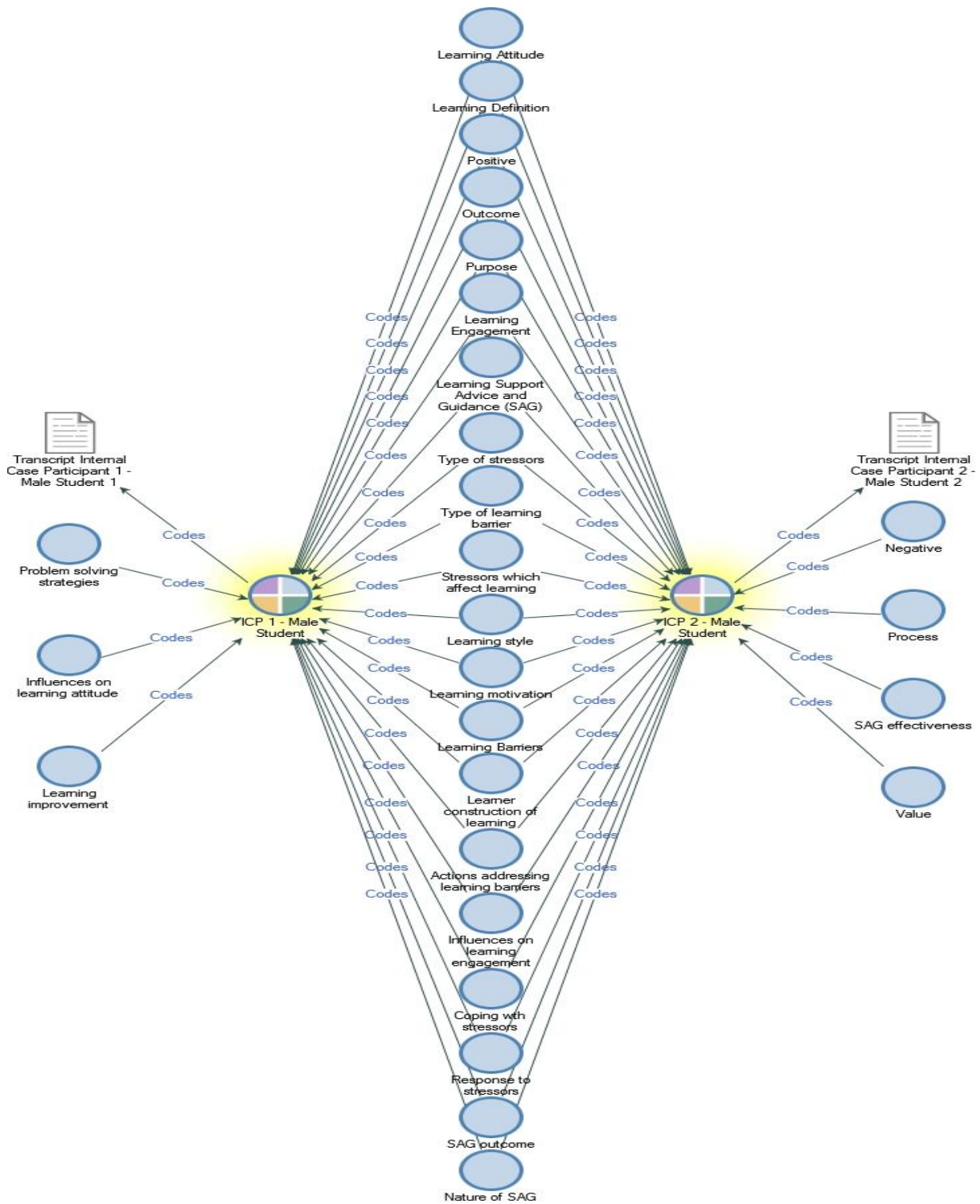
4.8.2 Image 4.4 Diagram showing all case participants contribution to stressors which affect learning at a glance, with links to coded areas in their respective transcripts to allow for a focused examination.



4.8.3 Image 4.5 Diagram showing all case participants contribution to learner construction of learning at a glance with links to coded areas in their respective transcripts to allow for a focused examination.



4.8.4 Image 4.6 Diagram showing comparison between ICP1 and ICP2 in terms of themes





The outcome of this stage of analysis is presented in the next two chapters; findings and discussions. In reaching an understanding of the experiences of the participants, I, the researcher, chose to stay close to the words used by the participants and the meanings they associated and or seem to be conveying on the subject under study solely from their experience and perspective although it can be seen from so many other angles. Adopting this approach in the interpretation phase also gives the participants a voice in the literature and ownership of the findings of the study as well as generates a valid and authentic contribution to knowledge on stressors which affect learning.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

Although the Framework Method is described in five distinct steps, I found a high degree of overlap in the steps in practice. For instance, while in the familiarisation phase, some degree of work towards identifying the thematic framework in the form of researcher thoughts was already accomplished. Also, during the charting phase, some degree of mapping and interpretation was done. There was also a constant going back and forth over what one has previously done in each step, in order to inform actions in other steps making the method flexible and able to be used in a recursive manner until analysis is deemed to be complete, thus when there is no fresh insight emerging. Using CAQDAS NVivo 11 Pro with has tools for Framework Analysis; creating framework matrices, summarising transcripts into matrix cells and converting coding into framework matrix helped immensely. It was easy to retrieve previously accomplished work, making necessary changes such as make additional notes, create new codes easily, merge codes, correcting errors such as change codes or categories as new insight emerged during the course of the analysis and convert information in the framework matrices into a report.

#### 4.10 Box 4.1: Key terms as defined by Gale et al (2013:1-2) in relation to the Framework Method

*“Analytical framework: A set of codes organised into categories that have been jointly developed by researchers involved in analysis that can be used to manage and organise the data. The framework creates a new structure for the data (rather than the full original accounts given by participants) that is helpful to summarize/reduce the data in a way that can support answering the research questions.*

*Categories: During the analysis process, codes are grouped into clusters around similar and interrelated ideas or concepts. While categories are closely and explicitly linked to the raw data, developing categories is a way to start the process of abstraction of the data (i.e. towards the general rather than the specific or anecdotal).*

*Charting: Entering summarized data into the Framework Method matrix*

*Code: A descriptive or conceptual label that is assigned to excerpts of raw data in a process called ‘coding’*

*Data: Qualitative data usually needs to be in textual form before analysis. These texts can be produced by transcribing interview*

*Indexing: The systematic application of codes from the agreed analytical framework to the whole dataset*

*Matrix: A spreadsheet contains numerous cells into which summarized data are entered by codes (columns) and cases (rows).*

*Themes: Interpretive concepts or propositions that describe or explain aspects of the data, which are the final output of the analysis of the whole dataset. Themes are articulated and developed by interrogating data categories through comparison between and within cases. Usually a number of categories would fall under each theme or sub-theme.*

*Transcript: A written verbatim (word-for-word) account of a verbal interaction, such as an interview or conversation”.*

# FINDINGS

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the case study are presented and reflect the collective views of all study participants. In order to report the findings of the case study, it is expedient to revisit the study's aim and objectives.

The aim of the study is to gain an understanding of BTEC Level 3 Business learners' perception of stressors which influence their learning. The study's objectives are to:

1. Describe stressors which affect learning among the learner group
2. Explore how learners cope with stressors which affect learning
3. Identify the available institutional support systems in place to help learners mitigate stressors which affect learning
4. Explore how the learner-teacher relationship influences the learning experience
5. Examine how stressors affect the experience of learning

The findings chapter of the case study is a qualitative synthesis of the responses of all the ten study participants of the study, giving a holistic view of the subject of the case in question. The study participants are grouped into External Case Informants (ECI) and Internal Case Participants (ICP). The participant characteristics are presented in Appendix 1. The emergent thematic coding framework which depicts the codes and sub-codes which has emerged out of the case study is presented in Table 4.1.

## 5.2 Learning – Definition

### 5.2.1 Learning – Definition: Views of External Case Informants (ECIs)

Various learning definitions were advanced the ECIs. Learning was deemed to be a process where knowledge is acquired, understood and then applied elsewhere, in places such as employment or transferred to different situations. In this way, learning is seen as having an outcome. The importance of this process involving having to gather information and develop skills that are new and pertinent to for various uses in the future was also emphasised. For example:

*“the gathering of new information new skills that you don’t have before and you take forward and use for different things”. (ECI 2: lines 19-20)*

The need to make progress with learning and have a sense of moving forward towards a goal were also reported. Learning is deemed a goal directed and purposeful activity with potential benefits including gaining employment, a better lifestyle or gaining access to higher education. All these were deemed key to the meaning of learning. For example:

*“...making progress, working towards something, learning along the way and getting your qualification in the end and you can progress. It means a certain job or certain life and certain pathways.” (ECI 2: lines 23-25)*

Learning was also reported to be a continuous endeavour that can be carried out in different ways, with the value of experience highlighted as key to the learning process. A picture was also painted of learning as aiming and heading towards a destination or milestone that is reached when the appropriate developmental journey is complete. Learning was also seen as tangible but intangible at the same time as elements such as motivation and encouragement

are not evidently seen. The following excerpts from various ECIs illustrate the above points.

*“...when we are born until we are mentally unfit we learn all the time. We learn all the time in my opinion. Everything that we do is around learning.” (ECI 3: lines 15-17)*

*“...kind of acquiring a knowledge, a skill or a piece of information usually either by experience or studying or observing.” (ECI 4: lines 17-18)*

*“For me learning is not always can be physically or tangible sometimes, sometimes you can just see it in their eyes, if that makes sense.” “Their imagination., in terms of say business say physical skills they need to go to work, it could be opening up mindsets, opening up opportunities, opening up more ideas, giving them further lists than they’ve first arrives. So, learning isn’t always about a, b and c. It’s about encouraging, driving, that’s for me, if that makes sense.” (ECI 5: lines 24-31)*

FE learners were not deemed to have devoted much thought to what learning meant to them and the ECI were of the view that FE learners would not necessarily understand why they are learning. One ECI expounded this view in the quote below and blamed this lack of understanding as one of the main reasons for disengagement with learning.

*“I have worked for about 15 years with learners who usually disengaged in education so I will sort of think that they will not understand potentially why they are here and what they are learning for em and usually that is one of the reasons they become disengaged em they think it is compulsory and it is not their choice to be here and potentially they want to do something different so em from their point of view they wouldn’t potentially have a definition of learning.” (ECI 4: lines 28-33).*

Practical learning using active learning strategies were deemed useful in achieving learning objectives in the context of vocational learning and less emphasis was placed on theoretical and didactic learning.

### 5.2.2 Learning – Definition: Views of Internal Case Participants (ICPs)

A male learner aged 18 years with GCSE grade C in Maths and D in English and a preferred auditory learning style, defined learning as “*effective education*” (ICP1: line 41) and elaborated that education is the:

*“...learning that combines the sense of things that one discovers... and picks them up as knowledge.” (ICP1: line 46-51).*

He further expanded his definition as follows:

*“...a lot of things that you need education for and it is best to have education and learn about things before you implement or something?” (ICP1: line 55-56)*

Another male learner, also aged 18 years with GCSE grades C in English and Maths, who preferred learning on his own, defined learning as:

*“...the process of understanding information and committing it to long term memory so that you can use it again at a later date.” (ICP 2:47-53)*

He was of the view that learning is extremely important and useful in terms of future aspirations and articulated that view and the rationale behind it as follows:

*“...learning is incredibly important as knowledge doesn't really have a value, you can't put a value on how or knowing something so I feel knowledge, the learning is priceless in that sense of the word. You can't. it doesn't have a value but It's extremely valuable.... Learning is valuable because I suppose no one can take away from me so what I learn is what I have chosen to learn what I have and in that sense, it's valuable, learning is valuable to me because I have made a decision to learn this and so it's my decision of what I have chosen to do so I have made it valuable to myself on a personal level.... I hope to use my learning. I will like to set my own business in the future so everything that I am learning I hope to be able to apply it so that I can make the best business that I can and ultimately to help other people. So, the more I learn the more I can do.” (ICP 2: lines 61-77)*

The only female learner, aged 18 years, with GCSE grades D in Maths and English and a preferred auditory style of learning, defined learning as:

*“...something that you can take interest in and register...properly” (ICP 3: line 22)*

She stressed the importance of taking full interest in learning as a basis of learning. She reflected that the importance of learning lies in what can be gained or achieved as a result of learning and emphasised practical learning as illustrated in the following quotes:

*“It is meaningful because I feel like I can gain something out of it ` and achieve something...Like maybe say when I learn something new and I actually you know I do try as well you know practical learning helps as well? Organising an event as well. So, learning the techniques of that.” (ICP 3: lines 24-41)*

A male learner, aged 18 years with GCSE grades C in both Maths and English and a preference for the auditory learning style, defined learning as:

*“...trying to learn new ways about particular fields and life itself...get a better understanding of the world you live in and how you can influence it.” (ICP4: lines 9-15).*

The importance attached to learning was explained as having to do with making individual progress as illustrated in the following quote:

*“...learning for me it’s been em meaningful in progression in life and how would life progress further for you if you take time to learn things and understand it. You get a better understanding of different areas such as politics, stuff like that and where you can make then informed decisions about em in your personal life and also in other areas as well...I feel at the moment that with what I am studying with business at the moment is very meaningful for me in terms of where I want to go...I want to go to university, I want to go to UCS, I wanna go into financial accounting, and I wanna progress further in that and I feel any sort of learning and skills I pick up here is going to benefit me when I am a lot older and achieve my goals. And the only way I can achieve those goals is by starting here and learning here and making the most of it.” (ICP 4: lines 24-42)*

From the various definitions of learning offered by the participants, both the ECIs and ICPs viewed learning as a process, a trajectory, with a starting and

end point that produces change recognisable by the progress made, whether physically or mentally (the learner's imagination). The latter has to do with changing mind-sets and the former to do with visible, tangible or demonstrable evidence of some sort. Learning is deemed by the participants to be very much linked to development, skills acquisition and outcomes orientated which can be individual in nature. The practical nature of learning, learning being a process as well as necessary for the educational preparation for the future, in terms of employment, or problem solving, or other areas of life have also been included in the definitions offered by the participants. Emphasis was laid firmly in the need to understand what is being learnt, gain knowledge and then apply it to effect change. However, no direct mention was made of assessment of learning. Also, the approach to learning to be adopted was not included specifically in the definitions. The need to have interest in what is being learnt has been reflected. However, the application of the knowledge gained in employment, decision making, personal life and other spheres of life have been included in the definitions. From the responses the participants gave as to their definition of learning, one can glean that collectively, learning is seen as a process, has a purpose, work towards an outcome, has value and the learner is expected to make progress. Surprisingly, contrary to some external participants' view that some learners may view learning as a chore or a checklist or something that has to be done compulsorily, the learners who made up the internal case participants did not report such views. The context of the external case informant's contribution as pointed out has to do with learners who disengage with learning or at risk of disengaging from learning.



## 5.3 Learning – Barriers

### 5.3.1 Learning – Barriers Described by External Case Informants (ECIs)

A female course lecturer, explained that learners will not say that this is a barrier to my learning, however through discussion one is able to work out what these are. In her view the following are deemed to be barriers to learning:

*“I don’t think someone says this is a barrier to me learning but I think through discussions you kind of work out somethings like it might be the practical stuff again, so like they don’t have a computer at home or working too many hours, and it’s quite a big barrier, some of ours work maybe thirty hours in a job on top of the college so that is obviously very hard for them to manage their time effectively and find the time to do the course work and so on.” (ECI 1: lines 77-82)*

Emotional issues and relationship stresses were also identified with the later deemed the main learning barrier in the course lecturer’s experience. She articulates this as follows:

*“So, they are individual relationships and I thought it will be more to do with stress at college and but that that isn’t always their main actually it is not one of their biggest issues. It is actually the external boyfriend girlfriend relationships and the kind of their impact on their life from that.” (ECI 1: lines 128-133)*

Having to get college work completed to deadlines was also identified as a learning barrier albeit that is not the main issue. Emotional and issues external to the curriculum or college were described as the main barriers to learning by this participant.

A student support advisor (SSA), also intimated that issues external to college and the curriculum are the learning barriers the learners face. Here is a quote of her response:

*“...personal issues, things at home, things that aren’t linked to the course but obviously affect it. Such as home and family issues, family*

*breakdown or abusive home life, financial or accommodation issues, getting kicked out of home, have no money, what else, em sort of health problems sort of mental health problems or physical health, both can affect someone's study quite a bit, em anything else personal to them friendship break downs or relationship breakdowns especially in the teenage years.” (ECI 2: lines 44-49)*

The importance of social life and friendship ties were deemed top priority for the learners and they tend to bring issues to do with these to college and that becomes a learning barrier when things go wrong and they are not able to engage with learning. This view is reflected in this quote from the participant:

*“I think at that age they put a lot of emphasis on their friendship groups so their social lives and college can also be linked up with that, they are meeting friends and they are making friendship groups and then they socialise outside of college and so if that breaks down for whatever reason, em that can affect their course and their time at college. And yeah, I think they put a lot of emphasis and importance on that and so when that goes wrong they bring it all into college and it means they cannot come in or they cannot do the work while they are here. So, a lot have to do with that.” (ECI 2: lines 53-58)*

Emphasis was also laid on the role played by mental health problems such as depression as a learning barrier to the learners. This has been described to affect learner attendance and their concentration in the classroom. The participant in describing this learning barrier, also reiterated that barriers to learning are external to the college and the curricula in the following quote:

*“...we see a lot is the mental health side of it so if they are struggling with may be with depression or em something like that then that is a massive barrier. Em then they probably still want to learn but they feel they can't, because that can cause attendance problems, concentration and things like that and it's all those outside stressors, like I have mentioned before such as family life, financial problems perhaps, mental health physical health, friendship breakdowns, relationship problems they are facing” (ECI 2: lines 97-102)*

The participant also described financial difficulties as posing a barrier to learning as learners struggle to get a bus pass to college and when they ring the absence line one of the reasons they give is that they cannot afford to come to travel to college. She bemoaned the lack of financial support for the learners in

general. Financial difficulties were also identified by another SSA as a learning barrier and she puts it this way:

*“Finance, that’s probably more with our older young people, the 19 pluses, obviously the college bursary can help but only to a degree and a lot of people who come back into college already started family and you have to be careful about childcare and financial problems. Once they are over 19, they have to pay and they are not entitled to free education. They have to get on the benefits such as job seekers allowance and then they can have free education. We signpost to the job centres and places like Mygo and an agency that help them look for work, compile their CV and they do some training. At times we give short term help with train tickets through funding from the college.” (ECI 3: lines 124-131)*

Additionally, various mental health problems were also highlighted as a learning barrier that is on the increase based on the experience of this SSA. Lack of interest in the subjects the learners are studying was also identified as a barrier to learning by ECI 4. This was explained as having to do with the learner not enjoying the subject as they do not understand it, and it is at a difficult level of study. Learners have been reported as saying the subjects are boring and they are not interested. Through discussion, it is apparent according to this participant that learners lack understanding and knowledge and do not know why they are even studying a particular subject. The participant is of the view that this can be attributed to choosing the wrong course in the first place or having other issues going on in their lives outside college. This participant explained the issue as follows:

*“...generally em couple of reasons that they have some sort of barriers that affect their learning one is that they have a lack of interest in the subject em or poor potentially the way it has been delivered or a negative experience about the subject which immediately puts up a barrier em I always find that generally there is a reason why they don’t want to that or not enjoying doing that and the reason other not they are not enjoying it or that particular subject is not interesting to them or the fact that they don’t understand the subject. It has not been explained to them maybe it is at a difficult level for them and there is always a reason, but you don’t get the truth from learners directly say this is the reason I am not enjoying it but will say I don’t want to do it. It is boring, and I am not interested.*

*But if you kind of have a chat and you start to discuss there is a reason as to why and majority of time I will say it is the lack of understanding and a lack of knowledge plus people have potentially pick the wrong course or they have changed their mind or they have got other issues outside of learning that have been affecting their actual learning.” (ECI 4: lines 92-103)*

Personal issues, being homeless, addictions, family issues, friendship issues, ill health particularly mental ill health were described by the participant as having a negative impact on learning and affect the learners’ ability to concentrate on learning. Furthermore, financial issues were explained as a learning barrier as some learners are not able to afford transportation to college and end up withdrawing from the college and going to get a job.

A course lecturer and personal tutor, described learning barriers as difficulties learners have in travelling to college, the cost of travel. The length of travel and the culture that pervades in the localities that the learners are coming from is seen as an issue. He bemoaned the high level of deprivation in such localities as a barrier to learning. He also highlighted split families owing to divorce and separation in families, where mum and dad are no longer together as a learning barrier. He also described management practices in the college with emphasis on English and Maths as barrier to vocational learning as most of his students have lost the edge in their vocational subjects. He reported that he feels management focus on embedding English and Maths in all vocational learning has jeopardized the learning of vocational subjects. Other issues described as learning barriers include financial issues resulting from the stopping of EMA, lack of motivation, drugs and personal issues which were explained by the participant as follows:

*“...I feel money. Money since the £30 a week has been stopped. The EMA has been stopped. That could be a two- sided coin because some of them they used to come because of the money. Obviously, that affects*

*attendance as well. But EMA they used to not to be able to work but they obviously do part time work. EMA has affected attendance. Coming from such poor area, part time work, and so many attendance issues. So many poverty issues now. So many. There are so many students who don't want to be here now, and they are here because their Mum and Dad are getting substantial amount of money for being here. Motivation. There are students who come here because the college is such good location and they cannot afford to their local high school. Students are trying to get a job, so they come here instead. There are variety of issues.” (ECI 5: lines 254-270)*

### 5.5.2 Learning – Barriers Described by Internal Case Participants

A male learner, described personal issues and social issues that has nothing to do with education as a barrier to learning. He mentioned family issues, problems with friends and peers, ‘moving house’, lack of self-confidence, not knowing what he is going to be learning, being behind in assignments, distraction in lessons, getting more assignments, the requirements of the grades, the assessment criteria and the complexity of the assignments, lack of focus and concentration in the classroom as other learning barriers he has experienced. Receiving negative feedback and the nature of feedback received was regarded as a learning barrier by a different learner as follows:

*“For me negative feedback is a big falling block for me. It's when if I am doing a piece of work and I have worked my absolute hardest on it and it comes back, and I have got everything wrong in it not I have got everything right in it. That can hugely knock me down. I feel like I have let myself down and I just want to stop whatever it is that I am doing and just do something completely different. I know that that is one of my difficulties. I don't like I can't handle that negative feedback given constructive things in them I can't work with and I have to learn to cope with and that is something that happens so I have to learn to deal with it as best as I can.” (ICP 2: lines 122-129)*

The only female internal case participant mentioned how the attitude of the teacher can be a learning barrier and intimated that in the following quote:

*“When the teacher is a bit too laid back I think. Maybe this is not now, but a couple of years ago, too laid back, having a laugh with students so much instead of being too strict or disciplined whatever and taking things*

*seriously, that doesn't help, and you don't feel like you have learnt anything" (ICP 3: lines 98-105)*

She described "ill behaviour" (ICP 3: line 203) by other learners, and certain actions such as what other learners say, and a noisy classroom were also identified as learning barriers by this participant. Physical ill health and what one of the ICPs described as "a lot of upbringing stuff" (ICP 4: line 88), the number of assignments, varying contexts of lectures and assignments, the complexity of assignments which makes them difficult to understand were highlighted as learning barriers by this participant. The learners who are the internal case participants in addition to describing personal issues and other social issues as learning barriers have elaborated on the academic issues which are learning barriers including behaviour of teachers and learners in the classroom. The external case informants who are employed to either teach or support the learners see most of the learning barriers as having to do with the learners' personal and social issues except for one who sees management of learning and teaching as a contributing to barriers in vocational learning. There is probably a need for self- evaluation on behalf of the teaching and student support staff and an improved dialogue between learners and staff employed to work with them to address learning barriers.

### 5.3.3 Learning – Type of Barriers

#### 5.3.3.1 Table 5.1 Learning – Types of Barriers Identified by External Case Informants (ECIs)

<b>ECI</b>	<b>Type of Learning Barrier</b>
ECI 1	Practical challenges, not having a computer at home, working too many hours, combining part-time work

Course Lecturer	with course work, poor time management, emotional issues, relationship stresses, issues external to college
ECI 2 Student Support Advisor	Personal and social issues, home and family issues, issues external to college, family breakdown, abusive home life, financial issues, accommodation, homelessness, health problems, mental health problems being a teenager.
ECI 3 Student Support Advisor	Financial issues, search for part-time work, travel cost, mental health issues, drugs and alcohol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feeling suicidal, external issues to do with learners' lives.
ECI 4 Student Support Advisor	Lack of interest subject, the way lessons are taught, negative experience of the subject, lack of understanding, personal issues, homelessness, addictions, family issues, ill health especially mental health problems, external issues, financial issues, travel difficulties.
ECI 5 Course Lecturer and Personal Tutor	Travel cost, distance learners have to travel, family issues, financial issues, part-time job and teacher factors.

5.3.3.2 Table 5.2 Learning – Types of Barriers Identified by Internal Case Participants (ICPs)

<b>ICP</b>	<b>Type of Learning Barrier</b>
ICP 1	Social reasons, family issues, friendship problems and peers. Moving house, being behind assignments, distraction in lessons, not concentrating and completing assignments on time. Having a lot of assessment criteria on assignment brief.

ICP 2	Negative feedback and how to handle it. Trying to think through feedback. Blaming self and feeling pressured and not being able to do anything.
ICP 3	Attitude of teacher. teacher not being organised, structured and self-disciplined. Poor classroom management. Distractible behaviour.
ICP 4	Personal reasons; health challenges, encouragement from significant others; family and health care professionals.

Overall, the types of learning barrier identified by the participants include mental health problems, alcohol and drugs, physical health issues, relationship issues, emotional issues, friendship issues, financial difficulties, broken families, transportation difficulties, travel costs, level of deprivation, homelessness, academic workload, complexity of assignments, nature of assessment, negative feedback, lack of immediate academic support and teacher unavailability. The external case informants have identified issues that are external to the curriculum and mainly in the social ecologies of the learners which tend to become a barrier to learning. The internal case participants also largely acknowledged personal issues and others not related to the curriculum being a learning barrier and additionally heavily construe their learning barriers to do with academic issues as well.

#### 5.4 Learning – Actions Addressing Barriers

ECI 1, a female course lecturer stated that learning barriers are addressed through discussions with the learners and talking to them about practical things they can do to address barriers to their learning such as how they can manage their learning and other demands on their lives, making clear “when



*they could ...actually be doing coursework*". Part-time work has been highlighted by this informant as a key barrier to learning and the action advised to learners is to reduce their hours at the time they need to be doing course work. Here, the learner is directed as to what to do to address the situation. It appears a situational analysis with the learner in a discussion precedes any directive that is issued cogent to what is established in the discussion as the barrier to learning.

Another key action mentioned by the course lecturer is that she ensures that barriers to learning are addressed, in that she refers learners to student support services and ensure that they attend to get the help that they need. She expressed lack of trust on the part of the learner to take the initiative themselves to go to student support services just on the say so of the course lecturer based on her previous experiences of learners promising to go and not doing so. What seems to be preventing this from happening is perhaps the lack of trust and absence of a relationship between student support staff and learners. She emphasised the need to build a relationship with student support staff to start with prior to disclosure of support needs. There is the need to ensure that a relationship is established between learners and student support staff in order to make the services they offer accessible to learners. Issues of approachability of student support staff would need to be examined to enable learners feel able to approach them and access their services. It appears the course lecturer having been teaching learners over a period of time would have developed a relationship with her learners and therefore able to have discussions, including confidential ones, because of the element of trust in the learner-teacher relationship owing to the learner and the teacher knowing each other for some time. Introducing learners to student support staff by someone they already know and trust as a first step in relationship building between learners and

student support staff has been verbalised by the course lecturer as an effective step in the right direction. It appears from her discourse that relationship based on mutual trust is paramount in learners feeling able to on their own volition and on recommendation of course lecturer take their own initiative to seek help from student support services through accessing the service, disclosure of barriers which affect learning and eliciting help or assistance to address them.

The other external case informant who contributed to how learning barriers are addressed is a female student support advisor. Her narrative is fraught with expressions of feelings of exasperation at how helpless the student support service is at times to the learners. She mentioned how it is difficult for learners to come into student services in the first place with their issues as they may not be wanting to do that in spite of their tutors pointing them in that direction to obtain help because they do not want to ask for help. Frustrations were expressed as to how difficult keeping contact with learners who need help is, especially if they have attendance problems. The nature of the help that learners at times require to address learning barriers were reported to be multifaceted and student support staff narrated how they are sometimes limited by what they can do as getting proper support is difficult due to lack of expertise. Listening to her words, she conveyed an expression of helplessness in certain situations that student support staff find themselves in at times where they could not be of help to the learner to address learning barriers:

*“Sometimes getting them to come to you in the first place? Maybe a tutor is pointing something out that a student need help from student support and maybe they are not wanting to do that and they do want to ask for help and then once perhaps they have been keeping that regular contact especially if they have got different things going on and to keep contact is difficult at times especially if they have got attendance problems. And again, it is how much you can help like not being a counsellor, not being anything in that sort of sense, how you can do anything. You can sort out all the practical things and you can be there for them to talk to and sometimes it comes to a point where you can’t do anymore. And*

*sometimes not having the services available out there to signpost them to as well. It's a little bit tricky. For example, mental health, trying to get them some proper support is difficult.” (ECI 2: lines 112-121)*

It appears that the help or assistance that student support services do provide is inadequate according to her view informed by her experience and assessment of various situations where in her own words, *“it comes to a point where you can't do anymore” (ECI 2: line 118)*, not because the professional will is not there but the knowhow, the expertise and the capacity of the service seems to be lacking, deficient or limited by what is made available by the college. There seem to be lack of specialist training which is alluded to in her narrative where she said, *“And again it is how much you can help like not being a counsellor, not being anything in that sort of sense, how you can do anything.” (ECI 2: line 116)*. The recruitment and training of student support staff in order to meet diverse needs of the learner population needs consideration if the service offered is not to be deemed as a skeleton service to say the least according to the view presented by this student support advisor. The calibre of persons recruited to who work in this service, thus the person specification for the job role, their induction, training needs analysis, on-going training and continuous professional development needs to be reviewed so as to meet support needs that learners in college can present including various learning barriers. She emphasised the need to review what student support service does so that new ways can be found to change the service it provides in order to help learners and also find other services which are external to the college to provide extra support which the college student support services are not able to provide. This is how ECI 2 puts it:

*“...review what we are doing so we can to find ways to change it to help and yeah review what we are doing and keep trying, keep looking for*

*other services and places that can provide extra support.” (ECI 2: lines 124-126)*

Both external case informants offered their experiential knowledge of how learning barriers are addressed. The learning barriers highlighted by the two external case informants who contributed to this theme were non-academic, thus external issues outside the college curriculum; part-time job, mental health issues, college non-attendance (owing to unspecified external reasons?). The teaching staff have a relationship with the learners and through discussion is able to identify learning barriers, direct the learner to take necessary actions to address the barriers, refer the learner to student support services, accompany the learner physically to student support services in order to start or initiate a building of a relationship and ensure that the learner attends the service to seek help or assistance required to address learning barriers. The student support advisor in assisting the learner to address learning barriers requires the learner to attend the service to ask for help, seek to listen to the learner, keep regular contact, do anything that they can do for the learner practically, be there for the learners to talk to in spite of not having the requisite qualification or expertise to provide professional needed help or a tailor-made service to signpost the learners to even if this happens to be external to the college.

Although both the external case informants are in different job roles clearly identified accessibility and approachability of student support services by the learners as an issue. They also indicated that accessing student support services is usually not a matter of self-referral for the learners. They are directed there or pointed in that direction by their course lecturer or tutors and this effort by their course lecturers or tutors is not enough for the learners to take the initiative to go to student support services on their own accord. It could be

because there is not yet a relationship built between the student support staff and the learners who need help and so trust issues are surfacing preventing learners from accessing the service, disclosing their support need and getting the help that they require on one side, and on the other side, once they are able to establish contact with student support services (which has been recognised to be fraught with difficulties by both external case informants), keeping in contact is another challenge especially where there are multiple issues including attendance problems articulated by the student support advisor. The service is also deemed as lacking in capacity to provide all the needed help that learners require to address their learning barriers. This brings to the fore the relevancy of the student support service in meeting the on-going support needs of learners including all necessary assistance to successfully address their identified learning barriers.

Learning barriers identified includes delaying assignments; negative feedback; not having a choice or say on when assessments need to be completed; delay of teacher input; teacher poor organisation causing delay in completing unit assessment; ill-behaviour of peers, particularly being loud in the classroom, which can be distracting to learning; struggling with academic work, getting content of assignments right to achieve desired grade. Actions taken to address the above were in the form of coming into college on non-timetabled days to work on assignments to prevent delaying in submitting them by their due date. This effort has been reported by one participant as helpful in allowing him to get back on track with his learning when he realises that he is behind [planning and organisation of learning issue]. Reference was also made to the use of virtual learning environment, VLE, Blackboard, as a helpful tool in remembering what the teacher has said in class as the presentations used by the teacher are

deposited there and one can make notes and write things down to aid understanding of learning material much easier.

In addressing the learning barrier of negative feedback, ICP 2 narrated that:

*“I will do my best to not think about what has been said too much and focus on what you are saying next. So, if you said one thing, In the past I would have just focussed so long, I would have completely almost ignored what was going to be said next even if it was you have done this brilliantly I will focus on what you said I haven’t done so well or even how I would improve it. And I would say I thought I did this I thought I did that? Now I will em try and leave what’s been said behind and I will focus on what is being said next and then I will go away and try to reflect on everything as supposed to just negatives.” (ICP 2: lines 150-157)*

ICP 2 reported having to make a mental shift in his thinking about negative feedback which changed his reaction to it as he now makes a conscious effort to choose to mentally overcome this barrier by changing his reaction to negative feedback. He has acknowledged that it is the negative component of feedback he receives which triggers his reaction, which then becomes a learning barrier as he could not see beyond the negative component of feedback. He has developed self-awareness and said he has decided not to focus only on the negatives in feedback received. He said he has now chosen to reflect on all aspects of feedback that is being given, listening attentively to the whole feedback instead of getting into a defensive coping mechanism which tends to block the other aspects of feedback which are not negative. Although not mentioned by the participant verbatim, his narrative indicates his reaction to verbal feedback. There is a need here to have both verbal and written feedback delivered to the learner if possible at the same time to enable a proper reflection to be undertaken by the learner after the learner has received verbal feedback and gone away from the teacher. The way the feedback is delivered need to be considered as well as various learners may react to different content of feedback

differently. Sensitivity to the learner and their learning needs, making feedback clear, being honest, caring and supportive and open to discussion of the feedback given will foster an atmosphere of dialogue and not argument, enhance reflection towards the next steps to address any shortcomings to improve learning and leaning outcomes. Feedback need to be delivered in a manner not to evoke defensive coping mechanisms in learners and where this is being displayed the teacher need to be able to assist the learner to manage this positively so as to overcome this learning barrier. Self-awareness and a mental transformation of both the way feedback is delivered and received is necessary to address this learning barrier.

ICP 3, the only female learner, who also had her learning support needs formally assessed, mentioned that she does not have a choice or say in when assessments need to be completed and that the individual help she received from her teacher towards writing her assignment could have been provided earlier only if the course teacher was better organised. This delay in receiving teacher input due to poor organisation on the part of the teacher led to a delay in completing one her course units. She vehemently narrated how she has to be recalled from the summer holidays to complete coursework that she thought she had already completed. However, she had no choice but to comply with the directives given in other to complete the course. ICP 3 said she just had to go back to college:

*“You’ve got no choice but to do it. You got to go and get on with it. If you’ve been told to do something, you’ve got to go, so you’ve got to go back so yes.” (ICP 3: lines 134-136).*

She was not pleased and posed a question to me, the researcher, asking if I would have been pleased if I was in her shoes in such circumstances. I had to

concur that I would imagine not. I hesitated to answer her but remembering that we were having a conversation about learning through which I am looking to refract the subject of the case study through the participants as an object, I had to keep the conversation going and share my honest opinion which was not meant in any case to validate her individual stance as being right or wrong as that is not the import of the study. She narrated having to respond to the phone call she received to come into college during the holiday time as directed by her course teacher and she received one to one teacher input which helped her complete the work and mentioned this was the case for few other learners as well reflected in the quote below:

*“There were a few people that sort of have similar sort of phone call all like they are being called in to do it on the same day so the teacher is there to help them go through it so he actually helped me to do it one to one sort of then get it done. So yeah.” (ICP3: lines 139-142)*

The ill-behaviour of peers, particularly being loud in the classroom, which can be distracting to learning was also reported by ICP3 as a learning barrier which she manages by not taking what they are saying seriously, laughing it off, and ignoring what they are saying, *“Its you’ve got to blank out other people’s actions that’s what I have to do literally” (ICP 3: lines 210-211)*, focusing on herself and performing her learning tasks. She also mentioned that when some of her peers are unbearably loud she uses her head phones with music on while performing learning tasks. This raises the issue of classroom behaviour management and needing to have classroom control in the classroom by the teacher. Poor classroom control and behaviour management in the classroom by the teacher can lead to noise and various other actions of the learners becoming counter-productive to learning.



With regards to actions taken to address struggling with academic work, the content of assignments necessary to achieve desired grades, ICP 4 recounted speaking first and foremost to his tutors to ask for help as they are there to help (*His tone of voice was extremely reassuring and indicative to me of there being a good relationship with his tutors, and that he felt they were approachable and accessible to him when he needs them. I also understood this to mean his previous experience of receiving help from tutors was a positive and encouraging one*) as well as talk to friends (*I understood this to mean classmates who are friends, thus not everyone in the class can be approached*) who have made the grade that is desired and ask them how they did it so that one gets an understanding of how differently they did their work to attain the grade, and carry out independent research. In addition to the above steps taken by the participant himself to address his learning barrier, he mentioned how he found the teachers, the college wide system, granting of extensions to deadlines in light of medical evidence, the friends he speak to about coursework, his own research, having a sheer determination to succeed, a positive mental attitude, professional medical from his health team especially his professor, the social support, practical help and encouragement he receives from his family especially his mother's input into his medical care as crucial to overcoming this learning barrier. It appears his struggling with academic work and content of assignments is associated with having to live with a chronic and debilitating physical health condition which he is managing alongside his college education. ICP 4 described this in an emotive way stressing how he derives his motivation from the support of others around him to make efforts to learn to show appreciation for the support he has been receiving without which it would not have been possible to address his learning barriers:

*“Erm my family, obviously with the situation that I have had it’s had a massive impact on our family...And my mum has gone through all of it. She is the reason I had the second transplant.... So, she fought like hell to get me there. And she will always be there for support in terms of learning but she is more there now though I take it for granted for like the willingness to say for, to prove to everyone that I am here and I am going to be here for the foreseeable future. I am not letting go!... Erm it’s for my family as well! It’s the least they deserve!!.....It’s the least they deserve after everything that I do well and fulfil what I want to do and then in that way then it was all worth it.... My mum in particular.” (ICP 4: lines 212-245)*

## 5.5 Learning – Engagement: Views of External Case Informants (ECIs)

ECI 1, a course lecturer, described how learners engage well in lessons when lessons are active and the learners are participating. According to her, learners tend not to engage with theory-based lessons and when something is clearly explained to them clearly, then they are able to work independently or in small groups to “*actually do*” the learning. Getting learners to reflect on their learning was also reported to help them engage with learning. She believes that using various teaching and learning methods such as role plays, videos and using different scenarios or case studies which are relevant to employment were deemed essential in promoting learning engagement. These methods she narrated, brings authenticity to the classroom and allows the learner to relate what they are learning for example to employment and actually understand how it fits into where they want to get to, thus their future destinations. Additionally, she reflected that having plenary sessions, checking through assignments, conducting learning checks, encouraging peer support by allowing another learner to explain to a class member what they have done promotes engagement and is a good way of verifying that the learner has engaged as they are able to put it in their words. The time of the day was also considered by this participant as an important factor to consider with regards to learning engagement because

in the mornings, around 9 am, the learners are usually sleepy and after 4pm they tend to be too hungry and are not engaged in lessons.

ECI 2, SSA, highlighted having support and a supportive environment, having supportive teachers who want learners to succeed and who makes the learners feel that learning is meaningful is important in ensuring learning engagement. She further explains that this is important because the learners would want to please these teachers and make them proud. She stressed home the point that learners need to make the link between what they are learning and what they want to get out of their learning as meaningful for there to be engagement with learning. She also reflected in this view that learners need to have a sense of progression that they have moved on so that they learn to get the results that they want. Practical learning and interactive lessons as well as use of placements were preferred methods of learning by this participant as opposed to the traditional sitting in the classroom and watching power points. Encouraging attendance, giving good feedback, positive and good comments from both the teaching staff and home as well were other strategies mentioned as helpful in improving learner engagement.

ECI 3, SSA, was of the view that home life affects the learner's mind-set is a key factor in learning engagement as well as teaching skills. She expressed this in the following narrative:

*“Within my experience most young people who come from a stable happy background will find education a more meaningful place to be. I think students who come from a more difficult background do tend to struggle. I don't think they are just struggling with the learning; they struggle with the whole environment.” (ECI 3: lines 37-41)*

The teacher's expectation of the class, classroom rules, and teacher-learner relationship were also stressed as crucial in ensuring learning engagement by this participant.

ECI 4, SSA, described positive reinforcement as important in ensuring learning engagement particularly where previous experiences of the learner have been negative. He advocated for teachers to use various teaching and learning strategies that are eclectic and allows learners with different learning styles to engage. He passionately offered his views as follows:

*“I have worked in the past with people who have been removed from education em they have been sort of excluded, expelled or withdrawn em and generally their experience is a negative one em so it’s about putting some positive reinforcement in there to say not all education is like that and em certainly not trying to fix them into a box but trying to fit education suited to them rather than trying to pin point and put them into a kind of box really.” (ECI 4: lines 44-49)*

ECI 5, a Course Lecturer and Personal Tutor, stressed the importance of learning by mistake and experience as the traditional chalk and talk method has not worked for learners in his experience and is of the view that learners do not find this beneficial. Communication, interaction of learners and use of technology as ways of innovation in the classroom was deemed by this participant as the way forward for learner engagement. He also stressed social learning, where he explains learning need to be linked to whole conversations. He explained what he meant by whole conversations as learning had to inform the ambition of the learner, ‘the next steps’ of the learner which he admits vary among learners and even arguably colleges. He advocated for peer pressure to be used in a competitive manner in the classroom and that as learners do not want to be the next statistics on the NEETs numbers, learning conversations can be employment or career driven. The crucial role technology should play in learning engagement was passionately intimated as follows by this participant in the quotes below:

*“These smartboards we got rid of them 5 years ago in another college because they were outdated. The learners are not seeing any changes here. You still got them so other students are sort of reacting to the changes. So, when they are learning at a rapid pace, our learners are*

*going to learn at an effectual rate, and seeing that what is happening in London and the world and the internet. Are learners going to be able to learn at that rate? Are they going to be able to respond? Are they going to be reacting? So, is that going to affect learning? Yes, it is! So, it's getting into the whole going back to your first question. What is learning? What is going to affect learning? Your whole technology.” (ECI 5: lines 166-175)*

Further ways of learning engagement were described by ECI 5 as ensuring that teachers are up to date in their knowledge, there are qualified, been in touch with industry, have passion, be flexible, give learners other opportunities outside the classroom to learn, encourage learners to research, inspiring them and being able to give good and timely feedback.

## 5.6 Stressors Which Affect Learning

### 5.6.1 Stressors Which Affect Learning: Views of External Case Informants (ECIs)

ECI 1 stated that learners do not necessarily approach staff and state what their stressors are. She alluded to the fact that these are usually picked up during conversations with the learner and the stressors are of a practical nature such as not having a computer at home, working too many hours, for example up to 30 hours on top of college work, leading to ineffective time management. She highlighted ‘*relationship stresses*’, particularly external boyfriend and girlfriend relationships as the main stressor for this learner group:

*“So, they are individual relationships and I thought it will be more to do with stress at college and but that that isn't always their main actually it is not one of their biggest issues. It is actually the external boyfriend girlfriend relationships and the kind of their impact on their life from that” (ECI 1: lines 129-133)*

She laid emphasis on the point that the stressors experienced by this learner group are chiefly external to the academic curriculum. The only reference made to academic stressors by ECI 1 was to do with learners having to get work completed to deadlines. However, she clearly and as a matter of fact mentioned

that the stressors are mainly emotional and external in nature and not academic:

*“...that doesn’t seem to be the main issue. Its normally something emotional and external.” (ECI 1: lines 138-139)*

ECI 2, was of the view that the stressors which affect learning include:

*“...personal issues, things at home, things that aren’t linked to the course but obviously affect it. Such as home and family issues, family breakdown or abusive home life, financial or accommodation issues, getting kicked out of home, have no money, what else, em sort of health problems sort of mental health problems or physical health, both can affect someone’s study quite a bit, em anything else personal to them friendship break downs or relationship breakdowns especially in the teenage years.” (ECI 2: lines 44-49)*

Here again, personal and other issues external to the academic curriculum were described as the stressors which affect learning. Relationships, friendship groups, socialisation were deemed to be of high importance to FE learners and as such issues such as friendship breakdowns tend to have an impact on their learning. ECI 2 attributed these to the teenage or adolescence developmental life stage in which the learners are and expressed her views in the quote below:

*“I think at that age they put a lot of emphasis on their friendship groups so their social lives and college can also be linked up with that, they are meeting friends and they are making friendship groups and then they socialise outside of college and so if that breaks down for whatever reason, em that can affect their course and their time at college. And yeah I think they put a lot of emphasis and importance on that and so when that goes wrong they bring it all into college and it means they cannot come in or they cannot do the work while they are here. So a lot have to do with that.” (ECI 2: lines 53-58)*

Other issues that were described by ECI 2 as stressors for FE learners were health problems, both physical and mental health as well as financial difficulties as summed up in the quote below:

*“...the thing that we see a lot is the mental health side of it so if they are struggling with may be with depression or em something like that then that is a massive barrier. Em then they probably still want to learn but they feel they can't, because that can cause attendance problems, concentration and things like that and it's all those outside stressors, like I have mentioned before such as family life, financial problems perhaps, mental health physical health, friendship breakdowns, relationship problems they are facing.” (ECI 2: lines 92-102)*

Financial difficulties and mental health issues such as self-harm, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, depression, drug and alcohol abuse were emphasised by the ECI 3 as major stressors which affect learning. She was emphatic in her narrative that stressors which affect learning are not academic in nature and highlighted mental health issues as the current main stressor for FE learners at the time of the study by this informant. The motivation to learn is reportedly largely affected by mental health issues:

*“Mental health at the moment is the biggest thing. We have so many students that are self-harming that we have several this year that have seriously been suicidal and we have a lot who have taken to drinks or drugs and that is not usually to do with anything from the learning side of their lives but is to do with the other bits but of course it then affects their learning or even they are wanting to learn because they will other be outside smoking and whatever else. I would say probably mental health, from people being from very low self-esteem to being really depressed and that really saddens me and I think it's just getting more and more each year. It used to just be an odd few you know but now it's such a large number.” (ECI 3: lines 133-141)*

ECI 4 is also of the view that stressors which affect learning are of a personal nature and sometimes outside of college thus external to the academic course of instruction and the wider college system. He mentioned homelessness, addictions, family issues, friendship issues, ill health, particularly mental health issues were deemed as contributing to have a negative impact on learning thereby preventing learners to actually focus and concentrate on their learning. Financial difficulties were seen as a stressor that can potentially cause a learner

to withdraw from a course of instruction as they may no longer be able to afford to travel to college. Interventions from student services were reported to be targeted at helping the learner faced with crippling financial difficulties remain in college. He was of the view that the financial difficulties experienced by FE learners are compounded by most FE learners not being eligible for a college bursary:

*“...personal issues I mean we deal with things like people being homeless, people having addictions, em having issues with families, having issues with friends, em ill health em particularly mental health em so all those kind of contribute to having a negative impact on their learning and things that affect their learning is sometimes outside and that’s why we can have the student service to obviously try and aid that so that students can actually focus and concentrate in their learning....One other sort of barrier to learning is financial. People can’t afford to come into college and decide to withdraw because they want to actually go out and go a job. Em, I particularly here I have to help people get sort of part time work and that sort of intervention and assistance have helped with the financial impact to make sure they can remain in college and em so again that’s the kind of external things about the learning that’s been affecting, em they can’t travel because they don’t have any money they are not eligible for the bursary and what else support is available em the only other thing is to go and get yourself a part time job which they find that sort of very helpful em if you sort out an issue like we have had numerous students who have come in to say they are homeless and they have nowhere to go” (ECI 4: lines 107-133)*

ECI 5 highlighted family structure, family composition and financial difficulties owing to the socioeconomic status of the learners as stressors which are affecting their learning. Again, no reference was made to the academic content of the course of instruction or any college wide system. His emphasis was on how families were split with mum and dad not being together, the distance that learners have to travel to college with some travelling over two and half hours to come into college. The cost of living which necessitate learners needing to get a part time job in other to afford transportation costs in other to attend college were reported as the stressors which affect learning. All these are external to



the academic curriculum. He also mentioned personal issues such as problems with peers and friends as well as family issues as stressors.

The external case informants deemed stressors which affect learning to be of a personal nature and external to the academic curriculum. Some in a sense see themselves as working with the learners to intervene in ways that mitigate these stressors to keep the learners in college while some see the learners as already taking steps to mitigate the stressors to prevent them from entirely killing their learning career. Some of the stressors are also seen as beyond the control of the learner and the staff and can only see this as a way of explaining how their learning is affected rather than supporting them to deal effectively with them. For example, learners' motivation, college attendance and risk of dropping out of college are important factors which would need to be dealt with by FE practitioners. There seem to be a sense of struggle to go through college with competing needs for attention or priority or importance which the FE learner has to meet. The following seems to be key issues in the personal and social ecologies of learners which affect their learning; relationships, personal life, social life and financial security. Clearly this points to a bigger issue of underachievement for the learners who are experiencing some of these stressors. How does the FE learner then prioritise these competing needs and does an opportunity cost to know which to focus on first? Does the FE learner have the capacity and the relevant support or necessary intervention provided to do this? Is this what they require help with and need to be the focus of interventions by FE practitioners to help mitigate any negative effect of stressors on both the health and well-being and learning? How should the FE learner be supported and what sorts of intervention would be necessary to help them to order the things in their lives according to order of priority? And who sets this priority with them? These are some of the questions that arise and calls for

brief interventions of all sorts by FE practitioners and potential referral to specialist practitioners, health professionals and relevant external agencies to support learners deal effectively with stressors which affect their learning. One could keep asking further questions, for instance; what about if owing to their family background, family make up, exposure and socioeconomic background there are no solutions and or alternatives to consider suggesting to the learner? Mental health education, mental health first aid, resourcefulness of learner support advice and guidance, relationship with tutors and staff, openness on the part of the learner, needing to have frank conversations, and involvement of specialist counsellors such as drug and alcohol workers, psychologists, mental health professionals such as CPNs could help. Curriculum development to include resilience building activities as an adjunct to their main qualification, assertiveness training, confidence training, psychoeducation, stress management, use of brief intervention in individual tutorials and group tutorials as well as teaching mindfulness could help mitigate any negative effect of stressors on the health and well-being and learning FE learners.

### 5.6.2 Stressors Which Affect Learning: Views of Internal Case Participants (ICPs)

The internal case participants reported different stressors which affects their learning as being both external and personal as well as internal to the college curriculum and thus academic in nature. ICP 1, A 22-year old male student reported these to be:

*“Things that can get involved in your life that might not have to do with education. They are just stressors in life and can interfere and also other social reasons as well.” (ICP 1: lines 107-109)*

He described stressors which affect learning as external to the curriculum and the social in nature and qualified them as involved with one's life and thus they are personal in as much as all lives are not experienced in the same way. Family issues and problems of friends and peers were cited as examples of these stressors by this participant. One of the ways ICP 1 reported that he reacted to these stressors is that his confidence and performance on the course suffered and he did not even realise that until after some time when he realised the course of instruction was not for him, had to move educational institutions and lived for a period of time in a state of anxiety and fear of a similar situation occurring:

*“...I have to move which had sort of affected my education and end at the back of a course and realised this is not my course really eh yeah it kind of affect your confidence I will say.... I didn't realise that to be fair until I realised or until I noticed how unconfident I was at the time.” (ICP 1: lines 120-137)*

Apart from describing the stressors as external, he also mentioned that being behind in assignments is common source of stress among the participant group and attributed it to distractions in lessons which distorts the lesson focus and does not promote learner concentration. This is a source of academic stress in the sense that it has to do with learner performance thus in completing given assignments to given deadlines. More clarification was given in this area by the ICP 4 when he elucidated further that it is not the number of assignments issued that is the source of stress but rather the content of assignments that needs to be covered to achieve desired grades. ICP 2 highlighted negative feedback as an academic stressor:

*“For me negative feedback is a big falling block for me” (ICP 2: line 121)”*

The way he reported reacting to negative feedback albeit delivered as part of an entire feedback on all his academic performance in unhelpful ways which appears antagonistic to the constructive elements of the feedback received as he stated that he finds it difficult to handle negative feedback:

*“Em in the past when I receive constructive criticism I have often completely lost my concentration on what we are talking about in the moment and I will sometimes get myself, I will just leave, I will zone out, I won’t be there mentally, I will just be sort of thinking to myself what have I done wrong? I will be trying to think my way through everything”. (ICP 2: lines 135-138)”*

He narrated his strategy of coping with receiving negative feedback and signified that he had undergone a process of transformation or change in his reaction to this stressor by changing his mind-set:

*“I suppose what I do to trying to overcome these is to say when you are giving me feedback now. Em I will do my best to not think about what has been said too much and focus on what you are saying next. So if you said one thing, In the past I would have just focussed so long, I would have completely almost ignored what was going to be said next even if it was you have done this brilliantly I will focus on what you said I haven’t done so well or even how I would improve it. And I would say I thought I did this I thought I did that? Now I will em try and leave what’s been said behind and I will focus on what is being said next and then I will go away and try to reflect on everything as supposed to just negatives.” (ICP 2: lines 148-157)*

ICP 3 reported stressors which affect her learning is of an academic nature and has to do with teaching, organisation of the course and communication. She reported that learning is made difficult and completion of assignments is delayed by teachers who are laid back and who don’t really teach well and are poorly organised.

ICP 4 identified personal reasons and physical ill health as stressors which affected his learning. He narrated how he has no control of the source of stress

and stated that it is “*just unfortunate circumstances*”. However, he mentioned how he has been receiving support to from his specialist healthcare professionals to deal with the issues arising from his physical ill health. He had had four liver transplants and narrated how this has impacted his life and ironically motivates him to learn to show that he can do it. In spite of the positive effects of surviving four liver transplants; living with a complex and chronic physical health condition; and being supported by top specialist health professionals in the country, who are interested in his holistic wellbeing, had had on his motivation to learn, he lamented that having a lot of assignments to do, the content expected in assignments and struggling to understand and meet assignment requirements from the contents of lessons which are completely different from assignment requirements can be challenging.

The external case informants highlighted what they perceive to be the stressors which affect learning and the reasons they think so hugely based on their experience in the sector without articulating how these are dealt with by the learners. Looking at their narratives critically, student support services seem to be the panacea of solutions to the learners’ problems and those who contributed to the study with this job role as their backgrounds are calling for a rethink in how the service they provide meets learner needs as they seem to be saying in a resounding way that we are a ‘*jack of all trades and master of none*’ and bemoan accessibility to services and other professionals like mental health professionals. It appears some of the help they wish they can offer the learners are beyond their scope of remit and they are powerless in this sense to offer any help or support. The relevancy of student support services hence is being called into question in supporting learners cope with stressors which affect learning. There is also a sense of the teachers seeing the stressors which affect learning as purely learner personal and social issues the control of which

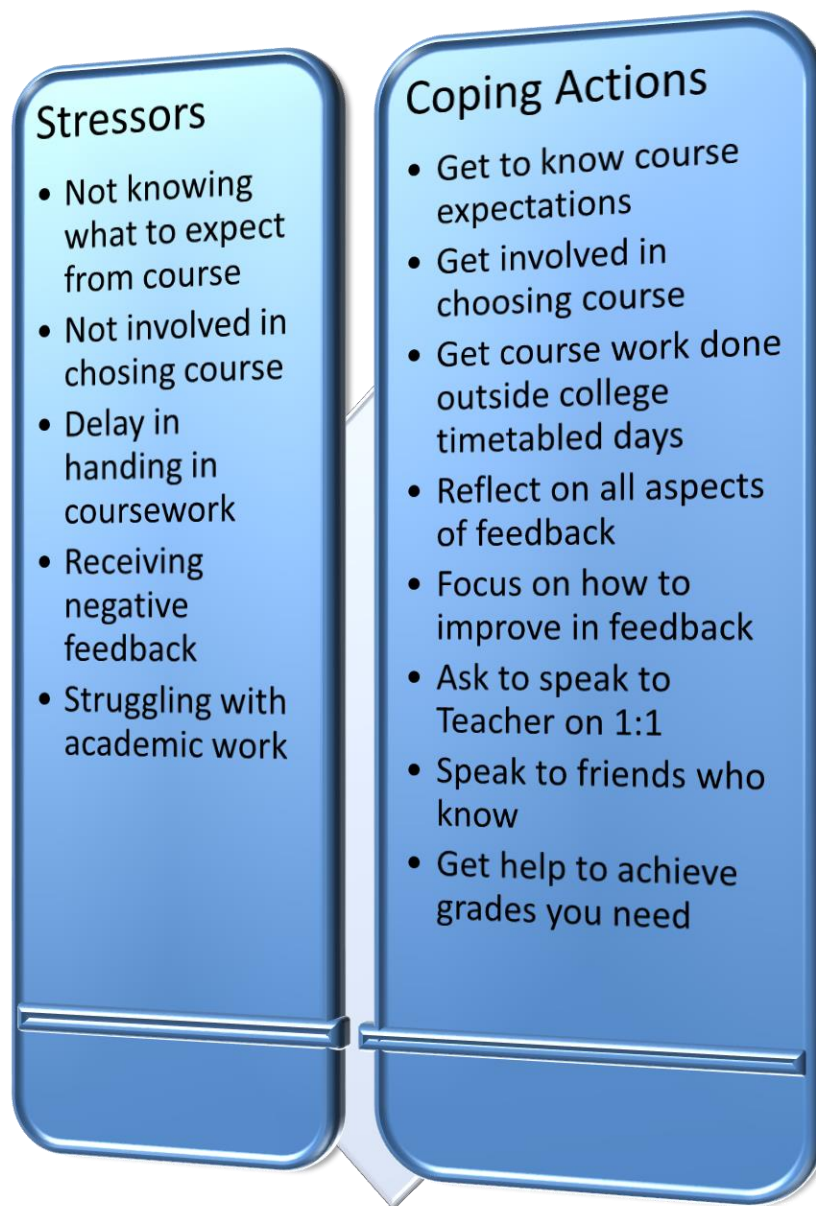
is outside their scope of remit. This has resulted in signposting to student support and mention is made of having to make sure this referral system works and example of ways in which this is facilitated is given (explained under the section -SAG). Also, the solutions to the socioeconomic issues raised are not seen as within the scope of the teachers or student support advisors.

On the other hand, the learners reported that the stressors are academic as well as personal and social. They focused very much on how they react to the academic stressors and seek to overcome them, making clear what worked for them and did not work and the changes that they had to make. One participant went to the extent of blaming her teachers and expressing her utter disgust at the way the course was organised among others. Clearly, from the insight they shared, teaching staff need to focus efforts towards supporting the learners to surmount their academic challenges described by the learners which have mainly to do with assessment, lesson delivery, classroom management, expected assignment content, grade descriptors and organisation of the course as in deadline for submission of course work and communication and involvement of the learners in all these process and decisions that affect it. While the learner is not being blamed directly by the staff for the stressors they described that they experience, the responsibility of having to do something about it is in some ways left with the learner, the college and or the government. Issues raised such as bursaries, travel distance, housing, mental health issues, deprivation, socioeconomic issues, learning facilities and the like are beyond actions that any individual learner or FE practitioner can take. This suggests a whole systems approach or some sort of collaboration within various stakeholders to address some of the issues raised.

## 5.7 Coping with Stressors Which Affect Learning

It is interesting to note that none of the external case informants discussed coping with stressors as such in their conversation. They have tended to refer to any effort to mitigate ineffective learning as actions addressing (which in a way constitute or justifies the work role that they have been employed in, in that they do not have to do the learning on a course but support learners to learn effectively. The experience then as they reported it was that of support, action to address, to engage learners etc., while the learners are the actors in the play so to speak and they talked of their experience in this regard as that overcoming a stressor or a potential source of stress. The input of the external case informants is considered in another section [SAG]. Each internal case participant described how they have coped with different individual stressors they experienced and mentioned in their conversations with me. These made clear that there are different sources of stressors for all internal case participants as individuals but looking at the case study as a whole, one can see the nature of stressors prevalent in the learner group as a whole and the coping strategies (actions taken to address it) employed to address identified stressors outlined in Figure 5.1. All identified individual stressors that the internal case participants reported that they acted to overcome are all of an academic nature. They all have to do with their course work and this is indicative that the participants are serious about their learning on the whole. The participants reported coping behaviour or action to overcome self-identified stressors which affect learning, all of which happens to be academic in nature) do and are taking the initiative to find ways of coping with the stressors which affect their learning. They have reported other stressors but did not go into details on how they cope with these. Overcoming academic stressors seem to be the priority here for the participants.

### 5.7.1 Figure 5.1 Coping Actions Taken to Address Identified Stressors



One internal case participant described how he was involved in choosing his course and knew what he is going to be doing. The importance of having a clear expectation of what the course entails is described here to enable the learner cope with any potential stress. It appears the fear of the unknown or not knowing what to expect is in itself a potential source of worry or stress which can be avoided by having clear expectations, role clarification, course objectives, target grades, grade descriptors, rubrics, assessment type, method, duration,



grading, turnaround time, formative, summative sow, career planning-how course fits into career aspirations of young people and potential destination of graduates would all be helpful in contributing to making learners know what to expect on a particular course of instruction.

Delay in handing in assignments has been identified as a main source of potential stress. The participant described coping with this when it is occurring by coming to college on the days of the week when he is not timetabled to be in college for coursework (that is tutor-led lectures or practical) and do come in on these days to get assignment work done outside college timetabled days begs the question why can it not be done at home? The question also could arise; what if he cannot come into college owing to money, transportation, part time work and so forth?

In coping with receiving negative feedback which was deemed a stressor by one of the internal case participants, he now chooses to focus on the way to improve what he has not done so well rather than on the negative aspect of the feedback. He also mentioned that he chooses to reflect on all aspects of feedback he receives now instead of just the negatives.

ICP 4 considered struggling with academic work as a potential source of stress and overcame this by speaking to teachers who were deemed as a source of help to receive further academic input, especially on a one to one basis. Another way of coping is to find help from friends on the course by speaking to friends who have already successfully completed work of a good grade in the topic area one is struggling in. This is also deemed helpful in obtaining one's desired academic grades. There is an allusion being made to having a social support system which includes teachers and fellow course mates (friends) from who the right support can be drawn to meet an identified academic need in order to improve and attain

one's desired or target grade. Again, it is noted that the focus or motivation for seeking help is to meet an identified individual need thus to improve academically in this instance and obtain desired or target grades. The effort is also being initiated by the learner:

*"I will speak to my tutors for a start because they are there to help. Errm if and that's where some, a couple of tutors have been helpful because they give great input especially if you are struggling. If you are struggling, you can ask for 1:1 and they can help you in that way and again it's just research. Just try to learn or speak to friends as well. Say if you have an assignment back, there could be friends who have got those grades and you haven't, so you can just say what did you do for this bit? What have you done differently and that can help you to get the grades you need."*  
(ICP 4: lines 150-157)

The sources of support where ICP 4 reported that he obtained assistance to cope with the stressors which affect learning include his teacher, course mates, the entire college wide system friends, his family, health professionals as this participant has a chronic and debilitating healthcare condition. He attributed a lot of his wellbeing today to his mother in particular. The support systems in this particular instance is both internal, within the college and external, from outside college. All these sources of support appear to have developed in the respondent resilience to face the challenges of learning that he faced in spite of his debilitating healthcare condition. There is a sheer determination to succeed and a positive mental attitude towards learning that seem to have resulted from the availability, ready access and from the nature of the support garnished from all these internal and external sources of support. This appears to be critical in helping him overcome the stressors he faced.

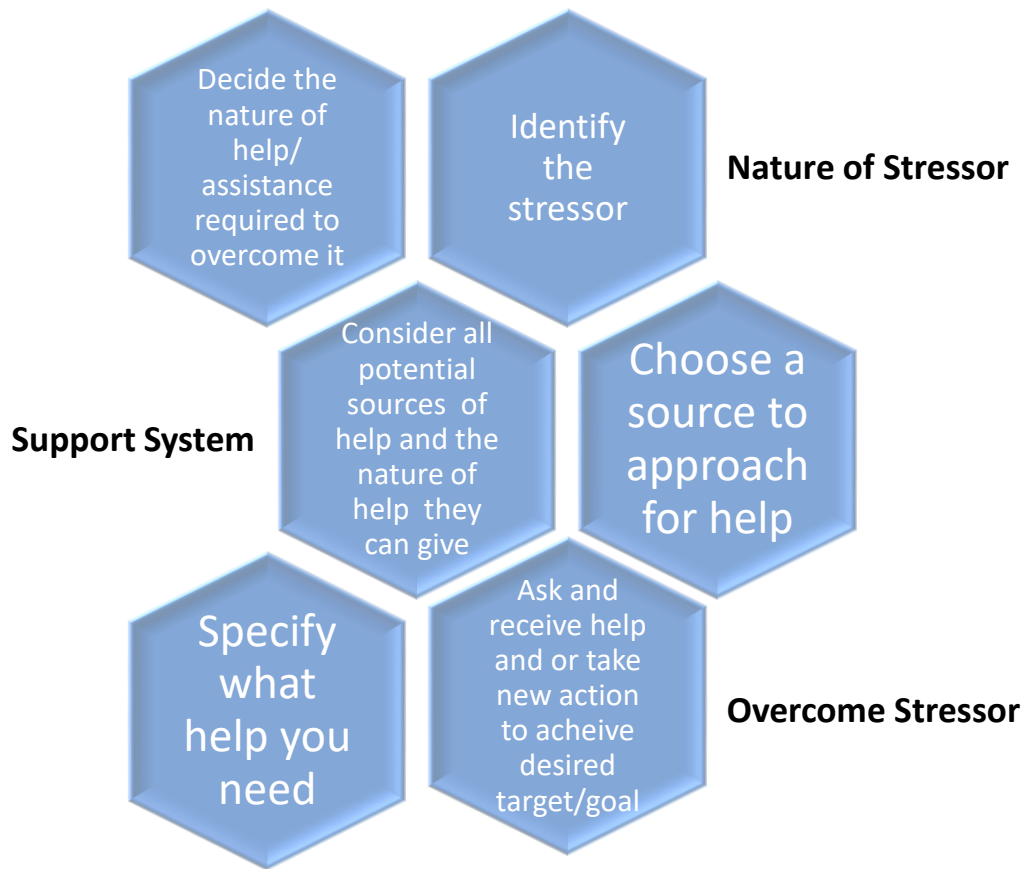
ICP 5 identified teacher one to one session and academic input to her with academic work as helpful in overcoming academic challenges and makes him *"learn really well."* He particularly identifies what the teacher does that is helpful:

*“I learn really well with 1:1 so if the teacher sits down with me and slowly breaks things down for me that really helps. I suppose if things really get challenging, I talk to the teachers, I ask them and get them to break things down” (ICP 5: line 148-151)*

ICP 5 talked to the teacher and asked for a specific kind of assistance. This implies that he was able to approach the teacher and express his needs freely and that the teacher listened to him and made the time that is suitable for both of them to provide the assistance that the learner needed to overcome his difficulty. Learning in small chunks seems to be a more digestible method of learning improvement to overcome challenges posed by academic work. Teaching in bite sizes, considering pace of the learner(s) and individualising the teaching and learning are clues embedded in the approach narrated by this participant as helpful in overcoming his stressor – challenging academic work.

Although different stressors were addressed differently by the participants, all of them were clear about what it is they are addressing, they decided to do something new, different, change their previous approach and had in mind what will show that the problem no longer exists or is impending. One can say they have an awareness of the issue, contemplated what to do about it and interestingly on their own volition (self-motivation, zeal, initiative was taken), made a choice to do things or approach things differently through the coping strategies, the actions, that they have described they took to overcome the perceived potential source of stress. There was no overt admission that any of them has experienced stress per se, but the words such as struggle and overcome implies there is the nuance of stress but not described in the same way. I could have on reflection asked a direct question but was weary that asking them a question on stress may in itself put them off from continuing to participate in the study, and I so very much wanted to get all that I could from them given the cumbersome process of getting access to them as a study cohort.

5.7.2 Figure 5.2 Summary of Related Coping Ideas Gleaned from Internal Case Participants



## 5.8 Learner Teacher Relationship (LTR)

### 5.8.1 Learner Teacher Relationship (LTR) – Views of External Case Informants (ECIs)

On the issue of LTR, most of the external case informants interviewed shared their views. This is an indication that they consider LTR as very important for supporting learners to overcome stressors which affect their learning. It also points probably to their conscientiousness of their job purpose to have a professional relationship with the learner and consequently discharge their duty of care to the learner. ECI 1, A Course Lecturer, talked about how building a relationship with the learner is important to “*helping them out.*” She narrated how she would for example when referring a learner to student services for any kind of support, accompany the learner, introduce the learner to student support staff and ensure that this introduction begins the process of building a relationship between the staff and the student as well as ensuring that the issue being raised by the student is being addressed as if left with the learner alone, the learner may not take the initiative to seek help from student services. She explained that the learner making this effort alone may find it “*daunting*” to walk into a room of unknown people and ask for help by saying, “*I have some issues.*” Having a relationship with the learner fosters trust and encourage the learner to seek help. There is also a suggestion that in the absence of a relationship, learners may not readily seek help or support that they need. ECI 1 further explains the nature of the relationship with the learner:

*“I think it is professional and formal but in an informal way as well so I gain their respect by knowing about them and remembering stuff so if they say eh their mum is having a baby or something then I will ask them how that is going and it’s kind of them realising that I have listened to them and that I am interested in their life and then you get their respect that way I think” (ECI 1: lines 171-175)*

On how the LTR helps to unearth issues that may be affect learning, ECI 1 offered certain approaches through which issues affecting learning emerge; using the tutorial process, giving one to one attention, offering constructive feedback, planning with the learner to solve identified problems. Furthermore, the participant offered some insight into how the LTR can be developed. From ECI 1's account, taking interest in the learner and the things that matter to them including their family, hobbies, using active listening and showing genuine interest in the learner's life and well-being is key in building and developing the LTR.

ECI 3, SSA on the nature of the LTR and how it works, was emphatic on the power difference in the LTR and how the teacher need to recognise this and not to be friends with the learner per se as she perceives being a friend and a tutor to be two different things. She also intimated that in the relationship, the learner needs to have an awareness of that and stressed that there is the need for the teacher to maintain a balance in how this power is exerted over the learner when interacting with the learner in order to foster a good relationship between the learner and the teacher. She also described the difference in the nature of the relationship in primary and secondary school setting as opposed to that in a college setting. ECI 3 articulated her views as follows:

*"I don't think particularly you have to be friends with the learners because you are the tutor and they are the learners and that is two different things. The relationship in the college is quite different than the teacher -pupil relationship in a school. Because it is so different, I think it is might be harder in the college to know where to pitch that relationship? You know and I have seen Tutors very much kind of befriending students and calling them mates and things like that em which may be my opinion of schools for like twenty years, for me that's a bit like Oooops. Em yeah but I think you just got to pitch the relationship at the appropriate level so there can be a mutual respect and we know that all young people do not respect and I think if you can gain their respect and their trust and form a relationship where they listen. If I went into a classroom to deliver something, I would expect them to listen to me. I can deliver that in a friendly way but I want them to know that actually*

*I am the adult in this room. You have to find that balance.” (ECI 3: lines 70-82)*

ECI 3 was also of the view that the background of the learner and the consistency of approach adopted, assessment of additional learning needs, cultural awareness and sensitivity coupled with the ability to do things differently are also paramount in building and developing the learner teacher relationship. She also mentioned the need for the teacher to know the learner personally in order to find out about issues that affect the learner.

ECI 4, SSA, spoke extensively on the LTR and stressed how ‘essential’ the role of the tutor is within the context of the LTR in motivating the learner, keeping the learners’ interest in the subject being taught, and causing the learner to engage with learning. He placed importance on the teacher having a genuine concern for the learner and being prepared to deal with a range of emotions that the learner brings with them into college with the resultant effect of making the learner comfortable to want to speak about what is affecting their learning. He also touched on the how important this relationship is for student support staff as well. Additionally, he was of the view that the teacher should not be overfriendly with the learner and be a role model for the learner to emulate. He also laid emphasis on the teacher and the student support advisor being caring, supportive and a guide to the learner within the context of the LTR.

*“I think a teacher or an advisor has a responsibility to be a role model and em that relationship is crucial and I think if a teacher or a tutor is overly friendly and very accepting then potentially the learners can take advantage of that but if again they are at the other end of the spectrum where they are too authoritative or they are too distant then em that can become again an issue...knowing what the relationship is and making sure students are aware of what the relationship is; I am your teacher, you are the students” (ECI 4: lines 242-249)*

ECI 4, SSA, also stressed the need for the teacher to be competent and consistent in how they approach learners and what they say to them.

ECI 5, A Course Tutor and Personal Tutor, stressed the importance of the teacher using active listening skills, showing genuine interest, finding common ground to build rapport and engender trust, and getting to know what their interests are and also using that as well to build the relationship. Furthermore, he is of the view that the teacher has to set boundaries, be sensitive to the needs of the learner and being honest in interactions with the learner:

### 5.8.2 Learner Teacher Relationship (LTR) – Views of Internal Case Participants (ICPs)

ICP 3 narrated what she construed as contributory factors to fostering a positive LTR as well as what is helpful and not helpful as follows:

*“When the teacher is a bit too laid back...having a laugh with students so much instead of being too strict or disciplined...taking things seriously, that doesn’t help and you don’t feel like you have learnt anything.” (ICP 3: lines 98-104).*

ICP 3 sees the LTR as foundational to creating a forum where the learner can update the teacher on progress being made and expect to be listened to and value the tutorials during which joint and SMART targets are set assignment progress checked. There seem to be an expectation that the teacher needs to be serious and disciplined instead of being laid back and extremely friendly with the learner. The teacher also needs to have a structure and get the learner to complete academic tasks, conduct tutorials, enquire about the learner’s experiences of learning, track the learner’s progress and set targets for the learner to achieve.



ICP 4 prioritised the understanding that a teacher has in the LTR as beneficial and helpful to making progress in learning.

The ingredients of a good LTR from the perspective of the participants are summarised in Table 5.3.

### 5.8.3 Table 5.3: Teacher Skills and Attributes Necessary for Good LTR

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Consistency</i></li> <li>2. <i>Competence</i></li> <li>3. <i>Sensitivity</i></li> <li>4. <i>Cultural sensitivity and diversity awareness</i></li> <li>5. <i>Conduct tutorials</i></li> <li>6. <i>Motivational skills</i></li> <li>7. <i>Find common ground</i></li> <li>8. <i>Build rapport</i></li> <li>9. <i>Target setting skills</i></li> <li>10. <i>Track learner progress</i></li> <li>11. <i>Show genuine interest</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. <i>Active listening skills</i></li> <li>13. <i>Show understanding</i></li> <li>14. <i>Honesty</i></li> <li>15. <i>Discipline</i></li> <li>16. <i>Organisation skills</i></li> <li>17. <i>Engender trust</i></li> <li>18. <i>Give constructive feedback</i></li> <li>19. <i>Give guidance</i></li> <li>20. <i>Ensure power balance</i></li> </ol>
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## 5.9 Learning Support, Advice and Guidance (SAG)

### 5.9.1 Learning Support, Advice and Guidance (SAG) – Views of External Case Informants

According to ECI 1, a course lecturer, there are varied views as to the SAG provided to learners at the college. The nature of SAG is deemed as practical and aimed helping learners overcome identified barriers to learning such as not having a computer at home, working too many hours in a part time job in addition to having to attend college. It is also aimed at alleviating any potential stressors, which may threaten to affect their learning.

Effective time management, planning support in terms of action planning and study skills support as well as extra academic support has been a key strategy in SAG provision to help learners manage and complete their coursework.

Furthermore, determining what approach SAG should take has been reported to be borne out of discussions with the learner and then the staff 'kind of work out' what the barriers are and how to address these. Learners were reported as not necessarily volunteering information or telling staff what barriers they are facing in their learning.

As a result of SAG, some learners were able to gain the confidence to negotiate with their part-time job employers to have varied hours during assessment periods and use their assessment schedules to agree an action plan to complete coursework effectively. This has led to a reduction in part time working hours during assessment periods, greater use of college ICT resources during their college attendance days to access computers, book study support sessions for proofreading and an uptake of study skills. These have been reported to lessen the potential impinging stress that assessment deadlines and having to combine college work with part-time work could have on the learners.

In order to provide SAG that is deemed effective, a good relationship between staff and learner is vital. Efforts were made by teaching staff in referring learners to staff in student services to personally hand over the learner to a named staff at student services as a way of providing moral support and encouragement to the learners and offering reassurance about the potential benefits of SAG as well as helping build rapport with student services staff. This is seen as making it easier for the learner to be able to engage with the student support staff and talk about their issues as they are not familiar with other staff like their lecturers and Course Tutor. The importance of offering this support is stressed as crucial to the success of SAG offered by another member of staff who is not familiar with the learner. The prospect of a learner opening up to a someone totally new to them was described as 'daunting' and this reflects the

need that academic staff has to take considerable care, offer practical support and make the effort to at least introduce the learner to student support staff with the hope of alleviating any potential stress associated with this for a learner.

Offering practical suggestions as to how to overcome the challenges faced by the learner as well as what needs to be done and how it should be done and *'actually...put some plans in place.....to solve them'*. Hence provision of emotional support, seeking to understand the needs and or personal issues of the learner that is affecting their learning and providing further or extra academic support is seen as a vital element of SAG.

The view of ECI 2, SSA, is that providing personal support to learners in a way where they are at ease and feel they can ask any question or make contact by using various communication channels to ask for help as at when they need and or want to in terms of academic support or 'support around extra things and not just around their course but around stuff that they got going on' is paramount to effective SAG provision. Practical support is also deemed essential part of SAG and an example of helping a learner find accommodation when faced with homelessness and being the link person between statutory services such as housing support worker and the learner were cited. The varied nature of SAG was also highlighted, however provision of emotional support in a pastoral sense, regular meetings and the need to frequently check on learners who raises issues that are affecting their learning was emphasised.

Regular contact was stressed as key to addressing attendance problems which affect learning. However, ECI 2 lamented the lack of appropriate training and services to signpost learners to outside agencies such as counselling and mental health services when they need it making SAG:

*'...a little bit tricky. For example, mental health, trying to get them some proper support is difficult.'* (ECI 2: lines 120-121)

There is a great concern that for staff to deliver SAG effectively, there is the need for staff who provide SAG to:

*"...review what we [they] are doing and keep trying, keep looking for other services and places that can provide extra support".* (ECI 2: lines 124-126)

Problem solving is used as a strategy to provide practical support to enable learners' move on from the stressors that are affecting their learning and it has been deemed effective even in cases where there are longstanding issues deemed to be difficult with unpredictable outcomes such as what ECI 2 said about a learner:

*'really struggling and you know they want to leave or they are about to be kicked off the course and then you see them through right from the beginning of term you can see the effectiveness of it.'* (ECI 2: lines 135-137)

Providing learners with a range of coping strategies such as ways to cope with anxiety including relaxation techniques, breathing exercise were deemed as helpful in terms of support given based on verbal feedback received by the Student Support Advisors from the learners they work with. Different coping strategies are provided to learners depending on what the learner is struggling with. For example, some of the learners benefit from staff putting together a revision plan as to what they need to do to stay abreast with their learning plan in order to help them manage and take control of their learning when it becomes overwhelming for them, while other learners for example may present with panic attacks and would benefit from being taught breathing and relaxation techniques. A lot of the support given was reported to be directed to learners

presenting with self-harm issues. The Student Support Advisors follow up on progress made by learners who receive support to cope with the challenges they are facing that affect their learning by finding out from them through repeat appointments, how they are getting on and check with them whether the recommended coping strategies are working. They also use their attendance record and speak to their course tutors and teaching team to have an indication of how they have responded to the support given and to gauge their interest and attitude towards the support that they have been provided with to determine how effective or ineffective they have been.

Parental involvement was also highlighted as an effective way of supporting learners cope with stressors, which affect their learning. However, it was deemed as having the potential to affect the process of engendering trust with the learner as communication with parents especially about attendance and keeping appointment with student support staff has in some instances led to a strained relationship with the student support staff ECI 2 as shown in the quote below:

*“Well I can think about having been concerned about someone’s you know state of mind and having to ring home and talked to the parent about it. And you will always say to the student, I am gonna have to ring home. Em I did do that and she did not come in next week and that was very worrying and I feel she is never going to talk to me again. You worry about the build up of trust you know they potentially knock it down by doing that, that did affect her learning because she did not come in,” (ECI 2: Lines 188-193)*

There are risks that learners may stop attending for their support sessions and others would not talk to the staff any longer and others may disengage with student services entirely.

Certain drawbacks to offering comprehensive support of a holistic nature to the learners were lamented by the staff who participated in the study. The small

size of the team, time pressures on staff, lack of frequent communication with academic, staff availability of resources and services to refer the learners to outside of the college, being able to know places and professionals to signpost learners to, as well as lack of opportunities to develop relationships with professionals and external agencies who work with young people such as Social Workers, Counsellors, General Practitioners, Community Psychiatric Nurse and Drug and Alcohol teams, Housing Officers were seen as not helpful.

There was a huge feeling among the SSAs who participated in the study that more money needs to be invested in student services, more staff have to be recruited and trained to provide specific services to learners. For example, a student counsellor, a finance officer, and a health and well-being officer, rather than just one individual SSA *'wearing all these hats at the same time'* and being saddled with administrative roles as well.

ECI 4, SSA, shared experiences of learners coming to student services with issues of homelessness, addictions, ill health, both physical and mental health with the latter being predominantly the case. Other reasons why learners seek support includes financial difficulty, help with seeking employment opportunities and they just need someone to talk to. The reasons for which learners tend to seek support advice and guidance were mostly deemed to have a negative effect on their learning and the support provided is geared at helping the learner to focus on their learning. Learners voluntarily attend student services to receive support, advice and guidance and are generally appreciative of the support they receive when they perceive the SSA as showing commitment and demonstrating a genuine interest in learners achieving their potential. Motivating learners to stay on the course and pointing them towards the future outcome of their course of study such as employment was laudably commented

on as well received by the learners. Also negotiating with the learners and setting ground rules and goals for support sessions were deemed helpful in refocusing learners on their learning. Also challenging learners to give reasons why they for example think a course is boring, or their approach to learning is not working or they are bored to learn or complete assignment were found to be useful in engaging learners and getting them to think deeply about their learning. Another useful strategy adopted by the participants is reflecting back to the learners that they have chosen to study their course of instruction and help them explore their reasons for making their learning choice and re-examine the expectations that comes with the choices that they have made. In terms of academic support for learners who are not achieving their target grade, for various reasons such as poor attendance, bereavement, alcohol abuse, pregnancies, family issues, and disciplinary actions, course lecturers spend extra one to one tutorial time in their own personal time not timetabled time to support these learners and guide them on how to achieve their assessment criteria. This extra academic input was provided as an adjunct to counselling or other forms of support the learner was already receiving.

### 5.9.2 Learning Support, Advice and Guidance (SAG) – Views of Internal Case Participants

The internal case participants reported receiving verbal and written feedback in class to be extremely helpful in supporting them to academically achieve. The feedback received is described as helpful in directing the learner to know what to cover, thus the scope, or add, thus omissions in their work, or if the learner needs to book an academic tutorial. The use of course virtual learning repository site (VLE) by academic staff to inform learners of learning materials was also deemed helpful. Communication with academic staff on learning topics of

instruction, the quality and depth of verbal exchange received is valued and seen as reinforced by materials academic staff put on the VLE.

Motivation by SSA and academic staff was also deemed as useful in inspiring learning and working towards learning goals. Guidance in the form of exploring alternative learning routes and the courses of instruction that can lead to one's desired ambition was deemed invaluable by one participant who is quoted below:

*"...in my experience em I have been shown alternative ways of doing things or if like two years ago when I had quite a bit of setback. They took the setback with me, they showed me lots of alternative routes I could take and how I can still get to where I wanted to be and going down the college route instead of going the A level route for example.....I find that extremely helpful because it helped me get past my setback and it helped me carry on. So, it showed that I can still get to where I want to go even though I had to change the route that I am taking. I will still get to where I want to be." (ICP 2: lines 171-192)*

Approachability of staff and academic staff, their readiness to ;give advice and provide one to one support have been reported by ICP 3 as making her learning easier and the need to deal with undesirable behaviour from other learners was highlighted, implying good classroom management skills of academic staff is essential for learning progress although the participant did not verbalise the effect and alluded to having to get on to deal with it herself. This is how she reflected on the support she received:

*"Obviously the teachers and the staff have been very good as well so they gave me lots of advice and yeah you know I have had pretty good groups over the years really so it has not been too bad. It's been pretty easy to every whoever you need to work with really so that's sort of made it really easy.." (ICP 3: lines 197-203)*

ICP 4 valued the empathetic nature of the academic staff when as a learner, he was struggling with academic work owing to ill health. Being provided with the opportunity to request for extension to assessment deadline and being



understood in the ways he is struggling, what he is struggling with and what is making him struggle made him feel less stressed and described his tutors as follows:

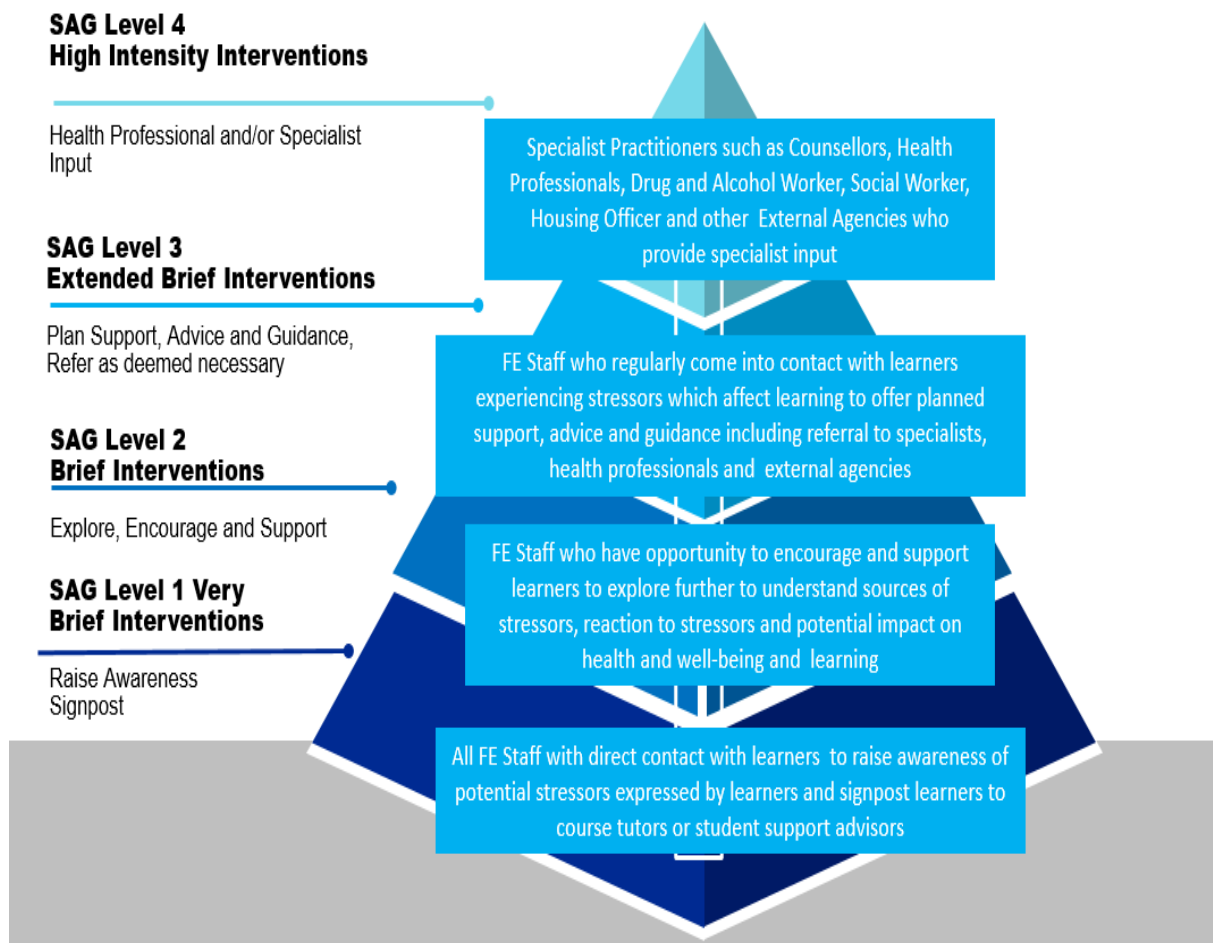
*“...if you have been struggling otherwise, they can say give you an extension? Errm so you don’t plus you don’t feel that stress about it you don’t feel as stressed because I feel when I am meeting that deadline I really really worry about it. Errm they will give you an extension just to get it done errm as well as when you are feeling better they can give you an input for what you’ve missed erm or what you have struggled at that point. So, it’s mainly with the understanding of the situation so they have been really really understanding of the situation.”(ICP 4: lives 187-197).*

There is the need for joint working between academic staff, student support staff and other healthcare professionals as well as relevant external agencies to ensure a holistic, effective and successful SAG provision. Effective communication and learner involvement would need to be a key priority.

All contact with the learner would need to count in this endeavour to ensure that stressors which affect learning can be identified early and dealt with appropriately and effectively in a timely manner. Since learners have been reported not to volunteer information readily on stressors in their personal or social ecologies, interaction of FE practitioners and learners can be goal directed and purposeful in exploring these domains at the any opportune interface between the learner and FE practitioners (this can be expanded to include all FE staff). It is recognisable from both the internal case participants and the external case informants reports that not all learners would need referral to external agencies, health professionals or even to student support advisors for support, advice and guidance to effectively cope with stressors. As such there could be various levels of SAG determined by the degree of interventions offered by FE practitioners based on how they interact with learners. Figure 5.3 offers a graphical depiction of such hierarchical representation to make every contact

count in dealing with learner stress and brings together the idea of adopting a whole systems approach. A hierarchical representation of how interactions with learners should lead to relevant interventions that would ensure that no stone is left unturned in the issue of learner stress. Thus, from raising awareness, signposting, exploring whether there are potential stressors from contacts made with learners to actually engaging in planned and focused interventions to address specific or identified stressors or making referrals for specialist high intensity interventions by specialist practitioners and other external agencies. It encapsulates the range of interventions that FE learners could benefit from.

5.9.3 Figure 5.3 Dealing with Learner Stress – Levels of SAG and Interventions by FE Practitioners



## 5.10 Summary of Findings

### 5.10.1 The Thematic Coding Framework

The thematic coding framework reveals what learning means to the participants, the stressors which affect learning as well as other salient factors which influenced learning. This shows that learning is a complex endeavour and the complexities of learning for the study participants are indexed in this emergent thematic coding framework. Learning is also shown to mean different things to different people and has several facets to it. Some of the participants think of learning as a process, others see it as a product, a means of achieving qualifications, an outcome, a destination or a pathway to a destination such as employment or a 'nice life', thus learning is seen chiefly by some of the participants as a means to an end. It is also seen as a practical activity or something you do as well as something you acquire through exposure. It is also perceived as not necessarily the priority for FE learners by the ECI and this view contrast with that of the internal case informants (ICP) who mainly reported on academic stressors and this could be seen as their inadvertent indication of learning as a priority. Their attitude towards learning was mainly reported as positive in support of this view. The thematic coding framework is expansive and detailed in revealing associated themes and sub-themes to the object of this study; stressors which affect learning through the lens of the case study participants who were the subject of the study. These themes could become a focus of further research in FE in future in addition to the main themes which would need further exploration in the virgin field of learner stress in FE.

### 5.10.2 Stressors Which Affect Learning

The stressors which were reported as having potential to affect learning are from three separate domains; academic stressors, personal stressors and social

stressors. The ECI ported more personal and social sources of stressors than the ICP, who focussed heavily on academic stressors. There is a significant degree of mismatch in the perception of ECI's stressors which affect learning as opposed to the ICP. The difference in perspectives may be related to their priorities such as influences of their occupational role, the business case for FE educators to keep learners on the registers, efforts aimed at preventing learner attrition and reduce dropout rates. The ECI enumerated several factors such as personal, relationship, transport, social, employment, family, social deprivation, financial difficulties and homelessness as key stressors which affect learning in FE. The ICP's reported academic stressors includes, the nature of teacher feedback on coursework, the content of assessments, the amount of assessment criteria being assessed in an assessment, course organisation, teacher factors and classroom factors. Reference was also made to physical health and personal factors.

### 5.10.3 Learners' Interpretation of What Influences Learning

The case study participants see stressors which affect their learning as barriers to their learning and did not report being stressed as a result of reported stressors. Learners were largely focused on academic stressors and explained coping actions they took to deal with these specific academic stressors. Learners did not voluntarily report that they are experiencing any other type of stressors and these were inferred by the ECI during tutorials where concerns about attendance, academic performance is raised and these emerge during discussions that ensues. Owing to the life stage of the learners being adolescence, perhaps there is a lack of awareness on their part as to the interrelatedness of stressors and how these impinge on their learning.

#### 5.10.4 Learners Response to Things that Influence Learning

The learners responded to the things they found as influencing their learning by seeking solutions to them and doing things differently. Problem focussed coping strategies were utilised by seeking changes to the things that influence their learning. Learners responded to the things they see as influencing learning by mostly seeking support advice and guidance (SAG) from the college staff; academic staff, their tutor and student support advisors (SSAs) to overcome the challenges they face and deem as influencing their learning. Some of the learners were directed by academic staff to SSAs for further support, advice and guidance where the help required is more of a personal, social or something to do with matters outside academic confines or where protracted help, professional help or signposting to external agencies are required. Learners were receptive to suggested strategies, support, advice and guidance given to overcome challenges posed by their perceived stressors. In their response, they considered the support systems available to them and the options they have or have been provided with and then make choices that help them cope with the stressors effectively.

#### 5.10.5 Learners Method of Coping with Challenges to Learning

The coping methods learners used were solution focussed and deemed effective. The coping actions particularly used are; seeking support from teacher, course mates, friends, family and health professional.

#### 5.10.6 Learner-Teacher Relationship and Support Systems Influence of Learning

The learner-teacher relationship is found to be critical in supporting learners to effectively cope with stressors which affect their learning. Both the ICP and ECI

made references to teacher factors such as teaching skill, classroom management, availability and approachability of the teacher, course organisation, involvement in choosing course, receiving feedback on coursework, the nature of the relationship and engendering trust as helpful in supporting learners overcome stressors which affect their learning.

The support systems reported in the study falls within academic support, student services, parental support and external agencies. Thus, both internal and external sources of support were utilised by learners to cope effectively with stressors which affect their learning. These support systems reportedly used by the learners in coping with stressors which affect learning in this study have been deemed to have a positive impact on their learning. The coping strategies of the learners included; seeking support from teacher, course mates, friends, family and health professional and all these appear to have positively influenced their learning experience they helped them to successfully cope with their identified stressors. The support learners received in this study in the context of LTR include; talking to the teacher and asking for specific assistance, being able to approach the teacher, ability to express their learning needs freely, attention that teachers paid through active listening skills, the time that teachers made for the learner and the practical assistance provided by the teacher to the learner when the learner is in need. These ways of supporting learners were deemed helpful in overcoming stressors which affect learning. Additionally, the study also found that individualising teaching and learning, teaching in bite-size, considering the pace of the learner regarding how they are imbibing teaching concepts or topics, embedding clues and using learning approaches that learners deemed helpful where highly esteemed by the learners as supportive of them in overcoming stressors which affect their learning, principally their academic work.

# DISCUSSION

## 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the main findings from the case study are discussed in view of current literature and the stressors which affect learning as reported by the study participants. The aim and objectives of the study are as follows:

The aim of the study is to gain an understanding of BTEC Level 3 Business learners' perception of stressors which affect their learning.

The study's objectives are to:

1. Describe stressors which affect learning among the learner group
2. Explore how learners cope with stressors which affect learning
3. Identify the available institutional support systems in place to help learners mitigate stressors which affect learning
4. Explore how the learner-teacher relationship influences the learning experience
5. Examine how stressors affect the experience of learning

## 6.2 How does a group of Level 3 BTEC learners perceive stressors which influence their learning at a Further Education College in the East of England?

The thematic coding framework identified different types of stressors experienced by the learners in the case study, their response to the stressors and how they coped with these stressors. What the thematic coding framework describes as learning barriers and the actions taken to address them could be seen as positive coping actions or coping efforts made by individual learners to address the challenges they face in their learning based on their perception of

the type of learning barrier on their learning performance as a potential stressor. It is important to understand how learners perceive stressors as stressors are deemed problematic external circumstances and experiences that could evoke responses from individuals based on their appraisal of their relative meaning and significance in terms of their endeavour, in the case of this study, their learning performance. Dupere et al (2015) are of the view that stressors could be discrete events that are disruptive in nature or could be relatively prolonged hardships and difficulties. Stressors depending on how they are perceived could elicit positive or negative responses that could call into question the individual's adaptive capability, resilience and capacity to adjust to the impending strain induced by the stressor (Fletcher et al 2006; Pearlin and Bierman, 2013). Should this go wrong, and there is lack of resilience, maladaptation and maladjustment, it is not only the educational success of the individual that would be at risk but the individual's health and wellbeing is also at stake. The effect of stress on health has been clearly documented in the literature as affecting the physiological, physical or psychological well-being or a combination of these when there is excessive stress. The chronicity and intensity of perceived stressors in inducing excessive pressure on individuals can be linked to mental and physical ill health including depression, anxiety, nervous breakdown and heart disease (Amponsah, 2010, Quick et al 1997). Different individuals are affected differently by chronic and increasing stress in many ways which can cause both psychological and physical distress and their health and well-being may suffer as a result (Eshun 1998; Misra and McKean 2000, Pearlin 1982).

Understanding learners' perception of the stressors which affect their learning would enable understanding of the particular circumstances under which these stressors begin to pose problems of adjustment or adaptation for learners so as to intervene and offer timely and effective support, advice and guidance (SAG).



This is important to prevent stress proliferation and accumulation of stressors (Dupere et al, 2015; Evans and Cassells, 2014; Evans and Schamberg, 2009) as the impact of stressors on individual adjustment is known to be indirect (Pearlin, 2010; Pearlin and Bierman, 2013) and accumulation of stressors and stress proliferation are neither beneficial to the learning, nor the health and well-being FE learners. Furthermore, there is the need to avoid toxic stress, dysregulated stress, which has been found to occur through exposure to chronic severe stressors without adequate support (Dupere et al, 2015; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Exploring the full configuration of the stressors (Dupere et al, 2015) that learners are exposed to which affect their learning, health and well-being is therefore expedient. Amponsah (2010) asserted both the physiological and cognitive effect of exposure to prolonged and excessive stress on learners. He linked the effects of stress on learners to their coping abilities that are aimed at minimising the physical, emotional and psychological problems that arise from the experience of stressful events and daily hassles (Snyder, 1999). He noted that physiologically, health problems can be precipitated in the digestive, musculoskeletal and immune system and eventually lead to the development of the general adaptation syndrome (GAS) if there is no recovery from these physiological effects (Selye, 1956).

Dupere et al (2015) noted that the stress process involves combinations of individual and social vulnerabilities, stressors and support systems, which altogether have impact on health-related outcomes. According to Fletcher and Scott (2010), stressors refer to events, situations or conditions and reactions to stressors could be positive or negative and the negative reaction to stressors is the strain imposed by the stressors. As such, although the learners in this case study have not reported strains imposed on them by their perceived stressors per se, their recognition of stressors, which affect learning is an indication of

potential stressful experiences. According to Lazarus (1990), the term stress does not refer to a description of a specific component of the transaction between an individual and the environment, but instead is a process that encompasses stressors, strains, appraisals and coping responses. There is the recognition in literature that psychosocial stress has an influence on learning and cognition (Blair and Raver, 2012; Evans and Schamberg, 2009; Quesada et al, 2012) and that this is important for education and adolescents are mostly reactive to stress (Dupere et al, 2015; Romeo, 2013; van den Bos et al, 2014). These observations highlight the importance of understanding the process of stress and stressors, which affect learning in further education in order to enhance learning achievement, prevent underachievement, non-achievement and reduce learner attrition/drop out as well as ensure the health and wellbeing of young people mostly adolescents who attend FE colleges.

The internal case study participants (ICP), the learners, viewed what the literature described as academic stressors (Timmins et al, 2011 and Burnard, 2007) as having major influences on their learning as opposed to stressors external to the college which have nothing to do with academics directly. However, the external case informants (ECI), the staff, reported mainly external stressors as having major influences on learning. There is a dichotomy of perception among these two participant groups. The differences in perception could be attributed to the lack of maturity or life experience on behalf of the ICP as compared with the ECI. The life stage of adolescence in which most of the ICP were could be a contributory factor to their inability to see beyond academic stressors as the only stressors influencing their learning. The ECI reported that through conversation, other stressors emerge as an adjunct to an academic stressor or an explanation of poor academic work or attendance for example. Also, the ECI, who are employees of the college, with a mandate to facilitate and

support the learning of the ICP, ensure retention and prevent attrition, could be seen as duty bound to look for stressors beyond academic stressors that influence learning. According to Last and Fulbrook (2003), stress associated with academic demands contributes significantly to the reasons why learners leave their course. This study shows that in FE there could well be other stressors indirectly associated with academic stressors. Freeburn and Sinclair (2009)'s emerging themes also revealed that learners' reported that managing their lifestyle was a source of stress and a significant majority considered dropping out of their course of instruction and they found tutor support very obliging in coping with stress.

As such, reasons beyond the curriculum, how the curriculum is run or delivered, and college structures into factors external to the college which may influence learning were strongly contributed from this participant group. Additionally, being experienced at their work, they may have seen overtime, different learners with different issues, and would have built a working knowledge of external stressors which influence learning. There were some acknowledgements on the part of the ECI on how some college structures could be improved to positively influence learning as well as references to teaching style, classroom management and arrangement for learner support, advice and information that learners receive. The ICP did not report experiencing stress per se but identified the things that affect and causes them to worry about their learning performance. They perceived the way stressors affect their learning as the things that are causing them not to do well in their learning and thus affecting them academically in terms of not completing a course of study, not understanding what is required of them in an assignment, feeling overwhelmed with the number of assessment criteria they have to address, not passing an assignment in the first instance or getting high grades and meeting their target

grades. According to Amponsah (2010), there are different ways that the term stress could be explained and interpreted. It may be explained as phenomenon stemming from the external environment, a result of a painful stimulus or a result of a process of interaction based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress between the individual and environment (Sandin, 1999). In the case of this study, stress as a process model is more akin to the findings of this study as the internal case participants did not use the term stress per se in explaining their experience of stressors, which affect learning. They used terms like 'learning barriers' and words such as 'struggling' and 'overcome' to indicate and also reaffirm that there could be many approaches to the explanation, interpretation, understanding and reporting of the experience of stressors. There was reference made to health as a factor, which influences learning by one ICP and this resonates with the ECI who asserted strongly that health including mental health is a major factor, which affects learning.

On the whole, this study found marked differences in the perceptions of stressors which affect learning among the ICP and ECI, however, there are some commonalities and collectively, they have provided a rich detail on the various stressors which can affect learning in further education for the learner group studied. The stressors, which affect learning as reported by the ICP includes personal issues, financial issues, family issues, relationship issues, lack of self-confidence, accommodation issues, no knowing what is to be learnt, being behind in assignments, distraction in lessons, getting more assignments, the requirements of the grades, the assessment criteria and the complexity of the assignments, lack of focus and concentration in the classroom, receiving negative feedback and the nature of feedback, attitude of the teacher, what other learners say, a noisy classroom, thus behaviour of teachers and learners in the classroom as well as physical ill health. Findings from other studies have been

found to lend credence to what this study says about stressors, which affect learning. Although the methodology, educational focus and context, geographical location, age, level of education of participants in these studies are entirely different, owing to the dearth of literature on learner stress research in FE in the UK, these research findings from other countries and different institutions have been relied on to see if any similarities and differences exist between the findings of this study and other studies in an effort to get a human understanding of stressors which affect learning in general. There are commonalities between the stressors reported by the learners in this study and the commonly experienced stressors reported among student nurses which are; completion of assignments, examinations (Evans and Kelly, 2004; Nicholl and Timmins 2005; Edwards et al 2010) and financial difficulties (Last and Fulbrook, 2003; and Evans and Kelly 2004). Timmins and Kaliszer (2002) also observed that the amount, thus increased academic content are a larger source of stress for students.

In a Czech study on psychological health and stress of medical students (Hanakova et al, 2015), anxiety and feelings of pressure from other learners, having less experience with planning the things to be learned, lack of time and high demands on the quality of knowledge and difficult exams were documented as contributory factors to learner stress. The findings of this study draw parallels to their findings in terms of similar academic stressors. Their study also found that learners who are subjected to constant evaluation, and have less money and time had more tension and stress than others. Yusoff et al (2010) also found in Malaysia that the main stressors for learners were facing tests/examinations, large amounts of contents to be learnt, lack of time to review what has been learnt, obtaining poor marks and having high self-expectation to do well and falling behind reading schedule. Additionally,

Hanakova et al (2015) reported lack of time for family and friends, inability to answer teacher's questions, poor motivation to learn and getting poor marks as stressors. Stressors reported by the ECI (emotional issues, relationship issues, personal issues, homelessness, accommodation issues, financial difficulty, family issues, divorce, separation, relationship with parents, physical health, mental health issues, self-harming, depression, low self-esteem, lack of understanding of academic subject matter, choice of and being on the wrong course, addictions, transportation to college, lack of motivation, part-time work and coming from a poor background have semblance to those of the ICP and the findings of Hanakova et al (2015) and Yusoff et al (2010), although they focus heavily on personal and social issues of the learners as opposed to academic stressors.

There is the need for awareness creation among learners to appreciate factors which affect learning to include the potential effect stressors external to the curriculum and college as a whole that are in the repository of learners' social ecosystem can have on their learning. Additionally, support, advice and guidance should be given to the learners to support them to effectively address and overcome these stressors.

### 6.3 How do learners interpret what they see as influencing their experience of learning?

Learning is defined differently by all case participants (both ICP and ECI) and their interpretation of what learning means shows that learning means different things to different people. Learning by definition in the thematic coding framework has been categorised into further sub-themes; learning outcome learning process learning progress learning purpose and value of learning. Other themes on learning that were pertinent to the study participants from the

thematic coding framework includes learning engagement, influences on learning engagement learning improvement learning motivation learning styles teaching skills delivery of learning and teaching style. From the various interpretations of learning offered by the case study participants, learning is seen as a means to an end; a process; product; an outcome; an opportunity to develop, thus learning is seen as developmental; a performance; practical and an organised and interactive endeavour. Learning is perceived as an individualistic endeavour and goal oriented. The goals could be deemed personal in nature such as leading to employment, creation of one's own business or the pursuit of higher education in university. Learning is also seen as a journey of discovery on which knowledge is picked up along the way. Motivation to learn was seen to be varied stemming from the government directive to stay in education till age 18, personal ambition, parental or family pressure and feelings of needing to be in education or being told to be in education compulsorily. The study found that there are some learners who would rather not be in college from the ECI but have no choice and those who want to be there and sees college education as a means to an end, typically employment and a nice life. The study participants understanding of learning was categorised into the following themes; outcome, process, progress, purpose, value, engagement, improvement, motivation, style, delivery, teaching skill, teaching style. The study found these themes to be important to the participants on their experience of learning as a whole.

In reporting what they see as influencing learning experience, the participants reported what they see mostly as barriers to learning rather than reporting experiences of stress associated with learning. The barriers which were reported were also deemed as potential sources of stress albeit no learner reported having experienced stress per se. A distinction between barriers to learning and

stressors which affect learning from the participants' perspective appears to be blurred in that they both limit the occurrence of learning as reported by the participants. The connection or relationship of reported stressors to the experience of stress was not reported even on further probing. The learners were not overtly comfortable with using the word stress or stressor. It appears there was rather a refraining from the use of the word perhaps owing to lack of understanding of the phenomenon and the process of stress and perceived negative connotations of associations of stress with mental ill health and not wanting to be labelled as such (Timmins et al 2011 and Warbah 2007). The closest association of stress in the context of an imposed strain on the participants in their interpretation of the things that influence learning is seen in the narrative of the participants who preferred to state that they 'worry' about their learning. Barriers to learning are perceived and shared as factors which have the potential to prevent learning and stressors as factors which have the potential to make the learners worry about their learning. In this vane, the stressors which affect learning encompasses the barriers to learning reported by the study participants as the barriers to learning recounted by the participants are largely similar to what emerged in the coding framework as stressors which influence their learning.

A closer look at the participants' interpretation of the things that influences their learning perceived as stressors which affect their learning and or barriers to their learning reflects the events, situations, circumstances, conditions and difficulties (Dupere et al 2015; Fletcher and Scott, 2010) of the participants resulting from their interaction with their college or external environment (Lazarus and Folkman, 1989). The interaction of the individual and the environment in terms of the process of psychological stress in theory brings to the fore Fletcher et al 2006 meta-model of stress, emotions and performance (in



the context of this study, performance being learning performance). This model of psychological stress explains the stress reaction or experience as having to do with the individual's interaction with the environment as well as elucidates key processes, moderators and outcomes of the stress process (Fletcher and Scott, 2010). It acknowledges the transactional nature of stress and recognises stress as an active process, thus imbibes the theoretical perspective adopted by this study (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

In adapting Fletcher et al's 2006 model in terms of learning performance, the stressors that arise from the environment the learner functions in can be mediated by the processes of their perception, appraisal and coping which may as a result manifest in positive and negative responses, feeling states, and outcomes. This active and ongoing process could be moderated by various personal, social and situational characteristics which would determine the nature and magnitude of the learner's responses. The moderating personal, social and situational characteristics would be the mitigating factors which would determine the degree to which stress is experienced and verbalised by the learner. Fletcher et al 2006's meta-model of psychological stress can be adapted into three distinct phases in terms of the insight garnered from this study on learner stress, thus the FE learners experience of stressors which affect learning, are discussed below.

According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model, stress is defined as a range of diverse phenomena which may or may not be causally related. Stress is deemed as a phenomenon which has three interacting components; environmental events that the individual appraises as taxing or exceeding their coping resources and threatening to their well-being; psychological, social or physiological mediators; and emotional stress responses. Hence all these three

components need to be assessed, thus, the source of stress or stressors, the mediators of the response to these stressors and the effect of these stressors on learners in seeking to support learners to effectively deal with their stressors. Stress according to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model refers to a particular type of interaction between the individual and the environment, where the stress emanates from demands that are taxing on the individual or exceeding the individual's resources. A transaction occurs in an event where the individual experiences a stressor in their interaction with the environment. During this transaction, the individual appraises the situation as involving a threat or challenge. On appraisal of the situation as stressful, a second phase in the transaction, is for coping strategies to be mobilised. How this is done is pertinent, and the sources of support mobilised is also important to determine how effective they are in helping the individual cope with stress. It is also important to know this so as to manage the relationship between the person and their environment. These processes would have a bearing on how the individual subsequently appraises such events, and thus the nature and extent of stress experienced. Stress therefore is not inherent in the environment per se, nor within the individual, their experiences, beliefs or motives but rather is a result of a changing transaction between the individual, their own experiences, beliefs and motives, and the environment. This changing transaction may be deemed as posing a threat of harm or loss or a challenge the individual depending on their personal characteristics. Regarding stress as an interactive process between the individual and the environment, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping lays emphasis on the dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment as well as deeming the individual's perception of the demands on them to be of utmost importance in the stress process.

As such, exploring the nature of learners' stressors; including issues in their social environment, thus events that they subjectively appraised as taxing or exceeding their coping resources and threatening their well-being; identifying possible mediating factors as well as specific emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses which they exhibit are important when supporting learners to cope with stressful situations.

Coping is defined as the constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts of an individual to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984 p.178). Coping can be classified into two distinct types of coping; problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The former has to do with adapting to external demands on the individual or managing encounters while the latter is about adapting to emotional demands on the individual and regulating emotions experienced in a distressed state.

The individual's thoughts and behaviour in a given situation deemed as stressful is highlighted as key in this definition. As such, this is paramount in assessing coping styles of learners. Coping is dynamic and involves cognitive appraisal and reappraisal between the individual and the environment, to override any distress caused by changing or managing an identified problem within the environment which is causing distress. This makes coping to be problem focused on one hand as well as emotional focused, because, distress caused can also be overridden by regulating the emotional response to the problem (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984 p. 179). Attention would need to be paid to the emotional responses of learners to what they appraise as stressors and should not be minimised or disregarded.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) noted that problem focused coping tend to be utilised when the individual has the belief that the resources available and accessible to them or the demands being made on them in the stressful situation can be changed. This understanding is crucial in supporting learners to effectively cope with their stressors through problem solving strategies. On the other hand, emotion focused coping is employed when the individual has the belief that nothing can be done to change the stressful situation.

Various types of skills and strategies have been outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to be used by individuals to change the problem or regulate the emotional responses they have towards the problem being encountered. They have noted the most commonly used of these strategies to include; direct action involving performing a specific or direct action to deal with the stressor; seeking information about the stressful situation to promote problem focused or emotion focused coping; and turning to others and seeking practical help and support, reassurance or comfort. Where the basic circumstances of stress cannot be changed, emotion focused coping strategies according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) would include resigning faith to acceptance and coming to terms with the problem. Where there is constant strain, emotional release may ensue as a way of ventilating feelings or reducing tension. Also, positive thinking and cognitive redefinition of a stressful situation to render it less severe in terms of threats posed or seriousness can be employed. Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) identified a further category which broadens the scope of classification of coping methods termed, meaning-focused coping. According to Lazarus (2008) in meaning focused coping, the individual falls on personal beliefs, values and existential goals as the motivation to sustsin coping activity and well-being in a challenging situation. Folkman (2008) postulated that this happens when the initial appraisal results in an unfavourable outcome following emotion

reappraisal, leading to chronic stress. The unfavourable situation give rise to a need to 'have a go again', leading to meaning-focused coping. Cognitive strategies are thus evoked in managing the meaning of situations like this. It is in this light the learner-teacher relationship becomes crucial in supporting learners to effectively deal with stressors which affect learning. Practical support and problem-solving strategies as well as collaboration with other professionals or agencies becomes helpful in helping learners cope effectively with stressors they are experiencing.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984)'s model of stress and coping as a transaction between the individual and the environment is documented in the literature as an influential theory of stress (Perrewe and Zellars, 1999). It is also seen as relational in a way that engages individual thinking, thus cognitive appraisal, and deemed phenomenological in approach to the concept of stress (Mark and Smith, 2008). The perceptive nature of stress through appraisal to discern whether there exists a discrepancy between the demands imposed in a stressful situation and the resources available to, accessible to and or possessed by the individual (in this case study, the learner) to deal effectively with the stressor, thus cope with the situation, such as support, advice or guidance, would determine whether stress occurs or not. Hence, the model is suitable for use in this qualitative exploratory study.

In further explication of Lazarus and Folkman (1984)'s transactional model of stress and coping, the dynamic relationship between the individual and the environment has been argued (Mark and Smith, 2008) and how the phenomenon of stress is described as a psychological and emotional state which is internally represented as part of a transaction during a stressful situation. Stress therefore is not located entirely within the individual and neither in the

environment (Dewe et al 2012). The nature of the interaction between the individual and the environment is what determines the stress experienced by the individual with the two key tenets being the individual's perception, thus cognitive appraisal, and coping (Perrewe and Zellars, 1999). Lazarus (1999) explained the concept of cognitive appraisal to be the process that connects the individual and the environment within the transaction and confers a relational meaning that the individual has constructed. This concept is key to the stress process and cognitive appraisal is deemed a conscious process that seeks to offer probable ways that link the discrete emotions that describes the individual's experience of stress (Cox et al 2000 and Lazarus and CohenCharash 2001).

According to Larazus (1999) two types of appraisal are pertinent to the transactional model of stress and coping; primary and secondary. Primary appraisal is how an individual evaluates a stressful situation in relation to potential personal relevance and significance in view of impact on well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and plays a crucial role in the coping process. What is at stake is identified by the individual, taking into consideration the significance of the individual's encounter of the stressful situation and the individual's evaluation with reference to the personal meaning attached to it (Lazarus, 1999). The phenomenological nature of the stress experience is thus revealed in this crucial process. Three types of evaluation have been identified by Lazarus (1999) to include the following; an irrelevant encounter; a benign-positive encounter; and a stressful encounter. An irrelevant encounter has no personal significance for the individual and as such would be mostly ignored. A benign-positive encounter would be evaluated as beneficial and or desirable while a stressful encounter would be evaluated as harmful, threatening or challenging to the individual. The stressful situation is thus appraised to

involve harm or loss, threat or challenge to an individual's well-being. These types of primary appraisal are the bedrock for coping (Lazarus and CohenCharash, 2001) and can be seen as serving as a point of reference where the individual is able to focus on what needs to be done, or what can be done about the perceived harm, threat or challenge through evaluating the available and accessible coping resources possessed by the individual. This is referred to as secondary appraisal by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) transactional model. Cheng and Cheung (2005) observed that this is an ongoing process which is regulated by individual and situational demands. Secondary appraisal involves evaluation of a situation and degree of control, as such different appraisals of stress would lead to various coping strategies. Coping according to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model is thus fundamental to how the individual interacts with the environment. This being an ongoing process would depend on the individual's experience of the demands imposed by the situation they are faced with. Perrewe and Zellars (1999) and Dewe et al (2012) observed that Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping presents coping as a choice of the individual informed by primary and secondary appraisal of an encounter or situation.

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1985), cognitive and behavioural efforts necessary to manage, override, thus master, reduce or tolerate what can be construed as a troubling disturbance of the relationship between the individual and the environment is what coping is about. Furthermore, the thoughts and behaviours that are utilised in managing the demands imposed on the individual by the stressful situation are also described as coping (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). Individual perception and determination of what can be done to cause change in the situation appraised as stressful is thus consistent with coping. The choice of coping method is thus influenced by the individual's

perception of the control that can be exercised over the appraised stressful situation (Perrewe and Zellars, 1999). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980), the result of coping would depend partially on how the coping methods applied fit with the individual's appraisal. As such, Cox et al (2000) asserted, where coping fails owing to either excessive demands on the individual or lack or non-availability or accessibility of resources, stress and negative outcomes would eventuate.

In supporting learners to cope with stressors which affect learning, their coping strategies would need to be explored with them depending on the different situations they face and how effective they deem these strategies. Learning performance, learning engagement and learning achievement would undoubtedly improve where learners' health and wellbeing is preserved by utilising effective coping strategies. These can be problem -focused coping, emotion-focused coping or meaning-focused coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984)'s transactional model of stress and coping demonstrates how individuals evaluate situations they face and the coping methods they employ in order to mitigate the negative effects imposed by stressful situations. It can be argued that the health and wellbeing of the individual is thus preserved when coping is successful as the ill effects of stress would have been averted.

Negative health outcomes can ensue when coping fails. This is particularly important to FE learners as learning would undoubtedly be affected when they are in poor health. Learners' health and emotional security are salient in enabling their full participation and engagement in learning and education (WHO, 1996). Positive and negative emotions have been found to be directly related to learners' engagement with learning tasks (Reschly et al 2008) with the frequency of positive emotions in class found to be associated with higher



learner engagement and frequency of negative emotions associated with lower learner engagement with learning tasks (Reschly et al 2008). Non-engagement with learning tasks owing to stress would undoubtedly lead to poor learning performance. According to OECD (2015), anxiety about learning related tasks, such as schoolwork, homework, tests and examinations is known to have a negative impact on academic performance. Learners who have higher perceived stress levels tend to have poorer academic performance (Rickwood et al 2016, Kotter et al 2017; and Stewart et al 1999).

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model is useful as individual differences that may exist in reaction to stress, in terms of health and wellbeing, could be explained by the model. However, the model does not explain learning performance, learning engagement and learning achievement or how learning performance can be prevented from declining. In spite of this shortcoming, its particular focus on how the interaction of the individual and the environment is the bedrock of appraisal and coping, renders it flexible enough to be applicable to supporting learners cope with stressors which affect learning.

In spite of the appropriateness of this model in explaining learner stress, consideration is also given to Fletcher et al's 2006 meta-model of stress in terms of borrowing ideas from how stress related concepts affect performance in sports to learning performance. The meta-model of stress (Fletcher et al 2006) fleshes out cognitive underpinnings of the stress process in terms of performance in sports, and the terms anxiety, arousal and activation have been associated with performance. In terms of learning performance therefore, one can relate this to learners' anxiety of achieving learning outcomes, thus passing exams and other forms of learning assessments; arousal of interest in learning, thus learners'

motivation; and activation, thus engagement in learning and learning promotion in terms of factors which could make learning conducive.

Fletcher et al 2006 observed that the definition of stress can be either an environmental stimulus, a response from the individual or the interaction between the environment and the individual which in their case is athlete. Likewise, the learner as an individual can experience stress as an environmental stimulus, a response from the learner or the interaction between the environment and the learner. However, they conceptualise stress as "an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their environments, making appraisals of the situations they find themselves in, and endeavouring to cope with any issues that may arise" (Fletcher et al, 2006, p.329). This definition reinforces the need to also be concerned about the psychological processes that underpin an encounter rather than being too focussed on the specific components of an interaction in the transactional concept of stress (Dewey and Bentley 1949; Lazarus and Launier, 1978). In the context of learning, the transactional concept of stress would imply that the learner is dynamically relating with the environment (college and outside college, thus including the learner's social ecology, the environment in which the learner is operating), whereby the learner appraises an event and coping resources available and accessible to the learner, the nature of the environmental demands on the learner, coupled with the learner's own personal characteristics that may be influencing these appraisals (Fletcher et al, 2006). As a result of these cognitive evaluations - primary and secondary appraisals, a learner may engage in thoughts and behaviours designed to deal with the situation. Strategies that are adopted may evolve with time as efforts are re-appraised and outcomes evaluated, for example to evoke meaning-focused coping. Thus, the ongoing dynamic would undoubtedly influence subsequent appraisals of

stressors and therefore the learner's response and possible choice of coping strategies as surmised by Lazarus (1998) and (1999). Fletcher et al (2006, p 329) further distinguished between stressors and strain and referred to stressors as the environmental demands the individual encounters, and strain as the individual's negative psychological, physical and behavioural responses to stressors. As such, Lazarus (1990)'s assertion that stress should not be used to describe any specific part of the transaction between the individual and the environment, but rather used to refer to the overall process which incorporates stressors, strains, appraisals and coping responses is affirmed by Fletcher et al 2006.

Fletcher et al's (2006) meta-model of stress encompasses emotions and performance, and although developed for use in sports performance, it could have relevance, utility and applicability to learning performance. The model outlines the theoretical relationships among the key processes, moderators and particularly consequences of the stress process, and builds on the transactional concept of stress by emphasising the transactional nature as a dynamic process (Lazarus 1998, 1999 and Fletcher et al 2006). Fletcher et al's (2006) meta-model of stress postulates from a sports coaching perspective that stressors originate from the environment a coach operate in, and the effects of stressors are mediated by the processes of perception, appraisal and coping, which then consequently result in positive or negative responses, feeling states, and outcomes. The process is deemed ongoing and influenced by various personal and situational characteristics (Fletcher et al, 2006).

The conceptual and theoretical grounding that Fletcher et al (2006)'s meta-model of stress offer in understanding the stress process among coaches, adds value in not just providing an amalgamation of constructs that explain

psychological stress from a conceptual and theoretical standpoint, irrespective of the field of study. It also offers a structure which can inform discussion of emergent research on experience of stress and therefore could be useful as a framework in supporting learners cope with stressors which affect learning in FE.

#### 6.4 A Model of Learner Stress (Based on Adaptation of Fletcher et al's 2006 Meta-Model of Psychological Stress)

##### Phase 1: Learner –environment interaction (L-E)

Stressors which affect learning could arise owing to interaction between the learner and the environment in which they function or operate. Individual learner perception of stressor and the personal meaning/significance attached to it in terms of learning performance is key in this stage. The latter would involve cognitive appraisal which may induce various emotions and may lead to attitudinal change.

##### Phase 2: Emotion –Learning performance (E-LP)

Learner's emotional or attitudinal reaction to stressor could give an indication of impinging strain on the learner and how this may affect learning performance. A cognitive appraisal of emotions and attitudinal change is paramount in this phase to determine personal meaning in terms of learning performance. This would lead to feeling states which would affect learning performance. Negative emotions and attitude would affect learning performance negatively.

##### Phase 3: Coping – Learning Outcome (C-LO)

Learner response to perceived stressors, choice and use of coping strategies and support systems including SAG could be a determinant of overall learning outcome. Availability and accessibility of SAG internal and external to academic

institution is critical to coping effectively with stressors which negatively affect learning. Inappropriate and inadequate use of SAG and coping strategies and other support systems would result in negative learning outcomes and non-achievement of learning goals.

6.5 Table 6.1 Model of Learner Stress

Phase	Name	Description	Implications for Learning
Phase 1	Learner–Environment (L-E)	Stressors which affect learning could arise owing to interaction between the learner and the environment in which they function or operate.	Individual learner perception of stressor and the personal meaning/significance attached to it in terms of learning performance is key in this stage. The latter would involve cognitive appraisal which may induce various emotions and may lead to attitudinal change towards learning.
Phase 2	Emotion–Learning Performance (E-LP)	Learner’s emotional or attitudinal reaction to stressor could give an indication of impinging strain on the learner and how this may affect learning performance.	A cognitive appraisal of emotions and attitudinal reaction is paramount in this phase to determine personal meaning in terms of learning performance. Negative emotions and attitude would affect learning performance negatively.
Phase 3	Coping–Learning Outcome (C-LO)	Learner response to perceived stressors, choice and use of coping strategies and support systems including SAG could be a determinant of overall learning outcome/goal.	Availability and accessibility of SAG internal and external to academic institution is critical to coping effectively with stressors which negatively affect learning. Inappropriate and inadequate use of SAG and coping strategies and other support systems would result in negative learning outcomes and non-achievement of learning goals.

Learners' health and wellbeing could be affected should the learner be unable to cope with the stressors in a timely and effective manner resulting in accumulation of stressors, stress proliferation, maladaptation or maladjustment (Dupere et al, 2015; Schonkoff et al 2012; Evans and Cassells, 2014; Evans and Schamberg, 2009; Pearlin, 2010; Pearlin and Bierman, 2013). Learners personal, social and situational characteristics are pertinent in mitigating how well they cope with stressors which affect learning. Owusu (2010) observed that approaches that minimise stress which negatively affect learning performance are needed and these may lead to developing "coping styles", typical ways of facing a stressor and dealing with it (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980,1985). Having looked at stressors which affect learning, attention will now be focussed on learners' response to the things they see as influencing their learning, their coping process and strategies in the upcoming sections.

## 6.6 How do learners respond to the things that they see as influencing their learning?

Learners respond to the things they see as influencing learning by seeking support advice and guidance (SAG) from the college staff; academic staff, their tutor and student support advisors (SSAs) to overcome the myriad challenges they face and deem as influencing their learning. Some learners are directed by academic staff to SSAs for further support, advice and guidance where the help required is more of a personal, social or something to do with matters outside academic confines or where protracted help, professional help or signposting to external agencies are required. Learning support, advice and guidance (SAG) has been categorised into the various sub-themes in the analytical coding framework of the study; problem solving strategies, how SAG is provided thus SAG Provision, accessing SAG, challenges faced in SAG, nature of SAG, needed

improvements in SAG, reasons for SAG, response to SAG, SAG delivery, SAG effectiveness, SAG outcome, and type of support. These are key topical issues that need consideration, planning, logistics and addressing when it comes to learner support to overcome stressors which affect their learning. The nature of SAG provision is varied as well as the reasons for which learners seek SAG. There are challenges faced by those who mainly provide SAG to the learners in the college, the SSAs, and suggestions made to overcome these are critical to supporting learners effectively cope with stressors which affect their learning. The response to SAG is deemed as positive overall. The learners found the SAG they received helpful and effective and some learners have been reported to be appreciative. When this is contrasted with learners' attitude to learning overall, the study revealed that learners can have three types of attitude towards learning; positive, negative and neutral. However, their response to the things that influence their learning negatively is seen largely as positive. The learners are seen as seeking to follow the SAG given by both academic staff and SSAs in order to overcome the challenges that they face in their learning in order to achieve their goals for learning. Addressing the challenges that are faced during SAG provision would bolster learner engagement even further and extend the reach of SAG to the learner population as a whole and prevent negative learning outcomes for learners.

### 6.7 How do learners deem methods of coping with challenges to learning (effective or ineffective)?

The learners' response to the things that influence their learning, particularly the stressors which affect their learning include how they react and coped with these stressors. According to Lazarus et al (1984), coping entails individual cognitive appraisal of the stressor, and the perception of the level of threat, impact of the stressor on the individual determines the level of stress and the

coping strategies of the individual (Lazarus et al, 1984). In their response, they considered the support systems available to them and the options they have or have been provided with and then make choices that help them cope with the stressors effectively. Each internal case participant, ICP, the learners, described how they have coped with different individual stressors they experienced and mentioned in their conversations with me. These made clear that there are different sources of stressors for all internal case participants as individuals but looking at the case study as a whole, one can see the nature of stressors prevalent in the learner group as a whole and the coping strategies (*actions taken to address it*) employed to address identified stressors. The main reported academic stressors and coping actions are summarised in the table below.

**6.8 Table 6.2 Summary of Academic Stressors and Coping Strategies**

Academic Stressors	Coping Strategies
Not knowing what to expect from course	Get to know course expectations
Not involved in choosing course	Get involved in choosing course
Delay in handing in coursework	Get course work done outside college timetabled days
Receiving negative feedback	Reflect on all aspects of feedback
	Focus on how to improve in feedback
Struggling with academic work	Ask to speak to teacher on one to one
	Speak to friends who know
	Get help to achieve grades you need

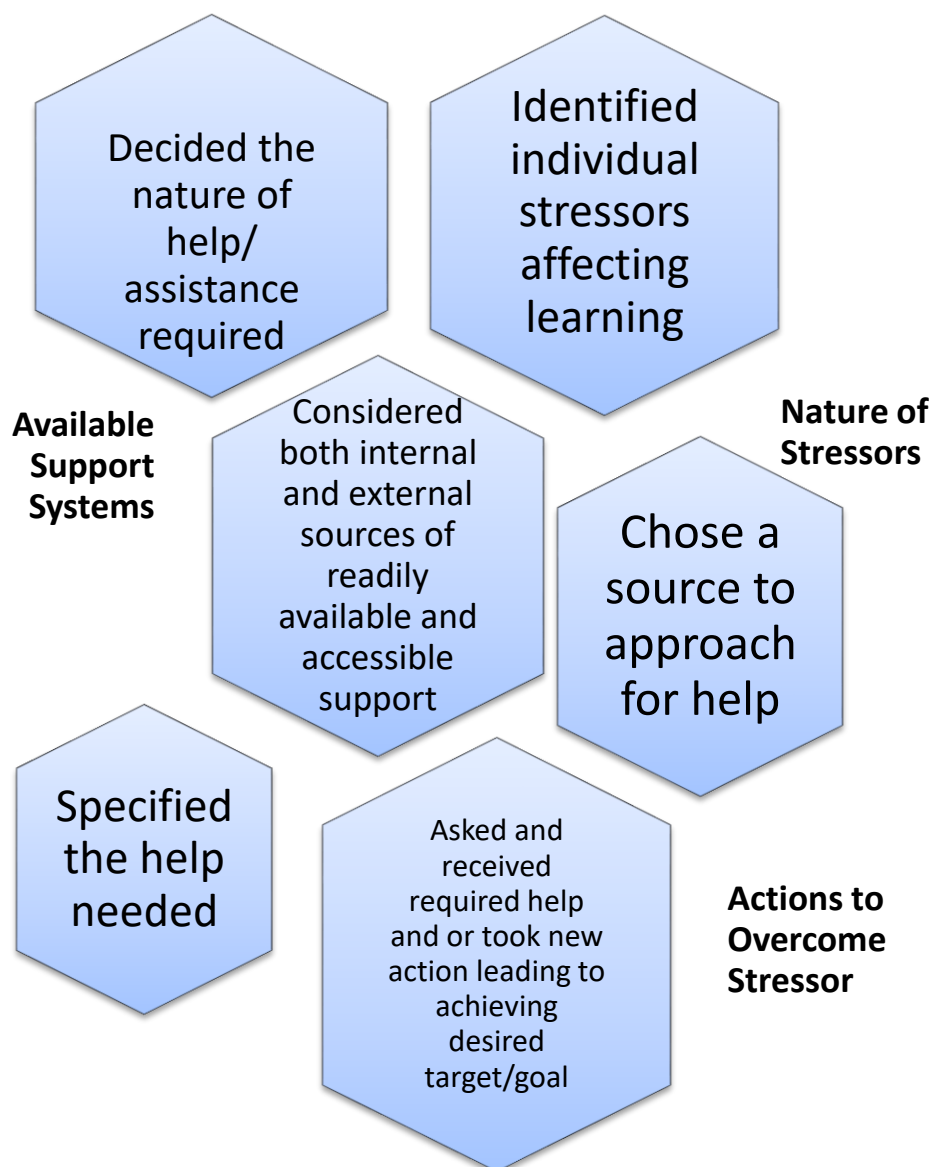
All identified individual stressors that the internal case participants, ICP, the learners, reported that they acted to overcome are all of an academic nature and



they deemed their coping strategies successful and thus effective. They all have to do with their course work and this is indicative that the participants are serious about their learning on the whole and are taking the initiative to find ways of coping with the stressors which affect their learning. Although different stressors were addressed differently by the participants, all of them were clear about what it is they are addressing. They decided to do something new and acted differently to change their previous approach. They also had in mind what will show that the problem no longer exists or is impending. One can say they have an awareness of the issue, contemplated what to do about it and interestingly, on their own volition (self-motivation, zeal, initiative was taken), made a choice to do things or approach things differently through the coping strategies, the actions, that they have described they took to overcome the perceived potential source of stress. There was no overt admission by any of the ICP that they have experienced stress per se, but the words they used such as 'struggle' and 'overcome' implies there is the nuance of stress but not described by using the same word. The coping ideas gleaned from the study participants include being clear about the nature of the stressor, the support systems available to them to use to overcome the challenges posed by the stressor, and taking actions to overcome these individually. The steps in this process could be summarised as follows; identifying the stressor, decide in the nature of help or assistance required to overcome it, considering all potential sources of help and the nature of the help that is available through these sources, choosing a source to approach for help after deciding on what help is needed to overcome the identified or specific stressor, specifying what help is needed to the source of support, asking and receiving help and or taking any new action to achieve a desired goal or target in order to overcome the perceived stressor. A summary of coping actions taken is presented in figure 6.1 below.

These actions taken by learners involved both cognitive appraisal and practical solution steps which relied in part on the input of others in their available support systems.

6.9 Figure 6.1 Summary of Coping Actions Addressing Stressors Which Affect Learning



The study has as its theoretical perspective and underpinning theory the transactional nature of stress-coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The findings are largely in support of the theoretical concept of stress and coping as being transactional. The learners did not report any overwhelming stressful

situation per se, and this could be partially due to how available coping mechanisms and support systems supported them to effectively deal with their perceived stressors and barriers to learning. In the view of Fletcher et al's 2006 adapted meta-model of psychological stress, it is not surprising that the experience of being overwhelmed by stress was not reported by the learners as they seemed to have coped effectively with the learning challenges they face, thus the stressors which they reported affected their learning. As such effective coping with stressors perceived as affecting learning is paramount in preventing learners from getting to a point where they are overwhelmed by their perceived stressors. On the other hand, other stressors which affect learning aside academic stressors were reported by the external case informants, ECI, academic staff and SSAs, who provide SAG to the learners. They have on the whole deemed stressors which affect learning to be of a personal or social nature and external to the academic curriculum. Some of them saw themselves as working with the learners to intervene in ways that mitigated these stressors to keep the learners in college while some of them see the learners as already taking steps to mitigate the stressors which affect their learning to prevent them from entirely "*killing off their learning career*" when they see them for SAG. Some of the stressors have also been reported to be beyond the control of the learner and the staff and were only reported as a way of explaining ways in which their learning could have been affected. For example, learner motivation, college attendance and whether they continue or drop out of college. The ECI reported what can be best described as a sense of struggle that some learners have in going through college with competing needs for attention or priority or importance which the FE learner has to live with. It is unclear to the ECI, whether stressors such as relationships, personal life, social life and or financial security are the greatest determinant of learner underachievement.

The support systems identified in the study falls within academic support, student services, parental support and external agencies. The support systems learners used in coping with stressors which affect learning are; seeking support from teacher, course mates, friends, family and health professional and these are in keeping with Timmins et al (2011) findings on the coping strategies used to cope with stressors although they are not so expansive as the coping mechanisms reported by the student nurses in their study (talk to friend, talk to someone about it, try to find information about your situation, try and sort it out on your own, talk to parent, try to take your mind of it, pray, talk to an older friend, talk to relative, would not want to talk to anyone, take drugs, drinks or get drunk, talk to lecturer, talk to doctor or general practitioner, talk to chaplain or clergyman, do nothing, talk to psychologist or counsellor, got to hospital or health centre). FE practitioners need to be cognisant of the support systems that learners can access in their colleges and outside their college. The support that learners require may not only have to do with academic issues.

Furthermore, some of the ways learners cope with stressors which affect their learning as reported by some of the external case informants (ECI) in this study (*self-harm, drug taking and alcoholism*) may not be healthy (Baldwin et al, 2008; Department of Health and Children 2005). This is in line with findings from students' self-report in Timmins et al (2011) (*take drugs and get drunk*). Learners would need guidance and encouragement to seek support from their lecturers and course tutors, student service advisors and from other external agencies as required. The nature of support that should be provided to the learners in FE need to be help them in developing effective coping strategies to overcome stressors which affect their learning given the fact that they are in the adolescence life stage and are still developing ways of coping with challenges that they face in life vis-a-vis their learning and education at large. Most of the

stressors reported by the learners are academic stressors and thus there is the need to pay attention to the curriculum and its development, course planning, the nature of assessments, the number of assessments, assessment schedules and explanation the criteria for achieving different grades. There is also the need to provide clear verbal and written feedback and be constructive and developmental in this endeavour on the part of the academic staff. They would need to take into consideration the way they provide feedback and its potential impact on the learner. The emotional response of the learner and how the learner deals with this should become a paramount concern in providing feedback. The goal of feedback should be developmental, motivational, and supportive of the learner to achieve so as to provide a positive learning experience for the learner.

In supporting learners to effectively deal with their emotional reaction, adjunct health promotion and emotional well-being topics could be included in the curricula as part of individual or group tutorials or these could be planned and provided as sessional topics to run alongside their mainstream curricula. These topics could be delivered by student services staff or course tutor to help develop and build resilience in FE learners and foster physical and mental well-being. Staff, both academic and student support staff could be trained in these approaches including brief therapy, motivational interviewing, active listening, stress management and emotional intelligence to prepare them to further support learners as individuals. Liaison with health professionals such as mental health professionals, counsellors and health promotion staff as well as the public health directorate of local authorities in a concerted effort to promote learner health and well-being, especially mental health and educate and equip learners to cope effectively with their emotional reaction to stressors which affect cope with stress

FE learners need to be supported to learn to share concerns they have about their learning by talking to other people such as staff and parents and assisted to cope with identified stressors which affect their learning. These efforts would help in enhancing the learners' coping skill and in addressing the various stressors identified in this study varying from academic stressors, personal and social stressors including relationship difficulties, financial difficulties, physical and mental health challenges and homelessness. Clearly, supporting the FE learner in addressing these stressors would advertently be addressing a bigger issue of underachievement. Ways of supporting and guiding the FE learner to prioritise competing needs, perform opportunity cost analysis to know which priority to focus on first, enhancing their capacity to do this would be a step in the right direction. The personal, social situations and conditions such family background, family make up, degree of exposure and socioeconomic background that FE learners find themselves would determine what they require help with and how successful that help is in mitigating the impact of their perceived stressors. The FE learner would need to be involved in setting their own priority and establishing what they need help with. Furthermore, alternative strategies would need to be offered and choices given to learners in this process. However, in cases where situations and conditions faced by the learner is beyond the control of SSAs, appropriate referral to external agencies should be indicated such as housing, mental health professionals and social services or law enforcement as the case may demand.

Mental health education, mental health first aid, resourcefulness of learner support advice and guidance, relationship with tutors and staff, openness on the part of the learner, having frank conversations are some of the steps that could be taken to support learners. Also, having access to specialist counsellors such as Drug and Alcohol workers, devising positive behavioural support plans,

working in conjunction with mental health workers, opening the college environment to host outreach clinics by Community Psychiatric Nurses (CPNs), providing learners with assertiveness training, confidence training and psychosocial education could be provided by these specialist workers. Internally, team building activities in group tutorials, having one to one session to allow learners to vent their feelings and explore stressors which affect their learning and the most effective method of dealing with them, offering brief therapy, training learners in mindfulness, anxiety management and stress management could be beneficial. It could also ensure that a robust SAG plan is in place to support learners to effectively cope with stressors which affect learning to prevent negative learning outcomes, underachievement, non-achievement and learners dropping out of college owing to stressors. Educating both learners and staff on anxiety and stress management would be beneficial as well.

#### 6.10 How does the learner-teacher relationship and support systems influence learners experience of learning?

The learner-teacher relationship (LTR) has been deemed as crucial to how learners cope with the factors which influence their learning by the study participants and other research (Freeburn and Sinclair, 2009; Timmins et al 2011 and Gibbons et al 2008). The emerging themes on LTR in the coding framework includes; the influences on LTR, the nature of LTR and rapport building. The teacher skills and attributes necessary for influencing learners experience of learning positively have been reported by the study participants to include consistency competence sensitivity cultural sensitivity and diversity awareness conduct of tutorials motivational skills finding common ground building rapport targeting setting skills target setting skills tracking learner progress teachers showing genuine interest in the learner active listening to

learners concerns Showing understanding being honest been discipline and having good organisational skills engendering trust giving constructive feedback and providing guidance another important factor for attribute mentioned by the study participants his teachers ensuring that there is power balance in the communication and relationship with the learner. Zupira et al (2007), Gibbons et al (2008) and Nolan and Ryan (2008) noted conversely that relationship between students and their mentors can be a source of stress and one could argue that where the LTR fails to be effective in supporting the learner to cope with stressors which affect their learning, it could well add to the accumulation and proliferation of stressors and compound the challenges being faced by the learner. For the LTR to be effective in supporting the learner cope with stressors which affect learning, there is a need for it to be engaging, relational, caring and pastoral instead of the focus being on performativity, which has become an established culture in FE (Whitehead, 2004).

Learning from research conducted outside the FE sector to do with teacher support and learning in the UK, one can glean from findings relevant to the topic which highlights significant approaches noted to be supportive learning and helping to deal with learner stress that draw parallels to the finding of this study. Erichsen and Bollinger (2011) suggested a more caring approach to the LTR and there is the need to balance physical and emotional aspects of the LTR (Brown and Holloway, 2008). As such the LTR would need to adopt a holistic approach to consider, explore and address with the learner matters in the physical, intellectual, emotional and social domains of the learner. Regular tutorials as found in this study would be crucial in enabling this to occur and contribute to moderating and mitigating stressors which affect learning. Bartram (2008) also suggested regular personal tutoring, and engaging the student in cultural (and in FE terms, may be peer networking as well) and social



networking and encouraging this have been found to be useful according to Brown and Holloway (2008). Hwang et al. (2011) reported that social support and a supportive learning environment can have a significant impact on student adjustment and learning performance. Hughes (2010) emphasised the need for teachers to be able to provide detailed information in relation to services that learners can access such as library and information services whereas Evans and Morrison (2010) recommended providing help in the classroom to reduce learner anxiety in the classroom through the teacher providing pre-reading material and briefing the learners ahead of planned lesson time. This approach would reduce the fear as well as stressors that learners have reported in this study as not being involved in choosing courses and not knowing what they are coming to learn. It could also help teachers to be better organised and potentially improve classroom delivery and manage learner expectations more effectively. Teaching skill, lesson delivery and supporting learners to understand the topics being taught are paramount in the LTR as the learners in this study have expressed struggling academically to understand what is being taught as well as finding assignments complex and demanding. Tange and Jensen (2012) stated that in guiding the student through the learning process, the teacher would need to accept and acknowledge alternative pedagogy and take the time to explain complicated theories. Furthermore, the teacher needs to be aware of how learners can become embarrassed, frustrated, disappointed and bored owing positive and negative learning incidents as this may result in disruptive behaviour (Andrade, 2006) which was alluded to by reference to the behaviour of other learners and classroom management as sources of potential stress in this study.

Timmins et al (2011) noted that relationship between staff and students has a major part to play in managing and preventing learner stress and in spite of the

acknowledgement that both staff and student may not be able to control the various stressors which may accompany the learning experience, both can work together to create an enabling learning environment (Gibbons et al, 2008). Inclusivity and approachability are key in the attitude staff need to have towards developing a learner centred relationship which values and respects the learner as an individual and is supportive to the learner (Timmins et al, 2011). Learner attitude towards learning can be nurtured and developed to be optimistic and positive in the LTR (Gibbons et al 2008). Stressors reported by learners would need to be explored fully as part of the LTR in order to be in a position to help mitigate any negative impact on their learning (Timmins et al 2011). This is particularly important in the light of the findings of this study that other stressors aside academic stressors only came to light through the exploration work of the staff in conversation with the learners.

The support systems reported in the study falls within academic support, student services, parental support and external agencies. These support systems reportedly used by the learners in coping with stressors which affect learning in this study have been deemed to have a positive impact on their learning. The coping strategies of the learners included; seeking support from teacher, course mates, friends, family and health professional and all these appear to have positively influenced their learning experience they helped them to successfully cope with their identified stressors. The support learners received in this study in the context of LTR include; talking to the teacher and asking for specific assistance, being able to approach the teacher, ability to express their learning needs freely, attention that teachers paid through active listening skills, the time that teachers made for the learner and the practical assistance provided by the teacher to the learner when the learner is in need. These ways of supporting learners were deemed helpful in overcoming stressors

which affect learning. Additionally, the study also found that individualising teaching and learning, teaching in bite-size, considering the pace of the learner regarding how they are imbibing teaching concepts or topics, embedding clues and using learning approaches that learners deemed helpful where highly esteemed by the learners as supportive of them in overcoming stressors which affect their learning, principally their academic work.

Various outcomes of learning were deemed important the case study participants reflecting the complexity of this case, and how variable the individual, personal and environmental factors that has the propensity to influence the experience of the case study participants and thus their perceptions on stressors which affect learning are. The social ecological context is therefore deemed to be a key influencer on the responses given by both the ICP and ECI, as such knowing the social backgrounds of learners in FE is critical in providing effective SAG. The importance of context is emphasised by Shogren et al (2012) as an integrating concept that unifies the total circumstances that make up the milieu of human life and functioning including personal and environmental characteristics such as age, gender and family. Bofrenbrenner (1979) also deems an individual's immediate social setting including personal, family and social relationships, their educational institution and their community environment as major influencers that can shape individual experiences. There is also an acknowledgement that policy and practice have a role to play in shaping society by influencing peoples' experiences (Shrogen et al, 2009). As such understanding individual personal, family and social issues and support available in educational institutions and the society, the community environment, outside of the educational institution, the FE college, is valuable to supporting FE learners effectively cope with stressors which affect learning. Also making changes in FE practice in terms of

heuristics, teacher and vocational pedagogy and in the way support, advice and guidance (SAG) is provided to FE learners to achieve their individual learning objectives could be seen as crucial the success of the FE learner. Outcomes of this case study would be supportive in this endeavour in helping to give FE learners opportunities for practical learning, paying attention and care to their individual needs in the learner-teacher relationship, working together with agencies and professionals external to the FE college would provide useful support to FE learners and contribute towards reducing attrition rates.

It is imperative for FE practitioners to be aware of the support systems identified by the study; internal within the college and external from outside the college. There is also the overarching need to from support learners to develop resilience in the face of the challenges they face in their learning. Learners need to be encouraged to develop a positive mental attitude, motivated and inspired to want to succeed through having the determination to succeed as well as be made aware of the availability and accessibility of student support services internally in the college and externally outside the college through referrals, signposting and collaboration cum planned or intentional joint working with health professionals and other external agencies deemed critical to helping learners overcome stressors which affect learning.

# CONCLUSION

## 7.1 Summary of Main Findings

The case study research approach was used to qualitatively examine stressors which affect learning as an object through the lens of the Level 3 BTEC Business Studies learners and FE practitioners as whole subject. This makes this study a single intrinsic qualitative case study (Thomas, 2011) which is exploratory in nature and has veered into uncharted territory of empirical research in FE. Learner stress has seldom been studied in the FE sector. This intrinsic qualitative case study explored stressors which affect learning, learners' interpretation of what they see as influencing their learning, how learners deemed methods of coping with challenges to learning, and how the learner teacher relationship and support systems influence learners' experience of learning. The study utilised the framework method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) to analyse the whole case data using CAQDAS NVivo 11. The resulting emerging thematic coding framework reveals a detailed, comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the perception of the study participants on the object of this study. The study participants comprise learners who formed the internal case participants (ICP) and FE practitioners- lecturers, course tutor and student support advisors who formed the external case informants (ECI). The study as a whole found three types of stressors which affect learning to be academic, personal and social in nature. Stressors reported by the ICP are mainly academic stressors and those by the ECI are mainly of a personal and social nature although there are some commonalities. Varied coping strategies were

used by the learners and the support advice and guidance (SAG) they received were deemed effective.

Learners specifically coped with academic stressors by getting to know course expectations, getting involved in choosing their course, get course work done outside college timetabled days, reflect on all aspects of feedback, ask to speak to teacher on one to one basis, speak to friends who know the topic and get help with the grades you need. The coping strategies learners used includes talking to family and friends, teachers, student support staff and health professionals. Sources of support just for stressors are both internal and external to the educational institution. How the learners responded to their perceived stressors and their coping actions were examined and a three-stage model of learner stress has been suggested based on adaptation of Fletcher et al's 2006 meta model of psychological stress, to make clear the implications of learner stress on learning performance. This model could be helpful in working with learners to explore how they perceived stressors which can affect their learning. It could also be used to determine which stage they are in and equip learners to develop and enhance appropriate coping strategies and take coping actions that will effectively counteract any potential effects of these stressors to prevent a decline in learning performance and or improve the same to prevent learner attrition, thus minimise dropout rates.

The coping actions taken by the learners and the support systems available and accessible to the learners were both internal and external to the educational institution. The learner teacher relationship has also been found to be crucial in supporting learners effectively cope with stressors which affect learning. The way the LTR can have influences on learning has also been discussed and suggestions made for FE practitioners to adopt a more humanistic and learner-

centred approach as a central tenet to ensure positive learning outcomes for learners.

Overall, this study has found that there is a mismatch between the perceptions of FE staff, the external case informants and the FE learners, the internal case participants on stressors which affect learning. There need to be collaborative working between FE practitioners and FE learners to determine stressors which affect learning so as to be in a better position to offer appropriate and effective help and support to learners to overcome stressors which affect learning. It also offer a fresh insight of the FE learner stressors they perceive as affecting their learning, to inform praxis, heuristics and tacit knowledge in everyday context. Furthermore, FE teachers pedagogic practice and personal theories of learning could be enhanced towards making improvements in learning and pastoral care roles.

## 7.2 Secondary Findings/Other findings aside the research questions

The thematic coding framework reveals other findings in this study which are adjunct to the main study questions. Learning attitude, learning engagement, learning improvement, learning style among others emerged as additional themes which could be further explored in research studies geared towards the FE learner, FE practice or FE learner constructions of learning.

## 7.3 Limitations of the Study

### 7.3.1 Research Design

The case study protocol could have been designed to follow up the learners and collect data again in another year of study. This would have made the study longitudinal in order to further enrich the data more with how perceptions could

have changed as learners got more settled into their course of study and also as they develop or mature in a year's time. However due to time constraints on the part of the researcher and the delay it took to obtain institutional approval, interviews were completed with second year learners only in the final year of the course and the researcher could not plan to go back to collect further data. The requirement to have a Chaperone in place by the institution which granted permission for the study to be undertaken, also added to the delay in facilitating the study. The whole process of access arrangement and the 'nervousness' that seem to have been associated with the study by the 'gate keepers' of the institutions approached was an arduous, prolonged and drawn out. The study was not necessarily priority for the institution although its usefulness was alluded to in the first instance of approaching the institutions to seek access. Several meetings and local protocols that needed to be followed to eventually grant the researcher access made it quite impossible to follow learners over a period of time and collect data twice over an interval of at least a year to enrich the case study data.

The study could have involved both Year 1 and Year 2 learners and the resulting data contrasted to explore potential different stressors that Year 1 and Year 2 learners on the same course possibly experienced. However, being a small-scale unfunded study being conducted by one individual which is foraying into uncharted territory and having faced so much resistance levelled by the first institution approached, both time, money and lack of human resources made the researcher to concentrate only on the learner group studied. The design could have been a multiple design where learners and FE practitioners from more than one FE college are involved and again, time, financial and human costs coupled with potential barrier of obtaining access to multiple institutions did not allow the case study design to be multiple in nature. Furthermore, the



intentionality of the study to be qualitative in nature and pragmatic as well as situated in the current and real experiences of the participants did not allow for the use of triangulation allowed in typical case study research. Pertinent information gleaned from the internal case participants individual learning plans were only used to provide a description of participant characteristics as a documentary review did not reveal any cogent information on stressors which affect learning. If a valid research instrument such as The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen, 1995) were to be used alongside the unstructured interviews, this triangulation might have enriched the study findings given the fact that learners did not overtly discuss having experienced stress.

### 7.3.2 Sampling

Although all learners that qualify as the internal case participants were approached and invited to participate in the study, only six (6) responded and there was one drop out and no reasons were given for the drop out. There was only one female learner and all the internal case participants were 19 years old or above and White Caucasians in spite of the learner group being made up of learners from Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BAMEs) as well as learners who are below 19 years old. This could be due to the fact that learners do not know the researcher and do not have any initial rapport with the researcher and do not fully appreciate the importance of their participation in the study. It is also likely that it is because they have not been involved in research studies and may perceive participation as an extra burden or not their priority. All the learners were given the participant information sheet as well as had it read to them by their Course Tutor. Another interesting observation was that the consent forms require parental consent for those under age 19 years and lack of interest shown by learners under 19 years could be attributed to perhaps not

wanting to make the effort to undertake the extra work of seeking and obtaining parental consent. Although the number of learners, the internal case participants studied were small, they provided data which is rich in detail and in depth to enable exploration of stressors which affect learning. However, the perspectives of BAMEs for instance could not be captured as well as that of learners under the age of 19 years. Although the researcher was short of being accused of researcher bias by the first institution approached, when initially wanting to conduct the study with learners on the course that he teaches on. The study was carried out with other Level 3 learners on a different course. Participation would have been greater where the learners already have a good rapport with the researcher and are able to get on with him. The rich data obtained from the study is authentic, revelatory and suggestive of actions that will support FE practitioners' heuristics in supporting learners achieve individual learning outcomes.

#### 7.4 Recommendations for Further Research

Judging from the complicated nature of gaining access to carry out this study in an FE institution, it is pertinent that further research involving FE learners are conducted in order not to make conducting research in the sector 'strange' and allay the 'nervousness' that seem to be associated with the concerns that were raised by the institutions approached. Also, learners who were under 19 years old should become a focus of further research in the sector. Based on the exploratory nature of this case study and the fact that it is a small-scale research project personally funded as part of an academic work, similar studies would need to be conducted on a large scale to actually get a wider glimpse of the stressors which affect learning in FE. Multiple case studies could be conducted and the case study protocol replicated across various colleges to

confirm some of the themes that emerged in this study, and closely examine the findings in towards their confirmation or further elucidation. This study being novel and the first of its kind in the sector focussing on learner stress, there is certainly a need for more qualitative research work on this virgin field of learner stress in FE and various aspects could form the focus of investigation or examination. More exploratory studies would be needed prior to descriptive, explanatory, confirmatory and interpretive studies. Real life learner experiences which seek to answer actual problems in the FE sector and enhance praxis and individual learner outcomes are necessary. The following topical areas involving FE learners would require further research focus as a result of this study; a call for more qualitative research work on the virgin field of learner stress in FE, learner health and well-being, learner health promotion, resilience and coping, stress related health problems in FE learners, impact of ill health on learning in FE. Further research specifically focused on; academic stressors in FE; SAG provision – descriptive, exploratory; joint or collaborative working in SAG provision in FE; LTR in FE– descriptive, exploratory; relevance of learning styles and learning approaches in FE; learning improvement in FE; learner engagement in FE; learning attitude in FE and classroom management.

#### 7.4.1 Lessons from Ethical Challenges

Application for institutional approval raised concerns from the institutions approached to conduct the case study mainly owing to the involvement of human subjects (most importantly the ICP, who were learners at the FE college). Concerns mostly expressed by the first institution approached about researcher bias and potential harm occurring to the ICP were dealt with through explaining the research methodology and outlining the typical questions that were going to be asked during the unstructured interviews with the case study participants.

However, the perceived nervousness about the study on the part of the research and ethics panel (REP) of the first institution signified to me the researcher, the need to have approached approval process in an informal way first, using the channels available to me as an employee of the institution, to explore areas of the study that may potentially not '*sit well*' with the institution, with its '*gate keepers*', engage in dialogue, clarify the research methods and resolve any misunderstandings prior to making an application for official permission to conduct the study and have access to the case study participants. Also use could have been made of the managerial, teaching and learning supervisions available to me the researcher, as an employee of the institution to get line manager and learning coaches involved. These actions would have built in a degree of faith and assurance that the REP of the first institution seemed to have been seeking in the manner in which the application for approval and access to the case study participants was treated. Involving other staff in the institution, such as line manager, department head and learning coaches would have allayed any anxieties associated with the involvement of the ICP in the study. Setting out to seek and obtain a mutual agreement with the institution, where its research gate keepers '*come on board*' and see the study as a joint effort between the institution and the researcher would have made negotiating and gaining access easier and quicker as the needs of the institution and the case study aims and objectives would have been more synchronous. In this way, the institution would have had a degree of ownership of the conduct of the study and may not have been hesitant in approving the study.

Being patient, prepared, flexible in approach and design of the case study and unrelenting in effort in communicating the import of the study and its benefits to the continuous professional development of FE practitioners to the SLT and other key staff in the second institution approached was effective in helping gain

approval to conduct the study in the second institution approached. My responsibilities as a researcher was to ensure that the safeguarding concerns of the institution were dealt with in the way agreeable to its leadership to ensure that no harm materialises to the ICP. Complying with all the actions identified by the second institution in this regard was key in obtaining official approval and gaining access to the case study participants. Recruiting and involving a Chaperone in the study met the reciprocity requirements of the second institution. Taking steps to meet all identified actions ensured that approval was granted and the study was carried out in spite of the delays experienced and the long and arduous process the ethical process took.

Overall, objectivity, confidentiality, protection of human subjects and reciprocity were the key concerns of the institutions approached. On reflection, prior to making a formal application to the institution for approval of study and gaining access to participants, care needed to have been taken to negotiate and clarify researcher intent and meet any reciprocity needs of the institution. It would have also been helpful to ensure that there was mutual agreement, joint risk evaluations, and assurances given on both sides, on the conduct of the study, and how it should progress, as well as an agreement reached on any risk management plan needed to cater for the safety of both the researcher and case study participants, particularly the ICP. Ironing out these elements and agreeing the research methods and the case study protocol, having taken cognisance of the institution's own need of reciprocity would have expedited the official approval of the study and granting of access to case study participants. As the study was an insider case study, having intrinsic value in the sense of the case being important to study in itself to inform practice and teacher development, use could have been made of all available channels of communication available to me the researcher share the import of the study as

well as its aims and objectives to galvanise managerial support. The appraisal process, managerial and professional supervision and the institution's learning and development arm could have been engaged in the process of getting the institution on board and readily seeing the objectivity of the study, have an agreement in principle, before making a formal application to prevent unnecessary delays and stalling of the research process.

The lessons learnt from the delay experienced means that doing things differently and more carefully with regards to engaging the institution approached and its key organs as suggested above would have contributed to further promotion of the aim of the case study to understand stressors which affect learning in the institution among a defined learner group to expand knowledge that would enhance practice and learner improvement. Also the values of mutual respect and fairness which underpins all collaborative work (Resnick, 2015), in this case with the institution, would have been much more palpable to the institution, if an engagement process were to be initially followed in terms of seeking out any reciprocity needs of the institution and concerns that the institution might have about the study through dialogue and communication via channels opened to me, the researcher, prior to making a formal application for approval to conduct the study. Furthermore, such an engagement process would have helped to receive more constructive criticism, garner additional support and benefit from more ideas to further expand and advance the case study.

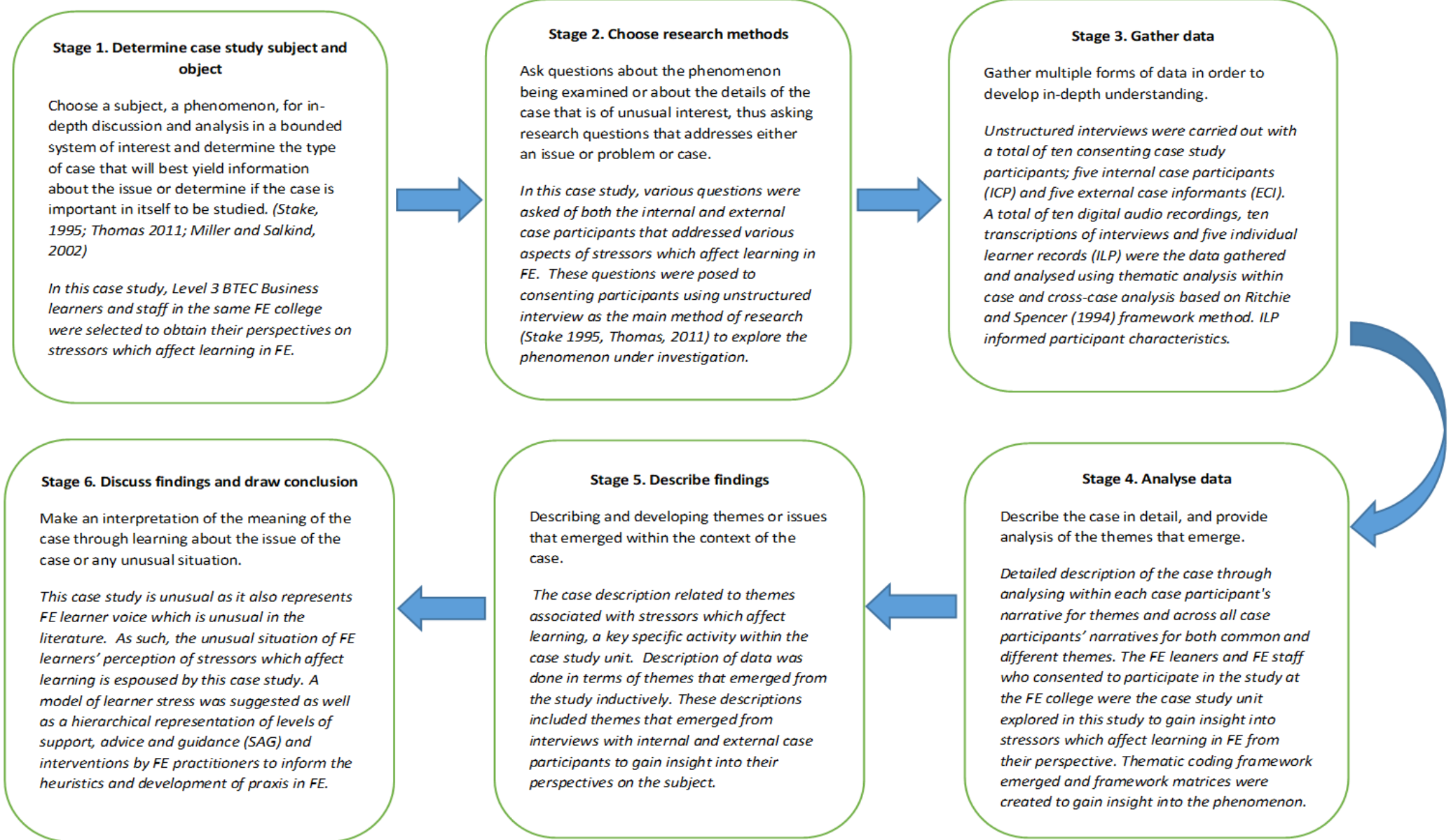
#### 7.4.2 Using this Case Study Process Methods and Units of Analysis

The number of participants in the case study is not statistically representative of FE learner population and the findings cannot be generalised to be the case

for other FE learners statistically. However, the data obtained provides a fresh and new deep insight into the issue of learner stress in FE. All FE practitioners will have contact, thus a professional interface with learners at a point in their practice and cues garnered from the data in this research would be valuable in how they assist learners to deal with stressors which affect learning. FE practitioners can take ideas from the data, analysis, findings and discussions in this case study into their professional practice. These can inform and develop their praxis, reflection and enrich their experience in working with FE learners to deal with stressors which affect learning, make improvements in learning and achieve individual learning outcomes. In this way, although the findings cannot be generalised to all FE learners even on the same course as the ones who participated in the study, FE practitioner heuristics would be better informed and they will arguably be further equipped in taking actions to address learner stress as part of their professional practice. In view of the fact that this study is authentic and addresses a real concern in FE learners, it can serve as borrowed experience for FE practitioners to develop their tacit knowledge and deepen their insights into learner stress in FE. The case study process, methods and unit of analysis shown in Figure 7.1.

**Figure 7.1 Case Study Process, Methods and Unit of Analysis**

## Case Study Process, Methods and Unit of Analysis





This study was not designed in order to be generalised statistically but to explore, examine and gain deep insight into stressors which affect learning and how these are dealt with effectively. This case study was not designed for statistical generalisability and so cannot be generalised statistically. The case study design however can be replicated in similar FE institutions as the process, methods and unit of analysis are clearly explained and documented. There is also intellectual honesty in data collection, analysis, findings and discussions of the findings in relation to relevant theory and research on the topic. The findings of this study have key relevance to FE practitioners in that it serves as a novel contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of learner stress, particularly in the FE context. Although this is an exploratory study, it has implications for FE practitioners who can be informed by its findings to develop and improve their practice to alleviate learner stress and improve individual learner objectives. Analytical generalisability can be seen in this study as parallels are drawn between the findings of the study and the transactional model of psychological stress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) and Fletcher et al 2006 meta model of psychological stress. This study can also be replicated in various FE colleges to further confirm, explain or extend understanding of learner stress in FE.

Since no two individuals are the same and there are various support systems individuals have to mitigate the effect of stressors, as such the findings of the study can serve to inform decision making in exploring support options that may be available to learners and providing support, advice and guidance to learners. The effective coping actions revealed in this study could form part of range of strategies that FE practitioners could explore with their learners. The suggested model of learner stress could inform the rational expectations of the

FE practitioners as they gain further gnosis through the findings of this study into a phenomenon that is complex and involves a high degree of uncertainty and individual differences in perception, reaction and coping actions that could help mitigate the effect of learner stress. The suggested model on learner stress could bring some degree of consistency, structure and organisation of information that FE practitioners have or could find when faced with situations regarding learner stress. The findings of the study and the suggested learner stress model could thus enhance the information set of FE practitioners, and could thereby extend their body of knowledge on the topic and make them aware of relevant factors to consider in their focused and goal directed interactions with learners towards mitigating stressors which affect learning. Decision making therefore amidst uncertainty, limited or prolonged periods (as cases may differ), expectations of learners, colleagues, parents, managers and other relevant stakeholders on the nature of SAG the FE learner is provided for instance could be based on collective information obtained as guided by their enhanced tacit knowledge, structure suggested in the model on learner stress. This study therefore albeit not able to be statistically generalised contributes to FE practitioners' determination of what constitutes that relevant information set on which to base their individual decision making when faced with learner stress in their teaching, pastoral or support or curriculum development roles. The decisions that are made based on such relevant information on learner stress would undoubtedly continue to define, develop and extend the rational expectations of FE practitioners as professionals and contribute to their dealings with various cases of learner stress effectively. As such the intellectual honesty demonstrated in this study with regards to design, operation, analysis and clear documentation makes the study's data and findings a valid contribution to the field of FE practitioner heuristics in supporting learners

effectively cope with learner stress to ensure their health and well-being and achieve their individual learning outcomes. By imbibing the implications for practice flowing from the findings of this study, one can arguably lay claim to a reasonable degree of intellectual honesty and modesty in their praxis in FE when dealing with issues of learner stress. A critical example of this being the importance of the learner-teacher relationship and how that has to be learner focused and learner needs led could also serve to inform professional practice in FE to ensure good individual learner outcomes.

This study has both construct and external validity as the approved case study protocol mentioned (See Appendix 2), made clear the subject and object of the case study, the aims and objectives, research methods, units of analysis and how researcher bias was dealt with. The particularity of the case and the location and boundaries of the case has also been clearly defined and a chain of evidence on the design, conduct, analysis and findings of the case study has been created. The case study design also includes key external case informants who are experienced FE practitioners as participants. The case study protocol can be taken to various institutions to be replicated with any FE learner group. Also owing to clear documentation of the data collection procedures and findings as well as accurate record keeping, this study is deemed reliable to produce the same results if repeated. The question of internal validity does not arise as this study is only exploratory and is not explanatory or seeking to establish any causal relationship.

## 7.5 Implications for Practice

The implications for FE practitioners have been referred to all along in this study. The key implications for FE practitioners lie in being able to identify stressors which affect FE learners' learning. This can be done by engaging and

interacting with them as the findings in this study shows that learners would hardly volunteer information on their stressors and it emerges through conversation with them when concerns are raised on indications of poor academic performance such as not passing assignments, attendance issues and in tutorials. There is also the need to build and develop a positive learner-teacher relationship based on trust and mutual respect. FE practitioners also need to be available and accessible to learners and endeavour to change their praxis from the culture of performativity to a more humanistic orientated approach that puts the learner in the centre of all decision-making including classroom management strategies and adaptations necessary in teaching pedagogy and curriculum planning. Curriculum planning may also need to consider incorporating psychoeducation, stress management and resilience building as an adjunct to support the way in which SAG is delivered. SAG delivery could be at different levels and involve all FE practitioners (by extension all FE staff) depending on their level of contact and or interaction with learners as well as specialist practitioners, health professionals and relevant external agencies. Adopting a whole systems approach would be the most efficient way of supporting learners in a seamless manner to deal effectively with stressors which affect their learning.

The thematic coding framework which emerged from the study has wider implications for FE practitioners in supporting learners' health and well-being and enabling learners to achieve individual learning outcomes. The learner-teacher relationship, teaching pedagogy and the way SAG is planned and provided are key instrumental areas that need to change to further support learners to cope with stressors they identified as affecting their learning which they also mostly conceived of as barriers to their learning. Supporting learners to effectively cope with stressors which affect their learning is paramount to

ensuring their health well-being and improving their achievement of individual learning outcomes.

One of the main findings from the study is that FE learners experience three different types of stressors which affect their learning; academic stressors, personal stressors and social stressors. Learning has also been found to be understood differently and mean different things to FE learners. Similarly, learners use various coping strategies and support systems which are both internal and external to the educational institution. The support, advice and guidance (SAG) given to learners to assist them to cope with stressors which affect their learning were found to also be varied in nature and largely depend on the reasons for which the learner requires SAG. As such understanding individual learner perception of stressors using the suggested learner stress model as one of the heuristic tools of the FE practitioner could be helpful in understanding individual learner's perception of stressors which affect learning. Such an understanding could be argued to be fundamental to planning and tailoring SAG to meet individual learner needs.

Another key finding in the area of LTR suggests the need for a culture change in FE practitioners especially lecturers and course tutors and student support staff from performativity towards learner focussed approaches that deliver positive learning outcomes for learners. Whitehead (2004) noted that FE staff are too focused on 'processes and procedures' compared to learner focussed outcomes and these have led to Ofsted describing some colleges as failing as a result brings into question changes that need to occur in the sector to improve what has been described as the 'Cinderella sector of UK (Kingston, 2004). FE practitioners need to be learner focused and adopt humanistic models of practice that places learners in the centre of their learning rather than being

more concerned about processes and procedures as a yardstick of performativity to measure success in FE. Since performativity is born out of the business case for FE sector following incorporation as a measurement tool for success (Ainley and Bailey, 1997) and one would argue does not necessarily serve individual learner interest or enhancing learning outcomes for the learner. Other commentators, Dent and Whitehead (2001), sees performativity as an 'obsession with measurement and assessment'. Having a humanistic focus and allowing practice to be learner orientated and ensuring positive learner outcomes through developing the LTR in a way that ensures that the individual learner becomes its central tenet would help support learners to effectively cope with stressors which affect learning.

In conclusion, this case study shows that learners perceived stressors which affect their learning also as barriers to their learning and their attitude to learning vary between being positive, negative and ambivalent or being neutral. SAG provision was found to have challenges and a better collaboration between academic staff, student support staff and external professionals and agencies have been advocated as key to ensuring that support is readily available and accessible to learners. Learners' ability to cope effectively with the stressors which affect their learning is paramount to maintaining good health and well-being. The adolescent developmental life stage in which the FE learners predominantly are in is also thought of as influential in their perception of stressors which affect their learning and their reaction to them. Unhealthy ways in which learners react to stressors need to be explored when dealing with learner stress as these can have negative impact on the physical and psychological health and wellbeing of learners. The LTR is critical to helping learners cope effectively with learner stress and it is important for FE practitioners to work jointly with the learners to explore stressors which affect

their learning from both their academic and personal cum social ecologies. This approach will help unearth associated stressors reposed in such ecologies of the FE learner to enable a support plan to be developed to mitigate these so that they do not become overwhelming for the learner and negatively affect their health and learning.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1 Case Study Participants' Characteristics

Table A.1 External Case Participants Characteristics

	ECI 1	ECI 2	ECI 3	ECI 4	ECI 5
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age group	21-30 years	21-30 years	40+ years	31-40 years	31-40 years
Job role	Course Lecturer	Student Support Advisor	Student Support Advisor	Student Support Advisor	Course Lecturer and Personal Tutor
Length of service	2-3 years	2-3 years	Over 5 years	3-5 years	Over 5 years

Table A.2 Internal Case Participants Characteristics

	ICP 1	ICP 2	ICP 3	ICP 4	ICP5
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male
Age	19	19	22	22	19
College attendance	95%	99.8%	98.3%	98.3%	96.4%

Punctuality in lessons	94.0%	99.6%	100%	99.6%	97.3%
Tutorial attendance	95%	95%	100%	100%	100%
Learning style/preference	Auditory	Individual	Auditory	Auditory	Kinaesthetic
Entry grade – Maths	GCSE Grade C or above	GCSE Grade C or above	GCSE Grade C or above	GCSE Grade C or above	GCSE Grade C or above
Entry grade-English	GCSE Grade D or below	GCSE Grade C or above	GCSE Grade D or below	GCSE Grade C or above	GCSE Grade C or above

## Appendix 2: Approved Case Study Protocol

### STRESSORS WHICH AFFECT LEARNING:

#### A CASE STUDY OF LEARNERS IN A FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGE IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND

#### **CASE STUDY PROTOCOL**

##### 1.0. RESEARCH QUESTION

How do BTEC Level 3 Business learners perceive stressors which influence their learning?

##### 2.0. RESEARCH AIM

The aim of the study is to gain an understanding of BTEC Level 3 Business learners' perception of stressors which affect their learning.

##### 3.0. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 3.1. Describe stressors which affect learning among the learner group
- 3.2. Explore how learners cope with stressors which affect learning
- 3.3. Identify the available institutional support systems in place to help learners mitigate stressors which affect learning
- 3.4. Explore how the learner-teacher relationship influences the learning experience
- 3.5. Examine how stressors affect the experience of learning

##### 4.0. METHODOLOGY

This is an exploratory qualitative study.

##### 4.1. Justification for Methodology:

Qualitative research would enable the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that are not easily reduced to numbers. It would yield data that is rich in depth and detail as well as capture the subjective views of the phenomenon under study. As such, it is deemed appropriate for conducting an intensive study which is seeking

depth, context and subjective detail in order to have an understanding of the influences on the internal case participants' learning. Learning and education in general are complex human endeavours involving complex human interactions that can rarely be studied or simply explained in numerical terms alone. The scope of educational/learning research can be extended by the use of qualitative methods seeking subjective meaning on influences on learning. A qualitative research approach can help provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the influences on learning and thus enable valuable subjective and contextual insights into learning (and teaching by extension) to emerge.

## 5.0. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study will employ the case study approach and use a discursive and narrative interview method (open-ended interview) and documentary analysis to explore the learners' perception of factors which influence learning in a longitudinal study.

### 5.1. CASE STUDY APPROACH

#### 5.1.1. The Case

The case being studied is BTEC level 3 Business learners as a group. All learners who consent to participate in the study will constitute the case, thus forming the subject of study. The object of the study, stressors which influence learning, will be studied through this group of learners.

## 6.0. SAMPLING OF INTERNAL CASE INFORMANTS

### 6.1. Purposive Sampling

Potential internal case informants will be recruited from learners enrolled on both year one and two of the fulltime Pearson BTEC Level 3 Business Studies course. This group of learners will be approached as they are within the school where I the researcher also work although I do not teach them. I will be in a position to have access to the staff team who teaches and tutor this group of learners to seek recommendation of learners to recruit onto the study so as to ensure a maximum variation sample and also negotiate more readily with the staff team who teach on the course for purposes of expert sampling.

All learners enrolled on the course will be invited by letter to participate in the study through their personal tutors. The letter will state the purpose and potential benefits which can be derived from the insights gained from the study. This group of learners will form the study sample, the case, or in the terms of Thomas (2011), the 'object' of the study, through whose experiences, stressors which affect learning, the 'subject', will be 'refracted' thus studied, in order to elucidate stressors which affect learning and gain an understanding of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of the learners as a group.

Having a group of learners on the same course of instruction will allow for a focused and detailed study of stressors which affect learning to be explored across that particular group. A review of Suffolk New College's Self-Assessment Report for 2012-

13 academic year, indicates that this study could be of relevance to learners on this course of instruction as well as other courses where improvements in learning and or learner achievements are being sought. Findings which emerge from the study could potentially be transferable to other learner groups (learners on different courses) by informing the heuristics and praxis of teaching and learning practitioners in making learning improvements. It is hoped that issues raised by studying this group will be applicable to other learner groups and the tacit applications of knowledge/insights gained from the study will contribute to enhancing learning improvement, learning support, pastoral care, lecturer-learner relationship, teaching pedagogy and learner engagement among others.

#### 6.1.1. Maximum Variation Sampling

A maximum variation sample will be drawn to ensure that the study captures a wide array of learner views on stressors which affect learning. Although this is a non-probability sampling strategy and I will not be seeking statistical representativeness of the whole learner group, this sampling strategy will ensure that key features of the learner group are represented (Cohen, 2014; Mason, 2002). The sample drawn will constitute mixed characteristics such as gender, achievements on entry onto the course, learner risk category and ethnicity so that a wide range of characteristics or behaviours possessed or exhibited respectively in the learner group are reflected in the study [Teddlie and Yu (2007); Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009)]. Inclusion criteria in order to achieve such sample will be determined by my judgement and the recommendations of the personal tutors and course leader taking personal histories of potential participants and the degree to which they are deemed to be able to make varied contributions to the study to enrich it into consideration (Yin, 2014; Newby, 2014). It will also be informed by the themes which have emerged from the literature review and theoretical perspective of the study (Togoh, 2014). In this way, stressors which affect learning can thence be looked at from various angles to gain greater insights and generate common themes evident across the sample as a group (Lund Research, 2012).

According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), the sample size in qualitative research, need to be large enough to allow 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) and rich data, but at the same time manageable enough to prevent data overload. A quorum not exceeding 15 learners is hoped to be recruited to constitute the internal case study participants due to financial limitations imposed on the study and also the fact that the study is mainly serving an academic purpose.

## 6.2. SAMPLING OF EXTERNAL CASE INFORMANTS

### 6.2.1. Expert Sampling

All lecturers on the course, personal tutors, course co-coordinator, programme leader, learning support assistants and student support staff who work with learners on the course will be invited by email to participate in the study as external case informants. The external case informants' involvement in the study will allow knowledge to be gleaned from their expertise on the topic and potentially contribute new or additional areas for exploration at interview with internal case participants (Lund Research, 2014).



## 7.0. METHODS

A triangulation of methods, unstructured interviews and documentary analysis will be employed to obtain holistic data on stressors which affect learning among the learner group under study. Participation in the study will be made as flexible to the needs of individual case informants, both internal and external as possible. The time of the interviews will be negotiated to suit their needs and other commitments. This will ensure that the interviews are convenient for the participants (Gillham, 2005).

### 7.1. Face to Face Interview

Individual face to face, in-depth interviews anticipated to last between 45 minutes to one hour will be held with internal case participants and external case participants to obtain primary data. The interviews would be scheduled to occur during normal timetabled week to prevent any additional travelling costs into college by participants. The interviews would not be held at the end of the college day to ensure that participants are able to access support following interview if required and not proceed to go home without receiving support should this be needed. In other for the interviews not to affect teaching, learning and assessment, personal tutor consent would be sought to possibly use allocated tutorial time or any other time for personal development deemed suitable by the personal tutor. The personal tutor would have to agree to the participant's involvement in the study so that participation does not in any way have a detrimental impact especially in case where a participant may be behind with college work. A third person who is also a member of staff who is safeguarding trained would be present at the interview acting purely as a safeguarding measure because the interview may result in matters being raised which are sensitive in nature. This individual would not be involved in asking questions nor answering them. Cohen et al (2011) stressed the importance of using face to face interviews for data collection where sensitive topics are being researched. The interviews will be conversational and discursive in nature and learner centred. I will establish rapport first with each interviewee, obtain ongoing informed consent verbally at the point of interview and let the topic emerge gradually over the course of the interview.

Although interviews will be unstructured, it will be topically guided by themes that emerged from the review of related studies and theoretical perspectives from literature. The interviews will begin with asking participants to describe their learning experiences, personal and academic stressors which affect their learning (Togoh, 2014; Lee, Kang and Yung, 2005; Blonna, 2007; Girdano, Dusek and Everly, 2009; Seward, 2009). The literature equates the things individual perceive as stressors outside curricula issues as personal stressors and no intrusion into the personal lives of the participants is intended by this study and a demand would not be placed on learners at interview to talk about or disclose their personal matters. Rather, each individual participants account of what influences their learning aside curriculum issues that they perceive as threatening their learning effectively is what is construed in the literature as "personal stressors". A list of questions to be asked at interview is attached to show how the researcher is seeking to capture the individual participants' narrative rather intrude into their personal life or deliberately evoke any particular emotions or bring to the forefront matters perhaps beyond the immediate control or support of existing college

mechanisms. The words personal and academic would not be used in the actual conversations with the participants. The questions would be chiefly focused on learning and the things that the participants' perceive as influencing their learning. The researcher would be reflecting in action in action during the interviews to ensure that he guides avoids using leading questions. As such, open ended questions will be used in the interviews to enable the participants to express their views on the phenomenon under study using their own words as this is deemed more suitable for researching sensitive topics (Sudman and Bradburn, 1982; Cohen et al, 2011). Furthermore, open ended questions will ensure that participants are at liberty to talk about issues they consider meaningful to their learning and learning experience. A conscious effort will be made to avoid jargon and academic language and use simple and familiar words that learners understand in conversation with them to reduce any sense of threat and make them feel more relaxed as advised by Lee (1993) so as to reduce risks of influencing the subject under study (Garrison and Gardner, 2012).

All interviews will be digitally recorded by two digital audio recording devices to allow for failure of one device and ensure that subsequent transcription is accurate. All participants will be informed of the need to record the interview during the invitation to participate in the study, when obtaining informed consent through signing of consent form and also at the point of each interview. They will be asked to consent again to recording at the beginning of each interview (Gillham, 2005). The digital recordings and transcripts will be stored electronically on a password protected computer to which only the researcher will have access to constitute part of the study data.

## 7.2. Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis will involve going through each internal case participant's individual learning plan (ILP) on Promonitor including learner achievement records to extract information to do with their learning, learning support and achievement. This data will also be securely stored electronically on a password protected computer to which only I, the researcher has access.

Each internal case participant will be followed for one academic year and interview data collected twice in the year. Initial data will be collected midway through semester one. Data collection will be repeated midway through semester two. This will allow the study to capture participants' view of stressors which affect their learning in both semesters.

External case participants will be interviewed once in the academic year in the first semester so that any new insights or themes that emerge can be explored in the second round of interviews of the internal case participants in the second semester.

## 8.0. ETHICS

### 8.1. INFORMED CONSENT

All study participants will be informed verbally and in writing about the purpose of the study and its academic nature as well as the potential benefits that can be derived from the insights gained from the study. All participants (both internal and external case participants) will be required to sign a consent form to indicate their consent to participate in the study, both interviews and granting access to their ILP. Ongoing participant consent will be validated verbally prior to the commencement of each interview at the point of interview. This will ensure voluntary participation based on full understanding and open information about the study, its benefits/risks, how information given will be treated and used (Crow et al, 2008; Malone, 2002; Mishna et al, 2004; BERA, 2011).

The consent form for the internal case participants, the learners, will include a section for parents or guardians to sign alongside their wards signature to confirm that they are in agreement with their participation in the study where learners are under 18 years of age (BERA, 2011; British Psychological Society, 2009; Homan, 2001; Kuthner and Posada, 2004). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the age of adulthood as 18 years and the legal age of competency in the UK is 18 years (Farrimond, 2013). In spite of the Gillick competency of learners who are under 18 years of age and the fact that permission is being sought from college authorities, who can be deemed as *locos parentis* (Farrimond, 2013; Sanderson, 2010) of all learners while they are in college. Hunter and Pierscionek (2007) advised that the researcher should not be accessing Gillick competency himself so as to prevent a conflict of interest. Learners may also reveal sensitive information about themselves, their family and other people at interview including perceived stress which may potentially necessitate follow up and parental involvement.

A letter explaining the purpose of the study and the extent of participant involvement will be sent to their parents or guardians with the consent form attached for them to sign alongside their wards signature to indicate their support for the learner's consent. Seeking parental consent in this way is not meant to undermine the autonomy, capacity and the right to self-determination or disempower learners below 18 years of age (Mishna et al, 2004; Vargas and Montoya, 2009; Alderson and Morrow, 2003; Grieg et al, 2007). Rather, it is an added layer of safety and security measure to safeguard the interests of the learners who fall into this category and address the ethical issue of power differences/imbalance between the learners and I, the researcher (BERA, 2011; Grieg et al 2007; Mahon et al 1996; Stainton-Rodgers, 2004; Alderson and Goodey, 1996; Bloom-Di Cicco and Crabtree, 2006; Coad and Evans, 2008; Crowe et al, 2006; Howe and Moses, 1999; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Cocks, 2006).

The consent forms will state that any participant can withdraw from the study at any time without explanation and are not bound to continue with the study by reason of signing the consent form. Participants will also be informed that they may decline to answer questions without any further explanations (BERA, 2011).

## 8.2. FOLLOW UP OF LEARNERS EXPRESSING PERCEIVED STRESS

Given that the study topic is sensitive in nature and the study will be engaging learners by probing into their learning experience which some may have found stressful (Morrison, 2006; Lee, 1993), there is the potential for learners to express perceived stress.

Holding the interviews in the college within college opening times will ensure that the learners are familiar with the setting and do not feel threatened in anyway. I will establish rapport prior to commencing the interviews to ensure that learners are at ease and not feel unduly uncomfortable at the time of the interviews. However, there could be the possibility that some learners may be too shy, feel unable to fully disclose their true feelings and opinions perhaps for fear of adding more negativity to “current perceived stress” or simply because they may be embarrassed (Cohen et al, 2011) to talk readily about the stressors which affect their learning. There could also be the possibility that some learners may exhibit displacement or projection at interview. I will be sensitive in my communication and use my mental health professional skills to acutely manage this by offering immediate emotional support and subsequently refer any learner expressing perceived stress for further support in accordance with college policy.

Furthermore, what I, the researcher may not consider sensitive may be highly sensitive to the study participants (Cohen et al, 2011). In a situation where a learner expresses perceived stress during interview, I will arrange necessary adequate support to assist the learner to cope effectively. Firstly, I will offer immediate emotional support and then make referrals to student support and relevant personal tutor for follow up so that they will have access to further or ongoing support to enable them cope effectively with the perceived stress.

Where a learner makes a disclosure bordering on safeguarding, the College’s safeguarding policy will be strictly followed and the learner will be duly informed in line with the confidentiality and safeguarding policy of the college.

## 8.3. RISKS TO ME, THE RESEARCHER

The risk to me as a researcher in conducting a face to face 1:1 in-depth interview with learners who may potentially express perceived stress is in potentially becoming heavily taxed emotionally in having to offer immediate emotional support necessary to support a learner should this eventuate.

All interviews would be scheduled in the North Cluster meeting rooms which are clearly visible and well located to enable me access readily available support where needed. All participants would be informed that exchanges between the researcher and the internal case participants will only be conducted at scheduled interviews and there will be no communication outside these times. A third person who is a safeguarding trained member of staff will be present during all interviews as a safeguarding measure.

Where a learner reports during interview ‘a current stressful situation’, seeking to ensure that necessary adequate support is in place to support the learner cope effectively will professionally and naturally become my priority. There is the potential of

this adding to my workload significantly where the number of learners reporting this experience becomes high as conducting this study will be in addition to other contracted college duties.

In order to prevent this from occurring, I will seek frequent, regular and timely research supervision, ensure effective time management and seek managerial support as necessary in order to avoid being burnt out. In this vane, I already have in place regular supervision arrangements with two external academic supervisors associated with this study based at the University of Essex, the frequency of which can be increased to monthly sessions. I also have immediate access to my line manager here at the college, to discuss matters which may eventuate and pose a risk to my ability to manage my workload effectively. I would have four weekly meetings with my Programme Leader or Head of School to feedback progress and discuss any concerns/risks as a supportive measure. Furthermore, I will personally strive to achieve a healthy work-life balance and use meditation among other strategies to manage personal stress effectively.

There is also a potential risk of my beliefs being challenged and perhaps subtly changed or shaped differently as a result of the study. As a qualitative researcher, a professional teacher and a registered mental health nurse, I will be keeping a reflective journal and also use reflexion to explicate ways in which my prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences are being affected throughout the conduct of the study. Furthermore, a reflexive account will also highlight any biases I may hold and make clear how I reach decisions and make judgements as to the questions I ask the participants. Cohen et al (2011) advised that a researcher of a sensitive topic such as stressors affecting learning need to be acutely perspective during interviews and ensure that their non-verbal communication do not give any hints of judgement, support or condemnation. Counter-transference by way of projecting my own views, values, attitudes, biases and background will be guarded against during the conduct of the this study.

There is also the potential risk of being accused of treating the study participants as objects rather than subjects of the study (Cohen et al, 2011) because of the case study typology (Thomas, 2011) underpinning the study's construct. In this wise, the purpose of the study and the potential benefits its findings may hold for learning improvement and practice will be emphasised as a laudable effort in which the study participants are playing a meaningful role by talking about their learning experiences.

Another potential risk to me as a researcher in conducting 1:1 interviews with learners is potential accusations of misinterpretation of study participants. To avoid this, the interviews will be digitally recorded by two digital recording devices to manage any technical difficulties and allow for interaction and intense listening and observation as a researcher. Each recorded conversation will be transcribed and the complete transcript of each conversation will be checked against each recording. Also, the complete transcript will be subjected to individual member checking for review and approval prior to thematic analysis of each conversation to reflect the views of the study participants. To analyse, the transcripts will be imported into qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10, where each conversation will coded by themes and subjected to further analysis and outputs by NVivo 10 as deemed beneficial (Nihat Sad

and Ozhan, 2012; Betzner et al, 2012; Dahm, 2012; Kalinowski et al, 2012). All data will be stored and managed according to the Data Protection Act (1998) and college policy.

Finally, I will manage health, safety and security risks by ensuring that the interviews are conducted in a safe and private room booked in the college during college opening hours. The location of the room will be made known to the learner's personal tutor. Learners will also have the option of bringing along a college friend or classmate as long as the person is not a study participant either for cultural reasons or personal confidence and security. The emphasis will be on having a face to face interview with one participant at a time.

#### 8.4. DEBRIEFING AT THE END OF RESEARCH

At the end of the research, I will hold series of debriefing sessions with the participants and the management team to present study outcomes, invite discussions and offer the opportunity for participants to draw a closure to their involvement with the study.

#### 8.5. DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Although the lead researcher is an employee of the college where the study is situated, the study is not being sponsored by the college and it is being independently carried out to inform improvement in learning practice development, meet an identified gap in the academic literature and to also obtain an academic qualification.

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## Appendix 3: Stages in The Design of Case Study Protocol

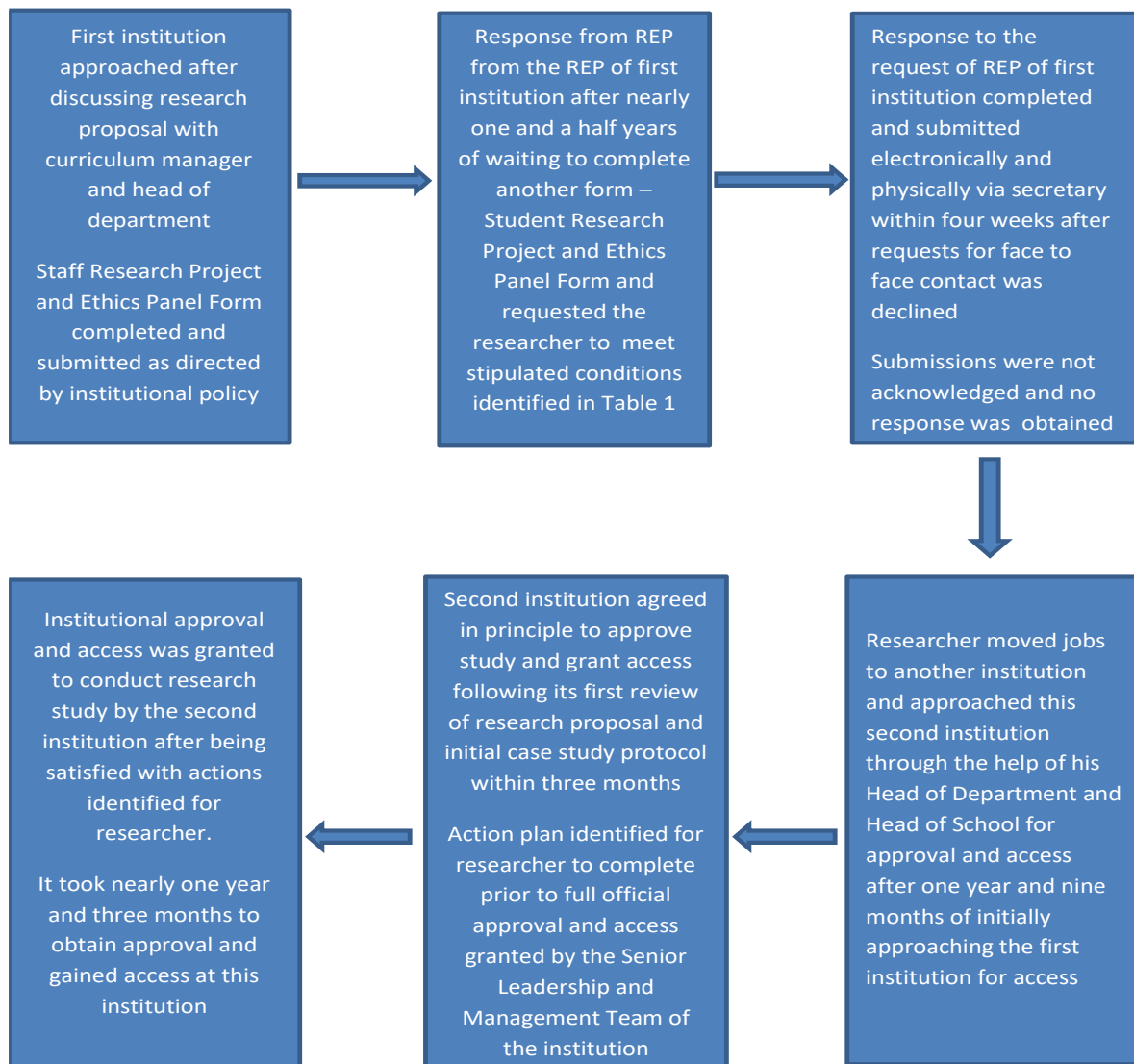
Table A.3 Stages in The Design of Case Study Protocol

<b>Case Study Design</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Study Participants</b>	<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>Ethical Concerns and Suggestions</b>	<b>Actions and Revisions made by Researcher</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<p><b>Initial stage</b></p> <p><b>Insider Qualitative Intrinsic Single Case Design</b></p>	First FE College	<p>Internal: BTEC Level 3 Health and Social Care Learners</p> <p>External: Experienced FE Practitioner</p>	<p>Unstructured interviews with both internal and external case participants</p> <p>Documentary analysis of learner records</p>	<p>Thematic analysis</p> <p>Use of CAQDAS NViVo</p>	<p>Potential psychological harm and anxiety to internal participants</p> <p>Potential Researcher bias</p> <p>Disapproval of unstructured interview method and its interactional nature</p> <p>Demanded written down questions prior to interview</p> <p>Demanded agreement to having a college appointed supervisor through whom all research contacts are to be made by the researcher</p>	<p>Typical/sample interview questions suggested to REC</p> <p>Agreed to a college appointed internal supervisor to oversee research activity</p> <p>Written academic response to further explain interactional nature of the unstructured interview method, steps to be taken to minimise researcher bias and deal with any potential anxiety or emotional reactions of participants</p>	<p>No further communication from REC at the First college after responding to their concerns in writing</p> <p>Nominated REC contact at the FE College declined request for face to face contact by researcher to clarify protocol</p> <p>REC failed to respond to chase up methods; email, phone call,</p> <p>Outcome of case study protocol undetermined and remained unapproved</p>

<p><b>Final stage</b></p> <p><b>Insider Qualitative Intrinsic Single Case Design</b></p>	<p>Second FE College</p>	<p>Internal: BTEC Level 3 Business Studies Learners External: Experienced FE Practitioner</p>	<p>Unstructured interviews with internal and external case participants</p> <p>Documentary analysis of learner records</p>	<p>Thematic analysis</p> <p>Use of CAQDAS NViVo</p>	<p>Action plan identified by second FE college to complete prior to approving the study</p> <p>Change of internal case participants to minimise researcher bias</p> <p>Clarifications sought on nature of research questions and risks to researcher</p> <p>Recruitment of Chaperone to be present during interviews with internal case participants</p> <p>Access to learner records to be made only on college computers on college premises within working hours</p>	<p>Internal case participants changed as requested</p> <p>Presentations and written responses were given to key decision makers to clarify and explain the research methods including qualitative research ethics</p> <p>A Chaperone was recruited and trained on how the case study protocol is to be implemented</p>	<p>Agreement in principle to approve the case study protocol secured after initial review</p> <p>Case study protocol approved and access granted to the researcher to carry out the study</p>
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## Appendix 4: Process of Obtaining Institutional Approval and Gaining Access to Study Participants

Figure A.1 Process of Obtaining Institutional Approval and Gaining Access to Study Participants



## Appendix 5: Document reflecting change of institution

Contact: Julie Minns  
Telephone: (01473) 382326  
Email: Julieminn@suffolk.ac.uk



Dear Dr. Mark J Francis-Wright,

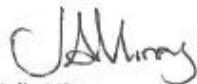
**Reference: Research Study by Woedem Togoh**

I am pleased to confirm that as Woedem's Head of School I am still considering his proposed research project and keen to facilitate him undertaking this within the School of Business, Health & Child Care before the end of this academic year. I have received draft proposals from Woedem which raised some questions, Woedem has responded to and submitted a full detailed revised proposal to me to address these questions.

I hope to be able to read through the revised proposal in the next two weeks and then seek permission from the Senior Leadership team based on my recommendations, for Woedem to complete his research.

I hope this is satisfactory, but if you have any further questions then please do contact me.

Yours,



Julie Minns  
Head of School  
Business, Health & Child Care

Suffolk New College  
Ipswich  
Suffolk IP4 1LT  
tel 01473 382200  
fax 01473 382441  
www.suffolk.ac.uk

# Appendix 6: Institutional Approval Document

Direct Line: 01473 382326  
E-mail: [julieinns@suffolk.ac.uk](mailto:julieinns@suffolk.ac.uk)



Dr. Mark J Francis-Wright  
Senior Lecturer, Research Lead, Occupational Therapy  
Room: 2S2.5.09  
Kimmy Eldridge Building  
University of Essex  
Wivenhoe Park  
Essex  
CO4 3SQ

Dear Dr. Mark J Francis-Wright

**Reference: Research Study by Woedem Togoh**

I am pleased to confirm that I have today received confirmation from the Senior Leadership Team that Woedem Togoh can undertake his planned research here at Suffolk New College based on the proposal submitted. I have asked Woedem to meet with Sharon Bye the Programme Leader for Business after half-term to move forward and when all consent forms are in place, including parental consent for those under 19 years of age, and this has been confirmed to me.

I have recommended that Woedem meet with Steve Goodfellow his line manager on a regular basis to review progress and discuss next steps. The college reserves the right to stop the research at any time.

I wish Woedem every success and look forward to reading the findings of his research.

Yours sincerely



Head of School for Business, Health and Child Care  
Contact: 01473 382326  
[julieinns@suffolk.ac.uk](mailto:julieinns@suffolk.ac.uk)

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fax 01473 382441  
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## Appendix 7: University of Essex Ethics Approval

24 November 2020

MR WOEDEM TOGOH  
67 HAZELTON ROAD  
COLCHESTER  
ESSEX  
CO4 3DS

Dear Woedem,

**Re: Ethical Approval Application (Ref 14026)**

Further to your application for ethical approval, please find enclosed a copy of your application which has now been approved by Dr Wayne Wilson on behalf of the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa McKee  
Ethics Administrator  
School of Health and Human Sciences

cc. Sarah Manning-Press, REO  
Dr Mark Francis-Wright, supervisor  
Professor Jo Jackson, supervisor

## Appendix 8: Participant Information Sheet

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### TITLE OF STUDY

Stressors Which Affect Learning:  
A Case Study of Learners in a Further Education College in East England

#### INVITATION

You are being invited to take part in a research study on the influences on learning in Further Education as someone deemed to have a wealth of experience of learning in Further Education. Before you make your decision, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything you are not clear about or would like more information, please feel free to contact **Woedem Togoh** (contact details below).

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

There are hardly any research studies done to examine how learners deem things that may affect their learning in further education. By listening to your experiences of learning in FE, we will get information and understanding that we may not otherwise have known. The study will enable us to identify the things that affect engagement with learning and allow us the opportunity to find ways of supporting learners to effectively cope with these and further enhance learning and improve learning practice and achievement in further education.

This study is investigating the following:

1. How learners interpret what they see as influencing their experience of learning
2. How learners respond to the things that they see as influencing their learning
3. How methods of coping with challenges to learning are deemed as effective or ineffective
4. How pastoral care, learner-teacher relationship and support systems influence learners experience of learning

This study is being undertaken as part of a PhD qualification in the School of Health and Human Sciences at the University of Essex. It is being supervised by Dr. Mark Francis Wright and Professor Jo Jackson. The Senior Leadership and Management Team of the College are aware of the study and it is being monitored by the Head of School of Business, Health and Child Care. Their contact details are attached below.

#### DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you will need to sign a consent form. You will need to keep this information sheet, however you are not under any pressure to take part or continue with the study. You may withdraw from the study at any time without having to explain why. In the event that you choose to withdraw from the study, you may opt for any information obtained from you to be retained and continued to be used in this research or removed from the study. If you choose not to participate, this will not influence your work in any way.

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I TAKE PART?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be interviewed about your experience of learning in FE once in a private interview to be conducted at a venue and a time convenient for you. The



interview is expected to last about 45 minutes to an hour and will be recorded by digital recorder. The interview can be stopped at any time. A transcript of your interview will be sent to you to check that it is a true reflection of what was said at interview.

#### **WHAT IF THERE IS A PROBLEM?**

If you are concerned about any aspect of this study, please ask to speak to the researcher (Woedem Togoh) who will do his best to answer your questions. You can also contact the researcher's supervisors (contact details below). If you have any concerns about general college issues, this should be brought to the attention of your line manager as the researcher is conducting this study in a research capacity.

#### **WILL MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

Yes it will. You will not be identified on the digital recording and only the interviewer will have access to your identity. If during the interview something was said that could indicate harm or a safeguarding issue, the researcher would be bound by his professional duty of care to disclose this and you will be informed and College procedure will be followed. When the interview is finished, the digital recording will be numbered and securely stored in a password protected computer to which only the researcher has access. The recording will be listened and typed up by the researcher word for word. The transcript will remain confidential and be kept securely in a password protected computer electronically and the paper copies kept in a locked cabinet at the University of Essex. All data will be analysed by the researcher. All digital recordings will be stored for up to 3 years once the study is complete and then securely destroyed. Any reports or publications as a result of this study will not identify your name.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES AND RISKS OF TAKING PART?**

There are no known disadvantages or serious risks to you in participating in this study. You will be participating in this study in your own time.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?**

There are no obvious direct benefits to you and there is no financial or any other reward for your participation. However through participating in this study you will be helping in a very important way by providing a wealth of information that will enable us find out about the things that affect learning in further education. It is hoped that this will enable us find ways of further supporting learners to engage with learning effectively as well as improve learning practice and achievement.

#### **WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?**

This research study has been reviewed by the School of Health and Human Sciences at the University of Essex and the Senior Leadership and Management Team (SLT) at the College and will be conducted under the auspices of the Head of School for Business, Health and Child Care at the College.

#### **WHO IS ORGANISING THIS RESEARCH?**

Woedem Togoh is the lead investigator. This research will form part of a PhD qualification with University of Essex.

#### **CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:**

Woedem Togoh, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park,  
Colchester, Essex, CO4 3SQ Email: [wktogo@essex.ac.uk](mailto:wktogo@essex.ac.uk)

**RESEARCH SUPERVISORS:**

Dr. Mark Francis-Wright and Professor Jo Jackson, School of Health and Human Sciences,  
University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex, CO4 3SQ

Email: [mfrancis@essex.ac.uk](mailto:mfrancis@essex.ac.uk), [jmjack@essex.ac.uk](mailto:jmjack@essex.ac.uk)

## Appendix 9: Consent Form

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### TITLE OF STUDY

Stressors Which Affect Learning:  
A Case Study of Learners in a Further Education College in East England

#### IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Please read through the participant information sheet carefully before agreeing to give your consent to participate in this study by signing this form. By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to the following:

I have read through the participant information sheet YES/NO

I understand the purpose of the research study YES/NO

I am clear about the voluntary nature of my participation, what my involvement entails and my rights

YES/NO

I understand that I can decide to withdraw my consent and stop being part of this research study at any time without explanation

YES/NO

I understand that I can ask that any information I give during the study be withdrawn and destroyed if I no longer wish to participate in this study

YES/NO

I understand that there is no payment value or any other incentive for my participation in this study

YES/NO

I understand that there is no penalty associated with non-participation or withdrawal from this study and that I am under no obligation to participate in the study

YES/NO

#### PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT:

I hereby consent to be a participant in this research study.

Participant's name:

Participant's signature:

Date:

## **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

### **TITLE OF STUDY**

Stressors Which Affect Learning:  
A Case Study of Learners in a Further Education College in East England

### **IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

Please read through the participant information sheet carefully before agreeing to give your consent to participate in this study by signing this form. By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to the following:

I have read through the participant information sheet YES/NO

I understand the purpose of the research study YES/NO

I am clear about what my involvement entails and my rights YES/NO

I understand that I may decide to withdraw my consent and stop being part of this research study at any time as well as refuse to answer any question without explanation

YES/NO

I understand that I can ask that any information I give during the study be withdrawn and destroyed if I no longer wish to participate in this study

YES/NO

I understand that there is no payment value or any other incentive for my participation in this study

YES/NO

I understand that there is no penalty associated with non-participation or withdrawal from this study and that I am under no obligation to participate

YES/NO

I am also agreeing for the researcher to have access to my learner records on ProMonitor for the purposes of this research only. The researcher will not add any comments/information to ProMonitor.

YES/NO

**PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT:**

I hereby consent to be a participant in this research study.

Participant's name:

Participant's signature:

Date:

**PARENTAL CONSENT:**

I have read the research participant's information sheet and I hereby give permission for

.....  
.....

to participate in this research study. I fully understand what participation in this study entails for my child who is under 18 years and I am happy for his/her participation in the study.

Parent's name:

Parent's signature:

Date:

## Appendix 10: Framework Matrices of ECI and ICP

	A : Learner-Teacher Relationship (LTR)	E : Learning Attitude	J : Learning Barriers	L : Stressors which affect learning	O : Type of stressors	P : Type of learning barrier	Q : Learning Definition	S : Learner construction of learning	Y : Learning Engagement	Z : Influences on learning engagement	AG : Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)
1 : ECI 1-Course Lecturer	Building relationship between learner and student support staff through induction and accompanying learner to student services on referral.	It is very positive and a good approach . Everyone wanting to learn and wanting to gain knowledge and qualification.	Learners will not readily say this is a barrier to my learning. Through discussions this is worked out by lecturers. Learning barriers include practical challenges such as not having a computer at home or working too many hours. Combining part-time work with course work and time management are also notable barriers. Emotional issues, relationship stresses which are external to	Financial issues, part-time working hours. Practical challenges, time management. Resource issues, not having a computer. Academic issues in terms of course work deadlines. Social issues, relationship issues, emotional issues, issues external to college.	Boyfriend , girlfriend, external relationship stressors. College stressors. Deadlines for completing college work.	Emotional issues. Relationship issues. Completing academic work to deadlines. External issues.	Developing knowledge and understanding and using it elsewhere such as in employment. Be able to transfer knowledge to different situations. Developing skills and knowledge . It can be a tick box exercise.	Learners probably do not have a different view of learning to that of lecturers. They may not have thought of what learning is.	Learners enjoy active lessons and engage very well when they are participating . Learners do not enjoy theory based lessons at all. Clear explanations are necessary. Independent work and group work where learners actually do work and learn through their own experiences . Reflective accounts, role plays, watching videos and use of different scenarios linked to employment so learners see the authenticity and	Organisational skills Access to learning resources on virtual learning environment. Type of lesson and how the lesson is taught. Learner participation in the lesson and time of the lesson.	Having discussions with learners and talking to them about how to manage. Time management. Balancing part -time work hours with time for coursework. Using college resources such as computers, help with proofreading. Referral to student support and accompanying learners there. Through tutorials and planning with the learner and using constructive feedback.



		college are the major barriers.						relevance of learning is helpful. Checking through assignment work in class, using question and answer technique, as well as encouraging peer learning are helpful. Time of lessons need to be taken into consideration.	
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<p>2 : 2 - Stu den t Sup port Adv isor</p>	<p>Learners feel like they are being forced to be at college to learn. at college to learn because of the change in the participati on age in compulso ry education . Also learners do not want to study crtain subjects suchas Maths and English and their attitude at times seem to fit into that of their peers so they can fit in.</p>	<p>Personal and social issuesh such as home and family issues not related to college, including family breakdown, abusive home life, financial issues, accommod ation, homelessn ess, health problems including mental health problems. friendship breakdown s and being a teenager. These affect learners' attendance and when they are able to come in, they are uunable to do the academic work.</p>	<p>Personal, relationship, family and social issues that are not related to the course including accommodation , physical and mental health problems.</p>	<p>Personal and relationsh ip issues, family issues, fanancial issues, accommo dation issues, physical and mental health issues.</p>	<p>Personal issues, relationship issues, family issues, accommodat ion, financial issues, physical and mental health problems.</p>	<p>Gathering new informatio n, and new skills to use for different things. Making progress, working towards something and getting a qualificatio n at the end and being able to get a job. It offers different pathways to university or employme nt and a certain lifestyle.</p>	<p>Different pathways to university, or employment adn a certain lifestyle.</p>	<p>Having support and a supportive environmen t and supportive tutors and teachers that want them to succeed. And if they feel that then it feels meaningful to them and they want to please them and make them proud. Learning has to be goal oriented and achievable for the learner and there is a sense of progression so they feel that they are learning.</p>	<p>l</p>	<p>Giving personal support so learners. Offering practical support to keep learneirs in college. Refering them to other agencies, providing pastoral and emotional support. Regular meetings to check on learners and offer regular support. Having regular contact and providing ongoing support if learners have got different issues. Looking for other services and places that can provide extra support. Using problem solving approaches, Being able to sit with the learner and listen to them. Suggesting coping strategies, anxiety management, and relaxation techniques, breathing exercises. Putting together a revision plan. Having conversations with learner's teachers, getting parents involved. Being able to signpost to external agencies and professionals.</p>
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5 : ECI 3 - Stu den t Sup port Adv isor	Teacher should not be friends with learners. There need to be mutual respect and trust learners to listen and recognise that the Teacher is the adult. There need to be consistency else things will just fall apart. However, consideration need to be given to learners from different backgrounds and those who may need extra support.	Some learners see learning as misery and they do not want to particularly at this stage of their lives engage in learning. Some of the learners do not want to be in college.	Financial issues, search for part-time work, travel cost, mental health issues, drugs and alcohol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feeling suicidal. External issues to do with learners' lives.	Personal and social issues outside college; financial issues, mental health issues, travel cost, part time work.	Personal and social stressors; financial, travel cost, part-time work and mental health problems.	Financial issues, search for part-time work, travel cost, mental health issues, drugs and alcohol, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feeling suicidal. External issues to do with learners' lives.	Learning is about lifeskills and we learn all the time including everything we do. Learning is meaningful as long as it leads to obtaining something .	Some learners think of learning as hard and as a misery.	Engagement depends on how learners are nurtured and whether they appreciate education or not. Home influences such as having a happy background or difficult background can also determine engagement. Teaching skills and delivery of learning also influences learning engagement. Teacher expectations also matter as well as the learner-teacher relationship.	Learner's attitude towards learning, home factors, family background, teaching skills, learning delivery, learner-teacher-relationship, and teacher expectations.	Having conversations with learners. Making learners see the positive reasons for learning. Supporting learners and listening to them. Dealing with safeguarding issues. domestic abuse issues, supporting learners who have been asked to leave the course. Supporting learners cope emotionally.
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4 : ECI 4 - Stu den t Sup port Adv isor	Teacher's role is very essential in motivating learners and keeping their interest in the subject and keeping learners engaged in lessons. There is the need to make the learner feel comfortable and being caring and genuinely interested in the learner is paramount. Getting the personal and the outside issues right is key to getting things right in the classroom. The teacher has to be role model and not be overly friendly or too distant. Respect is key to the relationship and one needs to be consistent and treat learners as individuals.	Majority of learners have a negative attitude to learning initially owing to previous bad experience in their educational career.	Lack of interest in the subject area. The way lessons are taught and negative experience of the subject can make learning unenjoyable for learners and leads to lack of understanding. Personal issues such as homelessness, addictions, family issues, ill health especially mental health problems have negative impacts on learning. External issues tend to affect learning, focussing and concentration in class.	Personal and social issues; homelessness, addictions, health problems including mental health challenges, financial issues, travel difficulties.	External issues; personal and social in nature. Financial difficulties, homelessness, travel difficulties	Financial difficulties, travel difficulties and homelessness.	Acquiring a knowledge, a skill or a piece of information by experience or observation and be able to use it afterwards to do something. Learners do not potentially understand why they are learning.		Learners need to have a good and positive experience of learning and enjoy lessons or risk dropping out of education. Use to be made of positive reinforcement strategies with learners. Teaching and learning strategies should contain a 'mix of things'. Visual aids, practical learning sessions, use of technology and emphasis on practical things should reinforce 'chalk and talk', auditory methods.	Lesson delivery, teaching and learning strategies, teaching style, learning style, experience of learning, practical and varied learning activities.	Help learners deal with personal, social and academic issues such as; homelessness, addictions, family issues, health issues including mental health, relationship and friendship problems. Learners ability to focus and concentrate in lessons is usually affected and the goal is to help the learner to be able to focus and concentrate in lessons.
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			Financial issues and travel difficulties are also implicated.								
3 : ECI 5 - Course Lecturer and Personal Tutor	Learners need to be listened to, their interests explored and their ambitions as well as anything they wish to share about themselves generally. Making every effort to build rapport, showing genuine interest in the learner and getting to know what their interests are and also using	Learners are learning to survive, to enter the job market. Learners are learning because of parental pressure. Learners	Travel cost, distance learners have to travel, family issues, financial issues, part-time job and teacher factors.		Social stressors; family issues, financial issues, travelling cost, and part-time employment.	Travelling distance, time to travel to college, family background, part-time employment, teacher's style of delivery, lesson content and pressure on teacher.	Learning is a journey. Learning is giving to someone something that they can have and it leads to development. Learning is not always tangible.		Avoiding learning by 'chalk and talk', encouraging learning by experience, communication and interaction among learners and using technology and allowing	Innovative ways of learning, use of technology, teacher passion, lesson content, learner feedback, relationship between the learner and the teacher creating a positive learning atmosphere that encourages asking of questions. Others include personal factors,	Help with CV writing, finding part-time jobs and work experience. Having one to one tutorial sessions. Giving learners extra time. Referral to student support for counselling, help with behavioural issues, alcohol abuse, and dealing with pregnancies. Referral to external agencies and professionals. Helping with assignment writing, proof reading

	that as well to build a trust based relationship. A high degree of empathy and emotional intelligence is required. Honesty is also important as well as timing.	are not competitive or ambitious.							learners to be innovative and relating learners individual aims and objectives to whole conversations.	use of drugs and alcohol, social issues including peer influences and financial issues.	and guidance towards next steps such as university.
	A : Learner-Teacher Relationship (LTR)	E : Learning Attitude	J : Learning Barriers	L : Stressors which affect learning	O : Type of stressors	P : Type of learning barrier	Q : Learning Definition	S : Learner construction of learning	Y : Learning Engagement	Z : Influences on learning engagement	AG : Learning Support Advice and Guidance (SAG)
1 : ICP 1 - Male Student		Fair attitude to learning and can do better	Stressors in life can interfere as well as social reasons such as family issues, friendship problems and peers. Moving house and being behind assignments. Distraction in lessons and not concentrating and completing assignments on time.	Personal life issues, social issues such as family, friends and peers, moving house, Assignment work; the number of assessed criteria.	Personal, social, relationship and family stressors.	Personal life issues, social issues such as family, relationship, peers and friends. Assignment content with numerous assessment criteria. Distraction in lessons.	Learning is effective education. to pick up knowledge and learn about things before you implement it.	Learning is effective education. to gain knowledge and learn about things before you implement it.	Having a positive atmosphere and feeling prepared to deal with things in the future. Learning from others socially.	Positive atmosphere and social environment and understanding of the outside world.	Teacher verbal feedback and written feedback are effective. Use of Blackboard as learning repository. Email support and one to one tutorial.

			Having a lot of assessment criteria on assignment brief.								
3 : ICP 2 - Male Student	Learning is the most important aspect of life. Some learners think it is a necessary evil and it is pointless.	Negative feedback and how to handle it. Trying to think through feedback. Blaming self and feeling pressured and not being able to do anything.	Negative feedback and how to handle it	Academic ; related to negative feedback on coursework	Negative feedback	Learning is the process of understanding information and committing it into long term memory to be used at a later date. Learning is incredibly important and is priceless and extremely valuable owing to a decision to learn and use it to establish a	Learning is the process of understanding information and committing it into long term memory to be used at a later date. Learning is incredibly important and is priceless and extremely valuable owing to a decision to learn and use it to establish a	Driven by desire to success. Mixture of learning activities.	Able to remember what is learnt and apply it in practice. Receiving positive feedback.	Alternative ways of doing things. Being helpful and shown how to get to my desired destination through alternative routes.	

							business and help other people.				
5 : ICP 3 - Female Student	Teacher needs to be serious and self-disciplined, organised, and structured. Have tutorials and set smart targets with learners, listen to learner concerns and check progress and not be detached.	Good positive and want to learn. Regular attendance and being punctual proves interest.	Attitude of teacher. Teacher not being organised, structured and self-disciplined. Poor classroom management. Distractible behaviour.	Academic stressors; poor organisation, completing course work late.			Something that you can take interest in and register properly and gain something out of it. It is practical and involves learning techniques.		Teachers' motivation, passion and competence. Practical activities and having independent learning time. Taking notes and being present in sessions.	Teacher attitude, seriousness, organisation and self-discipline. Social aspects of college and self-confidence. Deadlines for coursework.	Advice from teacher and staff. Support from learner groups. Having one to one with teacher to go through course work.



4 : ICP 4 - Male Student	Teachers are understanding and readily help.	To be as positive as possible and have determination and find a way to get the grades.	Personal reasons; health challenges, encourage ment from significant others; family and health care professionals.	Personal reasons; health challenges.	Personal issues; unfortunate circumstances, upbringing; ill health. Volume of assignments. Lesson context being different to assignment context. Availability of learning resources.	Personal issues; illhealth, volume of assignments, having to do online research and accessibility of learning materials.	Learning new ways about particular fields and life itself to get a better understanding of the world you live in and how you can influence it. Learning is a meaningful progression in life and understanding of different areas to make informed decisions even in your personal life. Learning skills to inform and benefit self development.		Taking notes. Conducting internet research. Knowing what is being said in a lesson. Referring to what has been said in lessons	Parental involvement. Help with proof reading, communication, teamwork and socialisation.	Having extensions on assignments. Teacher understanding situation and struggle.
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2 : ICP - 5 - Male Student						Inavailability of teachers when needed Having to wait for teacher input		Learning is not about getting a lot of information. Learning is about gaining new knowledge and developing new skills.			
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