# The Paradox of the Raising Participation Age: the experiences of ‘disengaged’ youth on an employability course in a further education college

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**Abstract**

The Raising of Participation Age (RPA) policy introduced by the UK government in 2013 claims that youth participating in post-16 education and training are able to attain higher qualifications and skilled employment. Adopting a case study approach within a large further education (FE) college, qualitative research was conducted over two academic years (2013–2015) with tutors and students enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, an employability course designed as an RPA re-engagement provision to engage former NEET and disengaged youth in further education. Highlighting the paradox of RPA, my key empirical findings show that instead of the 'upskilling' and 'equal' access and opportunity announced in government rhetoric, most participants were marginalised and participated in an employability course which rarely resulted in quality tuition, or the right type of qualifications needed to progress within this setting. Although the course was considered a second-chance opportunity, the way this particular RPA re-engagement was enforced at The Site produced social exclusionary practices and multiple barriers which systematically filtered, blocked and prevented most participants from acquiring the credible qualifications needed to facilitate their progression in education and employment. This thesis argues that while in one sense RPA may not have the desired effect for most participants, from a policy perspective this re-engagement course was accomplishing policy goals in the sense that most former NEETs were re-engaged in an RPA course regardless of quality concerns. They were off the streets and being kept busy, regulated and socially controlled within The Site. Yet, in terms of improving labour market outcomes for the participants, RPA looks to have been a failure.

**Keywords:** Raising of Participation Age (RPA); Further Education (FE); NEET (not in education, employment or training); Employability; Youth

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**Glossary**

| | |
|---|---|
| BIS | Department for Business, Innovation and Skills |
| BKSB | Basic and Key Skill Builder (BKSB) Functional Skills Diagnostic Assessment of English and Maths |
| BTEC | Business and Technology Education Council |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| DfES | Department for Education and Skills |
| FE | Further Education |
| FHEQ | Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. |
| FSM | Free School Meal |
| GCSE | General Certificate of Secondary Education |
| HEFCE | Higher Education Funding Council for England |
| HND | Higher National Diploma |
| Infantalisation | Students seen as vulnerable and lacking in the capacity to cope with academic pressure |
| LSP | Learning Support Practitioner |
| NEET | Not in Education, Employment or Training |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualifications |
| NQF | National Qualifications Framework |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills |
| QCF | Qualifications and Credit Framework |
| RPA | Raising of Participation Age |
| Social welfare | Tutors prioritising and wholly engaged in social welfare duties at |

| | |
|---|---|
| tutors | the expense of formal teaching and classroom learning activities |
| Warehousing | Keeping students busy with classroom activities which lack academic purpose and rigour; involves low-quality teaching, disorganisation and chaotic classroom conditions |

**Introduction**

> Participation and attainment post-16 directly impacts upon life chances for young people…if a young person continues their education post-16 they are more likely to …. learn more, and lead happier, healthier lives (Green Paper, '*Raising Expectations: Staying in Education and Training Post-16'* DfES, 2007:3)

We are told by the British government that leaving the English education system at the age of 16 with few or no academic qualifications can be detrimental to young people's future prospects, increasing the risk of social exclusion and increasing marginalisation from education and employment at a crucial stage in life. This is especially the case for youth who are not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) for sustained periods during their formative years. Many have left school with low GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) grades or no school-leaving qualifications (Tomlinson, 2013) and are already positioned as 'hardest to reach' in official discourse (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). From the point of view of the Department for Education and Skills, NEETs and those lacking in educational qualifications cause political concerns in that they undermine the political ideals of responsible citizenship and prospects for national economic growth.

Consequently, the government has introduced policies which focus on increasing youth participation in post-compulsory education and training opportunities in the workplace. Strategies to increase youth participation in post-compulsory education go back to the

1970s at least, as seen in the development of the Youth Opportunities Programme for example. A contemporary strategy was established through the Education Skills Act 2008 which introduced the Raising of Participation Age (RPA) policy of extending compulsory education to 17 and 18-year-olds. It suggests that participation in post-16 education and training offers youth the opportunity to gain higher qualifications and become members of a skilled, qualified workforce that contributes to the national economy. Implemented in England in 2013, the RPA policy stipulates that young people are required to remain in education or training until the end of the academic year in which they turn 17. In 2015, this participation age rose to their 18th birthday (RPA regulations for Local Authorities, 2014). Another strategy promoting the skills agenda involved the publication of stories of infrequent individuals who move from rags to riches perpetuating the meritocratic idea that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough (Coffield et al., 1986).

The assumption of RPA was that a prolonged period in education or training would improve young people's qualification achievement, facilitate the acquisition of skills, and also improve financial prospects (see Simmons, 2008). Individuals were held responsible for their lack of qualifications and reduced levels of participation in further education, key reasons why they may face difficulties in securing access to an increasingly competitive education sector and labour market. By focusing on individual shortcomings, complex, wide-ranging structural factors which perpetuate social inequality and impact youth transitions to higher levels of study and employment were neglected. Yet, the route to inclusivity and improved life chances announced in RPA is not straightforward. This is especially the case for NEET and disengaged youth who are mostly drawn from working-class backgrounds (see Atkins, 2009).

Despite the challenges raised by structural inequalities, the government has continually pushed for raised participation levels. By implication, the further education (FE) sector is expected to play a key role in producing future workers with the credentials, knowledge and skills necessary to compete in the modern economy. Colleges are consequently expected to develop closer links with industry and the local economy.

As a consequence, within neo-liberal governmentality where the conduct of individuals or of groups is directed by the government (Foucault, 1978), higher levels of educational attainment and skills training are considered obligatory for successful competition in the knowledge economy (Exley and Ball, 2013). In the knowledge economy, education becomes a marketable commodity, resulting in a situation where those with higher levels of skills and qualifications are preferred in a competitive labour market and global economy. In so doing, neoliberal governmentality establishes a new form of *homo economicus*, 'the man of enterprise and production' (Foucault, 1978: 147), positioning the individual as the 'entrepreneur of himself', the source of (his) earnings' (*ibid*.: 226). Within neoliberal discourse, individuals are construed as the bearers of 'human capital' (skills, abilities and knowledge) made up of innate and acquired elements (*ibid*.: 226–227). Through RPA, youth are therefore urged to develop their own human capital, investing in education and constantly learning new skills. However, although absent from rhetoric, scholars such as Tomlinson (2013) have highlighted the actual reality that youth are competing with each other in stratified education systems and insecure labour markets, which affect the individual's capacity to attain personal ambitions for improved academic and economic goals. Also, contrary to the government's claim that there was a demand for labour, academic evidence (see chapter two) has found that there is a surplus

of young people who are overqualified and mostly working within the basic service sector rather than the knowledge economy announced in the government rhetoric.

**Background context:**

**RPA and marginalised youth**

Although some research evidence supports the claim that the attainment of academic credentials facilitates higher academic and economic outcomes (Bynner, 2004; McIntosh, 2004), more extensive and current research conversely highlights complexity and policy contradictions. In other words, improved qualifications do not necessarily guarantee improved outcomes. This can be seen in various studies which illustrate that there is already a continued over-supply of well-qualified workers (MacDonald, 2011; Simmons, et al 2011; 2014; Allen and Ainley, 2010; Ainley, 2016; Avis and Atkins, 2017), with many of them working in low skilled occupations such as kitchen/catering assistants and waiters/waitresses (Office for National Statistics, 2014; Ainley, 2016). So, contrary to RPA discourse, qualifications do not always guarantee access to high-skilled occupations. Indeed, labour market vulnerabilities increase for young people from poorer backgrounds. For example, key studies on marginalised youth show that when they engage in further study, they are found to receive low-level provision which hardly provides opportunity for improved social and economic positioning (Simmons et al., 2011; Atkins, 2010; 2013; Wolf, 2011).

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be enrolled on courses that are on the lower level of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Atkins, 2009), instead of the higher-level study programmes that might offer better chances for students to

achieve greater academic and economic gains. Furthermore, as well as being positioned on low-level provision, former NEET and disengaged youth also tend to have restricted access to higher-status modes of knowledge within many educational settings (Simmons et al., 2011). In fact, current research on marginalised youth points to complexity in outcomes and recognises the challenging prospects of social inequality, experiences of differential access to knowledge and subsequent restricted opportunities within academic settings. These are key influences which may limit the extent to which young people with no or low school-leaving qualifications benefit from participation in post-16 education, training and employment.

**NEET youth**

Concern about NEET youth is not a new phenomenon. The acronym 'NEET' is synonymous with terms previously used to describe experiences of youth with education and employment issues (Nudzor, 2010). The changing nomenclature includes: 'Getting Nowhere' (Bynner et al., 1997); 'Status Zero' (Williamson, 1997); 'High Risk Category of Non-college Bound Youth' (Worthington and Juntunen, 1997); 'Generation Z' (Pearce and Hillman, 1998); 'Off Register' (Bentley and Gurumurthy, 1999); 'Wasted Youth', 'Disengaged', 'Disaffected', 'Disappeared Young People' (Holroyd and Armour, 2003; DfES, 2007); and 'At Risk' (Conrad, 2005). In 1996, a Home Office official suggested that the term 'Not in Education, Employment or Training', (NEET) (Williamson, 2010) should be used to refer to 16-19-year-olds not engaged in any form of education, employment or training (Nudzor, 2010). Whilst the term NEET was originally created to describe 16-18-year-olds outside education, employment and training, these days it is also often used in relation to youth up to the age of 24 years (Simmons et al, 2014).

Nevertheless, for the purpose of my empirical study, I will focus on former NEET youth within the 16-18 years age category.

Other than the changing use of the acronym NEET, there were conceptual difficulties with the term highlighted in the literature. Popular culture and representations of NEET youth portray a negative stereotype of a homogenous group with common personal characteristics including: poor educational attainment, teenage pregnancy, use of drugs and alcohol, looked-after care status, persistent truancy, disability, mental health issues and criminal behaviour (Coles et al, 2002). In comparison, most academic literature suggests a more complex and diverse conceptualisation of NEET youth as a heterogeneous group consisting of individuals from a wider range of backgrounds (Simmons, 2008). The spectrum of circumstances therefore includes those with social and behavioural problems, youth from families with a culture of worklessness, others considered to be 'floating NEETs' who alternate between periods of being NEET and phases of participation in further education (FE) courses, or phases of employment with no training (Simmons, 2009), and individuals in transition or on a gap year before progressing onto further or higher education (Coles et al, 2002).

There are therefore many different conceptualisations of the term NEET, with a number of possible implications. Not least, conceptual ambiguity may arguably give rise to misconceptions. For instance, although the majority of my research participants displayed characteristic social, academic and behavioural issues, they were a heterogeneous group in that a substantial minority of them had higher academic grades, but had enrolled late or were home-schooled. A few reported experiences of social anxiety and therefore also

enrolled on the employability course as a transitory step towards mainstream provision. There is also the possibility that the negatives stereotypes could affect the educational experiences and outcomes of students enrolled on employability courses.

**Moral panic**

NEETs are labelled and conceived of as part of the 'under-class' identified by Charles Murray (1984). They closely resemble Cohen's conceptualisation of 'folk-devils' (1972), seen as the young 'feckless', 'lazy' and 'dangerous' individuals, part of a 'problem population' who give rise to moral panic. Consequently, an increased focus on youth training and employment has taken on great importance in political discourse on NEETs. This means that work takes on a moral aspect in which 'work is equated with worth' (McDonald and Marston, 2005: 391[1]), apparently providing individuals with a sense of purpose and moral duty.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, many sociological accounts exposed the proliferation of individualising and pathologising conceptualisations of unemployment, particularly highlighting the influences of the media and the Conservative government's roles in perpetuating such an approach. Seaton (1986:25), for example, noted the rise of 'scroungerphobia and blame' expressed in the media during this era (see also Sinfield, 1987: xii). Continued criticisms were directed at individuals for lacking so-called important employability skills, resulting in 'victim-blaming' and the growing tendency to personalise unemployment (Cole, 2008). Examples can be seen in the series of individualising employment policies like the New Deal (see for example, Furlong, 2006;

[1] Such thinking is nothing new – it is the same as the age-old idiom 'the devil makes work for idle hands'.

Mizen, 2003; Tonge, 1999) or the focus on NEETs - individuals who require ‘welfare-to-work’ employment training programmes to instil in them an ethos of industry (Hodgson et al, 2009). However, social researchers have been sceptical of youth training schemes: for instance, Furlong (1993: 33) argues that ‘YTS [Youth Training Schemes] did little to remove the handicaps of its disadvantaged trainees’, and in fact contributed to the institutionalisation of unemployment. Along similar lines, Tonge (1999) believes youth employment schemes offer inadequate training and generally have no lasting impact because most young people returned to unemployment after participation in a particular government scheme. He argues that such policies appear to fail on their own terms to ameliorate youth unemployment. From a sociological perspective, employment schemes mostly appear to do the opposite and arguably exacerbate unemployment among marginalised youth (Furlong, 2006; Mizen, 2003; Tonge, 1999).

**The employability discourse**

It is fundamental to draw close attention to the employability discourse, a key influence that has progressively become dominant in post-industrial economies including the UK, where the workforce is expected to have improved qualifications and social skills in order to hold their own in an increasingly competitive and knowledge-driven economy. Against this backdrop, UK policies such as RPA are ostensibly drafted as a mechanism to facilitate a global, knowledge-driven economy. This political motivation was directly linked to the notion of a global economy, a key influence that has played a profound role in establishing the global markets over the past 30 years. In turn, the effects of globalisation can be seen in the deindustrialisation of employment which resulted in an increasing spread of more flexible, precarious labour markets as well as growing forms of

income inequality and work. As a consequence, nowadays more people face a precarious existence without any job security, undertaking short-term labour without any assurance of employment benefits received by the by those in employment (Standing, 2011). Highlighting the issue of the precarious nature of employment, the UK Government skills strategy white paper, *21st century skills: realising our potential - individual, employers, nation*, (DfES, 2003) cautions that the idea of having a job for life is no longer possible within a global economy; instead, it is more realistic to talk about employability for life.

The government white paper highlights employability as a national strategy aimed at ensuring that individuals have the right skills to be employable in a globalised knowledge economy. It presents employability skills as transferable skills based on individuals' qualifications, technical skills, literacy and numeracy skills as well as social skills. Similarly, the European Union introduced education policies that reflect a more flexible labour market in response to the challenges of globalisation, portraying the idea that an investment in human capital through qualification attainment and skills development could improve employability (European Commission, 2007). On this basis, both national and international policies reflect a relatively new type of discourse that prioritises employability, these policy changes apparently reflecting the contemporary employment landscape.

Thus, in the last few decades, there has been a shift from speaking about employment to speaking about employability. Rather than speaking about a shortage of employment and describing the citizen as employed or unemployed, policy nowadays makes reference to a lack of employability, where the citizen is defined as employable or unemployable

(Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), or in need of employability skills (Williams, 2005). Consequently, although the term ‘employability’ has been in use since the early twentieth century, there has been a marked shift from employment to employability in contemporary discourse. Employment programmes continue to focus on this issue of employment and current welfare-to-work programmes are designed to support individuals who are long-term unemployed, disabled, or those with a health condition in order for them to return to work. The most recent Work and Health Programme was introduced in England and Wales to this end (Department for Work and Pensions, 30 Nov 2017). However, employability programmes have gained greater political significance. These tend to be generic rather than job-specific, and focus on the supposed transferable skills needed by an individual to make them ‘employable’. Thus, in addition to the development of technical understanding and subject knowledge, employability skills include social skills, creativity, personal attributes such as communication and interpersonal skills, problem-solving, self-presentation, numeracy, team-working and values as key requirements in the current workforce (HEFCE, 2017). Supposedly, employability skills are teachable. Training courses aimed at developing employability are therefore expected to produce a workforce that is job-ready. This means they are educated and qualified, literate and numerate, as well as having social skills that can be transferred into a workplace.

Furthermore, instead of speaking about education, government policies increasingly speak about learning, a form of learning that is not only connected to formal schooling, but that also extends to numerous practices and everyday life (Fejes, 2010). Hence in order to develop employability skills, learning does not only focus on developing a student’s

knowledge and abilities relating to a particular job, but it aims to raise the student's awareness of their self-identity. It is reflected in their personality, attitudes, interests, values and abilities which encourage them to develop social skills that make them employable and flexibly able to respond to a changing labour market. Hence, in the current atmosphere, employability is used as the main explanation for unemployment (Strath, 2000). This shift in policy discourse extends to the learner. More than ever, education policies position learners as responsible for their own employment (Fejes, 2010), reducing the emphasis on structural inequalities and challenging labour market conditions.

As a consequence, the use of the employability term does not only suggest a shift in terminology but indicates also a shift in the understanding of different explanations for employment and different constructions of the worker (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This means that there has been a 'shift from a systematic view of the labour market, to a focus on the individuals and their qualities' (Garsten and Jacobson, 2003: 2). At the same time, it does not mean that the state has entirely retreated, rather that the government's aim is now equipping individuals for a knowledge-driven, increasingly competitive economy by expecting them to take responsibility for their own employability (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). RPA illustrates this point in that it offers a relatively flexible education framework to raise participation in post-16 education, training and employment, allowing youth from diverse backgrounds to access a range of RPA provisions including apprenticeship and part-time study with the option of employment. However, although in principle these are policies aiming to develop a knowledge-driven economy, this rhetoric seems to be unrealistic where former NEETs and fellow students

with complex academic backgrounds are concerned. Several chapters in this thesis will draw particular attention to a range of academic evidence which highlights a highly unequal, stratified education system that contributes to differential academic and employment outcomes in the post-16 education sector. Hence, it cannot be assumed that all the students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course are going to engage in the knowledge-work that is alluded to in political discourse, particularly given the precarious nature of employment in contemporary society.

Researchers who have adopted Foucault's view of governmentality (Rose, 1999; Fejes 2008) use the concept of a decentred state that no longer governs people in a top down manner, where governing is less centralised and spread more throughout the entire social body and is conducted by the citizens themselves. In principle, RPA allows youth to undertake in on-the-job-training to develop vocational knowledge, experience and social skills required for the workplace. However, there appears to be some disparity between policy and the actual reality of youth seeking access to the labour market. For instance, in chapter one I identify academic research which reveals a national shortage of apprenticeships, worsened by the fundamental lack of apprenticeship provision for 16-18 year olds in comparison with adults. Nevertheless, the political motivation is to develop students who are resourceful and adaptable and who possess a range of social skills and attitudes which could benefit the economy. Discourses on employability are therefore mobilised in a broader terrain of governance, whereby citizens are produced through their interactions with various forms of governance (Fejes, 2010). Emphasising lifelong learning and investment in human capital (referring to an individual's skills-set, capacity, education, qualifications and personal attributes which influence their earning potential),

the individual is held responsible for becoming adaptable and flexible as a way to become or remain employable. In order to investigate these questions, I conducted empirical research on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, an employability course designed as a second-chance opportunity for marginalised youth lacking in academic credentials and employability skills. This specific course prioritised key areas central to the employability agenda; further elaborated on in the subsequent section.

**Level 1 Achieving Skills Course and broader employability agenda**

The Level 1 Achieving Skills Course is an RPA re-engagement provision aimed at developing employability skills for former NEETs and disengaged youth deemed to be on the margins of society. The curriculum includes an employability certificate and additional qualifications in numeracy, literacy and personal development. Students are expected to engage in work-related training to gain knowledge and understanding of the workplace, as well as focusing on their communication, literacy, numeracy, self-presentation and interpersonal skills. This course aims to develop vocational knowledge and expose students to workplace behaviour, whilst focusing on students' social identity and personal attributes. Besides focusing on confidence building, self-esteem, independent learning and CV writing skills to get students job-ready, essentially the RPA course that I examined was part of a broader, national employability strategy intended to instil the work culture in the youth workforce necessary for the current competitive, changing economic and labour market. Hence, through participation in the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, discourses on employability were mobilised in the wider terrain with a central aim of constructing a pliable and adaptive worker.

Moreover, for many young people from working-class backgrounds, issues of social identity and societal expectations may influence employability. The socialisation and social identity of an individual can also influence an individual's relative chance of obtaining different types of employment (Simmons, 2009). For instance, research has found that the absence of certain behaviours, attitudes and social skills may also indicate why some youth may struggle with employment (Rainbird, 2000; Atkins, 2009; Simmons et al., 2011). For this reason, the employability mandate recognises the constraining influences that can arise from an individual's lack of self-presentation, social and interpersonal skills. Through engagement in lifelong learning, individuals are expected to develop in the required areas so that they do not have to face such disadvantages – at least in principle. For this reason, RPA is considered to be a key political and economic strategy aimed at delivering employability skills to NEET youth and those lacking in qualifications. Employability courses therefore play a central role in FE. They are designed for unemployed 16-18-year-olds, aiming to improve their 'employability' by teaching them a combination of vocational training and social and personal development skills to be used in everyday life and in the workplace. For instance, at *The Site* the curriculum focused on Functional Skills English and Maths with the aim of enabling students to perform practical calculations, for instance working out discounts if working in retail, or measuring cement for bricklaying. The course also aims to help build the students' confidence and the communication skills needed for the workplace and daily interpersonal interactions. Youth on employability schemes are often perceived as lacking certain behaviours and attitudes and there is usually a curriculum focus on social and personal development issues. This emphasis can be seen in qualifications that are advertised as helping young people to develop the key personal skills, qualities and

attitudes required by employers as well as helping students progress in education (City and Guilds, 2012). In view of this, the employability curricula emphasise that much of the 'learning' students expect to undertake will also involve socialisation into the workplace including a consequent focus on social and functional skills necessary to enhance employability (Atkins, 2013).

Employability programmes are therefore likely to subject young people to forms of socialisation in an attempt to make changes to the social identity of the individual (Atkins, 2013). This thesis will illustrate the various ways in which tutors extended their evaluations beyond students' academic abilities, focusing on students' social identity and self-presentation. For this purpose, the flexible use of informal assessments and the national Basic and Key Skill Builder (BKSB) Functional Skills Diagnostic Assessment of English and Maths, were found to be key influences which governed tutors' practices and decisions as to whether students were judged as capable of accessing limited, albeit essential, mainstream provision and vocational training opportunities within *The Site*. These evaluations did not necessarily work in most students' favour. My thesis recognises the iatrogenic consequences for several marginalised youth on this particular course, when personal and social skills development are conflated within the employability skills rhetoric.

Most contemporary explanations of the term 'employability' within the UK employment sector draw on the historical influences of James Callaghan (1976). Callaghan claimed that education settings did not provide youth with the appropriate skills, attitudes and abilities required for the workplace. The effects of such discourse can be seen in the

increasing political mandate to foster stronger links with industry and ensure that students acquire relevant employability skills, i.e. transferable skills based on subject-specific knowledge and abilities, along with an individual's awareness of their self-presentation, social skills, personality, values, attitudes and interpersonal attributes. It is anticipated that arguably these qualities will cut across all industry types reflected in a workforce that generates national economic wealth and able to respond to a changing, competitive market. To this effect, recent government policies on youth unemployment take an instrumentalist interpretation of employability, one that is rooted in supply-side explanations. Worklessness is considered to be a behavioural and cultural shortcoming amongst individuals (DWP, 2008; 2010), rather than placing an equal focus on the demand-side factors and acknowledging the growing structural complexities and relative buoyancy of local labour markets (Lindsay and Houston, 2011). By implication, current policy discourse fails to recognise what Brown et al. (2003, 110) describes as the 'duality of employability', where employability exists in two dimensions: the relative and the absolute.

In this respect, a broader definition of employability identifies the absolute abilities and qualities of individuals, including basic skills and personal awareness, yet also considers the key influences of economic and labour market conditions (Simmons, 2009). For that reason, it could be argued that current political discourse draws on a somewhat static and reductionist notion of employability which subsequently masks its complexity. This issue is illustrated in the work of Simmons (2009), who argues that while many of the unemployed may become 'employable' during a period of labour shortage, when jobs are in short supply even individuals with skills, qualifications and experience may find

themselves without work. In other words, it is quite possible to be employable and not in employment.

Thus, in the current political milieu, employability is construed as a matter of an individual's knowledge, social skills and attitudes, which may depend on how these qualities are used and the individual's capacity to display them upon application for employment or further study. This argument is reflected in the work of Hillage and Pollard (1998, 2) when they state:

> For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and aptitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work.

Such discourse has contributed to a political focus on the skills development required for the workplace. However, this notion of skills has attracted criticism for its narrow view of educational aims (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). A prioritised focus on skills creates controversy, insofar as skills are socially constructed and intersected by social class, gender and race divides (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). This is especially the case if we consider the influences of social and cultural skills within the context of employment recruitment. It was found that the decision to appoint an individual is rarely neutral and research into the recruitment processes of major companies found that decisions were largely subjective interpretations of applicants (Hesketh, 2003). Decisions were influenced by prejudices and discrimination towards those of lower social class, of a different race, national origin, or gender, and those with disabilities. This suggests that

what is taken as evidence of skills is largely determined by who the worker is and the present circumstances (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). As such, policy discourses of employability in the UK, in addition to the human capital theories (Becker, 1975) on which such discourse is based, have been criticised for their diminished recognition of employment and occupational structures and the varying ways in which opportunities are framed by gender, race and social class (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964, 1970; Brown, 2003; Brown and Hesketh, 2004) – questions that I investigate in subsequent chapters throughout my thesis.

**Rationale and introduction to the empirical study**

Although there is a range of previous academic literature on working class youth in the education system, actual research studies on pre-vocational and Level 1 students on employability courses are limited. Though useful, these studies were largely conducted pre-RPA when students were under no obligation to participate in post-compulsory education. This evidently highlights an existing gap in current research in the post-RPA era. Very little seems to be known about the current state of affairs and whether the RPA has positively influenced the possibilities for Level 1 learners to progress to higher levels of study or employment.

RPA is a relatively new policy and at the time when this research was conducted the topic was under-investigated. My fieldwork was conducted at The Site, a pseudonym for a large general FE college located in the South-East of England. The college has more than one campus; the main site in Campus 1 and the rest situated in nearby towns, recruiting students from surrounding deprived communities – although the town itself was largely

affluent. The college provided a wide range of vocational further education and apprenticeship training programmes (delivered both directly and through a range of subcontractors), as well as the delivery of vocational higher-education programmes validated by a local university.

At the start of my research inquiry, I was working as lecturer and programme leader on a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Level 3 Health and Social Care course, an industry-related qualification equivalent to A-levels, delivered within an FE college. Faced with so many different qualifications and levels of study within the college setting, and bearing in mind that student access and progression to higher levels of qualifications play a central role in my thesis, it is therefore essential at this stage to distinguish what these levels meant (more detailed and comprehensive information on the qualifications and frameworks are explained in chapter 1).

In England, there are eight different levels of education that indicate the rating of notional difficulty, ranging from entry level up to level eight on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Entry level is the most basic form of qualification and usually provides an introduction into education for those looking to enter formal education. Employability courses such as the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course are situated on this level and are considered to be a pre-vocational qualification. This means that the course is positioned outside mainstream provision. Level 1 qualifications are the first formal rung on the numbered system of qualifications that lead to access to vocational courses in college; it was also the provision to which most of my participants were seeking access to further their education. Level 2 is

the next step up from Level 1 and provides equivalent GCSE qualifications (grades A*, A, B or C); students may progress to Level 3, find employment or undertake an apprenticeship (a work-based learning route with an employer). Level 3 qualifications are equivalent to A- level qualifications and can lead to employment, apprenticeship or university study.

My teaching duties were largely restricted to course management and the teaching of BTEC Level 3 classes. Occasionally they also involved staff-cover for the Level 1 and Level 2 classes in the department. Whilst teaching Level 3 students, I noticed that they generally appeared to be more focused and engaged in lesson activities and coursework than Level 1 students. They were also able to readily access in-house college provision to pursue higher education or employment goals. Likewise, Level 2 students were able to progress either onto the next level vocational course or employment with the attainment of the Level 2 qualification playing an influential role. However, the trajectory for Level 1 vocational students seemed a lot more complex.

Despite the attainment of the Level 1 qualification, this rarely resulted in progression onto Level 2 vocational courses or training opportunities for students within The Site. No one in the department could explain, other than citing behavioural issues, why Level 1 students on the course struggled to attain the required grades to advance onto higher levels of study or secure employment. It turned out that the student achievement and success rates tend to be lower for Level 1 vocational students on the course. On average, approximately three out of a class of twenty students progressed and achieved the required entry grades to move onto the next level course; the majority were signposted to

the Prince's Trust or the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, whilst others were recorded as 'destination unknown' or became unemployed. In contrast, Level 2 and Level 3 students appeared to have better student outcomes including employment in care homes and hospitals, while a substantial proportion of Level 3 students progressed to higher education in the fields of nursing, social work, and physiotherapy. The unfamiliarity of teaching Level 1 students and the degree of reported uncertainty over their educational experience and progression outcomes provoked my research interest. This issue, coupled with the growing political discussion on RPA and NEETs, strongly influenced my decision to focus on this particular cohort.

**The ethnographic study**

Participants were enrolled on an entry level employability course which I have termed the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. It was designed for NEET and so-called disaffected youth who were positioned outside mainstream provision. The college website advertised the course as follows:

> The Foundation Learning Achieving Skills Course is a free learning programme aimed at 16-18 year olds who are not in training or employment (NEET) and wish to gain qualifications in Maths and English from entry level to level 2. The study programme provides a progression route to employment, vocational study and/or apprenticeships for learners studying at level 1. Programmes aim to equip learners with the skills and confidence required for successful progression by providing a highly supportive learning environment and diverse, exciting curriculum. Learners are provided with a high level of support and guidance, and encouraged to set themselves challenging, achievable goals in order to reach their aspirations. Programmes incorporate a combination of vocational learning, personal and social skills, development and Functional Skills (English and Maths). Enrichment activities are also

> included in the programme to develop confidence and social skills. This is a full-time course which runs from September to June (35 weeks) or January to July (25 weeks) and is delivered at the different campuses.

Advertised as a full-time course, it is aimed at young people who were previously NEET. Such detail highlights the students' academic background and also contextualises why several students might want qualifications and therefore enrol on the course. This is a structured study programme available to all, including those with low or no school-leaving qualifications. No formal entry requirements are set other than the requirement that students should "just desire" to improve their skills so as to enable progression to another programme. The website further advertises that students have the opportunity to gain qualifications in English and Maths, although details later stipulate it pertains to Functional Skills qualifications only. The excerpt notably did not mention GCSE qualifications as an option, although students were able to enrol for GCSE classes alongside their main study programmes in line with the college's policy on GCSE retakes.

Nevertheless, the course sets out to provide a highly supportive environment to NEET and so-called disengaged youth. It represents a starting point for some and perhaps a second or third chance for others needing qualifications. Besides qualifications, the course also reportedly gives scope for progression to employment, vocational study and/or apprenticeships. Likewise, the prospectus outlines that the course provides students with the opportunity to develop their academic, personal and employability skills in order to progress to Level 2/3 programmes in a variety of subject areas across the College or an apprenticeship. Progression routes available for these particular students are advertised to provide access to full-time courses/apprenticeships including Business and

Administration, Public Services, Carpentry, Construction, Health and Social Care and so forth. While details on progression opportunities appeared clear, it was difficult to establish what the actual learning requirements are on the course. It was only through discussion with course tutors that it was clarified that students have to pass Functional Skills English and Maths exams alongside the City and Guilds Certificate in Employability and Personal Development to complete the Level 1 employability qualification. Thus, if students complete only one of the above two learning requirements, they will not pass and will be recorded as ‘completed but not achieved’. Bearing in mind that a substantial proportion of students on the course have experienced previous educational failure, it was important that course details on the learning requirements were clear and understandable. However, in its current state during the research period, the information on the learning requirements both on the website and in the prospectus arguably lacked clarity, which reduced students’ capacity to make an informed decision about the course.

In order to avoid negative stereotypes and ideological assumptions about NEETs, it was necessary to capture the students’ actual educational experiences and examine the extent to which the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course facilitates the purported RPA benefits. My study thus considers the political agenda behind increasing the compulsory period of study, and examines whether marginalised young people’s engagement in further study, aided by the qualification itself, resulted in their inclusion and progression to mainstream vocational education and training. In order to achieve this research goal, I addressed four separate yet interrelated research questions. Firstly, I undertook an evaluation of the participants’ educational experiences in order to find out whether this specific

employability course offered an actual chance for former NEET and disengaged youth to gain higher academic credentials and consequent entry to higher levels of study and training prospects within The Site. Secondly, I evaluated the influences of several government and organisational policies, along with staff practices which impacted the students' capacity to access educational and training provision and progression outcomes as a consequence. With a particular focus on the course curriculum, I also analysed the extent to which the course's pedagogy and the tutors' practices either facilitated or hindered goals for enhanced academic and employment outcomes. Lastly, I evaluated the RPA framework, drawing particular attention to its rhetoric on re-engagement provision designed for marginalised youth. This involved a close exploration as to whether participants were able to benefit from the 'language of choice', 'opportunity', 'inclusion' and 'upskilling' when they engage in a prolonged period of study in post-16 education echoed in RPA logic.

Adopting a case study approach, qualitative research was conducted on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course over a period of two academic years from 2013 to 2015, with two student groups and their respective tutors in order to detail what such provision looks like in practice. I used a range of qualitative strategies in the form of interviews with individual students and staff members, student focus groups, classroom observations, and an analysis of student records, policy and organisational documents. The fieldwork consisted of 130 hours of classroom observations with two student cohorts, two student focus groups, nine staff interviews and ten semi-structured interviews with students. I anticipate that the use of different sources and methods at various points in this study, for

the specific purpose of building on the strength of each type of data collection strategy would therefore enhance the credibility of research findings.

**Empirical findings and original contribution**

My key empirical data revealed that participants experienced restricted participation and exclusion from limited, albeit essential, education and training provision which therefore hampered opportunities for higher progression outcomes. Instead of widening access and gaining opportunities to up-skill, the way the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course as re-engagement provision was structured and delivered at The Site, these conditions contributed to multiple barriers which diminished choice, highlighting the paradox of RPA. It also reproduced inequality and exclusion for marginalised youth at a time when they are legally required to participate in post-16 education. These findings are significant for better informing policy and practice, and raising awareness of the difficulties some learners with low or no school leaving qualifications may experience in a FE college.

Although my thesis is original in its focus, my major research findings identified several educational processes and practices which predate RPA. Concerns over inequality in education impacting many marginalised youth have been documented for many years by several scholars such as Foucault, Ball, Simmons and Ainley. In line with this reasoning, my empirical data described these educational processes and students' experiences, refining existing debates and highlighting the warehousing function of the course, its content which is based on 'busy work', the sometimes overly-protective tutoring, the lack of meaningful progression on the course, and the pressure on tutors and management to meet performance targets and improve their quality ratings with Ofsted. These issues are

nothing new, but a focus on RPA provided contemporary academic evidence which highlighted a precarious academic environment for most of my student participants with low or no academic qualifications. They were faced with a restrictive educational offer and less choice within The Site. Hence the central argument of the thesis is that RPA is effectively ‘business as usual’.

**Outline of Thesis**

Chapter one of my thesis offers a brief, historical and political overview of the English education system, with a particular focus on the FE sector. This is to contextualise the research study, highlighting key academic and political discourses on the topics under investigation. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the latest reform and the extent to which NEET and disengaged youth could benefit from improved educational and employment prospects, as echoed in the RPA discourse.

Chapter two consists of a review of literature on social inequality in the education sector, and the role of educational credentials and the post-16 education skills agenda in relation to youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. The review focuses on the RPA and its underpinning neo-liberalist assumptions, exposing a complex interplay between enabling and constraining effects entrenched within broader structural and institutional factors which also impact student outcomes.

Chapter three focuses on key methodological details underpinning this research investigation. Sections are therefore sub-divided focusing on: negotiating and gaining access; the fieldwork stage which included a discussion on the study’s research design;

data collection methods; analysis and findings. This chapter concludes with a consideration of research ethics, as well as a discussion on the benefits and limitations of this study.

Chapter four is a contextual chapter which explores the actual research site, highlighting that, in theory, as an institution The Site offers a broad spectrum of education provision, ranging from vocational education and training provision to university education. However, I show that although these particular learners re-engaged in further education and were ideally positioned in a college which offered wide-ranging courses, nevertheless they were excluded and subjected to notions of marginalisation within The Site. I consider whether these particular students noticed or experienced inequality in education provision within The Site, and if so, what did they say or feel about it? I found that the students have certainly noticed. Many voiced their confusion, frustration and disappointment at being unable to access GCSEs, apprenticeships and higher levels of study within The Site.

The next sections of my thesis report on my empirical findings which focus on the implementation of RPA with former NEET and disengaged youth enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course at The Site. Chapter five is the first which draws attention to the particular ways in which government and institutional policies and practices were constructed around GCSEs and BKSB diagnostic assessments. These acted as mechanisms of social control and exclusion from key provision, marginalising and further reproducing social inequality within The Site. Notably, the employability agenda and neoliberal influences played integral parts on the course.

Chapter six brings into focus emerging data which identify a predominant welfare discourse and how it was mostly counter-productive on this particular course. The chapter considers the political impetus for a broadened welfare agenda, bringing into view complexities and contradictions when educational and welfare goals are merged. In particular, a major finding highlighted the blurring of professional roles and the activities of 'social welfare tutors'; they prioritised welfare duties over academic learning - reducing the course to something akin to therapy.

Chapter seven explores underlying ideologies, practices and educational processes, revealing the practices of warehousing and the social development of students. The influences of the employability agenda are recognised, and students' success and progression outcomes are displayed to communicate key ideas. The chapter concludes that an amalgamation of broader structural issues, government and institutional policies, together with tutors' practices, contributed to unequal processes which occasioned differential access to specific sets of knowledge and skills within The Site. As a result, current academic conditions limited the extent to which participants could attain higher academic goals, contrary to RPA logic and the stated employability agenda.

Chapter eight concludes and accentuates key ideas in line with empirical data. It offers a discussion on the experiences of participants in the study and key themes which need to be addressed. Original contributions are re-emphasised, also identifying limitations and further scope for future research on this particular topic.

My thesis argues that although in one sense RPA may not have the desired effect for most participants, who were expected to repeat a similar course the following year despite having attained the qualification, from a policy perspective this re-engagement course was accomplishing policy goals: most former NEETs were re-engaged in a RPA course despite quality concerns; they were off the streets and being kept busy; regulated and socially controlled within The Site. Yet, in terms of improving labour market outcomes for the participants, RPA looks to have been a failure.

The next chapter provides a brief, historical and political overview, particularly of the FE sector, to contextualise the research study and also identify key academic and political discourses on the topics under investigation.

## Chapter One: Youth participation and the ever-changing reform of further education in England

For three decades after the end of World War Two, most youth were able to make relatively straightforward transition into the workplace and adult life. Even though there were some areas in the UK which experienced unemployment, generally school leavers were able to find employment in line with their ambitions and expectations (Simmons et al, 2014). Most young people left school and entered work at the earliest opportunity, often followed by leaving home, getting married and starting a family (Jones, 2009). It was rare for the majority of youth to attend post-compulsory education and training and only a small minority of white, middle-class youth attended university, while day-release study to a technical college was often part of an apprenticeship programme. Young men in particular worked alongside schoolmates, sometimes employed in the same factory, mine or mill as other members of their family. Working life offered them a form of stability and continuity, which does not exist for contemporary youth (Simmons et al, 2014).

Work conditions were however challenging as youth often experienced workplace bullying, abuse and humiliation; factory life was a bleak and alienating experience for many (Beynon, 1973). Also, even though most youth were eager to leave school, some of them did not settle as easily into working life, resulting in some young people 'churning' chronically from job to job (Finn, 1987). The ready availability of employment in some respect masked this particular issue. Yet, those with few formal qualifications were generally able to obtain employment, unlike their counterparts in contemporary society. Nevertheless, although young people played a pivotal role in the workforce for much of

the twentieth century, from the mid-1980s onwards, virtually half of all 16 and 17 year olds were unemployed (Simmons et al., 2014). As a result, various work-related training programmes were established in an attempt to both manage and disguise youth unemployment (Finn 1987:49). The emergence of the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) was the first of such schemes which became a familiar – if unpopular – part of the labour market during the 1980s and 1990s (Simmons et al., 2014).

This chapter begins with a historical overview of key policy changes and systems of governance, covering various qualification frameworks. I go on to show how a competitive culture within The Site led to high entry requirements which limited participants' access to essential and desirable education provision. The chapter highlights the effects of policy changes and global economic processes in contributing to a declining youth labour market. Although the FE sector varies across the four nations of the UK in terms of education policy and operations, this chapter primarily focuses on FE provision in England. Within England, the FE sector plays a key role in the delivery of post-16 education across a wide range of learning contexts that include providers such as colleges of further education, sixth form colleges, adult and community provision, offender learning, work-based learning as well as third sector organisations, such as charities. The sector also includes national specialist colleges for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, in addition to colleges specialising in art, design and performing arts as well as agriculture and horticulture (see: www.et-foundation.co.uk).

## Historical developments in FE

### The early development of FE pre-1944

FE in England has its roots in the forms of technical education chiefly acquired during an apprenticeship. This form of provision held comparatively low status as general education was considered to be more prestigious (Green and Lucas, 1999). The issue of differential academic status associated with types of education provision is therefore not a new phenomenon. The growing academic divide increased during the 1820s with the emergence of the Mechanics' Institutes. These were educational establishments formed to provide adult education to working men, particularly in technical subjects. This development also established a tendency within the education sector to separate general, scientific and technical education from one another. As a direct result, this process reinforced an increasing academic and vocational divide, and it sparked many political and educational debates (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). In response to these debates, the 1868 Taunton Commission was established to improve the low status of vocational education, but initial progress was slow. From the mid-nineteenth century, the vocational tradition was subjected to increasing criticism over the poor-quality technical education available to British workers.

The introduction of the *Technical Instruction Act 1889* and the *Local Taxation Act 1890* led to an increase in public funding for technical education. They also gave rise to the establishment of a range of technical colleges and polytechnics in the 1890s. Despite this, a sharp divide remained between general education and technical education. Technical education for instance, was considered to have a distinct separation of skills and knowledge, a characteristic that could be traced to its historical origins in the Mechanics'

Institutes. However, this sharp conceptual division was not prevalent on the Continent. In countries such as France and Germany general and technical education were considered to be strongly interconnected (Green and Lucas, 1999).

In 1902, the *Education Act* was introduced to facilitate the growth in technical education, particularly in commercial fields (Green and Lucas, 1999). The National Certificate was introduced for both ordinary and advanced level (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). This qualification type subsequently became the mainstay of vocational education and training in FE colleges (Tolland, 2016). The *Fisher Act 1918* required local authorities to offer part time education for all youth up to the age of 18, especially those not in full-time education (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). During the Second World War there was further growth in technical courses and engineering cadetships which gave rise to higher national certificates in industry (war production) and the armed forces (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). After the Second World War, military personnel required training for work at home, which resulted in adult education institutes running alongside technical colleges to deliver part-time academic, vocational and leisure activities (Green and Lucas, 1999).

**FE throughout 1944 - 1992**

The introduction of the *Education Act 1944* charged Local Education Authorities (LEAs) with responsibility for FE provision. It also aimed to do for FE what the *Fisher Act 1918* failed to: the implementation of day-release and also physical, vocational and practical training at county colleges (Hodgson et al, 2015). After a slow start, this extension of provision led to 335,000 being enrolled on day-release courses in 1954. By 1956, the Percy Report had led to the establishment of ten colleges of advanced technology,

forming the onset of 'advanced further education'. These developments led to the expansion of polytechnics in the 1960s (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). Polytechnics delivered advanced FE, whilst FE colleges engaged in non-advanced FE (Parry and Thompson, 2002). Likewise, the 1956 white paper *Technical Education* proposed a new diploma in technology equivalent in level to the university bachelor's degree. The aim was to double the number of day-release students, but these targets were not achieved (Green and Lucas, 1999).

The Carr Report (1958) and the Crowther Report (1959) claimed that FE provision was lacking in quality standards of training and education for the workforce (Green and Lucas, 1999). These criticisms resulted in the 1961 white paper, *Better Opportunities in Technical Education*, which aimed to improve standards and increase provision for technicians, craftsmen and operatives. Around the same period, the Robbins Report (1963) on higher education also impacted the FE sector. It recommended an increase in HE provision, advanced technology, teacher training institutions and polytechnics (Scott, 1995). Consequently, the 1966 white paper, *A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges*, established the binary divide between universities and polytechnics as providers of HE (National Archives, 2015). It was during the postwar era, that FE colleges were known as the 'local tech', institutions with a clear vocational identity rooted in the delivery of day-release and practical training courses to develop vocational skills and award practical qualifications.

However, in the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s, there were substantial changes in the function of the FE sector. The collapse of much of the UK's traditional industrial base in

the years following the OPEC oil boycott of 1973 brought about rapid changes in the labour market, de-industrialisation and mass unemployment was commonplace in many parts of the country – especially amongst young people (Tusting and Barton, 2007: 12). The *Employment and Training Act 1973* established the Manpower Services Commission, a national body created in 1974 to organise vocational training. Their role was to oversee and develop government initiatives such as the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) and other training schemes offering retraining and skills development to unemployed youth and adults. The decline in youth employment gave rise to the 'new vocationalism' (Atkins, 2009), which entailed the broadening of the curriculum in FE colleges to include more vocational courses. This gave rise to government employment schemes such as the YTS intended to develop job preparation and readiness for the unemployed school leaver (Avis, 1983).

However, because of the poor reputation of YOP and similar schemes, many young people chose to stay on at school, go straight into work, or enrol on full-time courses at FE colleges instead of government-led training programmes. Moreover, welfare benefits were progressively reduced for 16-18 year olds and sanctions were imposed on those refusing to engage in a Youth Training Scheme (Simmons et al., 2014). In 1988, 16 and 17 year olds were barred from receiving unemployment benefit, and the *Social Security Act 1988* ended the entitlement to means-tested benefit payments for most young people under the age of 18. Such changes helped to disguise levels of worklessness. Whilst young people without jobs were no longer officially classified as unemployed, policymakers were left searching for new ways of describing youth unemployment (Furlong, 2006).

During the mid to late 1980s, college organisational structures adopted a corporate identity, a strategic precursor to the incorporation of colleges into self-governing 'incorporations' with responsibility for their own staff, budgets, assets and marketing (Green and Lucas, 1999). With the introduction of the *Education Reform Act 1988*, the regulatory powers of college (and school) governing bodies increased while the power of local authorities declined. This development was the first step towards more independence and corporate status granted by the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* (Hyland and Merrill, 2003). In gaining corporate status, FE colleges were removed from local government control and instead were able to operate as self-governing 'incorporations' with responsibility for their own staff, budgets, assets, course planning and marketing - part of a neo-liberal turn to make educational institutions more competitive and adaptive to local needs.

**FE colleges after incorporation**

With the introduction of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*, the FE sector expanded and placed FE colleges and sixth form colleges under the same framework; sixth forms were previously under school regulations. Colleges and sixth form colleges consequently were incorporated into self-governing 'incorporations' on the 1st of April 1993; the incorporation of these colleges subsequently created a substantial shift of ownership and control away from the LEAs and on to colleges themselves. Hence, from this time FE colleges were no longer funded primarily with public money through local authorities. Instead, the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* required that colleges which were funded by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) use a new funding model based on details of the Individualised Learner Record (then known as the

Individualised Student Record) (Howard, 2009). Subsequent to this, FEFC introduced a new funding system described as an output-based funding model that emphasised key indicators around student retention and achievement, course completion and achievement of qualification (Panchamia, 2012).

Alongside these changes, the FEFC further introduced quality ratings and a new inspectorate that was to be responsible for quality assurance protocols instead of Her Majesty's Inspectorate and local inspectors of education as in the past (Fletcher et al., 2015). By implication, the quality rating awarded following college inspections determined the college's funding stream. In light of all these subsequent changes, these developments illustrate the point that although FE colleges became incorporated organisations they were neither fully public nor private organisations, mainly because the provision was heavily governed by national policy levers, funding mechanisms and a centralised funding council which replaced the role of local authorities (Coffield et al., 2008).

Central to this change was the introduction of new qualifications still relevant today, accredited by external bodies such as EDEXCEL (a hybrid term combining the words Education and Excellence; part of the Pearson qualifications group), OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and the Royal Society of Arts) and the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) (Tolland, 2016). These new qualifications included BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications awarded by EDEXCEL. These key vocational qualifications will be discussed in the subsequent section on qualifications.

During this period, FE reform was massively influenced by neoliberal processes that altered the role of education and its relationship with the knowledge economy. On this model, colleges have to work within a business and financial model, operating as businesses maintaining a widespread focus on financial growth, 'performance' and 'increased efficiency'. The education market became increasingly competitive, and the government discourse held that individuals require qualifications and high skills in order to compete in a competitive labour market and global economy. As a consequence, the onus is placed upon individuals to engage in some form of education and training in order to gain qualifications and training so they become employable and relevant to industry.

However, such a narrow definition of employability overlooks wider structural influences. The effects of neoliberalism can be observed in the FE sector: FE colleges, for instance, were directly impacted by the relative absence of local employers and a changing economy that was less industrial and more focused on the financial and service sectors (Cofield et al., 2008). As a consequence, wider structural factors therefore play a prominent role in impacting the extent to which FE colleges could supply relevant vocational education and work skills as announced in the government's skills agenda.

Furthermore, in 2001 additional changes occurred when the FEFC was replaced by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Unlike the FEFC, the LSC was given responsibility for planning funding and regulating learning opportunities in the context of community and adult learning, work-based training and other FE provision (Tolland, 2016). Along with this particular change, the LSC replaced and also brought together under one common planning framework a wide range of service provision that included the seventy-

two training and enterprise councils, three separate inspectorates, sixth form colleges, adult and community learning and other voluntary and community organisations (Coffield et al, 2008). Therefore, although colleges remained the dominant FE providers, they were now joined by a number of different organisational types which included private training companies, charities and various community organisations. Furthermore, great attempts were made to encourage general FE colleges to specialise in one or more vocational areas. For instance, the *Foster Report 2005* recommended that colleges should sharpen their main focus on their vocational origins and traditions as technical colleges (Foster, 2005). Likewise, the introduction of the Foundation Degree in 2001 formed part of the political drive to promote vocational excellence. Employers were therefore invited to participate in the design of vocational courses with the intention of encouraging the application of knowledge to specific workplace issues (Parry, 2012). In 2006, government schemes such as Train2Gain thus adopted an approach to align the sector with other public services (Foster, 2005). This political drive also resulted in colleges and private training companies competing with each other to deliver work-based training (Panchamia, 2012).

**FE and contemporary developments**

The introduction of the *Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learners Act 2009* established and formalised the National Apprenticeship Service as the principal apprenticeship scheme. The Act also established Sixth Form College Corporations which were distinctly different from FE Corporations. They were regulated by the Department for Education rather than the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2014). In 2010, the LSC was shut down and replaced by two new funding agencies: the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) which provided funding for youth between 16-19

years and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) which allocated funding for adult learners (Fletcher et al., 2015). Both organisations were smaller than the LSC, partly due to the coalition government's austerity measures and the decision to simplify funding methods (Fletcher et al., 2015). However, in 2012, the YPLA was replaced with the Education Funding Agency (EFA) whose remit was extended to include funding for education from ages 3-19 years (Hodgson et al., 2015). A new funding system was thus created whereby younger students in FE were funded on a per capita basis. Here, colleges were prevented from enrolling learners on qualifications that had no beneficial outcome, as identified in the *Wolf Review* (2011). The FE sector in England became funded by three separate government bodies: the Education Funding Agency (EFA), the SFA for some HE students in FE colleges and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

In 2015, the government introduced *Fixing the Foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation* (HM Treasury, 2015), a policy aimed at improving national productivity. This government plan aimed to increase the involvement of major stakeholders and outlined key responsibilities to re-shape and re-commission local and regional provision. The FE sector consequently faced further reform and this resulted in the creation of institutes of technology that had a specific focus on high-level skills. However, not all colleges were able to meet this mandate. The reform accordingly gave rise to a new wave of area reviews, which resulted in the closure of a number of colleges inspected and judged as 'inadequate'. The productivity plan also highlighted the government's intention to reform the professional and technical education system in England. Later, the Sainsbury Report (2016) instigated further FE reform when findings highlighted the need for substantial changes in vocational/technical routes in the FE sector. As a consequence, in July 2016

the *Post-16 Skills Plan* (BIS and DfE, 2016) was established to enhance quality standards, reduce the number of qualifications and limit awarding bodies responsible for technical qualifications. Stringent measures were established for further education institutions, along with a competitive bidding process whereby only one awarding body per route for level two and three qualifications was authorised to deliver these programmes. Qualifications were also now licensed and covered 15 different occupations or occupational groups.

**Qualifications and their frameworks**

There are various qualifications that are offered by FE colleges which include higher levels of qualifications such as high-skill technical and vocational education. They also offered intermediate and lower-level vocational and work-based provision that usually included a focus on numeracy and literacy skills, together with entry-level courses aimed at delivering the basic life skills that develop students' personal and social skills – as previously outlined in the introductory chapter.

The structure of qualifications is determined by three frameworks: the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).

**Figure 1: The qualification frameworks and the characteristics of their qualifications**

| **The QCF** | **The NQF** | **The FHEQ** |
|---|---|---|
| Mainly vocationally | The full range of | Applies to degrees, |

| related and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) | qualification types, including general, vocationally related qualifications and some NVQs | diplomas, certificates and other academic awards granted by a higher education provider in the exercise |
|---|---|---|

**Source: Pearson (2015) and (QAA, 2008)**

The NQF comprises of six different qualification levels, ranging from entry level up to level five. In 2004, level four was subdivided into levels four, five and six and the old level five was subdivided into level seven and level eight (QCA, 2004). These changes aimed to better match the FHEQ and the International Standard Classification of Education (a level classification system run by the United Nations) to help potential students (and other stakeholders) to identify possible progression routes for career paths (QCA, 2004).

**Figure 2: Example qualifications on the NQF and QCF**

| **National Qualifications Framework** | | **Qualifications and Credit Framework** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Level** | **Example qualifications** | **Level** | **Example qualifications** |
| 8 | NVQs level 5 | 8 | Vocational Qualifications level 8 |
| 7 | BTEC Advanced Professional | 7 | BTEC Advanced Professional Award, Certificate and |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Award, Certificate and Diploma<br>level 7<br>- Fellowship and Fellowship Diploma<br>- Postgraduate Certificate<br>- Postgraduate Diploma<br>- NVQ level 5 | | Diploma level 7 |
| 6 | NVQ level 4 | 6 | BTEC Advanced Professional Award,<br>Certificate and Diploma level 6 |
| 5 | HND<br>- NVQ level 4<br>- Higher Diploma | 5 | BTEC Professional Award, Certificate<br>and Diploma level 5<br>- HNC , HND |
| 4 | Certificate of Higher Education<br>- Key Skills level 4<br>- NVQ level 4 | 4 | BTEC Professional Award, Certificate<br>and Diploma level 4 |
| 3 | AS and A-level<br>- Advanced Extension | 3 | - BTEC Award, Certificate and Diploma |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Award<br>- Cambridge International Award<br>- International Baccalaureate<br>- Key Skills level 3<br>- NVQ level 3<br>- Advanced Diploma<br>- Progression Diploma | | level 3<br>- BTEC National<br>- OCR National<br>- Cambridge National |
| 2 | GCSE (grades A*-C)<br>- Key Skills level 2, Skills for Life level 2<br>- NVQ level 2<br>- Higher Diploma | 2 | - BTEC Award, Certificate and Diploma<br>level 2<br>- Functional Skills level 2 |
| 1 | GCSE (grades D-G)<br>- Key Skills level 1<br>- NVQ level 1<br>- Skills for Life level 1<br>- Foundation Diploma | 1 | BTEC Award, Certificate and Diploma<br>level 1<br>- Foundation Learning level 1<br>- Functional Skills level 1<br>- OCR National |
| Entry | Entry level Certificate<br>- Entry level Skills for Life ( Level 1 pre- | Entry | Entry level Award, Certificate and<br>Diploma |

| | vocational employability course) | | - Entry level Functional Skills<br>- Entry level Foundation Learning |
|---|---|---|---|

**Source: Pearson (2015)**

Each qualification framework constitutes a qualification level that indicates the rating of notional difficulty and value in comparison with other qualifications (GOV, 2015; QAA, 2008). For instance, GCSE and A-level qualifications are well recognised in England and usually taken at 16 and 18 respectively. GCSEs are usually deemed the precursor to A-level qualifications. Thus, on the NQF and QCF, the GCSE is at level two and the A-level is at level three. Also, to further illustrate and broaden focus, the table below briefly depicts the framework for HE qualifications.

**Figure 3: Example qualifications on the FHEQ:**

| **Framework for Higher Education Qualifications** | |
|---|---|
| **Level** | **Example qualifications** |
| 8 | Doctoral degrees (e.g. PhD/DPhil (including new-route PhD), EdD, DBA, DClinPsy)** |
| 7 | Master's degrees (e.g. MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)<br>Integrated master's degrees*** (e.g. MEng, |

| | |
|---|---|
| | MChem, MPhys, MPharm)<br>Postgraduate diplomas and certificates<br>Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)**** |
| 6 | Bachelor's degrees with honours (e.g. BA/BSc Hons)<br>Bachelor's degrees<br>Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)****<br>Graduate diplomas and certificates |
| 5 | Foundation degrees (e.g. FdA, FdSc)<br>Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)<br>Higher National Diplomas (HND) |
| 4 | Higher National Certificates (HNC)*****<br>Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE) |

**Source: QAA (2008)**

This qualification framework outlines a broad overview of the different types of qualification structures and varying levels of qualifications within the education sector as a whole. It is however necessary to adopt a more specific focus on the types of provision and qualifications on offer to better illustrate the extent to which students could potentially progress onto higher levels of study and further training within *The Site*.

**Overview of Qualifications and Courses within The Site:**

Although The Site provides a broad range of vocational and apprenticeship training, its predominant intake of students is mainly 16 to 18 year olds. The college offers a variety of FE courses that are structured along three main qualification frameworks: the pre-foundation and supported learning framework; apprenticeships and work-based provision; and BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications in various industry-related employments.

**Pre-foundation and supported learning framework (pre-vocational level)**

This framework of learning is a national programme based on the *Tomlinson Report* (2004), which established the government's 14–19 year old education reform designed to tackle low post-16 participation rates, offer greater flexibility, re-engage disengaged youth and provide better vocational routes aimed at equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need for further learning and employment. This framework accordingly provides a diverse range of courses that include youth employability courses such as the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, Learning for Living and Work, Supported Studies and ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) Skills for Life. The provision offers pre-vocational qualifications and alternative education for a diverse group of students operating outside mainstream provision, including NEET youth, those with a disability or special educational needs, and pupils excluded from school or on a reduced timetable. These courses generally aim to boost an individual's skills and confidence in order for them to achieve learning goals and progression into employment or further study. Although most courses within this learning framework did not demand any formal entry requirements, the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course was the exception.

Students were expected to function at Level 1 pre-foundation (students who had previously worked towards their GCSEs, without necessarily completing them), partly because progression options included further study on BTEC courses and apprenticeship training.

**BTEC qualifications (vocational/ mainstream provision)**

BTEC is a work-related qualification that was developed in consultation with employers and higher education experts. The course was designed for students to demonstrate higher standards of knowledge, practical skills and understanding (Pearson, 2015). As such, BTEC qualifications have work-placement requirements and can therefore lead to employment, while the Extended BTEC Level 3 programme in particular can equally grant access to university training. The BTEC qualification symbolically represents the first chance required to re-engage marginalised youth and improve their positioning on the qualification frameworks and within The Site.

BTEC qualifications were sought-after qualifications amongst many of my participants, since a place on any BTEC course gave students the chance to improve on previous low grades; gaining GCSEs or equivalent A-level qualifications was a possibility if they remained in further study. Likewise, a BTEC also placed them on a direct vocational pathway that could result in a vocational trade and/or university after BTEC level 3 study. From any point of view, BTEC qualifications are considerably desirable. It was therefore hardly surprising that the uptake of BTEC courses was usually popular amongst college students. Other than the substantial minority of students that might want employment or to go on to apprenticeship training, most student participants hoped to undertake BTEC

courses once they had completed the employability course. Whether these goals are to be accomplished is explored later in my thesis.

There are various levels of BTEC qualifications and the table below illustrates the entry requirements and progression options available to students at the time empirical research was undertaken.

**Figure 4: BTEC levels**

| BTEC Level | Entry Requirements | Progression details |
|---|---|---|
| **BTEC Level 1**<br>One year certificate | 3 GCSEs (grades D-G) and an interview | To a Level 2 qualification<br>or an apprenticeship |
| **BTEC Level 2**<br>One year extended certificate | 4 GCSEs (grades A*-E), including English and Maths | Completion of the full study programme at Merit/Distinction, including GCSE English and Maths at grade C.<br>Employment<br>or an apprenticeship |
| **BTEC Level 3 Subsidiary Diploma**<br><br>One-year level 3 | Students from Level 2 can progress if they achieved a relevant level 2 qualification with a | National Diploma<br>Employment<br>or an apprenticeship |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| programme worth 60 credits and is equivalent to one A Level | Distinction plus English and Maths GCSE at grade C or above | |
| **BTEC Level 3 National Diploma**<br><br>Two year programme, worth 120 credits and is equivalent to two A Levels | As above, but at 4 GCSEs grades at A*-C including Maths and English | Employment<br>or an apprenticeship |
| **BTEC Extended Diploma Level 3**<br>Two-year programme, worth 180 credits and is equivalent to three A Levels | 5 GCSEs at grades A*- C including Maths and English and 3 other science or humanities GCSEs (2 of the 5 being at grade B or above) | Progression to university<br>Employment<br>or an apprenticeship |

**Apprenticeship provision (mainstream vocational/ training provision)**

*The Site* offers apprenticeship provision and provides students with the opportunity to develop work-related knowledge and practical skills. A few participants were hoping to get an apprenticeship once they completed the employability course. *The Site* delivers intermediate and advanced apprenticeship provision on a wide range of courses. On both programmes, students are required to find an employer to undertake the apprenticeship programme.

**Figure 5: Type of Apprenticeships**

| **Type of Apprenticeship** | **Entry Requirements** | **Course Details** |
|---|---|---|
| **Intermediate Apprenticeship**<br>( Level 2 Certificate) | 4-5 GCSEs at grades A*-C including Maths and English<br>(Depending on the department that delivers this provision) | The duration of the course varies dependent on the qualification<br><br>Students have to undertake a basic skills assessment in English and Maths, a satisfactory interview with the Apprenticeship Hub team |
| **Advanced Apprenticeship** | Satisfactory completion of a relevant Level 2 qualification<br><br>Plus 5 A*-C GCSE grades including Maths and English | |

The above apprenticeship framework illustrates the respective entry requirements, but also shows how apprenticeship training is heavily regulated within *The Site*, possibly complicating the extent to which my participants were able to gain an apprenticeship.

This could be seen in the demand for a high academic tariffs and strong emphasis of GCSEs on industry-related provision.

Indeed, when it comes to participation in the labour market, the employment landscape is tough. Existing research illustrates significant constraints, for instance, employer engagement in apprenticeships did not increased at all from 2012-14. In 2012, the UKCES Employer Perspectives Survey found that only nine per cent of employers took on an apprentice and that this had only risen to ten per cent by the time of the 2014 study (Allen, 2016). Surveys indicate 939,270 applications were made via the apprenticeship vacancies website from 16 to 18 year olds in 2013/14 alone (House of Commons Library, 2015). Almost 461,500 new applicants submitted online applications through the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) between August and October 2013, representing an increase of 43 per cent but vacancies only increased by 24 per cent (Office for National Statistics, 2013). The NAS estimated there were twelve applicants for every post with twenty six applicants per vacancy in arts, media and publishing and twenty for ICT positions (Allen, 2016). Labour's shadow Business Secretary, Chuka Umunna, claimed on the BBC that it was 'more difficult to get an apprenticeship at British Aerospace or Rolls-Royce than it was to get a place at Oxbridge' (Allen, 2016). Put simply, post-16 learners face restricted access to the labour market and have limited choice to 'freely' choose from the diverse range of RPA provisions echoed in government rhetoric.

Gaining access to the employment sector is difficult and although several employment initiatives have been introduced, they did not often result in actual employment. To illustrate this point, take for example the Access to Apprenticeship pathway. Although

this provision was not available at *The Site*, nevertheless, it is a government strategy designed as a stepping stone to full apprenticeship. Yet existing research highlights that not many students progress to full apprenticeships after the six months completion period. For instance, drawing on government statistics, there were 5,500 starts on the Access to Apprenticeship pathway in 2012/13, of which 1,400 moved on to paid employment allowing them to complete their apprenticeships (Mirza-Davies, 2014). This is lower than 2011/12 when there were 7,200 starts on the Access to Apprenticeship pathway of which 3,000 moved on to paid employment (Mirza-Davies, 2014). The point made here is that the Access to Apprenticeship pathway did not appear to do what was anticipated; there were reduced numbers of places available and when students enrolled, these places rarely resulted in full apprenticeships.

Secondly, a focus on apprenticeship statistics illustrates a proportionate lack of apprenticeship provision for 16-18 year olds (see fig 6 below). The reported statistics revealed:

**Figure 6: Number of apprentices by age and total number of intakes per year**

*Academic years (1 August – 31 July) - England*

| **Age of apprentice** | **2009/ 10** | **2010/ 11** | **2011/ 12** | **2012/13** | **2013/ 14*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 16-18 | 186.000 | 203.000 | 190.000 | 179.000 | 257.000 |
| 19+ | 305.000 | 463.000 | 617.000 | 681.000 | 674.000 |
| All ages | 491.000 | 666.000 | 807.000 | 860.000 | 931.000 |

*Sources:* BIS, Statistical *First Release, DS/ SFR 20, October 2013*

** indicates illustrative forecasts; these figures are not available.*

The data indicate that there has been an overall increase in the number of apprenticeships made available for all individuals in England. However, a notable difference can be observed in the reported findings: for instance, although there has been a steady increase in apprenticeship places for 19 year olds and older, in contrast these numbers fluctuate for 16-18 year olds. Based on apprenticeship statistics in 2012/2013, the data indicates a total of 179,000 apprenticeship places for 16-18 year olds, in contrast with the 681,000 apprenticeship places available for 19 years and older individuals. There were approximately four times as many apprenticeship places for 19 years and older individuals in that year. On this basis, these statistics suggest a lack of apprenticeship provision for 16-18 year olds, which raises doubt over the extent to which vocational students really have a ‘choice’.  Such findings make me question the feasibility of apprenticeship provision for 16-18 year olds announced in RPA. This issue reinforces the argument that students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course may experience difficulties in securing an apprenticeship, based on national shortage of placements and additional stringent regulatory controls exercised on apprenticeship provision within The Site.

**Hierarchical divide and implications of the qualification structure**

It appears that the type of qualification determines the extent to which students are able to access opportunities and transition into further study or the labour market. For instance, vocational qualifications do not appear to attract the same economic benefits as academic qualifications (Dearden et al., 2002; Dickerson, 2006). This issue was particularly noted in the *Wolf Review* (2011) when it was discovered that GCSEs and A-levels were the ‘most highly valued’ qualifications with universities and employers. Furthermore, the

benefits of certain vocational qualifications below Level 2 are slight (McIntosh, 2002; Dearden et al., 2004; Dickerson, 2006). This distinction is apparent in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which illustrates a particular differentiation between vocational qualifications: Level 3 vocational courses are ranked more highly and are equivalent to A-levels, enabling progression to university; Level 2 courses are considered equivalent to GCSE qualifications. On the lower end of the spectrum, Level 1 and entry level courses held less academic status (Atkins, 2009). The completion of them provides a certificate that in theory should serve as an entry point for access to lower-level vocational courses or employment. Yet key research such as the *Wolf Review* (2011) discovered that these courses rarely offered progression and were often deemed a waste of time.

Level 1 qualifications rarely enter political and academic debates (DfES, 2002; DfES, 2003a; DfES, 2003b). In contrast, the Level 2 qualification gained particular status with the introduction of the DfES publication, *21st Century Skills: Realising our potential. Individuals, employers, nation* (2003). It established the notion of the 'Level 2 Attainment Threshold', outlining the 'minimum' credential for employability. This was set as five good GCSEs (grades A*-C) in order to achieve Level 2 qualifications. As a consequence, youth who have D-G GCSE grades attain Level 1 status by default and thus fall below the 'Level 2 Attainment Threshold'. They find themselves positioned on the lower ranks of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Atkins, 2009). Figuratively speaking, they are also placed at the bottom of the economy of student worth (Ball et al, 1998). Because of the overemphasis on GCSEs, other forms of capital were devalued: low GCSE grades

and previous work experience held less significance (Hillman, 2005; Kendall and Kinder, 2006).

## Conclusion

This chapter began with a historical focus to illustrate the developments of the FE sector and a succession of policy reform that shaped service provision and influenced funding systems. It also focused on the varying qualification frameworks that structured education provision in England, therefore identifying the awarding bodies and qualifications recognised within The Site. Particular attention was drawn to BTEC qualifications, and their significance as second chance provision for most participants. Hence, doing the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course offered a possible route to facilitate such prospects. However, the chapter also draws attention to some complications: although most participants reportedly wanted access to BTEC courses and indeed could benefit from such qualification, nevertheless it was a popular and 'sought-after' qualification in demand by many, bringing participants into direct competition with often better- qualified students for a place on the course. In this way, the chapter highlights the influences of the ethics of competition for access to a limited supply of education and training provision within *The Site.* Several sections in this chapter therefore started to identify complications for marginalised youth around student access to essential and desirable provision; particularly in respect of access to BTEC courses and apprenticeship provisions once they have completed the employability course.

In an important way, the qualification structure was instrumental in regulating entry requirements for courses. As such, the chapter reveals educational processes which

challenged RPA policy presumption that progression routes are viable for all students. In recognition of apprenticeship data, various challenges are identified which indicated stringent controls and a fundamental lack of apprenticeship provision for 16-18 year olds. Hence, although participation in post-16 education and training can be viewed as a starting point to attain qualifications, the education system has constructed tight educational constraints on a large proportion of British youth who have not achieved the required 5 A*-C GCSE grades. How students with low school-leaving qualifications are impacted is further explored and discussed in the empirical findings section of my thesis.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The preceding chapter outlines a highly complex further education system that is governed by a series of educational reforms ostensibly designed to establish a qualified workforce, and a 'fair' educational system. This political ethos is reflected in RPA legislation that underpins the political agenda of widening participation, upskilling and granting supposed equal access to the full range of post-16 education provision. Using insights from a range of literature, this chapter primarily focuses on five recurring themes that have emerged from the literature reviewed: the ethics of competition; raising aspirations; the role of educational credentials; discourse of meritocracy; and the discourses on 'supply' and 'demand'. Although the literature presents these themes in a variety of contexts, the review will primarily focus on an analysis of the political discourse surrounding post-16 education, the skills agenda and how this relates to marginalised youth in the FE sector.

### The 'ethics of competition'

The introduction of the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992* has been one of the most influential changes, inasmuch as this particular reform established neoliberal principles impacting FE operational systems and work practices within settings. As a consequence, colleges characterised as large-sized businesses driven by market principles; they were also centrally placed to meet students' consumer rights and demands including the purchase of an educational service. It also meant that colleges were opened up to the free market and could compete with each other for students, funding and resources. This ideological change created an 'ethics of competition', which transformed the educational landscape into a highly competitive enterprise. From the government's perspective,

'ethics of competition' primarily yields positive results; these competitive conditions help to promote choice, raise quality standards and strengthen attempts to build a highly-qualified and suitably trained workforce to compete in a global economy. However, although unstated in government rhetoric, the literature suggests that the 'ethics of competition' produces challenging and negative outcomes in education settings (Apple 1996, 2001, 2004). In particular, the literature shows that it gives rise to a performance culture within the post-16 education sector. This is reflected in the varying ways in which organisations regulate work practices: the close monitoring and surveillance measures imposed on students and staff; tutors faced with a heavy workload; and large numbers of socially disadvantaged students increasingly subject to mechanical and centrally-controlled measures (Simmons and Thompson, 2008). The performance culture, by which I mean the monitoring of educational services and staff performance through inspections and accountability measures, is furthermore seen in performance indicators including the standardised testing of pupils; the heavy focus on league tables and student satisfaction ratings and scores Institutions compete for students, especially those considered good' and 'promising' as well as the recruitment of the 'best' teachers (Graham and Neu 2004; Webb 2007; Webb et al, 2009; Metka Mencin Čeplak, 2012). In this way, the existing academic literature highlights an increasingly competitive bureaucratic education system that prioritises performance and accountability measures, calculated to enhance quality standards of teaching and learning.

In the same vein, these competitive conditions within institutions also largely contribute to a 'blame culture' (Avis, 2003) and an unhealthy emphasis on fear and control within education settings (Lambert, 2016). Central to these governance processes, is the

increasing involvement of regulatory agencies such as the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), an inspection agency that conducts institutional evaluations on the apparent quality of education provision within a setting; placing institutions in direct competition with one another. In keeping with the principles of competition, colleges and educational institutions are rated as ‘excellent’, ‘good’, ‘required improvement’ or ‘inadequate’. Ironically, although Ofsted inspections are subjective and open to manipulation, inspection ratings are taken as read and take on greater significance in a competitive enterprise. For instance, Ofsted’s quality ratings are widely publicised and often used as a framework by parents and students to prejudge a setting’s quality of education provision. As a consequence, competitive conditions have led to popular colleges and courses being oversubscribed, enabling certain settings and departments to cherry pick what they consider to be the best students. Colleges with lower quality ratings are subject to stringent regulatory processes which may result in institutions either being shut or advised to merge. Similarly, these competitive conditions have created the potential for discrimination of students, particularly in the context of intense competition for scarce educational resources (Kaščák and Pupala, 2010; 2011).

Several academic studies confirm that there are limited educational and training opportunities (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997; Edwards and Alldred 2000; Holmer Nadesan 2002; Lareau 2003; Pongratz, 2011; Kaščák and Pupala, 2010; 2011), an issue that was noted in previous discussions on the lack of apprenticeship provision for youth and the oversubscription of BTEC courses. These studies draw attention to issues of discrimination and marginalisation when settings face the challenge of limited educational provision together with concerns over meeting performance targets. It was discovered that

the use of strict regulatory systems facilitates the management of scarce resources; however various studies reveal that these regulatory conditions often disadvantage marginalised youth, contributing to traditional social inequities, hierarchies, and segregation (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993; Whitty et al, 1993; Ball et al, 1994; Apple 1996, 2001, 2004; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; James et al. 2010). Research suggests that NEET and disengaged students, such as those who participated in my study, are more likely to be marginalised and may consequently face challenges in gaining access to popular courses such as BTEC and apprenticeships within The Site. Placed in direct competition with students who have higher academic grades and a stable period in education, participants with previous academic failure enrolled on an employability course (positioned on the bottom of the education framework) are less likely to be considered as favourable students given the greater uncertainty that they could help institutions achieve their performance targets.

Current academic conditions marginalise and reproduce social division within contemporary education settings by using various educational processes such as raised entry requirements and a prioritisation of academic qualifications, which are likely to disqualify those with no or low school-leaving qualifications like students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. Thus, contrary to supply-side explanations propagated by the government, the rising competitive culture within academic institutions gradually constrains the extent to which marginalised young people are able to upskill and acquire qualifications to become skilled, qualified workforce members as echoed in RPA rhetoric. Therefore, although RPA promotes the idea of greater availability of post-16 options, in actual practice, research (Mirza-Davies, 2014; Allen, 2016) has discovered limited RPA

provision. Contrary to the political assumption that students can make a straightforward transition from education into the preferred routes of either higher levels of study or the labour market, instead, there is doubt as to whether or not there are actual available and meaningful education opportunities in FE colleges, particularly for marginalised youth.

**The notion of raising aspirations**

In the previous section, I drew attention to the competitive and performance culture that increasingly operates within education settings. Likewise, academic discourse exposes the duplicity that underpins the 'ethics of competition': although the government claims it improves outcomes for the setting, students and the state, academic evidence shows it also reproduces disadvantage for students that lack the required credentials and skills within a particularly competitive environment. Despite these structural influences, current government thinking maintains a focus on individuals and claims that there are various factors that stop young people from disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting from higher academic and economic outcomes. In this respect, poverty of aspiration has been singled out as a key contributing factor, announced in one of Gordon Brown's speeches as Prime Minister when he stated: 'Poverty of aspiration is as damaging as poverty of opportunity and it is time to replace a culture of low expectations' (Brown, 2007). Likewise, a few years on, Prime Minister David Cameron stated, 'It's that toxic culture of low expectations – that lack of ambition for every child - which has held this country back' (Cameron 2012).

Adopting a historical focus, Raco (1990) highlights that the current rhetoric on aspirations has its roots embedded in a change in politics: the ideological shift from the

'expectational citizen' that expected state support under Keynesian economics, to the neoliberal conception of the 'aspirational citizen', an individual who aspires to achieve on their own without governmental interference. Hence, in the current political climate, the aspirational citizen has been construed as someone who simply requires aspirations to be 'unleashed' and actualised (Abrahams, 2016). In so doing, governments individualise structural inequalities and expect individuals to succeed, regardless of social structural inequalities that constrain individual efforts. With this in mind, academics such as Reay (2012b: 9) criticise the rhetoric of 'raising aspirations', considering it to be an 'ideological whip' used to beat the working classes.

Governments hence persist with a focus on a poverty of aspiration and consider it to be a threat to national economic wealth. Noticeably, this particular discourse has commonly been linked to political concerns over NEET youth echoed in RPA legislation. Being NEET generated economic concerns not just for the individuals involved, but also for the state and taxpayer, who suffered a loss of income tax and national insurance estimated at around £22 billion in additional public spending, and a total of up to £77 billion a year when lost income is included (Coles, B; Godfrey, C; Keung, A et al, 2010). Also, periods spent NEET incur significant financial costs to the Exchequer in terms of benefit payments (Foley, 2014). Other than the actual financial cost implications, symbolically, being NEET also potentially threatens the political outlook for the qualified workforce required to compete in a highly competitive global economy.

The role of social class in relation to aspirations has also been widely researched and found to play a key role (Bates, 1990; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Dumais, 2002;

Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Archer and Yamashita, 2003; Patton and Creed, 2007). Research suggests that aspirations amongst middle- and upper-class students tend to be higher than their working-class counterparts; affluent students were found to have access to greater economic and cultural capital, which enable them to develop more ambitious occupational goals (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) and greater academic success (Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Croll, 2009; Croll and Attwood, 2013). These studies confirm Bourdieu's theory of capital, which recognises that children from affluent and middle income parents benefit from access to social and cultural capitals which position them to attain greater academic achievements within education settings.

Although in one respect we could take the view that affluent students are realistic in their aspirations given their access to material wealth, what these findings also suggest is that the individual's access to economic wealth appears to be linked to students' aspirations and success even though this discourse is distinctly absent from political rhetoric. This issue is especially noted in the works of various scholars, who argue that the political discourse of aspiration overlooks the social and contextual nature of aspiration construction (Brown, 2011; St Clair and Benjamin, 2011; Roberts and Evans, 2012; Allen, 2013). Instead, researchers identified a multitude of factors that influence levels of aspiration: i.e. the enabling or constraining nature of social class (Dumais, 2002; Schoon and Parsons, 2002; Archer and Yamashita, 2003); gender (Kniveton, 2004; Archer et al., 2007); parental influence (Miller and Cummings, 2009; Dalley-Trim and Alloway, 2010); peers (Dixon et al., 2008); tutors (Riseborough, 1992; Morrison, 2009; Mittendorff et al., 2010) and classroom practices (Bates, 1990; Woodman, 2012). In light of these studies, it

is clear that the issue of aspirations is far more complex and is interconnected with social structural factors too.

By no means does this suggest that youth from deprived communities lack aspirations. On the contrary, studies have found that young from working class backgrounds have aspirations, but these were considered to be far higher than the UK labour force could accommodate - aspiration raising interventions were therefore not considered necessary (Rose and Baird, 2013; St Clair et al., 2013; Archer et al., 2014). The Social Exclusion Task Force also reports:

> 'Disadvantaged young people do not have fundamentally different aspirations from their more advantaged peers' (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008: 10).

However, research also found that marginalised youth are likely to have what could be considered unrealistic aspirational goals. This might be the case, but it is equally necessary to take into consideration the competing influences of structural inequalities and stringent academic conditions which play a considerable role in making reasonably realistic aspirational goals, such as getting on a BTEC level 1 course, appear unrealistic within a competitive college environment. My thesis aims to investigate this issue as it acknowledges that although an individual's aspirations play a key role, the competing influences of broader socio-economic factors and the prevailing 'ethics of competition' cannot be diminished or overlooked. Here it is important to gather empirical evidence to investigate the extent to which this particular college setting, governed by principles of competition, is able to facilitate the aspirational goals and progression opportunities of marginalised youth currently engaged in an employability course.

**The role of educational credentials**

Rooted in supply-side explanations, government discourse similarly identifies that a lack of credentials, knowledge and skills are contributory factors that create inequality and poor outcomes amongst individuals. Such rhetoric was previously discussed in the employability discourse and youth employability schemes aimed at developing employability skills amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are various academic studies that support the government discourse: research has found that when young people left school with insufficient qualifications, educational choices were limited. They were unable to pursue higher-status academic or vocational courses that could potentially attract greater economic gain and credentials (Bathmaker 2005; Atkins 2008). Also, youth from deprived communities faced greater degrees of economic insecurity when leaving school prematurely (Thompson, 2011). Against this background, various policies such as RPA were introduced to give all youth equal access and scope to attain higher academic qualifications and levels of training within the education and employment sectors.

The increasing political drive for a skilled, qualified workforce is evident in various policies such as the white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). This particular policy announced the requirement for five GCSEs A*-C grades in English, mathematics, a science, a humanity and a language. By implication, the current demand for five A*-C GCSEs has in an important way raised educational standards and also established the benchmark for employability (Simmons et al, 2011; Atkins, 2011). In this way of thinking, education is construed as a 'positional good' (Hirsch, 1996), a means to improve life outcomes and economic wealth. As a result, GCSE qualifications gained elevated

status and have become the set entry standards for access to higher levels of study and employment. Breen and Goldthorpe's (1997) Rational Action Theory (RAT) demonstrates the credentialist nature and growing preference for educational credentials prominent within social institutions. It is apparent that in the current educational landscape governed by conditions of competition, high academic credentials, supported by government policy, are used as a key regulatory mechanism to manage scarce educational resources within education settings. As a consequence, those with lower or no GCSEs are disadvantaged and marginalised from an actual chance to engage in higher levels of study and training. Here, drawing on Foucault's (1978) theory on neo-liberal governmentality and its emphasis on a new form of *homo economicus*. I highlight the various contradictions whereby higher levels of educational attainment are construed as obligatory, yet current policies and competitive academic conditions restrict those with less skills, abilities and knowledge to improve on previous academic failure.

Hence, although the government holds individuals responsible for the lack of credentials, skills and knowledge, this review highlights complexity and consequently identifies constraining influences within government policies that create educational processes which reproduce inequality and perpetuate unequal outcomes. To illustrate: on the one hand policies are introduced to raise educational standards and prioritise higher GCSEs in an attempt to build a qualified workforce, but on the other hand, legislation uses raised credentials as a framework to divide and regulate student access to essential provision. Take for instance, *Crossing the Line: Improving success rates among students retaking English and Maths GCSEs* (Porter, 2015). This document lays out a policy requiring learners with GCSE grade D in English or Maths to resit in order for them to attain the

A*-C grade in the required subject. Although these students are given a second opportunity, this chance does not exist for NEETs and those with lower GCSE grades. Ultimately, these forms of educational processes make it acutely difficult for students with low or no school-leaving qualifications to attain higher credentials within contemporary education settings.

A further concern was raised over the low quality of education and training provision made available to marginalised youth, thereby restricting the extent to which students could acquire higher credentials within settings (Atkins, 2009; Simmons et al, 2009; Wolf, 2011). The *Wolf Review* (2011) in particular reports several concerns: learners are engaged in qualifications that hold very little significance, nor would be recognised in the next few years; and a large proportion of 16 to 19-year-olds are on courses that fail to promote progression into either employment or further education. Likewise, an ethnographic study on Entry to Employment (E2E) learners highlights that the course contributes to the socialisation of many of these young people for a life of low-paid and insecure work (Simmons et al, 2011). The study shows how discourses of disengagement and non-academic disposition add to the marginalisation of such youth within mainstream education (Thompson, 2011). These findings are no different to previously mentioned critiques raised in sociological perspectives on youth employability schemes when they were first introduced. Years later, contemporary studies on disengaged and low-achieving youth found that likewise, the E2E employability course they enrolled on did not offer opportunities for improved academic and employment outcomes.

Hence, structural influences play an evident role in student outcomes. A body of academic evidence concurs that broader systemic factors may well prohibit students' actual chance to attain higher educational credentials within education settings (Atkins, 2009; Simmons et al., 2011). Yet, the government tends to adopt a prioritised focus on individual factors, announced in current rhetoric on educational credentials and its purported academic and employment benefits. It also meant that a lack of educational credentials was often used as key explanation for employability difficulties, ordinarily overlooking wider structural influences which equally impacted employment prospects. What's more, scholars conducted a closer analysis of educational credentials and Bourdieu's (1977a) theory of capital in particular, identified the embedded power that was intrinsic to educational credentials within settings. Thus, contrary to political rhetoric, Bourdieu's theory essentially recognises the embedded power within educational credentials which governed students' capacity to attain higher academic and employment outcomes in academic settings. Extending this idea of capital to GCSEs and its contemporary significance, this analysis exposed the qualification's embodied power, shown in its inherent capacity to pre-determine students' trajectory and subsequent access to higher levels of further study and training.

Bourdieu's theory of capital, detailed in chapter five, has particular significance because his work recognises how students from middle and affluent families have access to greater economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital which furthers their advantage within the education setting. In so doing, Bourdieu's work highlights key educational processes and operational systems which facilitate social exclusionary practices within education institutions. The effects are demonstrated in practice, whereby education settings apply

higher academic qualifications to serve as entry requirements when regulating entry to essential and desirable education and training provision. By implication, those with fewer and lower credentials were mostly denied access to key provision. From this perspective, RPA youth find themselves in competitive academic and employment environments; participation is made harder for those who lack or have lower educational credentials. This review therefore highlights that participants in my study mostly likely would face multiple barriers in college, compounded by the lack of school-leaving qualifications.

**The discourse on meritocracy**

RPA propagates the idea that participation in education not only gives an opportunity to gain educational credentials, but it also provides individuals with the chance to gain better life outcomes. A closer analysis of RPA reveals an underpinning discourse of meritocracy, reflecting the ideological belief that if one works hard in education and aims high, one will achieve one's goals and improve one's social standing, regardless of personal background. This particular ideology could be seen during the twentieth century: the middle class was growing in size, and amongst those born after 1950, 50% remained in the working class whilst the other 50% had risen, at least into the intermediate class. Typically one of two working class children rose out of that class (Roberts, 2011:186). This process thus promoted the idea that education is essential for personal development (Ainley, 2016). However others, such as Savage (2016) theorise that individuals were simply sucked up into a new kind of employment system rather than pushing themselves into it.

What's more, he argues that mobility within the competitive education system increases rather than diminishes class inequality as those with the greatest resources do better. In this way, educational institutions are implicated in growing inequalities (Savage, 2016). Take for example the idea of social mobility - it has always been presumed to be upwards (Ainley, 2016). However, a review of background literature indicates varied outcomes depending on types and qualification levels: academic qualifications such as A-levels held higher success rates (Payne, 1999), whilst vocational qualifications did not appear to attract the same economic benefits as academic qualifications (Dearden et al., 2002; Dickerson, 2006). Whilst there is some research evidence in support of upward mobility, nowadays, the chances of people from working class backgrounds entering top-level occupations are much lower than they are for those from higher social classes (Sweenie, 2009).

Bourdieu (1979) recognises that political ideology overlooks the complex ways in which meritocracy masks the real structural inequality in the system. Scholars such as Reay (1998:1) suggest that 'the myth of meritocracy normalises inequalities, converting them into individual rather than collective responsibilities'. Within the meritocracy discourse, individual notions of intelligence or potential are thus emphasised while broader systems and structural influences are overlooked. Various studies acknowledge the complex and inter-related factors beyond individual efforts that can constrain student achievement and success within the education sector. There are several studies that challenge notions of meritocracy, particularly in relation to NEET youth and those who tend to have no or low school-leaving qualifications. There are key obstacles: for instance, Simmons et al (2013) identify substantial difficulties and barriers to participation when NEET young people

engage in education; these are further exacerbated by concerns over family and personal circumstances. Despite this, in their study, virtually all participants had aspirations for work and further education (arguably realistic goals in this case) and some had ambitions to go on to higher education or professional study. However, Simmons et al (2013) found that instead of gaining access to meaningful courses that could result in improved outcomes, former NEET youth were expected to repeat compulsory study and training on courses that offered little scope for meaningful progression. In this case, conditions on the course and within the setting have complicated the extent to which these students could progress and attain the goals, illustrating my previous argument on aspirations. For marginalised youth, institutional factors can create conditions that can make relatively reasonable aspirational goals appear unrealistic or 'high'. Within a competitive milieu, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face several barriers within the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979).

Likewise, Bradley and Lenton (2003) found that students without GCSEs were likely to drop out early from courses. The key idea put forward was that in order for NEET youth and other marginalised learners to achieve improved outcomes, they would need access to 'significantly different forms of education and training' (Simmons et al, 2013:1). Gaining access to education provision takes on greater significance for NEET youth. They predominantly come from working class backgrounds and a substantial proportion has no or low school-leaving qualifications. Some consider FE study as a 'second chance' opportunity, whilst for others it is the 'last chance saloon' (Allen and Ainley, 2010). The courses for NEET youth often lacked quality and embodied little more than 'warehousing' (Maguire, 2013:65-66). The *Wolf Review* (2011) particularly

recommended reform and better-quality post-16 education and training provision in vocational education. In the end, although participation in education has potential social and economic gains, these benefits seem diminished for marginalised youth.

Therefore, a growing body of academic evidence challenge any taken-for-granted notion that all youth, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, would ordinarily benefit from engagement in the education sector. In fact, key scholars such as Paul Willis (1977) identified distinct educational processes which reproduced social inequality and as a consequence, limited the extent to which many youth from working class background could attain higher academic outcomes within the education sector. Willis' classic study on the 'lads' has particular relevance, because most students who enrolled on contemporary employability courses tend to come from working class backgrounds. Therefore using his theory as part of my analytical framework, aim to discover whether this notion of a counter-school culture similarly existed or whether my participants had different experiences of the education system altogether. The lads in Willis' study resisted formal schooling and resorted to working class culture to manage their status within school, which as a consequence hampered their capacity to get qualifications and therefore they continued to be working class. Yet, in Willis' day, the lads found employment in factories which supported their masculine identity; today very few such jobs exist.

Admittedly, there has been a succession of educational policy reforms following the Willis' study. As a result, the first two sections of my thesis specifically foreground how the government continues to introduce neoliberalist policies, distinguished in RPA to re-

organise and transform the FE sector so that it supports the growth of a marketised, consumer-driven provision. However several studies on education reform found that as these neoliberal tendencies increase and intensify, instead of improving student outcomes as per the meritocracy discourse, they reinforce and increase inequalities across generations (Machin, 2003; Themelis, 2008). Even so, my contemporary focus on the enforcement of RPA within a college, may clarify whether RPA indeed made an actual difference in facilitating the actual achievement of higher academic and training goals for participants at The Site.

Furthermore, there is a long-standing achievement gap in England that is closely associated with socio-economic status (Cassen and Kingdon 2007, DCSF 2009 and Strand 2014). Children start education with differing access to levels of resources (Gorard, 2000). Research indicates that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to achieve lower GCSE grades than their counterparts (Rasbash et al 2010; Clifton and Cook, 2012; DfE, 2012; OECD, 2010). Although social policies aim to address this issue, an Ofsted report, *Unseen children: Access and achievement 20 years on* (2013), highlighted that years later, there still remains a substantial minority of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not succeed at school or college. Vocational students face hidden, challenging barriers which lead to a pathway that gives the illusion of opportunity (Atkins, 2009). Such language of opportunity can be seen in RPA and official rhetoric on post-16 education. Yet as previously indicated, choice is limited and access restricted to students with higher academic credentials. In its current state, low-level provision is judged to be unsuitable for promoting meritocracy and the enhanced goals alluded to in RPA and related political discourse.

Although education may provide meritocratic opportunities and may therefore facilitate improved academic and employment outcomes, these benefits are considerably diminished for NEET youth and those with low school-leaving qualifications in education settings. However, this does not mean that it is outside the realm of possibility for these youth to gain from further study. A select few individuals with low grades on similar employability courses may experience elements of meritocracy within the education system, but the explanatory factors are beyond the scope of this research. However, what research has shown is that for the majority of young people with low academic grades, current academic conditions limit the extent to which they could attain improved academic outcomes. Issues highlighted are concerns over the curriculum, work practices and structural influences which compound and further contribute to the negative outcomes for students enrolled on lower level courses. As a consequence the literature review cautions that a proportion of students engaged in my research are likely to experience similar complexities within this FE college.

**‘Supply’ and ‘demand’: unequal access and ‘tough’ youth labour market conditions**

Contrary to the political discourse which suggests young people ‘lack’ suitable levels of aspiration, skills and qualifications, the academic literature highlights complications when conceptualising youth participation in the current labour market sector. Academics suggest that the issue is not primarily about the individual, rather there are greater concerns over economic and socio-structural factors embedded within the youth employment sector, that produce unequal employment outcomes (Roberts, 2009; Simmons et al., 2014). Ken Roberts (2009:365) accentuates this point:

> Youth labour market imbalances in the UK are not due to a poverty of ambition. Young people today are excessively ambitious relative to the jobs that the economy offers. There is wealth of talent and a wealth of ambition, and overall shortage of jobs, not least good jobs…the economy cannot generate enough jobs…These are plain facts about current opportunity structures that need to be addressed, not young people making the wrong choices.

Roberts rejects government claims on aspirations and instead highlights key concerns over the shortage of jobs and systemic failure within the economy that gives rise to unequal outcomes within the youth labour market. Likewise, Standing (2011) claims that the economy fails to foster 'good' jobs as the relatively low level of unemployment is only sustained by part-time and insecure work. Adopting a critical focus on the contributing influences of broader economic and socio-structural factors, academic discourse identifies 'who' or 'what' is doing the excluding, i.e. governments and businesses, rather than explanations that focus on the social characteristics of marginalised individuals (Byrne, 1999). This type of language diverges from the political discourse, which essentially blames youth for low skills and aspirations instead of recognising broader socio-structural factors that equally impact the youth labour market (Atkins, 2013; Ainley, 2016).

Wider academic literature reveals tension and contradictions in relation to the government's 'supply' and 'demand' explanations. For instance, political rhetoric often expresses concerns over the need to provide young people with skills that are needed by the economy (DfEs, 2006; DfE, 2011; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012; DfE, 2013). However, researchers such as Hutton (1995) suggest not all employers

want or need the highly-skilled workers described by neoliberal government, who operate with a high-skills rhetoric. Scholars illustrate that in the current milieu the issues of unemployment, low-skilled, temporary work with low-status training at present appear to be a reality for some youth (Standing, 2011; Allen and Ainley, 2014). Hence contrary to the rhetoric, the literature states that it is no longer the case that greater investment in education will automatically lead to rewarding jobs (Brown et al., 2011). Such discourse challenges contemporary government rhetoric on RPA and the employability discourse with respect to NEET youth.

Government rhetoric remains inconsistent with the reality of the youth labour market. In view of ‘the employability equation’ (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), academics draw attention to the inconsistency in the political rhetoric surrounding the ‘skills agenda’. Drawing on the ‘demand side’ explanations, Gordon Brown claimed in 2006 that ‘of the 3.4 million unskilled jobs today, we will need only 600,000 by 2020’ (Gordon Brown, Budget Speech, 2006). However, Mansell (2010) suggests that this claim derives from a misunderstanding of the findings of the Leitch Report (2006: 50). The report states that, if proposed skills policies are successful, there are likely to be 600,000 low skilled *workers* by 2020, not 600,000 low skilled jobs. The government’s predictions on employment thus misinterpreted the findings of the Leitch Report. Although continually warned by experts, very senior policymakers including the prime minister continue to persist with this erroneous interpretation of the Leitch Report. What is more, although the numbers of unqualified jobseekers will have dropped to around 600,000 in 2020 – as predicted in the Leitch Report - researchers found that without a concerted policy effort, the numbers of jobs requiring no qualifications is likely to remain at around 7.4 million (Lawton, 2009).

The idea that future job opportunities would be concentrated in high-skill graduate positions was arguably exaggerated (Cox and Davies, 2014).

Furthermore, even if the supply of better-skilled jobs were to increase, it does not suggest there will be an equivalent demand from employers for those skills (MacDonald, 2011; Simmons, 2010). Significantly, Keep and Mayhew (2010: 569) warn against the preconceived idea that upskilling was the main solution to unemployment or low-paid work as such rhetoric disregards 'the scale and persistence of low-paid employment within the UK economy…the numbers of jobs requiring little or no qualification appears to be growing rather than shrinking'. In fact, it was reported that employers at the lower end of the labour market find 'little difficulty in filling vacancies' and show 'little demand for a more skilled workforce… low-paid work in the domestic [UK] economy remains, and someone has to undertake it if the economy and society are not to collapse' (Keep and Mayhew, 2010: 570). Thus, instead of creating opportunities for high-skilled employment in line with the skills rhetoric, in its place research found a perpetual employment demand for low-skilled employment which also tends to be temporary. Thus people churn in and out of work, not due to choice but due to 'flexible' employment policies. From this, it has become evident that the issue around youth unemployment is deeply complex, highlighting systemic and structural difficulties within the employment market that perpetuate unequal employment outcomes. So, at present the political rhetoric on youth employment overlooks key systemic issues around the employer demand for low-skilled workers and a discernible lack of job creation initiatives in line with the skills agenda.

Evidently, in the current neoliberal context, youth employment conditions are tough. This can be seen in the influx and continued over-supply of well-qualified workers relative to demand for them from employers (MacDonald, 2011; Simmons et al, 2011; 2014; Allen and Ainley, 2010; Ainley, 2016; Avis and Atkins, 2017). Thus, research indicates that a highly-skilled, qualified workforce is available. However, instead of the market suitably rewarding students, with more pay, more job specifications ask for degrees even though the roles did not require degree-level skills or knowledge (Roberts, 2010). This has therefore created a situation whereby ‘a degree is needed to “get” the job, if not to carry it out’ (Ainley, 2016:24).

In this highly competitive employment market, nowadays there is pressure on all students at both ends of the spectrum. There is increased competition for limited graduate jobs amongst those with degrees (MacDonald, 2011; Ainley, 2016; Roberts, 2010), but it is also a reality that non-graduates face increasing pressure to gain higher qualifications in order to ‘keep up’ (MacDonald, 2011). Students with low school leaving qualifications are therefore disadvantaged in such a competitive labour market and may therefore struggle to make a transition into the youth employment market. The current situation clearly brings marginalised NEET youth engaged on lower level courses, into direct competition with higher-qualified youth for access to a declining youth labour market.

**Conclusion**

Research into the educational experiences of marginalised youth is important, particularly in view of the political discourse on NEETS and the stated RPA benefits of post-16 education. My thesis therefore uses RPA as a framework to investigate the educational

experiences and, more specifically, the type of education provision made available together with progression prospects when similar marginalised youth enrol on an employability course within an FE college. To this end, research questions have been designed to examine how these outcomes compare with RPA logic. Further consideration is also given to broader structural influences, institutional factors and tutors' work practices and their consequent implications on students' capacity to access and attain higher academic goals within *The Site*. As a consequence, in conducting this literature review, I have been able to draw on a range of academic literature and relevant policies to examine and contextualise the research topic.

Whilst undertaking this review, however, it became evident that research into the educational experiences of marginalised youth was fraught with tension and contradiction. For instance, it is well documented that structural factors inhibit educational achievement, yet conversely there is also evidence that teaching and education, albeit very limited, can lift a substantial minority so they attain improved academic and employment outcomes. Why a few individuals on the same course manage to achieve aspirational goals within settings and others do not, is a complex idea further explored in my thesis. This situation is further compounded when academic research highlights that far from encountering a straightforward experience, marginalised youth face complex and tough academic and youth labour market conditions brought on by neoliberal influences operating within settings. Various studies recognise the effects of neoliberalism and its performance culture, as can be seen in a range of stringent regulatory mechanisms that govern and manage scarce educational resources.

As a consequence, the literature shows that educational institutions have become a competitive landscape in which students are competing and vying for access to essential and desirable educational provision. In this way, students with low or no school-leaving qualifications are placed in direct competition with peers who have relatively higher grades and who are considered to be more capable of achieving academic goals. Taken together, the academic literature highlights that under the principles of competition, youth with low or no school qualifications, similar to my research participants, are likely to experience marginalisation from key provision within an education setting. In contrast to the government's skills agenda and RPA's ethos of widening participation and social inclusion, various studies draw attention to the contrasting experiences of marginalisation, restricted access, low-quality provision and limited education provision necessary for student transition onto further study in vocational education, skills and training.

Furthermore, the review drew attention to conflicting ideas regarding this notion of aspiration in relation to youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. Inconsistent ideas were identified in the government's claim that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds lack aspirations, whilst a body of academic research recognises that marginalised youth have aspirations, although deemed to be unrealistic and disproportionately higher than the labour market could accommodate. However, more plausible explanations were reflected in the works of academics who have conducted specific research on marginalised youth within education settings (see for example Simmons et al, 2011; Atkins, 2010; 2013). They argue that a combination of broader structural factors and inequalities within education settings equally contribute to conditions that limit the extent to which marginalised youth are able to attain reasonably realistic aspirational goals, i.e. perhaps

doing a vocational course within education settings. These studies have relevance since my student participants also represent marginalised youth within an academic setting. It is therefore worthwhile to consider the issue of aspirations as part of my thesis in order to determine whether participants have aspirational goals and if so, how realistic these ambitions are; and what is their chance of accomplishing these goals within *The Site*. In so doing, I will be able to investigate and identify a range of issues, including the extent to which broader structural issues and institutional factors determine students' capacity to progress onto higher levels of study and training within *The Site.*

In choosing participants on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, my study sets out to explore whether this particular RPA re-engagement provision is able to promote choice, social inclusion, access and opportunities to upskill as proclaimed in government rhetoric. However, if findings suggest otherwise, my study aims to identify which factors contribute to these contrasting experiences and the resulting consequences for these participants. To this end, qualitative research was conducted over a period of two academic years, from 2013 to 2015, drawing on a range of qualitative strategies in the form of interviews with individual students and staff members, student focus groups, classroom observations, and an analysis of student records, policy and organisational documents.

In the next chapter, I will describe this approach and the methodological strategy used to investigate this research topic. Once key research details have been provided, the chapter will conclude with a consideration of research ethics, as well as a discussion of the benefits and limitations of this study.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The preceding literature review provides insight into an evaluation of central themes relevant to the research area including: the 'ethics of competition'; notions of raising aspirations; the role of educational credentials; a discourse on meritocracy; and the discourses on 'supply' and 'demand'. Key political ideas on marginalised youth and the role of post-16 education were considered using academic evidence, enabling me to contextualise the educational and employment landscapes within which my thesis is situated. The research focus is topical and necessary, particularly in view of numerous stereotypical assumptions about NEET youth and the political belief that RPA offers young people with low school leaving purpose, giving young people with low or no school-leaving qualifications and skills the opportunity to gain improved academic and employment outcomes when they participate in post-16 education and training.

In conducting this empirical research, my thesis focuses on an employability course designed for NEET youth; it is fictitiously named the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. The research aim is to explore the extent to which former NEET and disengaged youth are able to improve on previous academic failure and gain access to higher levels of education and training at *The Site*, a local FE college. The Level 1 Achieving Skills Course is a full-time course which runs from September to June (36 weeks), and provides a highly supportive learning environment focusing on a combination of vocational learning, personal and social skills development, Functional Skills (English and Maths) and enrichment activities aimed at developing confidence and social skills. Students on this course undertook work on career planning, job searches, confidence building, health awareness and involvement with outside agencies. Upon completion of the course,

students gain a qualification in a City and Guilds Extended Certificate in Employability and Personal Development, as well as Functional Skills in English and Maths. It is expected that students on this course will benefit from improved qualifications that make them ready for employment. With this in mind, empirical research was conducted on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course to explore how participants benefit from the employability course provided at *The Site.*

**Key research questions**

3.1.1 What are the educational experiences of students on this employability course within this FE college?

3.1.2. How do government and institutional policies, together with other institutional factors, influence these particular students' access to education provision and ability to progress once they have completed the course?

3.1.3 How does the delivery of this employability curriculum at *The Site* facilitate improve academic goals for students on the course?

3.1.4. How do these students' experiences and outcomes compare with RPA logic?

**Case Study Methodology**

Various students with a range of academic abilities and backgrounds had enrolled at *The Site*, a large provider of vocational education and training across a wide spectrum of courses, comprising full or part-time studies and apprenticeships. This college was the

main research site where fieldwork was conducted. The use of a case study design was considered to be an appropriate research strategy for the purpose of this empirical research. Through adopting a case study approach, I was able to provide a detailed report based on contextual influences that may construct narratives and operational practices within *The Site*. According to Berg (2004), a case study design provides scope for an intensive description and analysis of a research phenomenon that is place and time specific. A case study also enables a specific focus on a single unit or organisation, with the aim of providing detailed description and depth of meaning from the selection of 'information-rich' cases that are site-specific and of central importance to the purpose of the research (Ary et al, 2010).

However, despite its evident benefits, the use of a case study approach has its weaknesses. For instance, although they offer depth of understanding, case studies invariably lack reliability, limiting generalisability of research findings. Likewise, though by their very nature case studies provide critical insight, they open up the possibility of subjectivity and prejudice (Ary et al, 2010). Nevertheless, despite the inherent weaknesses associated with case studies, they do make positive contributions that are fundamental to the research issue under investigation. Therefore, in order to enhance the credibility of the data, the study used the triangulation of empirical data to present details on the research topic. It is important to recognise that the research aim was not to produce research findings that could be considered representative or generalisable to other general further education colleges in the region or other parts of the country. Instead, it is hoped that the study will provide a rich and deep representation of educational issues within a specific FE college as they exist at a particular moment in time when the study was conducted.

The main research site is in Campus 1, a large general FE college located in South East England and which serves the north-eastern area of the county. There are other satellite colleges in the same region, but with fewer students and limited courses. The main campus is situated in one of the larger towns and positioned near the main railway station and town centre area. The site was chosen as it offers a larger pool of potential research participants; satellite campuses have lower student numbers, flagging possible concerns over the risk of attrition and the study therefore not being completed. Furthermore, there was the potential that the smaller campuses largely attract students that live locally, whilst Campus 1 possibly facilitates greater representation and attracts students that have a wider range of demographic and diverse characteristics. Though the county is relatively wealthy, 17.1% of children live in poverty (Countywide Report, 2013). Equally all areas suffer comparatively poor educational qualifications measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) domain (Countywide Report, 2013).

Statistics show that the percentage of students achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs in 2012 (58.9% including English and Maths) was still lower than the national average, indicating that a proportion of students did not meet the expected grades/scores (Countywide Report, 2013). Taking into consideration the NEET statistics, the data indicate that the percentage of 16-18 year olds in the county has reduced from 6.4 per cent in 2011/2012 to 5.7 per cent in 2012/2013, very close to the average for the East of England and England. However, the county still has the highest proportion of NEET young people in England (Countywide Report, 2013) though lower than the national average. Furthermore, the 2013 School Health and Wellbeing (SHEU) survey indicates that 10% of children aged 5 to 19 years have a diagnosable mental health condition (equivalent to 25,000 children in

the county) and an additional 10% were diagnosed with emotional and behavioural problems, judged slightly better than or similar to the England average (Countywide Report, 2013).

**Sampling**

The selection of research participants is fundamental. It provides key information on the research issue under investigation. In order to develop a detailed understanding of the educational experiences of Level 1 students enrolled on this particular course, it was essential to choose a sampling method that would select research participants with a particular set of characteristics and experiences of the study programme. Purposive sampling is a technique that is characteristic of case study methodology and is designed to yield the most information about the phenomena under study (Silverman, 2000). It provides maximum insight and understanding on the research topic (Ary et al, 2010). Purposive samples are often premised on the concept of 'Theoretical Sampling' as introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to describe the selection of participants who represent the important characteristics considered as being of central importance.

Nevertheless, although this approach yields a detailed focus and information, any selection of non-random sampling strategies is open to bias and manipulation. However, even though a non-probability sample may not necessarily reflect substantial diversity (Babbie, 2010), by its very nature a criterion sample offers critical insight and depth into a research issue that advances knowledge and understanding on a research matter.

Taking all this into consideration, the criteria for selection of participants in my study were:

- Students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course
- Core staff in the above team
- Senior staff that have direct involvement with the course and type of learners

The students who participated in the study were predominantly White British, with the exception of two black female students and one white male student of Polish origin. These students were aged 16-18, the majority having low or no GCSE grades. However, a few students did have higher GCSEs grades and found themselves on the course usually due to late enrolment or an insufficient number of GCSEs required to enrol on vocational courses. An analysis of student records indicates that several students were referred by the NEET intervention team, who authorised by the local authority to refer and assist NEET young people with suitable forms of educational provision. The remainder of the student cohort either self-referred or were signposted by mainstream vocational courses for the purposes of improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

The records also show that the students previously studied at secondary schools in the local and surrounding area, some travelling to college by bus or train. A large proportion of these students had previous school expulsions, complex and wide-ranging academic needs, and were reportedly resistant to academic learning. Several students had mild to moderate learning difficulties, with some also diagnosed with dyslexia, dyspraxia, paranoia, social anxiety or being selective mute. Reportedly, various students had high levels of social, emotional, welfare and mental health needs that result in regular referrals to student welfare or staff involvement in pastoral duties inside and outside the classroom.

**Data collection tools**

I adopted a range of qualitative strategies in the form of interviews with individual students and staff members, student focus groups, classroom observations, and the analysis of student records, policy and organisational documents. In so doing, the aim was to triangulate and enhance the credibility of the research findings. I started the study with classroom observations, in order to ascertain what Savin-Baden and Howell (2013) refer to as the culture and customs of an organisation. A total of 130 classroom observation hours were conducted with both student groups and lecturers in their classroom, enabling me to observe classroom events and behaviour occurring in its natural setting. High in ecological validity, classroom observations help to contextualise empirical data, eliciting the meaning and experiences of participants. Admittedly this method is susceptible to observer bias and the Hawthorne effect, as the researcher's presence potentially influences participant behaviour during the period of study. However, despite its limitations, classroom observation has value and enables researchers to directly observe what people do rather than relying on what they say they do (Babbie, 2010).

In addition, interviews were conducted a few months later to gain further insight and context to the research issue. Interviews are useful for gathering quotes and stories to describe what is important to participants. However, despite its benefits, it has to be recognised that interviews can be time consuming and are susceptible to interview bias (Babbie, 2010). Focus group interviews were also conducted half way into the research period once students appeared more comfortable with my research presence in the classroom. Using focus groups as a data collection strategy is advantageous as it enables researchers to gain a collective view of participants' thoughts and ideas about important

aspects of the research problem. On the other hand, although focus groups are much more flexible and open than individual interviews, they allow less control and susceptibility to unbalanced power dynamics (Ary et al, 2010).

The college's database was another data collection tool used. It provided key information on the students' previous academic background, current attendance and academic progress, enrolment in GCSE provision and their destination data once the course has been completed. Student records were analysed, together with government policies and organisational documents. These strategies were unobtrusive and a good means of providing background information on the students, the organisation and the policy context. A review of documents is relatively inexpensive and may bring up issues not noted by other means. However, the process can be time-consuming and documentation could be biased (Ary et al, 2010). The use of field-notes was helpful and also served to supplement information from other sources. Essentially, they comprised two distinct aspects: first, they contained a descriptive component that gave a complete outline of *The Site* and classroom events; second, they had a reflective aspect that captured the researcher's personal feelings, impressions about events and so forth (Ary et al, 2010). Field notes and photographs were used to capture classroom events. Detailed notes were kept on teaching and learning activities, classroom talk, student behaviour, staff interactions with students, and how space and time were utilised.

**Epistemological approach**

Research is governed by a set of beliefs and assumptions about social reality, conceptualised as a research paradigm. In this sense, a paradigm refers to an overarching philosophical framework based on a system of beliefs or world view that in a fundamental

way guides the investigation, not only in choices of method but also in relation to ontological and epistemological assumptions (Krauss, 2005). Designing a research study is therefore not limited to decisions about appropriate data collection strategies, but it is far more broadly concerned with the inherent, fundamental beliefs which underpin each research study. Ontology is concerned with the nature of being and a consideration of a researcher's ontological perspective can therefore draw attention to assumptions they have about the way the world operates (Williamson, 2006). With regards to my own research, I held various assumptions before starting the study. I made assumptions about the education system, believing in the merits of education and the expectation that all youth, regardless of who they are, are able to positively benefit from education and gain higher academic grades if only they try. I also assumed that NEET and disengaged students might not necessarily want to learn and engage in education, and in doing the study I hoped to discover if this was really the case.

Epistemology, on the other hand, is concerned with the nature of knowledge and ‘how we come to know’ something in a field of study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Prior to the study, I was aware that there is an existing body of academic literature on the research topic. A review of literature highlighted that various academic studies were based on qualitative and quantitative research into the research area. These studies produced a wide range of knowledge which informed my research design.

Taking this into consideration, I was aware that given the complex backgrounds of most student participants and the research issue under investigation, I needed access to a wide range of academic knowledge to give a comprehensive outlook. For example, the fact that

most student participants have a history of disengagement influenced key research decisions about the most appropriate research strategies to optimise student participation and assist in gaining access to their knowledge. Taking this into account, considerations about the required type of knowledge informed which research strategies were finally chosen.

Empirical studies adopt different paradigms and approaches to research based on different traditions, producing different understandings of the world and subsequently different forms of knowledge. In this empirical study I have ascribed a social constructivist paradigm, a philosophical assumption based on the idea that social reality is unique to each individual. The research aim, therefore, is to understand the social reality experienced by my participants. Essentially, this research framework recognises the interconnected nature between the individual and his or her world, with a clear focus on ascertaining how individuals think and feel (Ary et al, 2010). It enables the researcher to search for meaning in the subjective experience of individuals, recognising the multiple constructions of reality experienced by these particular students and their tutors. Although any representation of reality is limited and imperfect, the constructivist approach attempts to articulate shared forms of understanding as they now exist, while accounting for how they have existed historically, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed (Williamson, 2006). In using a constructivist framework, the researcher is therefore principally concerned with eliciting the processes by which Level 1 students and staff members come to describe and account for themselves, this data being complemented by classroom observations and interview data which capture key details of the world in which they live and work. I will attempt to portray the multiple voices and

perceptions about the research issues and quotes will be used liberally to provide rich descriptions.

Despite the potentially positive contributions of social constructivism, it is important to note that the positivist paradigm can play an equally beneficial role in conducting research. It holds that the social world is governed by general principles or laws and that through objective procedures, researchers can discover and apply these principles to aid their understanding of human behaviour (Ary et al, 2010). In this paradigm, traditional scientific methods are used to collect and interpret social facts objectively, the assumption being that reality is concrete and laws and models of behaviour can be deduced from social facts in order to predict future outcomes. However, I did not think that the positivist paradigm was suitable for this study given the fact that most students have complex backgrounds and a history of disengagement with schools, thus reducing the likelihood of engagement. Most participants also might not be able to understand or complete questionnaires. Given the nature of the study, closer interaction between the researcher and students in their natural environment was required, hence the use of a qualitative research strategy and the predominant focus on the social constructivist paradigm for this empirical enquiry.

**Negotiating access and gaining entry**

Two years were dedicated to fieldwork, including time spent on a pilot study. In the pilot study, the aim was to identify the type of research participants required and also ascertain the most appropriate data collection tools for the main study. There were several phases in

the fieldwork and the following sections will describe the goals defined within each period.

**Phase 1: Negotiating access - July 2013**

A detailed report was submitted to the Research Committee at *The Site* to gain approval for the study and permission was accordingly granted. The report provided comprehensive information on the research aims to explore the FE students' educational experience, how the study was going to be conducted and how the organisation could benefit from fostering stronger links between research and operational practice.

**Phase 2: Pilot study – September 2013 to December 2013**

Initially I did not have a clear research aim other than a broad interest in student behaviour in the classroom. I therefore devised a survey, 'Dealing with challenging behaviour in the classroom', to establish staff perceptions of classroom management and their views on behaviour policies used within *The Site*. I was particularly interested in whether the lecturers felt equipped to manage student behaviour in the classroom. The email with the questionnaire was sent to all staff members at the respective campuses, with a low response rate of 34 completed questionnaires out of a total population of 350 teaching staff. Though the completed questionnaires flagged key concerns over staff feeling ill-equipped and unsupported in their practice, the data collection tool limited depth of explanation. At the same time, ten lecturers from the Health and Social Care Department were specifically approached. They agreed to be interviewed to establish whether the semi-structured interview questions were fit for purpose. The questions in the interview schedule worked well except for one question that was considered too vague

and required more specific focus in getting the lecturers to describe the type of students that usually enrol on their programme. Staff interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed. It was during these staff interviews that three Level 1 practitioners reflected on the challenge of teaching Level 1 students. Their responses further inspired a closer focus on this particular student group.

I also conducted 10 classroom observations, spending the entire day with Level 1 students on vocational courses in the Faculty of Health and Education at the relevant campuses. The aims were firstly to observe student behaviour, but also to gather a cultural understanding of the educational site, its student composition, and the nature of the teaching and learning environment. Classroom observations were recorded in a notebook and interview schedules were devised based on the themes that emerged from classroom talk, staff practice, student behaviour, and an analysis of organisational policies. During classroom observations, I engaged in informal discussion with students in the class. Here I soon discovered that although some students felt comfortable speaking with me on an individual basis, several others seemed a lot more vocal and confident when in a group with their friends. For this reason, I decided to also include focus groups as one of the data collection tools for the main study. Additionally, I also devised a student questionnaire with the initial intention to use it as the main data collection tool for the study. However, during the pilot study, the student questionnaire with Level 1 students at one of the smaller campuses did not work. Although there was a 75% response rate, the quality of the answers was poor and also lacked the required depth and explanation to contextualise these statements. Thus, the decision was made not to use questionnaires, but instead use focus groups and individual interviews to elicit detailed student data. In

retrospect, the pilot study became an essential platform as it sharpened the research focus and subsequently altered some data collection strategies.

**Phase 3: Developing access - 6 January 2014 – 28 February 2014**

As part of the pilot study, a survey was conducted with all lecturers within *The Site* with two staff members from the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course participating in the survey. They disclosed their identity on the questionnaire, which helped me to establish contact with these staff members once the decision was made to focus on this particular course for NEET youth. Consequently, I contacted the two lecturers individually to enquire whether they were prepared to meet in order to discuss the prospect of participating in the main research project; both practitioners held managerial responsibility for the course. Both Nina, the Head of Learning for Living and Work, and Hope, the course leader, agreed for the research to be undertaken. Their course team, comprising of seven practitioners responsible for the delivery of the curriculum across the three different sites, also agreed to participate in the study.

There were three courses and students were timetabled to be in college three days per week. I visited the Level 1 student groups on the course to introduce myself and the project and a flyer (see Appendix 1) was distributed to encourage students to contact me if they wanted to participate in the study. The flyer invited student discussion on their experiences of being on a Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, their goals, and how they felt about staying longer in education, employment and training. Though they were encouraged to contact me directly, they notified their tutor instead, who provided me with the names of the students. When approached, all students in Hope's class agreed to

participate in the study during March 2014 – July 2014, a total of fifteen students that I named 'Cohort X'. In September 2014 – July 2015, students from Gina's class also agreed to participate in the study; they were fourteen students named Cohort Y. Attendance issues however influenced to a great extent the varying degrees of access and student involvement on the day. See Appendix 1 for sample of consent form.

Careful consideration was given to minimise disruption for the students, especially in view of the fact that the study started with four months remaining of the academic year. Fortunately, I would be able to conduct exit interviews with Hope's students, whether they completed the course or not. The decision was made to start the research process with Hope's student group as she was due to go on maternity leave at the end of the academic year. She was also very keen to participate in the study. At the start of the new academic year, it was planned that research would resume with Gina and her new student group. In this particular phase I was working on building trust and rapport with the students and the staff participants. Although they were colleagues working with me at the main campus, we barely knew each other because of the large number of staff working at The Site.

**The fieldwork stage: March 2014 – July 2015**

Two focus group discussions, a total of 130 classroom observation hours, and ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with students at the main campus. I planned to conduct the staff interviews after the classroom observations and student interviews. I hoped that since the staff interviews were scheduled for the later stage of the study, this would help build confidence and trust, creating a required space where staff felt

comfortable and able to provide a candid account of their practice and operational systems in the college. Subsequently, nine staff interviews were conducted in their respective offices.

**Stage 1: Research with Cohort X in the academic term from March 2014 – July 2014**

Research started with Hope's students, known as Cohort X; they were in college on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays. Due to my work restrictions, initially classroom observations were limited to Thursdays only. Students were timetabled for two three-hour block lessons with a lunch break scheduled at 12pm and two thirty minute breaks at 10.30am and 2.30pm for toilet, snack or smoke breaks. Forty-eight hours of classroom observation were undertaken. During these observations, informal discussions with students were conducted to establish rapport. Initially several students were hesitant but eventually, after about two months they relaxed when they got used to me sitting in on their lessons. Those who were more confident were prepared to speak with me after they had an anger outburst in lessons, whilst others felt more confident to do so when they were in the company of their classmates. These observations enabled me to gather extensive data on student behaviour and classroom talk. It also soon became clear that the presence of Hope and her rapport with the learners somewhat influenced how these students behaved and classroom events that ensued. To elaborate, Hope cited that she felt maternal responsibility towards her students and was firm and strict, regularly challenging students who appeared disengaged. However, she was able to maintain a somewhat good rapport with almost all the students in class. It also later became apparent that although I had explained my role and purpose to the students, initially they viewed me as one of the college-wide Teaching and Learning Observation (TLO) staff members sent to observe

Hope's practice. These students wanted Hope to do well and therefore gave her high praise and often looked in Hope's direction for approval.

All the students in the class self-selected to participate in the focus group. Table 1.1 details the profile of the students that participated in the focus group. Pseudonyms were used to identify both students and practitioners.

**Table 1.1 Students in Cohort X who participated in the focus group**

| **Cohort X** | **March 2014 – July 2014** | |
|---|---|---|
| **Learners** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** |
| Zeke | M | White |
| Sam | M | White |
| Zara | F | Black |
| Shadia | F | White |
| Liam | M | White |
| Nate | M | White |
| Jada | F | White |
| Conroy | M | White |
| Britney | F | White |
| Ella | F | White |
| Shaun | M | White |
| Stuart | M | White |
| Russel | M | White |
| Daisy-May | F | White |

Being an experienced lecturer, I felt confident and able to conduct the focus group with the students on my own. However, Hope quoted health and safety concerns and worried that I might not be able to cope with large numbers of her students during the focus group. The students accordingly agreed that Hope and two learning support practitioners (LSPs) should be present, which in my view certainly shaped their responses and behaviour. This was evident in their regular gaze in Hope's direction. The fourteen students also continually spoke highly of the course and struggled to come up with problems they might have in class or on the course in general. As a consequence, I decided to discard this focus group data and treat it as a pilot study trialled to use with the new intake of students in the upcoming academic year. Changes were needed, which led to the decision to hold the next focus group discussions in a separate room, with a smaller student sample and no staff members present. I felt that this strategy would encourage freedom of speech and behaviour.

It was only during the exit interviews that some individuals in Hope's class expressed their ideas and felt able to comment on whether or not the course facilitated their progression goals. The aim of the student interviews was to provide scope for a smaller, intimate platform to detail and fully explore student experience of engaging in this particular study programme. Utilising the individual's narrative account allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the importance of the respondent's circumstances and experiences (Williams, 2006). Student participants volunteered to engage in student interviews, which were conducted on an individual basis during scheduled breaks and after lessons. Table 1.2 gives details of the research participants interviewed for the study, in terms of gender and ethnicity.

**Table 1.2. Students in Cohort X interviewed by gender and ethnicity**

| **Cohort X** | **March 2014 – July 2014** | |
|---|---|---|
| **Learners** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** |
| Zeke | M | White |
| Sam | M | White |
| Zara | F | Black |
| Shadia | F | White |
| Liam | M | White |

Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, the information was analysed and used to inform key details discussed in the empirical research findings section of my thesis. However, it is important to recognise that although the students appeared to offer a frank account of their experience, we should not lose sight of the timing when these interviews were conducted and its potential impact on students' narratives. At the time of these interviews, students received their results and gained feedback on their applications for further study at the college. Although there was perhaps a potential bias in their answers, a dialogue with students at the end of the course was important; it is a critical moment when students are able to provide an evaluation of the course, and also share key information on progression destinations. I was not able to access the student data of students who had withdrawn from the programme. I was given the telephone numbers of three students who had not completed the course, but they failed to pick up or respond to voicemail messages.

**Stage 2: Research with Cohort Y in the academic year extending over September 2014 – July 2015**

Research started at the beginning of the new academic year with Gina's new intake of students, known as Cohort Y. The research with this particular cohort was conducted over a full academic year, which enabled me to spend a longer period of time with students in the classroom. Taking into consideration the October and February half-terms, Christmas holidays and scheduled 1-1 tutorial sessions, an overall 82 classroom observation hours were undertaken on Thursdays and Fridays. Though there were fifteen students enrolled on the programme, usually six or seven students at the most would attend lessons. Of these, perhaps three students for the entire year would be regular in attendance and punctual for lessons. Gina and a learning support practitioner (LSP) usually arrived early to class, with the worksheets laid out on the table and learning outcomes written on the board. Student behaviour in Cohort Y was considered to be more natural as they did not appear to be constrained during Gina's lessons. They seemed to be relaxed, participating in class discussions, humming tunes, whistling, arguing, texting under desks, and displayed no hesitation to question and challenge Gina's practice. In this way, I was therefore able to examine student-staff interaction and classroom behaviour in more depth, than in the case with Cohort X.

Mid-way through the year, five students self-selected and participated in semi-structured interviews. In total, three female and two male students agreed to be interviewed on an individual basis. Within these interviews it was possible to discuss student understanding of the curriculum, how, when and why student behaviour policies are used and the

perceived benefits of doing the course. Details of the student participants are outlined in Table 1.3 below.

**Table 1.3. Students in Cohort Y interviewed by gender and ethnicity**

| **Cohort Y** | ***September 2014 – July 2015*** | |
|---|---|---|
| **Learners** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** |
| Lindy | F | White |
| Laurie | F | White |
| David | M | White |
| Adam | M | White |
| Zette | F | Black |

During these interviews, I was able to explore their views on the purpose of RPA, and whether they felt able to access essential educational and training provision that could help them achieve higher academic outcomes and employment prospects. In response, the students were able to provide an honest commentary of whether their study programme could purposefully navigate them towards their academic and employment goals.

Subsequent to this, a focus group discussion was planned in May 2015. It was held in a separate classroom with four students (two male and two female students) who volunteered to participate in the group discussion. These four respondents formed the majority of the students who were present on the day; as usual, only six students attended class on that particular day.

**Table 1.4 Students in Cohort Y who participated in the focus group**

| **Cohort Y** | **September 2014 – July 2015** | |
|---|---|---|
| **Learners** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** |
| David | M | White |
| Kyle | M | White |
| Lily | F | Black |
| Elsa | F | White |

This focus group provided these students with some space for reflection, both as individuals and also as a collective group. They engaged in an evaluation of the course, whilst also reflecting on their experiences of seeking access to further education, apprenticeship or employment. They provided rich data that showed awareness and understanding of organisational practices along with broader political, social and economic factors which, according to them, directly influenced entry requirements, student engagement issues and their progression destination. The focus group interview lasted 50 minutes and was digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed for the purpose of writing up empirical chapters. Subsequent to the period of field-work, my time was dedicated to transcribing interviews and data coding.

**Stage 3: Semi-structured interviews with staff members September 2014 – July 2015**

Semi-structured interviews were used with staff members to gather information about their occupational experiences and the impact of these on their personal and professional lives. The course team, comprising of seven practitioners responsible for the delivery of the curriculum across the three different sites, participated in the study. Additionally,

three senior managers responsible for key educational provision in The Site were approached, of whom two managers agreed to participate in the research. Nina was the senior manager directly responsible for the overall management of the employability provision under research scope, and Dina was the manager for the delivery of apprenticeship provision. However, the manager responsible for the delivery of GCSE provision declined to be interviewed, which restricted my opportunity to fully explore the philosophy behind the admission criteria to resit GCSE grades. Nevertheless, though limited, staff explanations as to why students could not re-sit their GCSEs offered some insight on the matter. Importantly however, these staff accounts are display gender-bias given that there is only one male staff member on the team. Even so, during staff interviews, they were able to provide rich and detailed information, reflecting on their teaching experiences, pedagogical activities and interactions with their learners. Through the use of semi-structured, qualitative interviews, researchers are able to contextualise the position of participants (Charmaz, 2003). When staff members were interviewed, one-to-one interviews were mainly used, except the joint interview with Aggy and Kirsten. Table 1.5 and Appendix 2 provide the details of the staff members who participated in the study.

**Table 1.5 Staff members who were interviewed**

| **Names** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** | **Occupation** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hope | F | White | Course leader |
| Gina | F | White | Tutor |
| Eve | F | White | Tutor |
| Tania | F | White | Tutor |
| Aggie | F | White | Tutor |
| Kirsten | F | White | Tutor |
| Peter | M | White | Tutor |
| Nina | F | White | Head of Learning for Living and Work |
| Dina | F | White | Apprenticeship Hub Manager |

During these interviews, the lecturers were able to critically reflect on their educational practice and also shared their reflections of working on the course within the broader organisation. In addition to the lecturers, two managers were also interviewed and offered strategic information and detailed explanations of operational systems and policies. Once the staff interviews were completed, they were analysed and included in the empirical findings of this thesis.

## Data Analysis

The challenge throughout the data collection and analysis stage was to make sense of large volumes of data with the aim of reducing it, identifying significant patterns within it, and constructing a framework to communicate research findings. NVivo, a qualitative

data analysis computer software package, was available to assist with the data analysis process, but a manual thematic method of coding was preferred. Though strong consideration was given to the use of NVivo on the basis that the software has primarily been designed to work with rich text-based information, the decision not to proceed with this course of action was made for two main reasons. Firstly, the research project was conducted on a small scale and this facilitated closer contact between me and the participants, allowing for reflexivity as I was suitably positioned to interpret my own research data, with the aim of producing deeper levels of analysis. Also, some content of the data was complex and required in-depth interpretation and analysis when comparing individual data or cross-sectional data, which can suitably be achieved by a manual thematic coding system.

In light of the large volume and the rich qualitative data gathered through the fieldwork a thematic framework was required. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest that researchers ought to make data analysis and data collection a simultaneous activity in order to avoid the risk of repetitious and unfocused data. With this in mind, I adopted a 'manual thematic coding procedure'. This involves the use of an interview schedule and classroom observations to elicit descriptive and explanatory accounts of how and why government and institutional policies and practices impact overall student levels of participation, achievement and progression within and beyond the education system. The interviews were transcribed in full and then each transcript was read alongside a framework of all major themes and sub-themes that were outlined within the interview keys. Whilst reading the transcripts, new themes and sub-themes that emerged during interviews were listed together with the original interview keys. This created a complex index of all the major

sub-themes that arose throughout the fieldwork and analysis. The structure and outlook of my fieldwork data was influenced by the students' and staff members' willingness to fully voice their opinions. Given that I am a staff member myself at the institution, though we hardly encounter each other, it is my belief that the staff members felt restrained and were guarded in their responses. This consideration brings me on to the limitations of the study and the ethical considerations arising from it.

## Limitations of the Study

This study contains certain limiting conditions, some of which relate to common critiques of qualitative research and some of which are inherent in this study's research design. In qualitative studies, because the analysis ultimately rests with the thinking and choices of the researcher, the issue of subjectivity is highlighted. One of the key limitations pertains to the fact that the researcher is an employee and therefore a colleague of the staff members that participated in the study. Though we did not know each other, staff members may have had difficulty adjusting to me taking on the role of an interviewer leading them to be restrained and guarded in their responses. Likewise, these issues were possibly also experienced by the students participating in the study. Recognising these limitations, the entire research process, including the findings and coding of the data were discussed and scrutinised by two peers. A further limitation of the study was that the research sample was restricted - research data could therefore not be generalised to other groups and other programmes. Although generalisability was not the intended goal of the study, what I address is the issue of transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) as similar processes might be taking place in other further education colleges in different parts of the

country. Key research findings are also able to assess government claims on RPA and its purported benefits for marginalised students studying at *The Site.*

**Ethical considerations**

In accordance with British Sociological Association ethical guidance, all research participants were asked for full consent prior to the classroom observations, interviews and focus group discussions. Though the course tutors Hope and Gina self-selected to be observed during classroom observations, I still approached both student groups and students had to complete a consent form (see Appendix 1). The only difficulty emerged when students who were absent during my talks, requiring separate meetings for me to brief them on the research project. This occurred only a few times, as often those students who regularly attended lessons were already immersed in the process. In the event of a student withholding consent for classroom observations, the plan was for me to leave the classroom and return the next day to check if that particular student was absent on the day. Fortunately, this was not an issue and I was able to conduct these observations without interruptions. This issue was only limited to classroom observation as consent forms were already completed for those students that agreed to be interviewed. All respondents were offered full anonymity but accepted that staff identity could be revealed due to the small scale of the research project. They indicated that this would not create an issue, which became evident in the frank and open accounts from nearly all staff members. Respondents were reassured they would receive a copy of their interview transcripts should they wish to revisit any statements made. All interviews were fully and openly recorded. During classroom observations, I took every precaution to minimise the potential disruption that could occur during the research. I therefore arrived early for

lessons and asked the tutor to indicate in which section of the room she wanted me to sit. By regularly arriving in class and being seated at the tables with the students, I became a regular occupant in the classroom. When it was time to withdraw from classroom observations, my contact was gradually reduced, reserving contact for individual interviews with staff and students and focus group interviews with students. This allowed time to thank the students and staff, and also say goodbye. A copy of my ethics approval form may be found in Appendix 3.

**Conclusion**

I utilised a multi-method research strategy for my fieldwork at *The Site,* which included a range of qualitative data collection tools in the form of 130 classroom observation hours, nineteen interviews with students and staff, two student focus groups, and the analysis of student records, policy and organisational documents. The next chapter briefly provides context by describing the research site in detail.

## Chapter Four: 'The Site'

This chapter aims to enhance understanding of the teaching and learning environment that surrounds the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. The organisational structure of the site will be outlined along with a close exploration of the education and training provision available for students who participated in the study. Photographs, observation records and an organisational profile are used to clarify explanations.

### The organisation

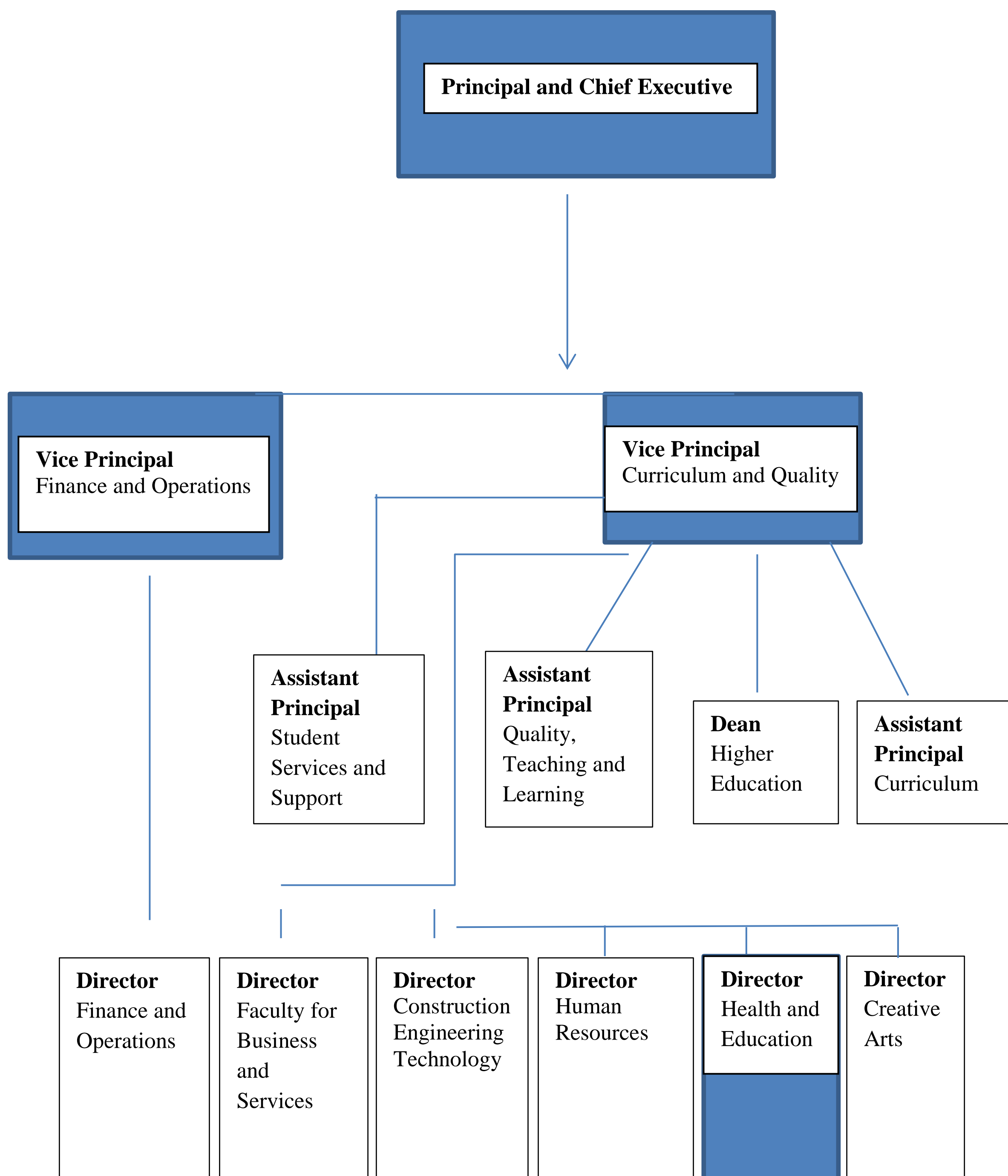
The Site is a large provider of vocational education and training, delivering a wide variety of courses ranging from full or part-time studies and apprenticeships to a smaller proportion of degree programmes validated by a local university. Students are able to access a range of higher levels of further education, training and university within The Site. So in an ideal situation the NEET and so-called excluded youth who participated in my study should be able to benefit from the wide-ranging scope of provision on offer at The Site and potentially attain enhanced academic and employment prospects.

The organisation has a bureaucratic structure, as depicted in the chart overleaf. The management structure is organised along levels of seniority and areas of operation. Occupying the most senior position in the institution is the Principal and Chief Executive, appointed in April 2014. The second tier consists of two vice principals: one with overall responsibility for finance and operations, the other focused on curriculum and quality. The tier below reflects a large number of senior managers, including six directors, three assistant principals and the Dean of Higher Education.

The Vice Principal of Curriculum and Quality holds overall management responsibility for a wide range of staff members with teaching, learning and curriculum duties. This includes overseeing the duties of three assistant principals: one responsible for curriculum, another for quality, teaching and learning improvement, and the third responsible for student services and support.

On the same management tier as the assistant principals is the Dean of Higher Education, along with six Directors of Faculty for Business and Services, Construction and Engineering Technology, Creative Arts, Health and Education, Finance and Operations and Human Resources. See Figure 7 outlining the Management Structure on the next page.

**Figure 7**: **Management Structure**

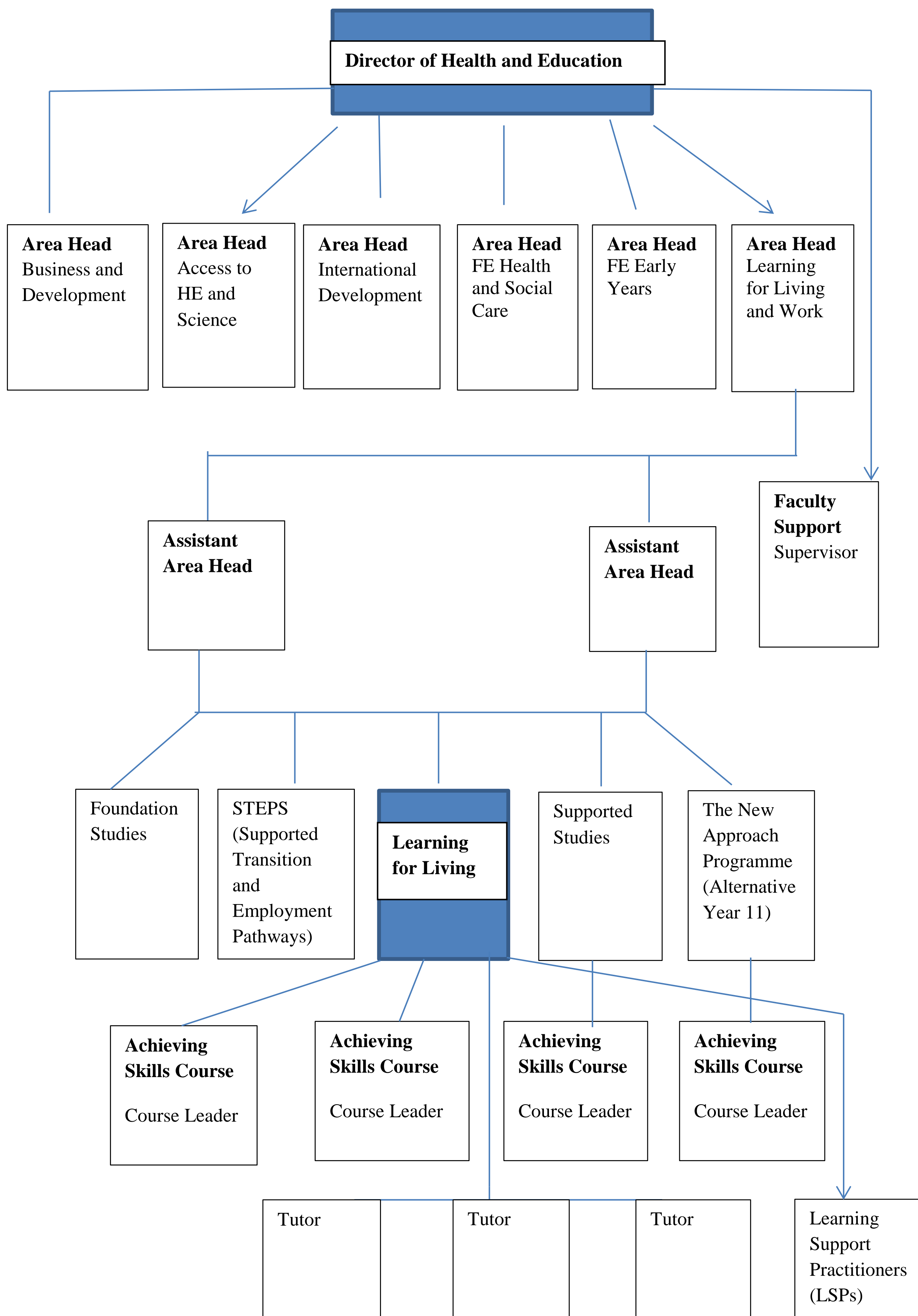


If we take a closer look at the Faculty of Health and Education's management structure (see overleaf), we can see there are a range of operational divisions responsible for specific educational and training provision. Heading the Faculty, the Director of Health and Education holds the most senior position. The Director has overall management responsibility for the Faculty Support Supervisor and six Area Heads. The Area Heads include the Head of Business and Development, Access to HE and Science, International Development, FE Health and Social Care, FE Early Years and Learning for Living and Work.

The division of Learning for Living and Work is of prime importance since the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course is located within this pre-foundational learning framework. Nina, the Area Head for Living and Work (who took part in this study), has direct management responsibility for two newly-appointed Assistant Area Heads who operate from separate campuses. In turn, they have assistant management responsibilities for various study programmes, i.e. Foundation Studies, Learning for Living, the particular course under inquiry, STEPS (Supported Transition and Employment Pathways), Supported Studies and the New Approach Programme – Alternative Year 11.

Within the Learning for Living department, the course team comprises of four course leaders, three core staff (all participants in the study) and learning support practitioners (LSPs). LSPs are key support staff members who assist the tutor in providing teaching support for students diagnosed with special educational needs such as dyslexia, but also assist with the general running of classroom duties. See Figure 8 outlining the Faculty of Health and Education Management Structure on the page below.

**Figure 8: Faculty of Health and Education Management Structure**



**The classroom building and surrounding area**

The Level 1 Achieving Skills Course was located in a temporary prefabricated building on the outskirts of *The Site*. Known as Q-block, the building is primarily used to deliver programmes for non-traditional students, i.e. NEET young people, disabled students, ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), Access to HE and adult learners on Welfare to Work programmes. The surrounding environment includes the car park, bike shed and smoking area.

A large car park separates Q-block from the rest of the buildings - mainstream provision is delivered on the opposite end of the campus. It is also furthest from the higher education building, the college gates and security guards. The Level 1 Achieving Skills Course and similar foundation learning programmes therefore seem separate from the other operations of this large institution. This does not go unnoticed, with both students and tutors commenting on the 'separateness' from the wider college. Students in the focus group observed that there are 'always people running, shouting, hitting walls, someone kicking off around the corner'. This resulted in another student saying, 'Oh my God we sound like we're talking about a mental home' (Focus group data, June 2014). Staff members, similarly, reported feeling vulnerable, as the building was some distance from security staff, a resource regularly used when having to deal with safety and security issues in lessons (Staff interview data, June- July 2014).

The college library is also in Q block, although the students rarely used this facility for study purposes. Instead, the library was mainly used as a 'cooler' to banish latecomers.

Though library services were available for students to access, students were instead kept in class to search online for information.

Classroom facilities were clean and spacious. The room consisted of an interactive whiteboard and essential classroom furniture. The classroom was laid out in a horseshoe shape with tables and chairs for written tasks, and along the far corner near the windows 18 computers were stationed. There, students could access computers to undertake project work and online tests.

**Example of an actual classroom delivery of the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course**

The following extract is drawn from field-notes on a morning session on managing personal finance. The aim here is to describe the teaching and learning environment in the classroom (observation undertaken - 04 December 2015).

> **8.57 am:** I arrive at the classroom. Gina (practitioner) and Mandy, her Learning Support Practitioner (LSP), along with five out of a possible fifteen students were present at the time. They were later joined at 10am by three other students. The lesson is on managing personal finance and is timetabled for 3 hours with a 30 minute break scheduled for 10.30am. Officially, class should start at 9am, but regularly starts at 9.30am with the explanation that some students might arrive late – so it was better to start later. This seemed customary, the rest of the students seemed untroubled - either chatting amongst themselves, whilst others were playing on their phones.
>
> **Tutor stated:** I'm meant to have fifteen students… one rang to say he will be late, one student has safeguarding issues, and another student comes

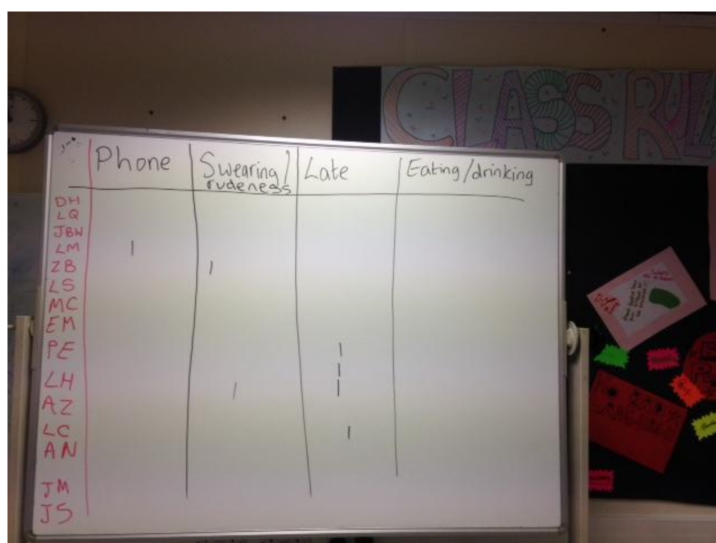
by train. Two students have part-time jobs, so when the boss rung them in the morning, they go…

**At 9.30 am** Gina starts the lesson – immediately drawing the class's attention to the classroom rules, highlighting 4 main issues written on the whiteboard. On a separate board (pictured below), rules were pre-written with student initials in the first column.

**Classroom rules written on separate whiteboard:-**

1) Use of phones in lessons – phones to go in bag.
2) Swearing or rudeness – need to use appropriate language – classroom is the space to learn appropriate behaviour.
3) Lateness – the door will be shut and students to wait outside until tutor attends to them.
4) No eating/drinking/going on Facebook and YouTube.

**Picture 1: The Rules**




Gina explains that if a student has 3 strikes in a particular column, they will be asked to leave the session. If attendance is below 75 per cent or 80 per cent, it

is flagged as cause for concern. Zette, one of the students announced, “Your bursary will be affected. You get £10 less if you do not come in”. The students did not challenge these rules at the time when rules were explained.

**At 10am -** 3 students arrived late…

**Lindy** challenges the tutor **“**Why do you let them in”?

**Gina:** “There are different reasons why students are late, Lindy. This could be due to the train…”

**Lindy:** “… but they don’t take the train!”

Gina ignored Lindy, told the students to come in to the class. Gina was trying to have a discussion on their lateness but also to assess whether they have completed previous tasks. During this time, Lindy became agitated, shouting abuse at the late-comers, immediately joined by fellow pupils. The anger outburst seemed mostly directed at the two female students, which probably influenced Gina’s decision to send them to the library to finish course work, whilst the male student was allowed to join the lesson. The two girls did not object and left with their folders and worksheets, presumably to the library. The disruption and outburst lasted between 10-15 minutes.

The lesson resumed, focusing on spending habits and personal budgets, with students having to calculate costs per week, per month, per year – totals recorded on a worksheet. Some students were struggling with the calculations. David, visibly frustrated, stopped work and started drumming loudly with his fingers on the desk. LSP tells him off. Several others joined in with this behaviour, completely off-task, engaging in lots of informal chatter about

their leisure time pursuits. The class went on their break at 10.30, arriving back just before 11am.

Students continued with the calculations outlined in the worksheet. Zette looked around the classroom and said out loud: **"**Everyone has gone Casper!**"** and started talking amongst themselves why students are not regularly attending and withdrawing from the course. They speculated about these students' whereabouts and then amongst themselves, in earshot of Gina, said these students were bored in lessons, can't see the point of coming in, some were considered to be lazy and others want to work and not be in the classroom the entire day.

Lindy took out her phone to check messages, and immediately the tutor gave her a strike. Lindy became verbally aggressive and Gina requested she stepped outside so they could discuss the issue. The LSP was asked to oversee things in the classroom and students were expected to continue with the task. Upon her return, Zette commented to Lindy, *"You are struggling with life!"* and made quiet conversation with Lindy. Subsequently, Zette swore in conversation, got a strike for this and said, "I don't care…", but later told Gina she is trying hard not to swear and did not want any strikes.

"I've done it", said Adam - he finished the task within 5 minutes of doing the calculations. "It's easy, Gina…this task" – however, when his answers were checked, some of them were wrong. Two students got the correct answers.

**Next learning activity:**

Gina stated, "It's difficult this task, but you will now have to apply the same calculations to your own vices. Here is a worksheet, first identify 4 vices, then you do the calculations per week, per month, and per year".

While Gina was speaking, another staff member entered the classroom to have a chat with a student named Judy. This was followed with a few camera shots; all this whilst students were supposed to listen to Gina giving instructions for the next classroom activity. Students got their folders out, and started on the task whilst the room was filled with lots of chatter. This informal and noisy classroom environment prevailed for the duration of the lesson: David singing a tune whilst sitting with the worksheet, others around him joined in, two girls chatting away non-stop, Adam texting under the table…all this goes unchallenged.

**Key observations on the classroom environment**

The classroom can be described as disruptive and chaotic: Gina the tutor seemed able to deliver the curriculum, or part of the lesson amidst challenging classroom events; students, on the other hand, were trying to 'pick up' and engage in lessons to varying degrees. Characteristically, although 'teaching' and 'learning' appeared to happen, it occurred in short successions, disrupted by outbursts of conflict, informal chatter and singing during lessons. Though not resembling 'traditional' teaching and learning conditions, it seemed a 'natural occurrence' for lessons to be interrupted and teaching to

be regularly suspended. Inevitably, this raised doubt over quality teaching and learning provision on the course.

The focus on classroom rules gives an indication of the tutors' efforts to enforce discipline and social control in the classroom. However, although the intention might be to primarily regulate student behaviour in the classroom, evidently, students used the same framework to monitor the tutor's behaviour. This issue surfaced when the tutor was judged to have broken the rule on 'lateness'. Outbursts of anger, verbal aggression and classroom disruption ensued. Also noteworthy was the tutor's practice of leaving the classroom to deal with conflict or welfare issues, placing the LSP in charge of teaching duties.

Attendance issues were a key concern with most students not attending classes on a regular basis. Students noticed this too and within earshot of their tutor, they were fault-finding, identifying boredom, irrelevance of lessons, not wanting to be in education as key explanations. Student narratives underscored that the course was entirely classroom-based; this, despite the fact that it was considered to be an employability course.
Punctuality issues were also observed - notably, the 30 minute late starts clashed with institutional practice and the course's flexible start times were out of sync with mainstream provisions across the wider college. Perhaps the type of learners on the course had some bearing. Nonetheless, the notion of punctuality is imperative in areas of employment, mainstream vocational education and apprenticeship training.

**Conclusion**

This chapter starts with a specific focus on The Site, giving emphasis to the fact that as an institution The Site offers a broad spectrum of education provision, ranging from vocational education and training provision to university education. In theory, its students therefore have access to a range of educational opportunities and hence could advance onto higher levels of study or training within The Site. Although The Site may very well symbolically represent a second, third or last chance for some learners, it also clearly presented as an educational space which can provide a wider scope of education, training and employment opportunities depending on student circumstances. By implication, former NEET and so-called disengaged youth enrolled on a Level 1 Achieving Skills Course at *The Site* should be able to improve upon previous academic failure and potentially improve their academic and employment prospects. RPA rhetoric echoes a similar line of reasoning that I have previously mentioned.

However, this chapter also begins to show that when these particular learners re-engage in further education, they are excluded and marginalised within *The Site*. The course appears to have low social positioning within *The Site:* students were not only marginalised from mainstream vocational provision, but the spatial location of the course was also symbolically representative of a metaphorical divide between pre-vocational study for ‘non-traditional’ students and mainstream vocational education aimed at ‘traditional’ students. The situation was exacerbated, by a contradiction in its ethos: this provision was marketed as an employability course, yet did not offer students prospects for actual work-related training. Complications were fuelled by somewhat chaotic classroom conditions: repeated and ongoing disruptions, student conflict, informal teaching and

learning conditions that complicated the extent to which students could benefit from higher standards of teaching and education.

Hence, to varying degrees these particular students' educational experiences and trajectory appeared to be limited. However, have these particular students noticed or indeed experienced inequality in education provision within *The Site*, and if so, what do they say or feel about it? With this in mind, the next three chapters of my thesis report on the empirical findings that focus on the implementation of RPA with marginalised youth enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course at *The Site.*

## Chapter Five: Marginalisation and social exclusionary processes on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course

In the previous chapters a range of historical and background literature foregrounded central themes, positioning my empirical study within the RPA framework. Academic literature has examined the government's discourse on post-16 education and the role of RPA in re-engaging youth with low and no school leaving qualifications to ostensibly increase their participation in the knowledge economy. However, contrary to political rhetoric, academic evidence referenced in the first three chapters of this thesis, recognises the predominantly negative effects of neoliberalism within the education system. These findings suggest that the current education sector operates along a bureaucratic structure governed by competitive principles which regulate students' access to essential yet limited resources within educational settings. Consequently, these chapters started to identify a competitive and unequal education system, one which mostly benefits those with greater access to resources. Thus, despite the succession of various education policy attempts to ostensibly improve academic outcomes for all students, educational achievements remains linked to background structural factors and to social class in particular.

This chapter is the first of three empirical findings based on my ethnographic research with former NEET and disengaged youth enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. I examine whether employability provision enabled participants at The Site to attain higher academic outcomes as suggested in RPA. As a result, I explore government and organisational policies, the students' educational experiences and the tutors'

educational practices. Given my critical focus on the education system, the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu (1977a), Foucault (2008) and Willis (1977) frame my analysis. For instance, Bourdieu's theory on capital acknowledges that there are forms of capital, such as social and cultural capital which middle income and affluent parents possess and pass on to their children to better acquire educational qualifications. By the same token, Foucault's theory on the conduct of conduct (detailed in the introductory chapter exposes underlying notions of individual responsibilization within educational processes and how students have become responsible for their employment regardless of constraining structural factors. This theory also highlights the central role of tutors as key governance agents regulating the conduct of students on the course. In addition, Willis produced ethnographic evidence drawn from a Marxist cultural perspective to investigate what was seen at the time as a developing crisis in education observed amongst the 'lads' who participated in the study. Of particular relevance is Willis' ethnographic approach in investigating the 'lads' educational experiences and the general recognition of structural factors that framed his enquiry. Similarly, the students in my study were also a social group stereotypically perceived as rowdy and reluctant to learn.

These scholars identified the constraining influences of complex, wide-ranging structural factors, pedagogical practices and educational processes which significantly restricted students in their capacity to attain higher academic outcomes within education settings. By means of illustration and introduction to this chapter, Zette, one of the participants on the course, articulated:

> I was doing Health and Social Care Level 1 last year and then I was going to do Level 2 but I did not get the right GCSEs. So I thought that this course did GCSEs but it didn't…they do Functional Skills…so it was a bit of a thing for me. I don't know….I'm a little bit on and off about the course, really. It's distressing having to do a Level 1 *** course! It's hard because I could have gone on to Level 2 but now I have to be here for an extra year. I don't want to waste a year here on this course. My English is like a D and my Maths like a F. But I don't understand why I cannot do my GCSE Maths if I don't get a D? I don't understand that! No, the tutors did not explain why I cannot do it. I would have thought that if you did not get the right GCSEs you can re-take them whatever they are? I didn't know it had to be a certain grade for me to be able to retake them….I need to take my GCSEs but I don't know where to retake them? (Interview with Zette - Field notes, November, 2014)

Zette is a student who previously studied a Level 1 Health and Social Care course. Her goal at the time was to progress on to the Level 2 Health and Social Care course with a view to study social work once she completed vocational education at college. However, Zette's trajectory within the education system took a diversion when she discovered a key obstacle: she did not have the 'right' GCSEs. Her academic profile on GCSE attainment indicated the following grades:

| **Subjects** | **Grades** |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| English Language | D |
| English Literature | D |
| History | F |
| Maths | F |
| Religious Education | E |
| Science | E |

Based on the above grades, Zette was told she could not progress to do the next Level 2 course and was instead advised to enrol on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course in the belief that she could still boost her English and Maths GCSE grades as part of the course provision. However, she soon discovered that sheer ambition to do GCSE classes in pursuit of higher academic grades was not enough; she had to contend with structural constraints embedded within *The Site*. For instance, although marketing brochures advertised that GCSE provision could be accessed alongside the course, Zette soon discovered that GCSE provision was heavily regulated and further restricted. College policy stipulated that only students with D grades in English and/or Maths could gain access to GCSE classes. Thus, despite her stated goal to retake GCSE Maths, Zette discovered that she could not access this provision to improve upon her F grade.

To exacerbate the situation, Zette encountered a further obstruction in the educational practice of the course team: they have judged her as unsuitable to cope with GCSE-related course demands, regardless of whether she met the D grade entry requirement for English GCSE classes. Consequently, Zette was enrolled on Functional Skills English and Maths,

missing a fundamental opportunity to do GCSEs - a key requirement for access to higher levels of study or training. What is more, Zette and fellow students on the course discovered that the Basic and Key Skill Builder (BKSB) diagnostic assessment tool was regularly used not only to assess students' levels of Functional Skills English and Maths, but also tutors used these results to further restrict access for students who qualified although were judged as incapable of coping with academic pressure and related demands of GCSE provision.

Zette's concluding remark established the premise for this chapter. There was the evident need to re-take GCSEs so she could attain higher academic grades in the hope of accessing higher levels of study. However, despite the aspirations and need for higher GCSE grades, Zette was denied access since GCSE provision was firmly placed out of reach within *The Site*. As a consequence, she was stuck with low GCSE grades at this particular college. This situation echoes a number of key themes discovered in my empirical findings.

**A profile of the students enrolled on the course**

The students from both groups X and Y represented a wide range of young people from various backgrounds, interests and abilities. Student records confirmed that the learners on the course were not a homogenous group; a few students came straight from school, whilst many joined the course as a result of self-referrals or referrals from the NEET intervention team. The academic profile also illustrated a mixture of academic ability, with the majority of the students having no or lower GCSE grades and a substantial minority that had a number of GCSEs within the A-D range. Student records further

indicated that several students had learning difficulties and/or mental health problems, whilst others apparently had not. Some students also had complex social welfare needs whilst several others had a stable home life. The students' background details therefore suggested varied personal circumstances and academic achievements that were brought on to the course with enrolment.

Once on the course, it was observed that student attendance was low, with nearly half of the student group absent from lessons. Classroom behaviour was problematic, with several learners' displaying disengaged and challenging behaviour towards fellow students and tutors. In this way, some of the students appeared to conform to the conventional stereotype associated with disengaged youth - that they do not want to learn. As previously mentioned, these stereotypical assumptions were often fuelled by political rhetoric and media representations on NEET young people and so-called disaffected learners which characterise these learners as dysfunctional.

My research data showed that although a substantial minority of participants did fit these stereotypes, most of the students wanted to learn, yet they appeared to be similarly disadvantaged by stereotypical attitudes. They seemed equally constrained by educational practices which complicated their educational journey within this college. These key issues were revealed in all empirical chapters: students on the course were perceived as a homogenous group; they were subject to common stereotypical assumptions which impacted their trajectory within this setting. Hence, although RPA requires participation, it is worth giving consideration as to whether and how these RPA benefits materialise in practice for these particular students and, equally important, how they conceive of RPA.

**Students' perception of RPA:**

**RPA: Restrictive Policy**

The majority of student participants had aspirations to engage in further study. To illustrate their academic goals, student narratives were provided and supplemented by details on prior academic achievements and their views on the relevance of RPA to their individual circumstances.

David, one of the participants, was critical of RPA. However, before a discussion on his view of RPA, it is necessary to highlight his academic achievements on entry:

| **Subjects** | **GCSE Grades** |
|---|---|
| Applied Science | D |
| Catering | C |
| Citizenship | D |
| Drama | C |
| English Language | E |
| English Literature | E |
| Maths | D |
| Science | D |

David's academic profile highlighted that he has eight relatively good GCSE grades, illustrating the point that not all learners enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course

have no or low school-leaving qualifications. Rather, he was enrolled because he missed the enrolment date for the vocational courses. His grades showed that he qualified to retake GCSE Maths, but his E in English presented complications as illustrated in the case of Zette.

Previously, David had studied a Level 1 Catering course in London, but changed location and college after he reported serious concerns over threats of violence from a fellow pupil. His intention is to resume his studies in catering once he has completed the course. David regularly attends college and usually engages in structured classroom activities, although with much persuasion from the teaching staff. On the subject of RPA, David considered a broader spectrum of all young people's circumstances and states:

> I think people should have a choice. If you want to stay in education until you're 18 let them. If you want to go out and look for a job, if they want to go on benefits… well obviously not benefits but just let them do what they want. Stop tying people down…That are all he does, that's all David Cameron does, just tie people down. Restricts them...

David's account straightaway focused on the obligatory nature of RPA and he voiced his frustration over the lack of choice associated with compulsory post-16 education. Clearly, David viewed the policy as restrictive and suggested that the Prime Minister, David Cameron, used the policy to 'tie people down'. He did not view employment as a possibility although it is an RPA option. Thus, other than participation in full-time study in a school, college or with a training provider, young people can also engage in full-time

work or volunteering (20 hours or more) combined with part-time education or training leading to relevant regulated qualifications; or undertake an apprenticeship, traineeship or supported internship (RPA Regulations, September 2016). A further error noted is that David chiefly blamed the then Prime Minister for the enforcement of RPA when in fact, the Labour government introduced RPA legislation in 2008.

Again, another student participant wrongly assumed that employment was not an option under RPA. Lindy is a white female student, currently in foster care. Lindy similarly had numerous GCSEs, scoring high GCSE grades in a range of academic subjects. Her academic profile reflects:

| **Subjects** | **Grades** |
| --- | --- |
| Stats | A |
| Maths | D |
| Applied Science | D |
| Design & Food Technology | C |
| Design & Technology | D |
| Geography | B |
| History | B |
| English language | E |
| English Literature | D |
| Physical Education | E |

| | |
|---|---|
| RE studies | B |
| Science | D |

Lindy too was a late enrolment and one of a few students with high GCSE grades enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. These were strong qualifications that could have granted her access to higher study programmes and apprenticeships. In fact, Lindy's aspirational goal was to secure an apprenticeship in animal care. Although in reality she already qualified for access to apprenticeship provision, she was at a disadvantage as she lacked cultural capital; she therefore did not know nor did the staff members advise her to follow this particular route.

Lindy therefore found herself on a pre-foundation course outside mainstream provision and in the classroom with a substantial proportion of students with less academic ability and grades. Her college attendance was low and when in lessons, she completed course work swiftly and spent the remainder of the lessons distracting others. On RPA, Lindy stated,

> Well it's (RPA) stupid….well, because some people want to work full time but they can't because of this (gesturing to the class). Whereas people are getting money for working full time….and they (students) are not allowed to because they have to stay in college.

Likewise, Lindy believed that RPA confined students to the classroom and prevented them from engagement in full time employment. She believed that RPA deprived youth of opportunities to access full-time employment and benefit from financial rewards. Quite possibly Lindy's misperception of the work requirements under RPA could largely be attributable to her own lack of knowledge on the actual policy, leaving her dependent on other people's interpretations of RPA. The local authority arguably played a key role in shaping RPA's 'message', favouring participation in full-time education as it also performs a social control function, therefore reporting on Lindy's progress and behaviour.

**RPA's associated benefits**

Whilst all student participants believed RPA confined students to full-time education, they offered a mixed response to the benefits of being in education. On this, Lindy stated:

> …all right in one sense because I then get my grades and then I am boosting all my grades up so that I will be able to do the course that I want to do.

This indicates that Lindy thought the policy provided an opportunity for her to improve on GCSE grades; evidently, Maths and English were key considerations. Although there is a distinct difference between having the opportunity to attain higher grades and students actually achieving these, what is important is to recognise that Lindy believed further study could directly result in her being 'able to do the course' she wanted to study.

Elsa likewise associated positive benefits with a prolonged period of education. Details of her academic profile were not disclosed at the time of research. Nevertheless, during the research period Elsa had a poor college attendance record. Once in lessons, she appeared

unfocused and disruptive. She had mixed views on the course and, although she believed that the course could help her develop employability skills, she reported frustration with the inconsistency of teaching standards and the slow pace of work. On RPA, she stated:

> I feel as if it's (RPA) actually a good thing that they stay in education, because if all of them, like if lots of children decided to stay out of education basically you have so many kids out there with nothing to do. So many people on benefits and stuff and obviously I think the main point the government is trying to do is get people off benefits and get out there to work.

Elsa's narrative communicated several key ideas, most significantly that RPA offers a route to employment, preventing youth from becoming welfare dependent. Her narrative also highlighted that RPA gives young people an opportunity to use their time constructively, as many of the 'kids' were judged to have 'nothing to do'. In her explanation, education was construed as a means to keep young people occupied. The discourse of 'keeping students busy' is also echoed in tutors' narratives in the ensuing chapter on warehousing. Leah, on the other hand, offered a balanced view of RPA. Her academic profile was:

| **Subjects** | **Grades** |
|---|---|
| English Literature | D |
| Certificate<br>First Language Eng | D |

| | |
|---|---|
| Certificate In Literature (Eng) | U grade |
| Mathematics | X |
| Additional Applied Science | No result |

Further study and retaking her GCSEs seemed particularly necessary in Leah's case. On RPA, Leah states:

> I think it's good and bad. I think it's good because it will help you improve your grades. It gives you more of a social life in college instead of going straight into work where people might not have had previous jobs. So it can help you in that way. But I think that it's a bad way because not a lot of people want to stay on at college, a lot of people might want to go out and work full-time and not do part-time. I just think it's one of them situations where it is good in ways but it is bad in other ways.

Thus, Leah similarly recognised that RPA facilitates grade attainment and also has benefits for social life. However, Leah also claimed that RPA does not treat people as individuals. In her view RPA prevents full-time employment and expects everyone to stay in education, although this is not the case as previously stated: youth can have a full-time job but it should be attached to part-time education or training with accredited training institutions.

**Adult influence**

Though several students highlighted what they perceived to be the restrictive nature of RPA, nevertheless student narratives also endorsed the positive ‘messages’ of prolonged education, often mostly endorsed by adults. Most of the students attended college under the firm guidance of parents and significant others. In the case of Lindy, she disclosed that social services stipulated that she must attend college whilst in foster care. Because Lindy is a looked-after child, social services have parenting responsibility and instructed her to regularly attend college. In this way she has the opportunity to gain a qualification and is equally engaged in what are considered to be constructive activities over the three days at college.

Similarly, Laurie indicated that her father told her to attend college, partly because it provided her with the opportunity to improve on her low Maths and English grades, which may bring her closer to her goal of becoming a prison officer. It also transpired that another motivation for college attendance was inspired by the fact that non-attendance at college affected parents’ benefit payments, which in this particular moment also shows broader links with social welfare policies. Despite Laurie’s reported ambitions, her college attendance record was low. I learned that she lived a distance from college and had to make a forty-minute journey by train and a ten-minute walk from the station. When she did make it into college, she habitually arrived late for lessons and was consequently sent to the library as punishment and not permitted to join in with lessons. On the days when she was in actual lessons, Laurie seemed disengaged and frequently talked about leisure time pursuits or played on her mobile phone. On RPA, she stated:

> **Laurie:** My dad told me about the law….because I didn't want to go to college, but he told me that I had to be in education until I was 18.
>
> **Interviewer:** Why did you not want to be in college then?
>
> **Laurie:** Oh, because I wanted to go and work…care work, but it's because I needed to retake my Maths and English….

In this account, Laurie stated her preference for employment, particularly in care work. However, she claimed that her father has advised her against this and said that 'the law' did not allow employment until the age of 18 years. Hence, her goal of immediate work was postponed whilst she focussed on the priority of retaking her GCSEs.

Laurie's desire for immediate employment was similarly reported in a substantial minority of participants. In almost all of these cases, these students were reportedly 'talked out of it' by adults and authority figures and were advised to pursue education instead. Even so, these students did appreciate the need for qualifications to further their employment prospects. From the next section onwards I will elaborate and explain why these students felt that they needed higher GCSE grades and the consequent struggles which many faced in gaining access to GCSE provision within *The Site.*

**The students and the need for higher GCSE grades**

The majority of the students who participated in the study had no or low GCSE qualifications. Student records illustrated this point, seen in their E, F, U GCSE grades. These grades suggest that most of them were functioning at Entry Level 3 (just below GCSE level) or Level 1 as highlighted in the my introduction. The majority of the

students blamed their school, friends and family problems for their poor academic grades. However, one particular student named Kyle differed and blamed himself for previous academic failure, despite the fact that he was diagnosed with learning difficulties and mental health problems. He appeared to show less consideration to the fact that he was having social welfare issues (reflected in student records) and relied on learning support. He reportedly also found it difficult to 'switch off' from family problems. His college attendance was low and, once in class, he often stared out of the window and rarely participated in class discussion. His reported ambition was do an apprenticeship once he finished this particular course. In reflecting on his grades, he explained:

> Just behaviour stuff and GCSEs and I didn't really concentrate on anything. I didn't go or anything like that and that was my fault that was a big mistake…Pretty much nothing (reference to qualifications) and that's my fault…And I'm making up for it now…Trying! I come in to college.

Kyle blamed himself for his school behaviour and qualifications. Kyle's narrative resembled neo-liberal conceptualisation of individual failure, blaming individuals for academic failure and other shortcomings seen to threaten broader political objectives promoting employability. According to the employability discourse, Kyle's lack of qualifications, attitude and behavioural problems were key factors which required modification. The fact that he viewed college as an opportunity to amend the situation echoed broader rhetoric on re-engagement provision: the employability course offered students with complex and disadvantaged backgrounds a second chance to develop the required employability skills in order to enhance employment prospects.

Thus, reflecting on his schooling, Kyle claimed that he made a 'big' mistake at school and seemed set to improve his grades as he "pretty much (had) nothing". He was not the only student with this issue. The students on the course all discovered that GCSE Maths and English were main entry requirements on both mainstream vocational and apprenticeship provision at *The Site*. As a consequence, the growing demand for higher academic grades generated academic pressure, revealed in the following focus group discussion,

> **Lily**: I just think the government and politics and stuff like that put too much pressure on young people to get the grades that they should have but they don't really do much about it.
>
> **David**: I'm not being funny but they shouldn't sit everyone down for one test, everyone has got different intellectual skills and we don't all know the same stuff do we? So I mean you get some people who can read a book once and remember all of it and one person who can't remember anything but then will remember other stuff. Some people excel in other things; it's just not fair on us.
>
> **Kyle:** Yeah everyone's good at something. You just have to find what it is.

The students highlighted that the government was largely responsible for the academic pressure placed on students to attain higher grades. They also raised concerns over the standardised GCSE assessment measures and how it appeared to favour those considered to be more academic. Such thoughts prompted the claim that "it is just not fair on us",

which in one way suggested that these students felt disadvantaged in their self-reported tendency to underperform in formal assessments. In their discussions, these students articulated their collective belief that the current educational landscape appeared to prioritise academic qualifications, and as a result, accentuated academic differences and caused further division.

Not only were different academic qualifications visibly brought to light by government discourse, but there was a growing divide between academic and non-academic subjects, with academic subjects being preferred. For instance, some students had Functional Skills, others had an A in GCSE Art or a C in Textiles, yet these achievements in non-academic GCSE subjects or related study did not appear to hold equivalent status at *The Site*. This is despite policy initiatives such as the *Dearing Review* (1994) that attempted to establish GCSE-equivalent status for subjects such as Functional Skills Maths and English.

This is a key issue which has clear implications for the students - though both Functional Skills and GCSE qualifications gave students the opportunity to develop literacy and numeracy skills, they significantly differed in academic status and value at this particular college. My findings confirmed that GCSE grades in specific academic subjects still hold privileged status (*Wolf Review*, 2011). Likewise, the Ofqual report, *Perceptions of A level, GCSE and Other Qualifications* (2012), reported that employers favoured GCSE qualifications in specific academic subjects and commonly used them to make a judgment about a candidate (The Education and Training Foundation, March 2015). From this point of view, the political demand for higher GCSEs in academic subjects

favoured those with the ‘right’ GCSE qualifications; they played a key role in the government’s aim of establishing a knowledge-driven economy.

However, this political objective has contributed to a situation where participants who were former NEETs and students from complex academic backgrounds found themselves in a precarious situation. Those with qualifications are faced with the misrecognition of GCSEs in non-academic subjects or equivalent qualifications. In effect, political ideals for the knowledge economy appear to contribute to social exclusionary conditions which, as already highlighted, make such rhetoric appear to be unrealistic to marginalised students.

Students in the study were aware of the significance of higher GCSE grades in Maths and English, previously echoed in Zette’s narrative at the start of the chapter. Zette clearly had concerns over the fact that she could not access GCSE provision as part of her studies. Her reported confusion comes as no surprise as the course information lacked clarity and accuracy (as highlighted in a previous chapter). It also omitted the fact that GCSE provision was subjected to stringent entry criteria with no guaranteed access. For students like Zette who sought academic credentials to advance to higher levels of study, this omission and incorrect course information regarding GCSEs were likely to jeopardise her academic goals. To understand why this may be the case, a closer focus and attention were required to investigate how GCSEs are used at The Site.

**Regulatory controls governing student access to education provision:**

**The gatekeeping function of GCSE grades**

There are various examples within the research data which demonstrate how GCSEs are predominantly used to govern and demarcate student access to essential and desirable provision within *The Site*. For instance, in re-visiting Zette's statement, we read:

> I was doing Health and Social Care Level 1 last year and then I was going to do Level 2 but I did not get the right GCSEs…. It's hard because I could have gone on to Level 2 but now I have to be here for an extra year.

Here we see how Zette has come up against the supposed meritocratic policies within the education system that legitimated the demand for higher GCSE grades to gain access to higher levels of educational opportunities. One could argue that educational policies such as the white paper, *Importance of Teaching 2010*, have been instrumental in that they introduced the requirement for higher GCSEs, a policy aimed at raising academic standards and qualification levels amongst post-16 youth. Such policy initiatives established this notion of the academic ideal, reflected in the required five A*-C GCSE grades including English and Maths. By implication, students who were academic would benefit from such a mandate.

However, students who fell short of this academic ideal might experience challenges within the education system. Take the case of Zette. She was hoping to study the Level 2 course in the Health and Social Care department. However, although she achieved the Level 1 Health and Social Care qualification, this

achievement did not appear to count. Instead, access to the next level course required four GCSEs (grades A*-E), including English and Maths. In this, the academic ideal operated within structural constraints, limiting the extent to which students could access vocational and training courses on mainstream provision. Most of the students were therefore confined to pre-foundation/pre-vocational learning.

There were further concerns that the option to undertake work-related or practical learning appeared to be non-existent for the learners on this course. The option of traineeship provision, a 6-month course with work experience that gets students ready for work or an apprenticeship, was not offered at *The Site*. The institution, like many others with satisfactory or below-quality ratings, was prohibited from delivering traineeship provisions. However, although *The Site* has since achieved a 'good quality rating', traineeship provision was still not delivered, which left apprenticeship as the only option.

The added complication of gaining experience of the workplace was hindered by the fact that higher GCSE grades were also required on apprenticeship provision. Entry to the course required four to five A*–C GCSEs with at least a D grade in English and Maths. As we can see, the demand for academic competence and qualifications also features as a prerequisite for industry-related training. As a consequence, the preference for higher academic grades resulted in the majority of the student participants not being able to apply for apprenticeship training and they were therefore restricted to the classroom.

The minority of students who could apply were further disadvantaged when they discovered that apprenticeship provision was subjected to stringent criteria. This issue confirmed existing academic research on the fundamental lack of apprenticeships for youth. My study equally discovered that space was limited and access was consequently restricted by high entry requirements.

This meant that at this particular college, the students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course were directly competing for access to apprenticeships with BTEC Level 3 and degree students. Based on my empirical findings, the academic conditions were tough, recruitment policies were strict, space was limited, classroom sizes were capped, and students were required to find their own employers who could offer a position for an apprenticeship. This issue has not gone unnoticed and Kyle, one of the students, said:

> I'd like to do an apprenticeship but it's not as easy as that, there is obviously a lot of people going for it too and there's not enough spaces. I think there should be more apprenticeships because if you look on the website there's not actually that much.

Kyle knew that it was difficult to get an apprenticeship, partly because they were limited in supply and too many people were interested in them. Therefore, the demand for higher GCSE grades became an important regulatory tool, under competitive conditions, to manage and govern access to apprenticeship provision. In managing scarce, yet desirable resources, competitive principles influenced which types of students were permitted access to apprenticeship and the labour market. For

those who did not have either any GCSEs or the 'right' ones, they faced reduced access to the employment sector and rather found themselves restricted to classroom-based education and work simulation initiatives within *The Site*.

The cumulative effect of the growing demand for higher GCSE grades has furthermore created a situation whereby students have had to undertake a longer period of study when they did not have the 'right' GCSEs. On this, Zette reported:

> It's distressing having to do a Level 1 *** course!
> It's hard because I could have gone on to Level 2
> but now I have to be here for an extra year.

Zette claimed that she was required to do an 'extra year'. This issue has similarly been echoed amongst several students who have had to accept an extended study period to achieve their goals. Though the students in the focus group mainly recognised the benefits associated with a prolonged study period, they have had several reservations too. For example, Elsa stated:

> Yeah I would like to go onto second year and do my GCSEs as next year I'll need to get GCSE grades to get into the next course. But I'll have to think about the fact that the government makes us all pay. As soon as you're 19 you have to pay (for adult provision).

The issue here is not the reluctance to undertake extended periods of study, because the students reportedly had aspirations to engage in further study. However, Elsa has considered the practical implications and recognises the financial constraints that may hinder any prospective study in her post-18 years. Elsa's explanation

highlights the disabling effects of structural constraints which reduced students' capacity to deal with the escalation of costs linked with 19+ provision.

The focus group likewise identified financial barriers which limited prospects for further study post-18 years. On this issue, they stated:

> **Kyle**: It's quite a lot of money. It's like thousands.
>
> **David**: Yeah it's a load of money to go to college and stuff…I'm not being funny but it's a bit unfair that they want us to go to college until we're 18 but then as soon as we hit 19 they won't pay for it. It's making us redundant really because we've got to go to college and then if we do one more year and we turn 19 in the third year then we have to pay for it. How is that fair on us?

Evidently, the students were aware that GCSEs were necessary to permit access to further and higher levels of study within college. These students acknowledged that they had to commit to a longer period of study beyond the compulsory age to attain their educational goals. Within their explanations, they recognised the issue of funding restrictions and the consequent role of organisational policies which affected their academic outcomes within *The Site*. This meant that the possibility of achieving higher qualifications was placed out of reach for most student participants and others in a similar position studying at *The Site*.

**The influences of BKSB and Functional Skills**

Although GCSEs played a central role in allowing students access to higher levels of study within *The Site*, BKSB and Functional Skills qualifications were also key influences in facilitating the gatekeeping function of GCSEs for students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. Here it is necessary to point out that Functional Skills qualifications embody the government's employability agenda and official rhetoric promoted Functional Skills English and Maths as essential skills vital to the personal and work lives of both adults and youth.

These qualifications allowed students to study such subjects in a practical way, whereby they were to apply core skills to real-life situations in order to make learning relevant and applicable to everyday life. In so doing, students engaged in lifelong learning as highlighted in a previous discussion on the employability discourse. They were therefore meant to be able to take education beyond the classroom arena and into areas of industry and social life and in this way develop transferable skills that allow students to adapt to everyday life situations.

The BKSB Diagnostic Assessment tool was designed to track student's Functional Skills levels in English, Maths and ICT from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 (these levels have already been explained in chapter one) (https://www.bksb.co.uk/about/functional-skills/). Functional Skills English and Maths were particularly portrayed as essential subjects and were mandatory for most training and education programmes, including diplomas, foundation learning programmes and apprenticeships. They also served as stand-alone qualifications or stepping stones towards GCSEs (https://www.bksb.co.uk/diagnostic-

assessment). The online BKSB assessment was fully interactive and enabled self-marking, giving students direct involvement and responsibility for taking ownership and addressing any shortcomings (see Appendix 4).

Although the motivation was perhaps to promote independent learning skills, at the same time the key influences of neo-liberalism and the employability discourse were identified in BKSB. For instance, when students completed the diagnostic assessments in English and Maths, they got a percentage score which automatically produced an interactive Individual Learning Plan (ILP) which highlighted their skill gaps as well as directing them to appropriate online resources which they were required to access in order to fill those skill gaps.

Hence, these Functional Skills qualifications allowed for a personalised assessment of an individual's literacy and numeracy skills which identified shortcomings, making the student responsible for addressing individual deficiencies in order to become employable. This responsibility was placed squarely on students to address these individual shortcomings, regardless of whether they agreed or had the financial means or access to computer software. On this basis, it could be argued that an over-emphasis on individual factors diminished a focus on the constraining effects of structural inequalities that also reduced a student's capacity to make improvements. Nevertheless, following the diagnostic assessment and subsequent delivery of the Functional Skills curriculum, the exams were graded as either a 'pass' or 'fail' and did not involve portfolio-work.

Entry Level examinations were paper-based, internally assessed and moderated by The Site. However, both Level 1 and Level 2 could be taken online or as a paper exam during set weeks in accordance with the awarding body calendar. These levels were externally assessed, moderated and carried out in exam conditions at an assessment centre within The Site. With respect to the students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course*,* depending on their prior academic achievements, they either enrolled for Entry Level or Level 1 qualifications in both subjects or had to sit the exams at the end of the academic year.

This meant that students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course were expected to comply with the Functional Skills mandate. Functional Skills qualifications were particularly important because students could only gain the overall Level 1 Achieving Skills Employability Certificate if they had completed the portfolio component, as well as passing both Functional Skills English and Maths exams. Students were informed that the sitting of Functional Skills English and Maths exams was important, because they needed it to acquire the overall employability qualification. The requirement for individual effort was mapped not only in the portfolio-work, but also the extensive academic and personal works that were required when doing Functional Skills Maths and English. However, this particular discourse did not accurately depict the precarious nature which prevailed within education settings and the employment sector, previously highlighted in the work of Standing (2011).

This issue was observed in Zette's circumstances referenced at the start of this chapter; she experienced levels of uncertainty when she discovered that her attainment of Functional Skills qualifications did not guarantee a place on the next Level 2 Health and

Social Care course. Instead, she was advised to apply for a lower qualification in pre-foundation learning as she did not have the 'right' GCSEs despite having done Functional Skills. Other than the apparent lack of equivalency between these two qualifications, the key argument here was that there was little guarantee that students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course would reap the rewards of their individual efforts in participating in several mandatory aspects of the course. Hence, there was no certainty that such ideals are obtainable.

The main research findings discovered that at *The Site,* GCSEs played a central role in allowing students access to higher levels of study, despite the attainment of Functional Skills qualifications. Instead, these Functional Skills qualifications socially controlled and governed the tutors' decisions as to whether students should be allowed access to GCSE provision. BKSB and Functional Skills qualifications were therefore key influences in facilitating the gatekeeping function of GCSEs for students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. The next section further explores this issue within *The Site.*

**The varying practices of GCSE gatekeeping at *The Site***

As previously mentioned, access to GCSE provision was heavily regulated and controlled through the government policy, *Crossing the Line: Improving success rates among students retaking English and Maths GCSEs* (Porter, 2015). It states that learners with GCSE grade D in English or Maths are the only ones permitted to enrol on GCSE courses and re-sit GCSEs. These students therefore have a second opportunity to improve on the D grade in Maths and/or English. *The Site* had an

identical policy and therefore also mandated that students with a D grade in GCSE Maths and/or English could access GCSE provision onsite.

This meant that if GCSE grades were lower than a D, which was usually the case with students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, there was no chance to retake GCSEs. Instead, 'pathways' have been designed for these students to undertake Functional Skills to develop literacy and numeracy skills designed as "stepping-stone" qualifications to GCSE. However, some students had their reservations about this, and Zette for example voiced her frustration about the lack of opportunity to do GCSE classes. She stated:

> I don't want to waste a year here on this course. My English is like a D and my Maths like a F. But I don't understand why I cannot do my GCSE Maths if I don't get a D? I don't understand that! No, the tutors did not explain why I cannot do it. I would have thought that if you did not get the right GCSEs you can re-take them whatever they are? I didn't know it had to be a certain grade for me to be able to retake them….I need to take my GCSEs but I don't know where to re-take them?

This statement revealed Zette's concern, as previously communicated, that for students like her, the GCSE policy essentially barred those with lower grades from re-sitting and improving on lower GCSE grades. Though Zette identified the need for higher GCSE grades, she found that *The Site* could not accommodate such ambitions and she therefore

had to search for a different educational establishment which would grant her opportunity to access GCSE provision.

Other than the college policy, Zette's situation identified another barrier in the work practices of tutors on the course: although she met the entry requirements for access to GCSE provision given her D-grade in English, the course team hindered access to GCSE classes and instead steered her and most students towards Functional Skills qualifications. To understand the logic behind this practice, Nina, the Faculty Manager of this course and of Foundation Learning, explained:

> So those who do GCSEs have joined a cross-college class…the students still need that higher level of support. Some of them are getting a little lost in those classes, because the classes are bigger than our group sizes. So if someone has got their D grade and we have done our thorough diagnostic assessment and where we have determined for example that English is going to be too much or Maths is going to be too much at GCSE, we've done the Level 2 Functional Skills instead, but they can progress in English beyond that.

Nina gave the impression that those students who qualify for GCSE courses were granted the opportunity to do GCSE English and Maths. However, it transpired that questions tend to be raised over these students' capacity to cope with GCSE provision. They were construed as requiring a higher level of support than what was on offer on the GCSE provision. More critically, this narrative showed how the BKSB diagnostic assessment was enforced and used as a key strategy legitimising restrictions on GCSE enrolment at

all levels within The Site. This meant that for students with lower GCSEs, the requirement for a D grade was used to restrict access to GCSE provision in accordance with institutional and governmental policy.

Yet, when students met the entry requirement, as was the case with some student participants, BKSB assessments were used to override the policy when tutors assessed and questioned students' personal capacity to manage the academic pressure associated with GCSE provision. It was speculated that these students could 'get a little lost' and 'classes are bigger' than what they were accustomed to and as a consequence, the intake on GCSE provision was restricted for students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. These considerations appeared to explain why tutors did not automatically enrol these students on GCSE courses despite them meeting the organisation's GCSE requirements.

What this situation further showed was an apparent deviation from the discourse on BKSB assessment. It emerged that although these assessments were used to track Functional Skills levels from Entry Level 1 to Level 2 in order to identify skill gaps, the tutors also used the results of the diagnostic assessments to form a judgement of a student's academic ability and therefore their capacity to advance to higher levels of study. Foucault's theory on the conduct of conduct has particular prominence here, because this framework identifies the varying ways how key educational systems such as BKSB and Functional Skills qualifications were principally used on the course to identify students' individual shortcomings, as well as the inherent expectation that they address any skills-gaps identified in the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) before obtaining the overall employability qualification. Drawing on Foucault's theory of conduct of conduct,

students were observed to have to self-regulate and take responsibility for skills development. Although there was no overt sign of rebellion, most students appeared to be procrastinating which required the course tutors to cajole them to complete the tasks, often to low academic standards. In this sense, most of the students were 'playing the game' to get the certificate, expecting it to result in the overall qualification. Foucault's theory on the 'conduct of conduct' furthermore highlighted the contributions of others, in this case meaning the course tutors who were likewise responsible for governance, regulating participants' trajectory and access to limited, albeit essential education provision within The Site.

Hence, rather than speculating over possible explanations for such practice, instead here it is necessary to consider that Functional Skills appeared to be institutionalised on the course. By implication, the course team completed diagnostic assessments on all students, even on those students who already have attained a D GCSE grade in the first place and therefore in principle should have been enrolled in GCSE classes. Moreover, a review of the database for GCSE enrolment at the different campuses on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course revealed that only seven out of forty-six students (15%) were doing either GCSE English or Maths. These student numbers excluded research participants such as Lindy, Zette, Adam and David who similarly qualified for GCSEs in Maths and/or English. Instead, they were enrolled with fellow students on Functional Skills English.

My research findings confirmed that Functional Skills was construed as the main form of alternative provision, and as a consequence, these participants missed a critical opportunity to gain the higher academic grades needed to access vocational courses and

apprenticeship provision within The Site. The fact that GCSE provision was restricted on two different levels made it harder for participants to improve on previous academic failure. This led me to agree with Simmons (2011); though at the time of writing he referred to his study on E2E provision, he plausibly theorised that it was both sad and ironic that the study programme designed to help some of the most disadvantaged young people to find work in some ways contributed to their continued exclusion given its restrictive curriculum. Thus, taking into consideration the *Wolf Review*, there appeared to be very minimal change in improved educational opportunities for students enrolled on low-level courses.

**Inequality and restrictions to higher levels of study and training**

GCSEs have increased in significance, given the government's political ambition to establish a qualified workforce able to work in a competitive knowledge-driven economy. Those with no or lower school-leaving qualifications, especially youth, are expected to participate in RPA education and training provision so they may attain higher academic grades and employment goals. Hence, whilst enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, it was necessary for these students to gain access to GCSE provision. Enrolment on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course offered these students a second chance to gain access to GCSE provision with the prospect of higher qualification attainment.

However, even though several students were seeking to access GCSE provision, they instead encountered multi-layered obstacles which prohibited their access. For instance, many discovered that the demand for higher GCSE grades in academic subjects was the academic currency that governed access to vocational courses, apprenticeship training and

the opportunity to retake GCSEs within *The Site*. As a consequence, GCSEs played a dual role within the college: for more 'academically able' students it served as a gateway to access essential GCSE provision and higher levels of vocational education and apprenticeship provision; in contrast, for less academic students it operated as a gatekeeper to restrict student access to key provision. Consequently, apprenticeship, GCSE provision and higher levels of vocational study were placed out of bounds, and most participants were unable to benefit from wide-ranging education and training provision at *The Site*.

Although retaking GCSEs in English and/or Maths provided student participants with a second opportunity to improve on previous academic failure, judging on national figures, not many students succeed at retakes (not just GCSEs) (The Guardian, 25 Aug 2016). Arguably, the increased number of failures could perhaps be due to the fact that more students with GCSE grade D in English or Maths were expected to resit those exams in accordance with the government's GCSE policy. The national figures showed a fall in national GCSE results, with the overall proportion of pupils getting A*-C in English falling from 5.2% to 60.2%, and Maths suffering a drop of 2.3 percentage points for grades A*-C. Only around one in four of those retaking the two core subjects gained a C or above in 2016. In England alone, it has been reported that the A*-C pass rate dropped from 68.8% in 2015 to 66.6% in 2016 (The Guardian, 25 Aug 2016) but went up this year.

For those studying Level 3 BTEC or A level, if they were unable to achieve the C-grade, there was still an opportunity for them to gain access to a university if this was perhaps

their ambition. However, other than employment, depending on the choice of course and also university, alternative Functional Skills qualifications alongside the overall Level 3 qualification enabled them to either gain a place of study on a foundation-degree programme, apply for a different course with a lower entry requirement or they were advised to work and retake GCSEs at secondary school during evening classes. In contrast, options diminished for those on lower-level courses; they cannot retake GCSEs whilst accessing higher levels of study as in the case of their counterparts. Hence, gaining access to GCSE provision, whilst being enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, was an important second-chance opportunity for students aiming to improve on previous academic failure within The Site.

Without a doubt the learners on this course found themselves in a competitive college environment that arguably institutionalised a system of success and failure. Stringent academic conditions and a high GCSE tariff brought them in direct competition with better-qualified young people. Those with no or lower GCSEs were therefore particularly disadvantaged in the competition for educational credentials and access to desirable resources.

Furthermore, my data showed how educational credentials were valorised and often used as a key explanation as to why access to essential and desirable educational opportunities was closed off to those with no or low GCSEs. Noticeably, policies and work practices within the setting constructed processes in which GCSE capital was used to construct an intellectual divide. Therefore, segregating those with low GCSEs from others deemed more academic.

These examples demonstrate Bourdieu's theory on capital and how GCSEs embedded power and produced academic barriers for several participants seeking access to GCSE classes in an attempt to gain higher GCSE grades. Here, GCSEs served a dual role within the setting: those with higher academic grades were granted opportunity to pursue higher levels of study and training in the college; whilst those with no or low GCSE grades were restricted and could not advance past pre-vocational learning. This meant that a range of educational opportunities were closed off, placing higher levels of vocational courses, apprenticeship training and the opportunity to retake GCSEs out of reach for most student participants, who were from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In some respects, these findings on students' struggles within the education sector, brings to mind Willis' theory: some working class 'lads' felt distrustful of schooling, perceived it as failing their own aspirations and actively mocked the schooling process. However, although most of my participants were similarly from working class background, many saw participation in the employability course as worthwhile and claimed it could offer them a second chance to gain higher GCSEs. In many ways my participants were no different from fellow students on mainstream provision. Contrary to stereotypical assumptions, many wanted higher grades to access vocational courses and apprenticeships that could lead to better-paid employments. They reported aspirations for higher educational goals and apprenticeship training, unlike in the case of the 'lads'.

However, several participants imminently discovered that the way in which this employability course was structured and delivered, knowledge seemed compartmentalised

and restricted, bound by time, space and learning activity. A combination of government, institutional policies and educational practice made relatively realistic aspirational goals unobtainable for most participants within The Site. Thus, despite individual aspirations, participants faced stringent academic conditions and multiple structural factors which placed them in direct competition with better-qualified students for access to essential education provision at The Site. Hence, although in principle participants were positioned in a setting which could ideally offer them a through-way from pre-vocational studies to university education or apprenticeship training if they wanted, in actual reality this opportunity was not granted for many participants. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Level 1 employability qualification held less academic relevance within the setting.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that most of these student participants were predominantly white, from low-income backgrounds, and many had no or few, low GCSEs. As discovered in my data, these students encountered various academic barriers which hindered their chances of improving on academic grades. Willis' contributions on issues of social class have some significance in examining the educational experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, I could not draw on social class explanations because many students from similar working class background were enrolled on GCSE or other 'higher' qualifications (what Willis's lads called 'the ear'oles'). However, despite possibly sharing similar social class backgrounds, the students on BTEC courses had higher academic grades and consequently had greater access to education provision within The Site. The distinct lack of qualifications marked their difference; and this issue is recognised in the literature previously reviewed. Hence, although social class influences play an essential role, nevertheless a lack of educational

credentials amongst marginalised youth significantly disadvantaged their capacity to make a transition into a competitive education and training sector.

Thus, as previously highlighted in the literature reviewed, Bourdieu's (1979) theory and criticism of the meritocracy discourse identify structural inequalities embedded within the ways in which numerous social and institutional arenas work together to influence the real chances available to marginalised students. Therefore, in contrast to neo-liberal rhetoric and the employability agenda, most of these participants expressed and demonstrated individual efforts whilst participating in the employability curriculum. However, even so, they have experienced a situation where the educational opportunities to gain higher levels of knowledge and qualifications were diminished within The Site.

This issue highlighted the central argument of several academic researchers (Simmons et al., 2009); Atkins, 2009; Allen and Ainley, 2010) displayed in the literature review who claimed that given the low-quality education provision currently on offer for marginalised students enrolled on low-level courses, these students were not prepared to form part of the high-skilled workforce.

In this context, the effects of the prevailing ethics of competition cannot be overlooked. The data identified that a lack of higher educational qualifications contributed to some participants' struggle to gain access to GCSE provision and making the transition to higher levels of study The Site.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the issue of GCSEs and how these qualifications appeared to play a dual role in either granting students with higher grades access to higher levels of study and apprenticeships, but also how those with no or lower school-leaving qualifications struggled to access GCSE provision in order to retake and improve upon previous academic failure. This chapter raised broader concerns over social inequality and the influences of the credentialist nature of the education system in contributing to the marginalisation of students with lower academic grades.

Despite most participants' stated ambitions to pursue higher academic and training goals, they experienced that individual effort in participating in prolonged education as per neo-liberal rhetoric provided questionable benefits for most students on the course. Structural inequalities embedded within governmental, employment and institutional factors inhibited the extent to which these students could access higher levels of study or the employment sector through apprenticeships. In particular, the influence of the government's employability agenda was recognised in the way in which BKSB assessments and Functional Skills qualifications were placed centre stage on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. This meant that students on the course were expected to take responsibility in addressing individual shortcomings.

Tutors often used the results of these assessments to disqualify Level 1 students who had already met the GCSE entry requirements. Tutors socially controlled which types of students were allowed on GCSE provision. BKSB and Functional Skills qualifications therefore contributed to participants' experiences of the gatekeeping function of GCSEs.

Similarly, institutional policies, largely driven by financial incentives, introduced stringent systems of operation which strictly controlled access to GCSE provision, vocational courses and apprenticeships and therefore prohibited scope for marginalised students to attain higher academic and employment goals. Thus, regardless of the political rhetoric on 'participation, inclusion and equal access', it was found that discourses of social exclusion equally exist in education settings.

There was thus tension and contradiction on the course. Principally RPA promotes participation and the opportunity for post-16 youth to attain higher educational qualifications. However, in practice, student participants experienced constrained participation and exclusion from essential provision. The study showed that the current college system makes it difficult for these participants and similar students with poor grades to accrue the necessary GCSE capital and achieve the type of academic success the students valued - one that could yield better opportunities tailored to their individual academic and employment goals. For the time being, these students were expected to participate and attend college, engaging in a restrictive provision that not only required longer periods of study, but also expected them to do so in a situation in which academic conditions were precarious. Consequently, there was great ambiguity as to whether these goals would in fact be accomplished in the current climate.

## Chapter Six: Student welfare: complexity, dilemmas and contradictions

> "…I've got a learner who comes in…she comes in one morning, and her head will go down on the desk and I know that there is a problem there. She's a self-harmer, she's got mental health difficulties, severe panic attacks, regularly she's going like this and I say, 'Are you okay?', and she says, 'I cut myself last night'. Then I have to pull her out the classroom, make sure the wounds are clean, make sure she's okay then maybe go to safeguarding, make sure that's put on pro-monitor, and that's before I even start teaching in the classroom. I can't just leave that girl with her head on the desk, because I know that her problems are massive. …we'll start teaching when I get back. But yeah, a nightmare! And that could take half an hour before I start teaching" (Interview with Tutor: Aggy – Recorded interview: June 2015).

Aggy's account illustrates the complexities, tensions and challenges of dealing with student welfare concerns on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. According to the tutors, the students experienced complex welfare problems; they were urgent, frequent, 'real' and potentially serious. This perception perhaps explained why their teaching practice was influenced by a strong nurturing and welfare focus. The sheer complexity of dealing with welfare duties on this course could not be overlooked. Although Aggy believed that such practice had benefits, her narrative also identified the pitfalls when teaching practice was governed by a predominant welfare ethos where dealing with student welfare issues took precedence over other educational concerns. As a consequence, formal teaching was

immediately postponed and classroom learning was temporarily suspended. The option of perhaps referring the matter to the college's safeguarding team as per protocol, was not considered the preferred route.

Background reading highlighted that 90% of English councils have experienced funding cuts for children and youth services. More specifically, from 2013 to 2014 alone, approximately £103m was cut from Children's Social Care, youth justice services and child protection services (UNISON, Aug 2016). Consequently, the FE sector, like many other public sector agencies, has borne the brunt of the government's austerity agenda, despite facing an array of challenges with repeated funding cuts, redundancies and ongoing disruption with the current area reviews that threaten the merging or closure of several FE colleges (O'Leary, March 2016).

As a result, within contemporary FE education settings, there was a broadened welfare agenda, observed in the *Children Act 2004* and *Children and Families Act 2014* which commissioned education, health and social care services to safeguard and protect vulnerable children and youth. As a consequence, education settings were expected to respond to student welfare issues on a limited budget. The growing welfare mandate and a likelihood of the disintegration of public services have contributed to conditions which give rise to the expanded role of education in social welfare matters.

In this chapter I recognise that there may be potential benefits associated with a focus on welfare, while at the same time noting that the welfare mandate within the education sector was deeply complex and fraught with tension. Previous academic studies supported

the need for welfare focus in order to address students' unmet emotional needs within education settings (Hornby and Atkinson, 2003; Hyland, 2005), but other studies cautioned against the prioritisation of welfare as such teaching practice tends to diminish an academic focus and limit student opportunities for higher educational attainment (Hayes and Ecclestone, 2008; Atkins, 2009; Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

My key empirical findings confirmed that a predominant welfare focus on this particular employability course produced tension and complexity, revealed in two key issues: the infantalisation of students; and the rise of social welfare tutors. The chapter concludes that tutors may unwittingly be reinforcing disadvantage through an overemphasis on care and nurture.

**Pedagogy and practice - the centrality of the welfare discourse**

The government's employability agenda played a prominent role on this Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. The course had an central focus on students' personal attributes and expected individual shortcomings to be addressed within the employability course. Thus, a focus on student welfare issues seemed justified, particularly when welfare problems arguably threatened political goals to make individuals employable inhibiting youth from attaining personal growth and individual success. Research conducted by Tower et al. (2011:512) confirmed that students 'burdened with difficult home circumstances' appeared 'unfocused and low in confidence' in the classroom. It was theorised that these difficult home and personal circumstances impacted a student's sense of self-esteem, confidence and academic attainment and therefore a focus on affective

processes and confidence building within educational objectives seemed necessary (Hyland, 2005; Tower et al., 2011).

The tutors likewise believed that the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course needed to focus on raising students' self-esteem and confidence building. Tania, one of the tutors, explained:

> …someone who either has not enjoyed school very much, not performed as well as they could, might have taken the easy route and not bothered… And suddenly they came to their sense and say 'oh no, I wish I didn't mess about. I really needed that GCSEs... And some of them are really very, very lovely. Others, as I have said, there has been barriers along the way, having learning needs and disabilities that have not been picked up. Problems at home, there could be abuse, self-harming, lots of mental health issues, lots of things getting in the way…Either way, to that point, most of them have not succeeded to their most potential at school (Interview with tutor, Tania – April 2015).

Although Tania's account had positive nuances, overall, when she described 'typical learners' on her course, she positioned some of them within a deficit ideology. In other words, the students all had individual shortcomings which could be seen in many students' low academic credentials, difficulties in home life, emotional and mental problems and so forth. Tania's description also portrayed a weakened image of most students on the course, which in one way perhaps explains why a predominantly welfare discourse and pedagogical activities would benefit students on the course. This issue was

detailed in the previous chapter on the discussion regarding BKSB diagnostic assessments. Drawing on the welfare discourse, Peter, one of the tutors, stated:

> ….XY (name of course) is a place where staff gives ‘a listening ear’ – learners need to be listened to. It facilitates trust and rapport. Feel ‘students have lost their voice’ – so by listening to them, you give them space to voice their emotions (Interview with tutor, Peter, July 2014).

Other than the tutor’s goal to foster trust and rapport with learners, these particular students were repositioned as having ‘lost their voice’. He therefore argued that the course was the given space for tutors to give *‘a listening ear’* and enable students to voice their emotions. There was therefore the need for a therapeutic ethos and desire to counsel students on the course. This point was reflected when Hope explained:

> “…because you definitely sometimes get the more ‘needier’ learners, or if you have a group who are living in ‘care’, or …it does kind of change. I very much see my role…I am almost a counsellor before a teacher, and then there is argument you are not a counsellor, but essentially we are because until you have that rapport with your student, and until they trust you and you take care of whatever else they worry about, they are not gonna worry about what is happening in the classroom. And I think that is the problem” (Interview with tutor, Hope, July 2014).

My research findings discovered that most of the course tutors considered their main role to be that of a counsellor first and a teacher second. In this respect, their practice appeared to be governed by counselling philosophies with some deviation from ‘traditional’

educational practice based in structured learning and conceptual knowledge. Ecclestone (2004) previously cautioned that within therapeutic education, educational practitioners could subtly adopt the role of therapist. My empirical findings confirmed that on this course, boundaries, roles and responsibilities appeared blurred. While this arguably takes place on most teaching courses, on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course there was a predominant welfare focus which contributed to the tutors adopting a counselling disposition in actual practice when teaching students.

Tutors routinely drew on Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain practice.

> I believe in Maslow so the hierarchy of need – that bottom bit needs to be sorted. So straight away we refer them to counselling, Student Services so they can get financial help to get into college – we pay their travel fees because a lot of them are from very disadvantaged families. So they couldn't even afford to get to college, so we (the College) pay their bus fares. Student Services can support with any sort of stuff they need for their courses and they can do referrals to Social Services…. (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

The tutors' humanistic philosophy was influenced by Maslow's (1954) model on the hierarchy of need. In line with Maslow's theory, the tutors sought to identify and address any gaps in the student's basic level of needs. Such interventions involved a range of services including financial support, referrals for counselling and other forms of practical assistance. In receiving such support, students from disadvantaged backgrounds gain personal support which may be difficult to access in the wider community. In this sense,

the welfare discourse aimed to strengthen areas which could hinder students' capacity to participate in the course.

However, such practice does not only entail brief, short-term interventions, but includes some practices which are likely to result in long-term support and which are often out-of-sync with core teaching responsibilities. For instance, my data identified that tutors sometimes tend to lose focus on their main role and instead use a predominantly therapeutic outlook to respond to students' welfare needs. Strong belief and justification for such a therapeutic logic was highlighted when Hope argued:

> You know they come in with so much baggage… you can't just go and say 'Right, sorry, we are doing percentages, I don't care if you had a massive argument with your mum, I don't care you've just been kicked out of home, I don't care you've only slept 1 hour last night because you are sofa surfing, I don't care that you sleep at the YMCA and have been high all night'. You know, if you try and ignore all that and just expect them to focus, you never are gonna do that. So I always feel that our pastoral support kind of kicks in before the academic. (Interview with tutor, Hope, July 2014).

Hope's statement highlights that several students in the class led complex and fractured lives which interfered with their ability to learn on the course. In view of the fact that the management of student emotions through pastoral timeslots became one of the principal aspects of the provision, it could be argued that Hope was not deviating from her role. However, there are conflicting challenges and tensions in trying to adopt a predominantly

welfare-oriented focus, as identified in my empirical data. For instance, my research found that in practice there was a comparatively disproportionate pastoral focus on welfare and emotional problems, which could be seen in the haphazard way in which welfare support was required or provided. Although welfare support was timetabled for after 3pm, welfare matters regularly took precedence over classroom learning.

**Illustrations of welfare-oriented teaching practice**

It can be seen that the welfare discourse influenced teaching practice on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. During interviews, staff members identified a wide range of teaching duties, including formal teaching and curriculum delivery, student recruitment, liaison with partnership agencies, referrals and management of pastoral support for students. However, when they considered the distribution of these duties within their daily practice, all tutors acknowledged that there was a disproportionate focus on pastoral duties. For instance, Eve elaborated on this issue:

> It's hard. I've never thought about it. It feels 50/50. I don't think it should be, but it feels 50/50…. It's to get them through their qualification, that's my main role. But I do feel the pastoral side is quite heavy sometimes… (Interview with Tutor: Eve - Field notes: June 2015).

Though Eve considered teaching to be her main role, she acknowledged that pastoral duties weighed heavier. Classroom observation data confirmed this disproportionate focus and subsequent work practices. How they for instance manage issues on punctuality, is very revealing. Most tutors generally adopted a sympathetic view when considering

possible explanations why students arrive late for lessons. They customarily engaged in private conversation in the corridor, the logic revealed when Aggy explained:

> …trying to get to know them and saying, 'What's the problem?' You know, how can we help? (Interview with Tutor: Angela - Field notes: June 2015).

The tutors on this course arguably created a metaphorical space to regularly engage in conversations about welfare, often beyond timetabled individual tutorials. Tutors asked intrusive questions, which often revealed sensitive information about the student's welfare and possible mental health circumstances.

However, contrary to common belief, student data illustrated that several students were reticent, not wanting to 'bring their problems into the classroom'. Nevertheless, tutors regularly instigated and provoked disclosures of welfare problems, highlighted when Aggy stated:

> ….you approach them and say 'Look are you okay, is there anything I can do for you' and then it would be 'Shout' and then they would start shouting and swearing and maybe throwing their work on the floor. By that time the class is disrupted so I say 'Come on let's step outside come talk to me' (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

Usually in these moments, it was observed that teaching and learning were temporarily suspended to facilitate a discussion on the reason for lateness. In turn, this circumstance

often served as a trigger for subsequent arguments and classroom disruption. Nevertheless, it became evident that the tutors were usually driven by genuine concern for the students' well-being and the recognition of the need for practical support. This genuine concern was also seen in the teaching practice of Tania and her learning support practitioner (LSP). LSPs play an integral role on the course in that they provide teaching support for those students with special educational needs. In turn, the tutor and LSPs often work closely together, and it was therefore unsurprising that LSPs were asked by tutors to assist with social welfare duties. For both, welfare-oriented teaching duties extended beyond the classroom, as explained when Tania reported:

> And we had a girl last year, who was 17 but she was still at risk and a vulnerable person. She was in care all her life, she kind of ended up homeless, so we couldn't send her to go and sleep under the pier or something. So it took me and the LSP, we had to go to the council offices, you know all that kind of things, you need time for. This was outside my teaching hours and ate into our own time, because it was quite late when we finally found her a B&B… (Interview with tutor, Tania – April 2015).

Tania's account demonstrated the extent of practical support provided to help one of the students attain housing and shelter for the night. Although these duties were clearly beyond Tania's remit, it is important to recognise that in that particular moment, she believed it was really necessary for her as tutor to step in and support the student at the housing office. These staff members evidently cared for their students and were moved by their circumstances.

Colleagues confirmed that there have been a few students faced with similar housing crises that required support. Without trying to minimise the importance of such duty, notably the narrative revealed the resolute welfare practice and time-consuming, complex nature of welfare duties. Roles, responsibilities and boundaries were blurred with some of the students' private affairs became public knowledge when tutors were duty bound to disclose safeguarding concerns to the safeguarding team and colleagues.

Evidently, these course tutors were emotionally moved by their students' circumstances, echoed when Hope stated:

> I literally have students crying on me because they have no home to go to, and you literally want to say, "I take you home, I'll give you dinner…" and you really worry about them… They may get in to trouble with the police and you worry about them. You kind of really live their lives… they are really open about what goes on…you can live through some difficult times with them.

Undoubtedly, the tutors believed that a strong welfare ideology was necessary when working with these particular learners. Although they felt that it was important for them to be involved with these welfare duties, most of the participants from both cohorts disagreed with them  on this issue. They usually preferred to access welfare support from wider college resources as they rather wanted their tutors to help them improve on previous academic failure and '*get their grades up*'. For these students the employability course was seen as a second chance enabling them to attain higher qualifications. They therefore expected their tutors to assist with these goals and for this to happen, formal

teaching duties and academic focus were needed. Although this sentiment was echoed by most of the students who participated in the study, it was uncertain whether the narrative included the students who faced housing issues.

Nevertheless, it became apparent that students were able to demarcate roles and functions far more easily than their tutors. According to them, they were looking to their tutors for assistance with learning, and wider college resources for welfare support (in line with college protocol). In light of classroom events and teaching practices, the main empirical findings largely reveal complexity and two key issues: the infantalisation of students; and the rise of social welfare tutors.

**The infantalisation of students**

A key finding that emerged from the empirical data pointed towards what Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) described as the infantalisation of learners, a negative discourse and resultant practice that reinforced a diminished image of student potential and academic ability. Despite good intentions, the learners were arguably infantilised in that they were positioned as weak, immature, lacking in responsibility and knowledge. They were systematically represented as 'not being able to cope' as well as other students on mainstream vocational courses. This was revealed when Kirsten claimed:

> … but as soon as they are outside the classroom, the level of maturity and the amount of responsibility that they take on is massively different compared to a lot of the FE students on a mainstream course… They have to take on the responsibility and a lot of them just don't know or can't cope with that

(Interview with Tutor: Kirsten - Field notes: June 2015).

Comparatively, students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course were viewed as lacking in personal attributes, reflected in questions over their responsibility and maturity to cope with mainstream provision. Routinely, tutors drew attention to their students' complex, private lives to construct ideas about their students' potential and academic abilities, drawing on Maslow's theory. Such therapeutic focus deviates from the governmentality discourse where students were expected to take responsibility for their individual shortcomings and tutors were expected to conform to neoliberal practices. This section therefore provided key examples of the inherent tension and conflicting discourses and practices which were entangled on this particular course.

Hence, although the employability discourse in principle seemed straightforward, an evaluation of the tutors' work practices demonstrated complexity, chaos and conflicting discourses which clashed with how the employability curriculum was delivered and the extent to which students could benefit from provision within educational settings. The previous chapter had shown that the tutors' work practices, seen in their decisions on GCSEs, illustrated that these ideas often disadvantaged the students on the course. With this in mind, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) cautioned that such practice generally resulted in the 'downsizing' of a student's potential. Aggy's statement below illustrates this point:

> … like I said before these kids aren't – they come from very chaotic family backgrounds and they haven't got that structure, so even the fact that they get into college is a miracle to be honest. That is a huge achievement, just the fact that they're turning

> up every day (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

In this way, Aggy's expectations were lowered, perhaps explaining why student engagement was construed a 'miracle' and 'huge achievement'. This particular issue of diminished expectations of student motivation and ambition appeared to be a common thread that emerged from staff narratives. It was also arguably interconnected with stereotypical assumptions associated with these particular learners.

Albeit unwittingly, most tutors largely held a weakened image which somehow clouded tutor perceptions on students' academic ability to cope and engage with other courses within college. This notion is also revealed in the previous chapter when staff members cited various reasons why almost all the students on this particular course were judged unsuitable to access GCSE provision. Notions of infantalisation were clearly expressed and students were therefore denied a key opportunity to resit GCSEs. In this circumstance, even if unintentionally, the practice of infantalisation directly reinforced disadvantage and marginalisation from essential and mainstream provision.

Notions of infantalisation were interconnected with this idea of 'fixing' the student on the course, a key finding discussed in the next chapter. This issue was further revealed in staff narratives on student progression. On this, Kirsten stated:

> "… So sometimes with our course you have to go back down to Entry 2 because you need them for that longer time until Level 1, for them to socially develop…. They would end up going backwards again. So you have to put them at a lower level

> academically so you've got more time to build them up. Do work experience with them, get them out on social events things like that" (Interview with Tutor: Kirsten - Field notes: June 2015).

Kirsten's account shows the way in which students were portrayed almost like infants who needed to be developed. Words like 'you put them at a lower level', and 'you've got time to build them up' conveyed the belief that several students required a longer time on pre-foundation learning, in some way likened to 'incubation' conditions. The GCSE case illustration drew attention to the idea that the course provision (the incubator) was deemed more sympathetic to the needs of their students, reflected in the idea that classes were smaller than GCSE provision and that students might be better able to cope with Functional Skills, a provision delivered by a different course team.

The learners on the course appeared to be disadvantaged by a predominant welfare-oriented focus. Fundamentally, when practice seemed geared towards an internal focus aimed at fixing students, the danger is that attention may very well be diverted from an outward, broader institutional context. In this case, student participants were systematically marginalised from essential provision that could facilitate higher progression outcomes. As such, a predominant welfare discourse can therefore also conceivably disadvantage students on the course. Furthermore, it can impact tutor practices too, including giving rise to 'social welfare tutors', subsequently illustrated below.

**The rise of social welfare tutors**

In light of the tutors' collective approach to student welfare matters on their course, their teaching practice was based on a strong welfare ethos which led to the rise of social welfare tutors; in other words, their teaching practice often prioritised welfare duties over formal classroom teaching. These tutors gave the distinct impression that they were capable of dealing with emergencies and complex student-welfare matters. The perceived themselves to be distinctly different from mainstream tutors. Gina explained:

> (XY) staff are 'not teacher teachers', not very strict tutors, a bit more lenient, but there is a mark… We are not 'teachery', but building a good rapport and relationship with the young person (Interview with tutor, Gina, July 2014).

They not only saw themselves as different to the 'usual' type of teachers, they also positioned themselves as 'strong'. They reported that the job reportedly required a 'tough person' who was able to cope with 'whatever the students throw at you' (Interview with Peter, July 2015). Fundamentally, this discourse and an inherent belief in their competence to deal with student welfare issues formed a firm basis for their practice. Referrals to the college's safeguarding team were considered the last port of call. As a means of justification, Eve explained:

> I'll sort out all pastoral issues, of which there are a quite a few with this group. They're very challenging, so there's lots of contact with parents, with mental health workers, with other support workers… With this particular student I've taken the lead because in situations like that it's easier to just pick up the phone and call the number and get

> somebody to come in. With something that's more long-winded you can say 'Here you go' but with an emergency situation which this instance was you just need to make the phone call… It works. It does work! (Interview with tutor, Eve, July 2014).

Perhaps this rhetoric explained why the tutors appeared confident and determined to 'hold on' to more serious welfare incidents than to refer the matter to the safeguarding team. Dealing with student welfare emergencies seemed to be their forte, inasmuch as they generally assumed the 'lead' or key role in meetings, despite the fact that qualified mental health workers were present, although over-stretched and limited given budget constraints. Yet even so, Eve seemed readily prepared, though unnecessarily, to deal with complex student welfare issues.

By no means could it be claimed that the tutors did not seek the services of the safeguarding welfare team. In fact, they do, but based on emerging data, safeguarding services were primarily sourced for so-called 'trivial' student welfare matters:

> I try and draw on as many resources as possible in the college, like the welfare team. So if we got some very disengaged students because they have a lot of problems at home, we are using those resources in college to help settle them and give them the support that they need…such as bursaries, food vouchers and so forth… (Interview with tutor, Hope, July 2014).

However, when presented with more serious welfare matters, the course tutors rarely followed college protocol to contact designated safeguarding officers for assistance.

Though the details of safeguarding officers were easily accessible, they believed they were better able to help and deal with students' problems. Conversely, students raised doubts and questioned the efficacy of tutor involvement in welfare matters. The focus group discussion revealed this.

> **Interviewer:** What happens when you bring it (your problems) into college?
>
> **Kyle**:(become) unfocused.
>
> **Interviewer**: Do you feel supported?
>
> **Elsa:** We do get support though from our LSPs.
>
> **Lea:** They're more nicer than the tutors.
>
> **Elsa**: Because they'll talk to you like privately. Just talk about anything and support you all the way through it and stuff.
>
> **Kyle**: Yeah I do I speak to LSP's about them and stuff. Sometimes yeah they're quite helpful.
>
> **Interviewer**: And then what happens after you tell them? What kind of support do they give you?
>
> **Lea***:* They give you advice on what to do next. They try and help you out, see if there's anyone upper in the college to speak to you about it.

However, why did the tutors prefer to deal with complex social welfare issues rather than refer matters to college resources and specialist agencies? Other than what appeared to be genuine concern over student welfare issues, one possible explanation emerged from Aggy's account:

> ….we used to have an amazing system in B*** College. We used to have pastoral tutors and we had one allocated to each area and they'd take on all the pastoral support for that student. So all the tutor

> would then do is invite them in, say this student needs X, Y and Z, and they'd take the whole lot on. They'd set up the meetings, they'd do the phone calls, they'd do the referrals, they'd have one to one tutorials with those students twice a week, liaise with the family. That was all taken away from the tutor so the tutor just did teaching and learning. And it worked fantastically and then we had the merger and they were all made redundant and its gone backwards (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

According to Aggy, the previous pastoral system was effective and reportedly beneficial to both tutors and students. However, it could well be argued that Aggy's version of the 'old' pastoral system clouded her judgement of the current system. From my own practice experience and first-hand knowledge of both systems, I judged the current system to have a more formal, co-ordinated and rigorous system of governance in place; that is, if college protocol was followed. The college's Safeguarding Students and Adults At Risk Policy clearly outlines a system of governance, aided by graphical depictions to indicate lines of responsibility and a list of allocated, trained safeguarding officers to deal with student welfare issues within the organisation.

Detailed, specific guidelines are stipulated to enable staff to report safeguarding concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Officers at the different campuses. Though not very numerous, a core group of trained staff members were designated to perform pastoral duties. In principle, tutors were therefore alleviated from the responsibility to perform welfare and safeguarding duties. However, in practice the designated safeguarding

officers were not always able to respond as quickly or conceivably as effectively as these course tutors when dealing with student welfare issues. According to college operations, student welfare issues should therefore be handled by trained personnel, but whether the course tutors on the day were prepared to concede to policy, was questionable.

However, this issue of dealing with student welfare matters is very complex and we cannot adopt a reductionist explanation when it came to the teaching practices of these staff members. The disintegration of public services and a broadened welfare mandate were instrumental and contributed to tutors struggling with the effects of an expansion of the educator’s role into areas of social care. This complexity is highlighted by Finney (2006) when he argues that, although there is often clear direction for educators to take action in a welfare mandate, their involvement seemed discretionary and boundaries lacked clarity. The call to engage in multi-agency meetings as outlined for instance in the *Children Act 2004* were echoed when Kirsten stated:

> I think all the pastoral side of things, because there is so many different people you need to go to, go down the right routes make sure you’ve taken all the right steps that that takes up a lot of time to make sure you’re doing it right and to make sure you’re not missing out any steps, to make sure everyone’s involved and all these different organisations that you’ve got to keep on top of. Communication with all of those organisations can take a lot of time (Interview with Tutor: Kirsten - Field notes: June 2015).

The above practice symbolically represents the merging of social and educational services and the complexity around this. This can be seen in the description of its time-consuming nature and the great responsibility to safeguard and support students with complex welfare issues. Evidently, the tutors on the course engaged in multi-agency meetings; even though these obligations were within the remit of the college's safeguarding team. This current practice amongst the course team was contrary to previous research that suggested many educational practitioners felt lacking in the required knowledge, understanding and skills to undertake therapeutic responsibilities (Hornby and Atkinson, 2003). Instead, the tutors that participated in my study appeared confident and competent to enter the remit of welfare practice. They regularly crossed the threshold into the students' private lives – a zone where the stakes were high due to the potentially serious nature of welfare issues; there was no room for error when dealing with safeguarding issues.

**Complications and dilemmas with welfare-oriented teaching**

The central aim of this chapter was to examine how tutors dealt with student welfare issues on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, and their implications on students and classroom conditions. An analysis of key empirical findings found that a welfare discourse was deep-seated and embedded within the course's pedagogy and staff practices. Despite good intentions, the predominant welfare discourse surrounding the tutors' practice did not always work in their students' favour. For instance, notions of 'infantalisation' can reinforce disadvantage, even if done unwittingly through an overemphasis on care.

No matter how well-meaning, welfare-oriented teaching seemed cloaked in notions of helplessness and emotional vulnerability. From this perspective, such practice was arguably deeply pessimistic. It routinely erected a metaphorical mirror that offered constant reflections of students' reported fractured lives. It also contrasted sharply with the 'more able', positive student images reflected in my student data.

The course team judged their involvement in welfare duties as necessary, perhaps because they care and probably felt that they were the best persons to deal with their students' welfare issues, despite it being the purpose of the safeguarding team. Nevertheless, a practice governed by a resolute focus on welfare in this case complicated the collective work duties of the course team. It also risked students not achieving higher academic qualifications and staff being held accountable for any problems around safeguarding duties.

Current and key safeguarding policies have repositioned welfare and education agencies to work together to promote 'better' health, education and welfare outcomes. Admittedly, multi-agency working between key professionals has potential positive benefits that facilitated 'swift' referrals amongst practitioners, information sharing and pooling of resources. However, it also creates challenges and complicated educational practice; in my study the tutors became entangled in a web of duties and as a consequence, roles, responsibilities and blurred boundaries.

Thus, although the education sector may well be suitably positioned to have access to youth of wide-ranging capacity, my key empirical findings raised concerns over a

broadened welfare mandate within *The Site*. As illustrated, when social welfare and educational goals merged, it complicated educational practice Lack of educational resources and government cuts to social services placed the tutors in a very tricky situation. Several young people (students) were falling through the gaps left by lack of essential services. Take for instance the increased rationing of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which has established a growing demand for welfare support aimed at adolescents experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties.

Although an investment of £143 million was announced in the budget speech (House of Commons, April 2016), widespread cuts from children and young people's mental health services have unveiled an overall cut of £35 million in spending on CAMHS (Young Minds, 2016). Hence, a culmination of broader social, political and structural issues together with the disintegration of publicly-funded organisations were key influences that could not be overlooked and affected the rate the occurrence of student welfare issues within *The Site*.

**Conclusion**

This chapter started with a focus on student welfare needs, highlighting the welfare discourse and tutors' pedagogical practices when responding to welfare issues on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. My key findings exposed the tensions, contradictions and constraints between official discourse and the 'on-the-ground' realities for these Level 1 students and their tutors. Although a pedagogy centrally driven by welfare could be considered academically advantageous when teaching previously NEET or socially

excluded youth, actual fieldwork data suggested that such practice complicated teaching practice.

Despite good intentions, a predominant welfare discourse on this particular course gave rise to the infantalisation of learners and ‘social welfare tutors’. A prioritised focus on welfare duties reduced the course to something akin to counselling and social work. Thus, a predominant welfare focus on this course might well be counter-productive, compromising academic ideals and challenging official RPA discourses of upskilling, inclusion and participation in higher educational opportunities.

A broadened welfare agenda in educational settings exacerbated and fuelled contradictions in official rhetoric on academia and welfare. RPA legislation reproduced such tension and contradiction; it broadened its intake of a diverse group of youth, announcing enhanced academic and employment prospects when students engaged in post-16 education (Cornish, 2018). Nevertheless, RPA placed an onus on individuals to achieve higher academic and employment outcomes, irrespective of welfare concerns or personal challenges. The demand to ‘work harder’ and the belief that young people could overcome social problems if only they try, underpinned both RPA and the actual course’s pedagogy.

## Chapter Seven: Warehousing and the social development of students

This chapter focuses on two key influences which impacted the teaching and learning conditions on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, and which also inhibited students' capacity to progress and attain higher academic goals within The Site. My data identified an embedded practice of warehousing, whereby one of the main practice aims was for tutors to 'keep students busy with any kind of thing'. Warehousing entails classroom activities which lack academic purpose, low-quality teaching, short college days, haphazard delivery of lessons often lacking in academic rigour, disorganisation and chaotic classroom conditions. Moreover, I discovered staff practices aimed at developing students' social skills on the course and how this focus on students' social skills influenced tutors' decisions to progress students within The Site. The chapter concludes that a combination of broader structural issues, government and institutional policies, together with tutors' practices contributed to unequal processes which occasioned differential access to specific sets of knowledge and skills within The Site. As a result, current academic conditions limited the extent to which participants could attain higher academic goals, contrary to RPA logic and the stated employability agenda.

### 'Keeping busy'

It is important to firstly mention that by no means did course tutors adopt a casual attitude to their work. In fact, lessons were well-prepared and tutors were rarely absent from work. This being said, when interviewed about what they thought as their main teaching practice, nearly all the tutors disclosed that their predominant teaching aim was to 'keep students busy'. Hope, the course leader, explained when she stated:

> Erm…. just getting them to keep busy, do any kind of work…. getting them to keep quiet when you are talking… We have to rely on someone like the Prince's Trust and **** Youth Services to move them on and keep them busy. They might come back to Level 2 and keep them busy or something else before they start something else full time in next September... (Interview with course leader, Hope, July 2014).

Hope revealed that her practice aim was to keep students occupied, getting them to do 'any kind of work'. Fellow tutors similarly echoed this philosophy, a practice likewise confirmed in student narratives when they claimed that tutors sometimes gave them unnecessary tasks. Importantly, the idea of students being industrious resonated with broader educational aims around national citizenship. However, on this occasion, it appeared that the call to 'keep busy' involved provision which embodied warehousing, characteristically seen in moving students around between similar lower-end courses which hardly offered students the opportunity to attain credible and higher qualifications- there was an apparent lack of academic focus and relevance.

This notion of 'keeping students busy' also involved the support of external agencies such as the Prince's Trust which offered similar provision. However, whether or not these agencies adhere to a similar practice is uncertain. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, Hope suggested an unfocused educational trajectory, a characteristic effect of warehousing: these particular students were moved from one course to another.

These conditions undermined the extent to which the course was able to facilitate the achievement of higher grades and employability skills echoed in RPA discourse. Taking into consideration my empirical data, there was a policy gap: the embedded practice of 'keeping students busy with any kind of work' contrasted with official RPA rhetoric that enrolment on re-engagement provision may enable 'disadvantaged' youth to gain qualifications, build confidence and develop key employability skills necessary to find and sustain employment (DCSF 2009). The employability agenda requires students to get into the habit of leading a structured lifestyle whereby they become active citizens, socially engaged with social institutions and compliant with any type of education or training demands aiming to foster core employability skills. These must be reflected in students' attitudes, behaviour, knowledge, qualifications, personal attributes and social skills, along with developing numeracy and literacy skills.

The tutors worked in accordance with the employability agenda, in its broadest sense, in keeping students busy. However, the problem lies in the fact that most of these Level 1 participants wanted meaningful education to attain the higher academic grades promised in RPA rhetoric, but it was difficult for them to attain higher aspirational goals on the course and within The Site. It appeared that this issue was no different for similar students in other institutions, as previous academic studies likewise found that in practice, these courses for NEET youth often lacked in quality and offered minimal scope for improved academic achievements and employment prospects (Simmons et al 2011; Atkins 2010; Wolf Review, 2011).

Paradoxically, although the course tutors' main teaching aim was to 'keep students busy, with any kind of work', it appeared that this sense of 'keeping busy' was likewise extended to the tutors themselves. They too were kept busy, doing crowd control to deal with challenging behaviour, or often engaged in pastoral discussions on a 1-1 basis with a student in the classroom or outside in the corridor. In short, those with fewer personal problems seemed inhibited by the problems of others in the classroom.

I noted in my classroom observations that self-directed learning was prevalent. Evidence for such practice was further revealed when Hope stated:

> Now I have developed packs with thorough instruction sheets and computer links. Those that want to work, I gave them the booklet and they have the LSP to help. I ask them to put their headphones in and they can go on the computer and actually achieve… For me, it is about crowd control with the others, really…. (Interview with course leader, Hope, July 2014).

The tutors' narratives made a distinction between students: those considered reluctant to learn; and the substantial minority of those who presented as motivated and engaged in coursework. Usually, self-directed learning activities were provided to facilitate independent learning, particularly in moments which required tutor involvement in welfare or behavioural issues. However, although some tutors differentiated and made self-study possible, independent learning provision in general appeared to lack in academic rigour.

This factor was evident in lesson activities which made use of one-page, one-answer worksheets or crossword puzzles which were meant to last for the duration of the lesson. Students were stationed at computers to engage in interactive maths or English quizzes, but quite often they were caught going on Facebook and YouTube. They wore headphones, but whether students were listening to teaching instructions on interactive learning websites, or their song list, was questionable; several students were on mobile phones or Facebook. The need to 'keep students busy' therefore seemed imperative, although it did not necessarily mean that classroom activities were always reflective of higher standards of teaching and learning which could amount to higher academic and employment outcomes.

**'Warehousing' in practice:**

A variety of issues highlighted the inherent conflict, tension and contradiction in how this employability course was marketed and delivered within *The Site.* Most participants reported experiencing time wasting and meaningless classroom activities, revealed in their narratives on warehousing in practice on the course.

**'Unnecessary' tasks being set**

The students participating in the study were asked to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences on the course. Several highlighted that when activities were set, these tended to be unnecessary tasks in the classroom. On this issue, Ellie explained:

> As in they'll probably just tell you to do some work that you don't really need to do, maybe just do research on that. You don't need it at all they just give you something random to do…That's boring

> really. It is really boring… (Focus group data, June 2014).

Noticeably, Ellie highlighted that when students were given additional work, the quality of lesson activities lacked academic purpose. Activities such as research (on the computer), were perceived as something that ‘you didn’t really need to do’. Although she did not state this Ellie noticed that the tutor’s intention was to ‘keep her busy’; that fundamentally these exercises did not seem to produce ‘useful knowledge’. For Ellie, classroom tasks seemed random, and therefore did not appear to be ‘meaningful’. Hence, the task was arguably construed as time wasting. What was certain was that Ellie’s appraisal of ‘unnecessary tasks’ as ‘boring’, suggested that stronger intellectual stimulation was required in lessons.

**The role of learning support practitioners (LSPs)**

A practice which seemed customary was the use and sometimes over-involvement of LSPs in formal teaching duties. As previously indicated in several sections of this thesis, regular LSP duties involved assisting tutors with diagnosed students who perhaps have dyslexia or learning difficulties in the classroom. However, they additionally assisted with general classroom duties, which occasionally extended to social welfare incidents too. As a consequence, LSP duties were often extended to replace tutors during welfare incidents. This was revealed when Aggy, another tutor, stated:

> Well yeah because they’re all turning round and looking what’s going on aren’t they? We’re not meant to leave an LSP in the room on their own, but you have no choice. So I usually remove the student

> outside and say ‘Look come into my office we’ll talk over it… (Interview with course tutor, Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

In this circumstance, the reported need to privately discuss the situation and support students with welfare problems largely contributed to a situation whereby the LSP was given responsibility to ‘baby-sit’ the class. Here, the tutor felt justified in leaving the LSP in charge of teaching-related duties whilst she dealt with student welfare problems, a key empirical finding already explored in the previous chapter. In the tutor’s absence, the LSP was expected to supervise, and in part, ensure students comply with the tutor’s instructions. Whether the class would pay attention, or whether the LSP was qualified or authorised to manage the classroom on his or her own, seemed irrelevant. The embedded aim was that students be ‘kept busy’ in the tutor’s absence, engaging in mundane activities, explained when Aggy stated:

> Well fortunately the LSP’s there, and so I maybe say ‘Get your portfolios out, get some sticky notes in where your gaps are, we’ll start teaching when I get back’. But, yeah a nightmare… And that could take half an hour before I start teaching. (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

In this circumstance, classroom observations found that warehousing furthermore entailed activities such as the use of student checklist activities which enabled students to read through their work and put labels in if there were missing pieces of course work or something they did not understand. This practice was customary and considered relevant, particularly when the tutor was absent from the class. The expectation that students would

be disciplined enough to carry out the task seemed naïve on the tutor's part. During such moments, I observed that only a few students would carry out and complete the task, a task that anyway did not last long enough, leaving students with nothing else to do for the duration of the lesson.

Furthermore, in the interim the majority of the students engaged in raucous behaviour: some left class unofficially on a smoke break; others were on mobile phones or singing tunes. All this time, the LSP tried to cajole students in to doing some work, without much success, partly as she was outnumbered. Excessive classroom talk and noise ensued. Though it sometimes was only 30 minutes, occasionally more, the time period seemed to stretch much longer, with very little work being carried out. The odd student might periodically be industrious, but most were engaged in social conversations and other non-work related activities. Instead of academic learning, leisure time prevailed.

Whether the LSP considered these responsibilities beyond her work remit, or perhaps felt ill-equipped to conduct stronger classroom management skills, was uncertain. Nevertheless, drawing on broader sociological explanations, for instance Gouldner's (1954) study of a gypsum plant, and in particular his observation of the management of coal miners in the US, helped to conceptualise the prevailing social atmosphere and lack of academic industry on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course. In his work, Gouldner introduced this notion of an indulgency pattern, to explain a traditional outlook where 'familiarity' and 'community' were emphasised over 'efficiency' regarding the operation of the plant and to plant-community relations.

Consequently, sociability and accommodation between supervisors and subordinates were emphasised and became an integral part of the operation of the gypsum plant. For example, when one worker was asked why everyone seemed to get along in the plant, he responded that the plant is ‘like one big happy family’ (Gouldner, 1954, 39). Extending Gouldner’s theory to my empirical study helped to conceptualise understanding around an indulgency pattern which could be seen in the culture of everyday familiarity between the staff and students; it also allowed staff to be somewhat lenient with students. Staff members therefore appeared indulgent with students so as to minimise conflict in a situation where they could not really control them.

**Short college days and too many breaks**

Another key issue noted in Gouldner’s theory which has further relevance to my study, could be seen in his argument that within an indulgency pattern, even though there were official rules, they were flexible and open to the discretion of supervisors. Until Vincent Peele's arrival (who brought in a new system that emphasised rational discipline and efficiency), for example, the rules regarding the length of lunch breaks, or clock punching, were never strictly enforced (Gouldner, 1954). This key observation had similarities with operations on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course: despite official timetabled and guided learning hours, college days were too short and too many breaks were offered to students.

Ordinarily, any course design allocates guided learning hours to allow tutors to deliver the curriculum within a set time frame; students are therefore expected to comply with timetabled hours. Within this framework, tutors would be expected to deliver planned

lessons and also arrange for extra activities to accommodate more academically able students. Without speculating whether this was the case on this particular course, the following student focus group data revealed an intermittent and unstructured delivery of the course:

> **Leah**: What I don't mind about college is when you've done all your work you can go home.
> **David**: And sometimes they are more flexible hours, to be fair it's not like school. Say if it's like 10 o'clock break, 1 o'clock lunch, 2 o'clock. But here it's just like bam bam bam bam lunch break break. You get so many breaks it's great - I love it. And you get to leave earlier as well. (Focus group data, June 2014).

Both students claimed that the college day on this course seemed shorter compared to a school day. Noticeably, the numerous, unscheduled breaks and the fact that students were allowed to leave earlier than timetabled hours, most likely had some bearing on these two students' perception. Classroom observations confirmed that contrary to the expectation of structured 3-hour teaching slots in the morning and afternoon, with a break at 10.30 and 2.30, the delivery of the curriculum was unstructured. In addition to the customary scheduled break at 10.30am for students to have breakfast, time spent in class was shortened by late starts (9.30am as opposed to 9am), and was further impacted during outbreaks of student conflict or episodes of welfare incidents. The several intermittent, unscheduled breaks which resulted meant teaching was delivered in short chunks, often in a haphazard way, whilst students were allowed plenty of leisure time away from classroom learning.

Furthermore, students like Leah could leave early, with no requirement to work beyond the day's lesson activities. Warehousing in this context overlooked the potential for extension activities that could increase student knowledge beyond timetabled events. The reasons why extension activities were not made available were unexplored. Noticeably, 'knowledge' seemed compartmentalised and restricted – bound by time, space and learning activity.

**Low quality provision:**

Warehousing was further revealed in a practice that gave rise to low quality provision, whereby most students were not challenged academically in lessons. By means of explanation, Kirsten, one of the tutors, stated:

> I think Ofsted picked up on it… one of the main things was attendance and how far we were stretching and pushing the learners. And a lot of the reason why the attendance was so bad and we don't stretch them was so we could keep them in the class and keep bums on seats as one would say. If you push them too far they'll want to go. If you are in conflict with them because of their attendance, then they will go. So there's a lot of that and that tension was picked up in Ofsted. (Interview with tutor: Kirsten - Field notes: June 2015).

Notably, the narrative drew attention to Ofsted's regulatory role in relation to course provision. Ofsted's 2014 inspection report identified concerns over lack of academic rigour and low student attendance on the course. This seems to confirm my assessment that there is an indulgency culture prevalent on the course. This particular issue was

evident when the tutor indicated concerns over the fact that if she pushed her students too hard, and made lessons harder, they might leave the course and tutors risked facing performance-management issues. Kirsten suggested that the decision 'not to stretch' students academically was a deliberate attempt to trade off student attendance against student retention. Balancing both issues within the setting's performance-driven culture was construed as complex and significantly influenced the overall teaching and learning conditions on the course.

Evidently Kirsten's reference to 'keep bums on seats' signalled a critical awareness of funding implications associated with student retention. Her narrative highlighted pressure to 'have bums on seats', arguably using this reported imperative as an excuse for not 'stretching and pushing learners'. This suggested that she viewed the performance-driven culture within The Site to be partly responsible for the reduced standards of teaching and education on the course. If so, it played an important part in reproducing conditions which contributed to warehousing: it was likely the college recruited these particular students with limited expectations of what they could achieve; likewise the course was seen as delivering low-level, portfolio and worksheet-orientated learning experiences.

Ultimately, the college was striving to keep the students on its books as that is how it draws funding, indicative of marketisation as previously discussed particularly in the introduction to my thesis. In this, the key transaction was financial and was between the college and the funding body. In this way the effects of marketisation and performance indicators previously discussed in sections of this thesis were notably revealed. Under competitive conditions, educational institutions draw on performance-management

principles, placing increased levels of responsibility on staff to meet performance targets. This includes a focus on students' success rates and retention numbers on the course, using results and student numbers to track students' progress to monitor financial targets. However, according to Kirsten, academically stretching learners on their course placed them at risk of losing students. In this way, perhaps Gouldner's theory regarding the indulgency pattern best describes how power was exercised and experienced on this particular course and in the broader education system.

Several students were able to identify that the 'slow pace' of learning was a further problem with the lessons. Some wanted a faster academic pace, revealed during focus group discussions when Ellie explained:

> It means sometimes the ones which work ahead they have to kind of slow down to wait on the students who have work that's missing and all that (Focus group data, June 2014).

However, on the other hand, other students could not cope with the pace, as seen when Leah stated:

> But you also have to think in this course that there are loads of people with different abilities. Some can't be writing as fast as others, some may need more help than others (Focus group data, June 2014).

These two quotes further illustrated the wide range of academic abilities of students on the course, perhaps as a means of explanation for the situation. However, whilst the 'slow

pace' of learning might be due to some students' low academic ability, their tutor's reported an inability to vary the tempo in lessons to accommodate 'more able' students here seemed to present a further challenge, even though this issue of teaching mixed-ability groups was a common issue faced in most teaching situations.

Furthermore, low-quality provision was noted and carried criticisms also from students. Adam reported:

> 'I find it (the course) a laugh. Being honest with you… look, look at the type of work we are learning… adjectives and verbs. Yes, look… I find it all a laugh! It is jokes! Look what we are doing. I want to learn proper English and maths… you know what I mean? Not this stuff… this is a waste of time' (Focus group data, June 2014).

For students like Adam, re-engagement in education was fundamental; he needed to improve on previous academic failure. While maths and English were taught in lessons, the standard and quality of provision were called into question – Adam mocked the provision and 'found it a laugh'. The point here, in Adam's opinion, was that the type of education available appeared to lack academic rigour. He found it 'a waste of time' – his time. Here, the possible influences of broader rhetoric on NEETs and the negative stereotypes associated with these particular students cannot be overlooked. The issues of ideological assumptions and stereotypical beliefs are key considerations discussed in the next section.

Evidently, access to what was considered ‘real and meaningful’ education appeared restricted for these participants. My empirical data highlighted how the education system and broader socio-political mechanisms introduced policies and practices that were considered useful and ‘supportive’, but which from the perspective of the student were seen as constraining. A similar discourse was previously articulated in the discussions on GCSEs and BKSB. Here in this chapter, Adam for instance wanted to be taught ‘skills to achieve’ - hence his stated desire to learn ‘proper’ English and maths.

Unfortunately, this type of classroom knowledge was not made available in their class, neither did these lessons appear to have rigour and meet these students’ expectations. As a consequence, Adam raised objections and seemed determined to make visible the type of education on offer to him and others in the classroom. Hence his claim, ‘look, look at the type of work we are learning’. Classroom provision was found to be lacking – at present, the type of education provided was construed as ‘jokes’. This account echoes previously mentioned academic discourse which argued that meaningful education was not generally provided on low-level courses.

**Influences of stereotypical ideology**

Bearing in mind that several students were formerly categorised as NEET and ‘at-risk’ youth, in addition to the stigma attached to this label previously mentioned in my introduction, background research further indicated that education and social policy tend to conceptualise NEET youth as deficient (Jones 2011), a ‘problem’ group seen to be lacking in skills and aspiration (Skeggs 2009). Perhaps this rhetoric could represent a proportion of NEET youth, underscoring an underlying common belief that they were

reluctant to learn. However, based on my empirical evidence, many student participants challenged conventional assumptions with several articulating the need for access to ‘proper’ education in order to achieve higher grades and qualifications.

Noticeably, there appeared to be complications. My findings suggested that on policy and practitioner levels educational expectations for marginalised youth was low. The generic assumption was made that youth on the employability course would mainly seek assistance to find low-skilled employment. This was not the case for most participants: they wanted to pursue further study to access vocational jobs such as plumbing, bricklaying, apprenticeship provision, and social work (in the case of Zette in chapter five). The point made here is that most of these students were no different from others enrolled on mainstream provision – they too articulated the need for higher academic grades.

Most of the participants wanted what appeared to be more than the employability curriculum made available; they wanted a stronger academic focus to access GCSE and related mainstream provision. Whether the course team was suitably trained and qualified to provide this was a different matter yet worth considering. The key issue here was the fact that although the employability curriculum emphasised knowledge and qualifications as core employability skills, these students found that the way the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course was implemented at *The Site,* hindered them from gaining equal access to knowledge-content embodied in GCSEs which could facilitate the transition of their knowledge and skills into areas of study and the workplace. Rather, most participants found that within a largely bureaucratic education system they experienced an elitist,

unequal credentialist system which stringently controlled access to a limited supply of GCSE, BTEC and apprenticeship provisions; the gateway to higher levels of study and employment opportunities.

Furthermore, whether course tutors were aware or not, they too had lowered expectations of their students. For instance, empirical data revealed that course tutors held diminished expectations of their students' academic competence. It was claimed students might not be able to cope with challenging academic conditions, despite the fact that a substantial minority of students for example already met eligibility criteria for GCSE courses. Diminished expectations consequently appeared to influence how students were perceived, which subsequently impacted a range of tutor decisions, including choices about teaching material. Classroom activities therefore tended to lack academic rigour and purpose. Not satisfied, students became critical and reportedly wanted access to 'real education'.

Likewise, empirical data showed that student participants too held expectations, but notably theirs differed from those of official agencies. Distinctly different to stereotypical ideas, these particular students at least said that they wanted to learn. What students found was that the Level 1 Achieving Skills course provision at *The Site* was conducted in what appeared to be a chaotic, unstructured teaching and learning environment. This particular issue seemed no different to that reflected in Atkins's (2009) study with similar learners; these students were often engaged in activities that were rarely educational (Atkins 2009). Educational experiences for these students thus could not be called education in any meaningful sense (Atkins 2009), a viewpoint similarly reflected in my empirical findings

too. In my study, participants were consequently critical and raised objections over what they believed to be lowered quality and standards of education on the course.

Chaotic classroom conditions to some degree arguably perpetuated and reinforced the negative stereotypes of these particular students. Student classroom conduct was observed to be loud and disruptive and arguably overshadowed concerns around pedagogical activities and teaching practices. It is likely that these overall work practices produced overwhelmingly negative outcomes. They generated negative classroom conditions which invited disruptive student behaviour, which consolidated the stereotypical belief that, with these particular students, there was some reluctance to learn or that conditions made it very difficult to teach them.

**Departmental and institutional factors**

The practice of warehousing students at The Site was shaped by key departmental and institutional factors. This was observed in the way in which the course was structured and delivered, educational ideology, staff composition and attitudes, teaching practices and available resources within The Site. My empirical data underscored contrasting ways in which the course tutors and students conceptualised and appraised the type of provision on offer. From the tutors' positions, they drew close attention to regulatory systems, blaming a prevailing performance-driven culture, referring to 'bums-on-seats' as seen in Kirsten's interview above, to illustrate contributing pressures that influenced teaching and education standards on the course. Rather than adopting a critical focus on their own work practices, blame seemed to be projected. Classroom issues and student behaviour were perceived as complex, warranting an over-involvement of LSPs in classroom

teaching. The ultimate teaching aim was to 'keep students busy with any kind of work'. As such, an indulgency culture played a fundamental part in determining the teaching and learning conditions on the course as explained previously.

On the other hand, my findings demonstrated that my participants have agency – they did not present as passive recipients of what resembled warehousing education. Instead, they were critical and observant, routinely vocalising expectations and concerns. While a substantial minority of students engaged in lesson activities, these moments of engagement were brief and intermittent, largely due to chaotic classroom conditions. Most students regularly engaged in raucous classroom behaviour, sometimes even 'voting with their feet' – giving rise to low attendance in class. Noticeably, although students did not appear concerned over short college days, they were critical of the type of education provided once in lessons. Classroom activities did not appear meaningful, and instead were considered to be boring, random and time wasting.

Classroom events offered a snapshot and appeared indicative of a broader issue; although this particular employability course offered so-called disengaged and NEET youth another chance to re-engage in further education, empirical data revealed that once in college, a different type of education and training provision was on offer. These particular students seemed marginalised, access to vital and 'meaningful' provision seemed restricted; and GCSE provision was heavily regulated with high academic tariff strictly controlling progression on to mainstream vocational education and apprenticeship training. Facing minimal prospects of accruing GCSE capital or possibilities to progress

onto mainstream vocational education, these particular students were 'held back' – academic progression was restricted and alternative provision made virtually inaccessible. Whether unintentional or not, the course team itself engaged in social exclusionary practices, fuelled by lowered standards of teaching practices. Principally, these particular students were subjected to actual marginalisation and social exclusion, whilst trying to re-engage in further education. The structural influence of this particular course appeared to be one that labels the student and then attempts to arrest any potential progression in terms of their learning. To that extent, the course at *The Site* appeared to replicate, reinforce and also consolidate a negative learning identity for these students. They were drilled into being disengaged and disaffected.

To take the analysis a step further, The Site appeared to create conditions which complicated access to higher levels of study and training, contributing to students becoming NEET. This issue was noted in the 2014-2015 student records of participants in Cohort Y who were recorded as NEET or Unknown as their progression outcome. This meant that either tutors did not know the students' destination data, or they knew that students were not entering any further education or training at *The Site* or any other education setting after completing the academic year. The majority of the students were unable to attain their relatively realistic aspirational goals as demonstrated later in the chapter.

The way this course was undertaken gave rise to warehousing conditions as most participants were hindered from attaining the qualifications that grant access to higher levels of education or apprenticeship provision, even if unintentionally. Also, the

contextual chapter highlighted that the students were confined to classroom-based education which offered no scope for vocational or work-related training, despite it being an employability course. For this reason, participants with low grades appeared stuck at The Site, as most were expected to stay on another year in the department to repeat a slightly modified version of the course.

**Tutor practice involving the social development of students**

Drawing on my key research findings, the next subsection focuses on actual course statistics and fieldwork data to illustrate success and progression outcomes for students on the course. Opportunities for students to progress were inhibited within *The Site*: notably, the qualification did not guarantee straightforward transition and neither did it appear to hold particular academic significance within the college. Aside from institutional constraints, my empirical data discovered a tutor practice aimed at evaluating students' personal attributes. It played a central role and impacted the extent to which students were able to progress.

The course tutors engaged in a practice aimed at socially developing students - a commanding ideology of the employability discourse referenced in the first chapter of my thesis. Students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course were generally expected to develop supposed basic personal qualities before tutors deemed them suitable or able to advance on to mainstream provision regardless of their attainment of the employability qualification. I argued that this particular course and college were structured in such a way that a range of policies, operational practices and structural constraints worked together to systematically deny students deemed ineligible to access higher educational

opportunities within The Site (whether it was the intended purpose or not). This was done even if such practice meant extending the tutors' involvement beyond academic competence, crossing into the personal domain to justify temporary delays and reinforce social exclusion within the college.

**The mandate for participants to socially develop**

As previously indicated, most participants expressed their ambitions to do a vocational course perhaps in child care, bricklaying or get an apprenticeship once they have completed the employability course. However, although they anticipated using their employability qualification to further this ambition, key findings discovered that tutor practices restricted scope for progression. The tutor's undisclosed judgements about their students' social skills were used to decide whether they were ready to progress. Thus, although students attained the qualification, on its own it did not guarantee progression onto mainstream provision. Students' lack of social skills was a key indicator which governed staff decisions, an issue further revealed in Peter's account:

> So sometimes with our course you (meaning the student) have to go back down to Entry 2 because you need them for that longer time until Level 1, for them to socially develop…So you have to put them at a lower level academically so you've got more time to build them up…. (Interview with Peter, Field notes, June 2015).

Peter's account was an almost identical discourse to Kirsten's previously referenced on the practice of infantalisation - she believed tutors needed more time to 'build up' students, which involved delaying student progression. Hence, despite the fact that several

students attained the employability qualification, most students had to repeat another year on the course, whilst a small minority were moved to Entry Level 2 (still pre-foundation learning but for students with complex academic needs). Although the majority of the tutors found it difficult to define this term, Aggy tried to elaborate on what 'socially develop' means. She stated:

> Yeah - so lack of motivation and I think self-belief, no self-esteem and no confidence. Definitely. Once they start achieving you can see then it's an amazing difference – 'I can do it' yes you can do it look! Now you've done that, let's do this. (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

Aggy identified key deficits within her students' personal make-up which warranted a need to focus on their social identity. She recognised that they tend to lack motivation, self-belief, self-esteem and confidence and therefore justified the tutors' practices of seeking to develop confidence and other personal attributes necessary for improvement and making students employable. These personal attributes were core skills central to the employability agenda. In other words, making changes to the social identity of individuals (Atkins, 2013:34) was not only part of the employability discourse, but also integral to the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course itself.

Whilst the tutors believed in the purported benefits of addressing student' social skills, such practices lend themselves to bias. The growing significance of social skills is based on the government's employability agenda, recognising the need for youth to have social skills and social presentation to promote their employment prospects. However, students were unaware that tutors used the assessment of social skills as one of the key

requirements to make decisions on their progression outcomes. This information was not communicated on the website and, as a consequence, students faced an invisible barrier which further restricted students' opportunity for progression within The Site.

It should not be assumed that such practice was entirely negative, particularly when some participants believed that they benefit from such focus. Students like Zara held a positive view, articulated when she claimed that:

> Doing the course with Hope has helped a lot. I have gained so much confidence from doing that course. That is why it is easier for me to do this course that I am doing now. I am also a lot more punctual, as you understand a lot more what could happen if you turn up late for lessons. Hope did not like us coming in late (Interview with Zara, Field notes, Oct 2014).

Here it was important to indicate that Hope took a very stern view of punctuality, a practice different from the rest of the course tutors. During my observations they tended to be flexible, as was particularly illustrated in Gina's practice within the contextual chapter. Hence Zara stated that doing the course with Hope as the tutor, made a key difference. For Zara a focus on personal development had positive benefits; she gained in confidence and became punctual.

It cannot be assumed that the course yielded positive outcomes on its own. It seems that the way Hope delivered the provision made a difference. Conceptualising this positive aspect associated with personal development, however, was very complex and complicated by the fact that Zara's account was possibly influenced by the fact that she

was the only student from both cohorts who was able to ‘move on and up’ to a Level 2 vocational course within *The Site*. Her positive endorsement of ‘soft skills’ was therefore perhaps influenced by her ‘successful’ progression outcome.

Although confidence building was considered significant for such learners as previously indicated in chapter five, a strong performance culture was identified within *The Site*. For this reason confidence building was deemed a ‘soft target’ which carried low credibility within a credentialist institutional framework. This complication was notable in the case of Sharon (who achieved the qualification). Reportedly the course helped her gain confidence, but without the right GCSEs and a negative evaluation of her social skills, Sharon was moved to the Work Preparation course. The course was aimed at those with complex academic needs and less likely to ever progress on to mainstream provision.

Though it could be argued that for students like Sharon, while a place on the Work Preparation course offered supervised retail might be a personal achievement, it did not match her aspirational goal to do a Level 1 vocational course in either child care or health and social care. Hence, although individual students believed that they benefit from a focus on personal attributes and development, this discourse is not supported by course statistics on student outcomes.

**Contradictions and discrepancies around student progression**

Evidently, the assessment of social skills was portrayed as regular practice amongst tutors on the course. They felt it was necessary to pass judgement on their students’ personal attributes. However, such practice is based on an arbitrary concept that is open to

interpretation and yet even so, it served as an important consideration influencing tutor decisions on students' progression outcomes. However, there appeared to be some variation in practice across departments within *The Site*. For instance, based on my practice knowledge and teaching experience on BTEC vocational courses, I know that BTEC Level 1 students are able to progress to Level 2 when they have attained the qualification and met entry requirements, regardless of whether the course tutor judged them to lack the required social skills.

Similarly, interviews with staff from other departments during the pilot study confirmed that BTEC Level 2 students 'moved on' if they attained the qualification, regardless of other factors. However, this was not the case for students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course; the majority of students were 'held back' and placed on a modified version of the course, despite their attainment of the employability qualification. On the one hand, perhaps a lack of available Level 1 courses within The Site could have some bearing on student progression issues. However, this appeared to be a secondary consideration in staff narratives given their strong emphasis and a repeated focus on students' lacking in social and personal development.

The tutors' focus on personal development became a controlling mechanism which governed student trajectory, evident in discourses like 'you put them at a lower level' and 'you've got time to build them up'. This seemed reflective of power and control which repositioned students as passive. Hope, one of the tutors, further revealed:

> We have an open-door policy – if no one wants to give you a chance, we will... We still have to be

> selective of the students we have, because at the end of the day we are still a FE course and are therefore still able to make some requirements. (Interview with course leader, Hope, July 2014).

Hope's narrative showed contradiction in the fact that the course was portrayed as having a widening participation ethos, although tutors' practice indeed involved the selection of students given that it is part of a wider FE college system. This dichotomy presented actual complications, particularly for students. The students' data suggested that instead of being passive, several participants were vocal and voiced dissent (echoed in the respective data chapters). For instance, Liam was one of several students who reported straightforwardly that '[t]he course hasn't helped me to move on' (Interview with Liam, Field notes, May 2014).

In one way, perhaps Liam's account was influenced by the fact that although he gained the qualification, he was not offered a place on a vocational course within The Site. Liam however demonstrated agency and argued that he did not benefit from doing the course. Most students wanted to move on, despite the tutors' belief that a prolonged stay on the course might be beneficial. The actual course statistics (detailed in the latter section of this chapter) demonstrated that instead, a substantial proportion of students were unable to progress within *The Site*. So although the employability agenda shaped the tutors' practice of evaluating students' personal attributes, such practice contributed to processes of marginalisation and restriction from key provision facilitating progression within this competitive college.

**Institutional and structural constraints**

It is important to acknowledge that conceptualising student success and progression outcomes was a complicated task. This was further compounded by technical difficulties surrounding data collection on national and local levels. Even though course and national statistics are beneficial, the use of reported data generated concerns - it was subject to human error, bias and the manipulation of data, hence the cautious use of both course and national benchmark data throughout this chapter.

What is more, The Site used numerous and overlapping categories to record learner destination codes. Categories such as 'NEET', 'economically inactive' and 'unknown' have specific definitions but were subjected to ambiguity and manipulation by staff. Like most institutions, staff working at this particular institution faced organisational pressure to deliver a 'successful' course - this issue was revealed in this chapter on warehousing. Thus concerns over internal and external quality assurance processes influenced how data was recorded and reported. As such, negative progression outcomes flagged concerns over course efficiency; this also had funding repercussions amongst other consequences.
As with the use of any data, it was difficult to gain an accurate view of the progression outcomes for several students in both cohorts. Nevertheless, to closely explore and conceptualise the students' outcomes on the course, 'success' was conceptualised in two ways: firstly, an obvious indicator of success was when individuals acquired the qualification they set out to achieve; and secondly, whether they were able to progress onto vocational courses, apprenticeship training or some form of employment upon completion of the course. However, these notions of success produce tension, especially given their interconnected link with the issue of progression.

Conceptualising ‘progression’ proved challenging. Principally, progression refers to the extent to which students were able to move between different stages of learner routes that enable student transitions (Fergusson and Unwin, 1996; Ainley et al, 1999). In my study this was limited for most students on the course. Hence, in an attempt to capture the nature of student outcomes on this Level 1 Achieving Skills Course*,* the concept of ‘progression’ is used in its broadest sense, to refer to transitions away from this particular course and any related pre-foundation courses, to student advancement on to a mainstream vocational course, apprenticeship or employment.

Furthermore, recent conceptualisations of student transitions have identified the substantial influence of cultural and social constraints on progression in terms of space and location (Avis and Atkins, 2017). Hence, in contrast to neoliberal rhetoric, the wider context plays an equally significant role: broader socio-economic factors, the actual location and place of study, and the course provision in itself are some key influences which can potentially restrict young people’s prospects - especially on the local level. These new conceptualisations of transition include notions of time (Colley, 2010), place (Webb, 2014; Mayhew and Keep, 2014) and ways in which these dimensions intersect and facilitate young people’s transitions in particular ways. For instance, tutors highlighted multifaceted factors which influenced student outcomes on this particular course, revealed when Aggy, one of the tutors explained:

> So what we’ve found, last academic year, they slashed most Level 1 courses … So these kids had nowhere to go … now they’ve upped the standards so you’ve got to have 4 GCSEs to get on a Level 1 BTech. So most of these kids aren’t going to have

> that so where do they go? The only choice is XXX*** (name of course) … there's no choice, why aren't these kids given choice? They're being treated like second-class citizens and they're not. Just because they're not able to achieve or to come out with these amazing A-C grade GCSEs, they're put on the waste dump. And they're not provided for! (Interview with Tutor: Aggy - Field notes: June 2015).

Aggy's narrative offered a critical focus on a combination of key systemic influences that contribute to a situation in which (according to her) the 'kids had nowhere to go' once they completed the course. The credentialist nature of the education system played a central role in her explanation. A key influence thus was notable in the construction of the 'academic ideal' for five GCSE grades A*-C. She used phrases such as 'second-class citizen', 'no choice' and students being 'put on the waste dump' to communicate her belief that current academic conditions give rise to processes of division, social inequality and marginalisation.

Implicitly, Aggy recognised that, given the way the education system currently functions, it creates conditions which do not leave space for students with lower grades to stay on within *The Site*. In a systematic way, space and movement were diminished for students on the course; this could be seen in relevant courses being "slashed"; comments that "they've upped the standards" and "they're not able to achieve or come out with these amazing A-C GCSE grades". This is key evidence for my central argument that such students were being systematically filtered out of the education system.

The course tutors' practices were of central importance to such operations. Ironically, whilst Aggy adopted a critical attitude towards exclusionary processes inherent within the education system, she did not seem to recognise that perhaps similar social exclusionary measures were equally embedded within her and the course team's practice and judgement of students' social identity. By the same token, further complication was revealed when Hope stated:

> We've had probably a small percentage go on to do apprenticeships. They *just* seem so difficult to get hold… Even if there is one that suddenly comes up, a learner suddenly goes "that looks great!"… then it's gone… there is so much competition for these apprenticeships (Interview with Hope, Field notes, May 2015)

Hope's narrative drew attention to the lack of apprenticeship provision, a national shortage previously highlighted in chapter one, a situation further compounded by high GCSE entry requirements similarly discussed in chapter five. So while in theory apprenticeship training was an option, in practice participants were in direct competition with BTEC Level 3 and degree students for limited apprenticeship provision. According to Hope, the students hardly had opportunity to apply for advertised apprenticeship provision given its swift uptake and short supply. Progressing onto apprenticeship was therefore not always a feasible option for participants within *The Site*.

Not only was apprenticeship provision out of bounds for the majority of these learners, but so too was access to work placements, as echoed by David, one of the students:

> You don't get to do anything hands-on. It would be really better if you could get to do something hands-on (Interview with David, Field Notes, June 2015).

Students on the course were engaged in work simulation activities such as cake sales in college. Finding work placements which enabled the development of key employability skills was a challenge acknowledged on the course. It was seen as essential that students on an employability skills course gain access to the labour market and develop knowledge of the work sector. However, as previously highlighted in several sections of my thesis, contemporary youth faced challenging labour market conditions. Structural issues, such as a declining youth labour market and an unregulated employment sector whereby employers had autonomy and could decide whether and to whom they wanted to offer work placements, impacted access and possibilities for work-related youth training opportunities. Educational provision was certainly restricted by broader structural issues, which resulted in diminished work placement opportunities and constrained participation under RPA. On this, scholars argued that although educational aspirations existed amongst contemporary youth (Furlong, 2009), and in principle, neoliberal educational reforms such as RPA set out to develop human capital, to some degree these benefits were constrained by conditions that limited educational opportunity (Apple, 2004).

Nevertheless, on an institutional level, students are expected to advance onto higher levels of study, revealed when Nina explained:

> At the end of the course, where is their progression? Because at the end of the course, they cannot take a backward step into pre-foundation, because that is a

> lower level… They shouldn't! They shouldn't do that because, you know, we should be evidencing their progression as an upward step (Interview with Nina, Faculty Head of Pre-Foundation Learning, July 2015).

Nina recognises here that education and training provision should ordinarily lead to 'an upward step' - meaning students should gain access either to employment or higher levels of study and training. Although these student trajectories were possibilities, in practice, stringent academic conditions limit most students' potential access to educational resources, as previously mentioned in chapter 6 on GCSEs. Nina's narrative had nuances of performance and accountability measures, which involved the monitoring of work practices and student outcomes. Accountability measures were formalised and observed in funding streams which measured success rates, and though FE college inspectors also enquired about progression issues and learner destinations, organisations curtailed their reports to qualification success rates, the inherent assumption being that successful completion of a course would naturally lead to progression onto the next level (Spours et al, 2009). However, as illustrated in my progression data, this was rarely the case with students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course.

**Low status of the course and employability qualifications**

Other than the stereotypical image associated with the students and the course, there was also reportedly a stigma attached to the qualification itself. This was revealed when Nina, the Head of Pre-Foundation Learning, stated:

> The concern that I have always is that the course is seen as a bit of a 'dumping ground' and I don't like that… that kind of term, but I can't think of another way to describe it. There is a risk of students being deemed a little bit too challenging or too complex… I'm sure there could be a stigma attached if they see where the students come from. But I would like to think that that is a small minority of people (Interview with Nina, Field Notes, July 2015).

Nina disclosed that the course was seen as 'a bit of a 'dumping ground'. Although it was uncertain whether the claim was restricted to this campus only, there was a stigma attached to the course and the qualification itself, largely influenced by the stereotypical assumptions of the students on the course. Scope for movement within *The Site* was therefore further restricted as a result of stigma and negative stereotyping. Arguably, the inherent ideological assumptions associated with NEET youth perhaps complicated the students' trajectory and the extent to which they could readily access college-wide provision, regardless of whether they had attained the qualification.

Another key influence was the hierarchical differences between study programmes and qualifications. These particular learners were in pre-vocational learning, whilst others were located on mainstream vocational study. Research indicates that NEET young

people and those with low levels of attainment were at the bottom of an unequal and highly stratified hierarchy (Atkins, 2013). Those on lower-level programmes seemed prepared to enter a different part of an unequal hierarchy, positioning them for what seemed a lifetime of marginalisation in the form of the 'low-pay-no-pay cycle' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). Although such an outcome might be deemed 'good-enough' for those with lowered or no aspiration, it contrasted with what the majority of student participants hoped to achieve from the qualification - they held relatively reasonable aspirations to access vocational education and apprenticeships which would hopefully result in 'secure' employment with relatively 'good' income prospects.

Given the participants' circumstances, there appeared to be a dissonance between policy and practice for students engaged in this particular employability course; primarily, the way RPA was implemented gave rise to these particular students' subjective experiences of marginalisation and inequality. Critics argued that employability programmes did not open up many opportunities for students (Simmons et al, 2014) and were lacking in any 'real contextualisation of the world of work' (Atkins, 2013:34). Work placements were viewed as practically non-existent (Atkins, 2013) and were not closely aligned with entry to work (Keep, 2014). What's more, Beck (2015) found providers often overstepped boundaries: in this case the degree of tutor involvement and 'mothering' resulted in them helping students complete course work. Consequently, these forms of tutor practices reinforced justified criticisms of poor-quality learning provision (echoed in the section on warehousing).

Hence, the trajectory of students on employability and lower-level programmes appeared constrained both within the education system and the employment sector. In two studies with similar learners, it was noted that although some students appear to harbour feelings of hopelessness that these programmes could not offer 'real chances' that granted access to 'secure' employment (Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2009; 2016), many remained hopeful that perhaps on this occasion, things could be different and their course might grant access to the reported secure, high-skilled labour market prospects announced in the rhetoric (Atkins, 2013). The students in my study similarly echoed hopeful notions, but as Simmons et al. note: 'it is both sad and ironic that provision which purports to help disadvantaged young people to find work, in some ways, contributes to their continued exclusion' (Simmons et al., 2013b:12). Clearly, this is problematic.

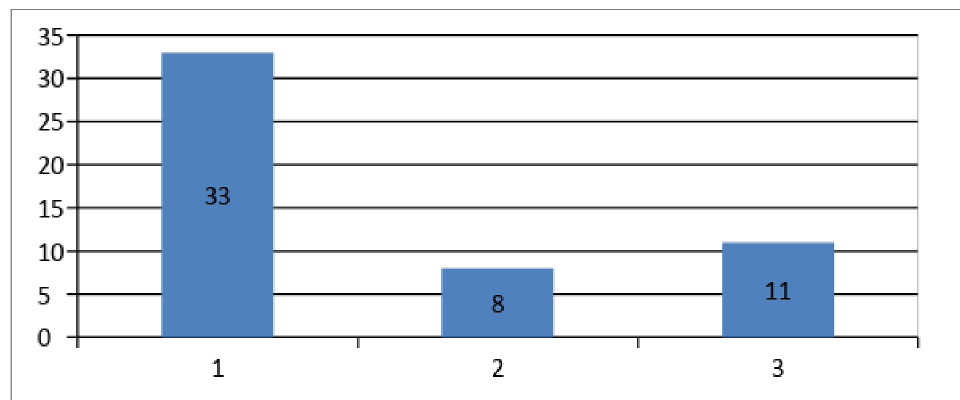
**Presentation and critical summary of course statistics**

The course data for both cohorts 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 indicated that although most of the students achieved the Level 1 employability qualification, only a substantial proportion of students moved sideways onto Level 1 courses and only one student, Zara, 'successfully' moved upwards onto a Level 2 vocational course.

In particular, the course data for Cohort X in 2013-2014 showed that from 53 students enrolled at all the main campus, the success rate illustrated that 62% of students fully achieved both learning outcomes – passing the portfolio-based work and both Functional Skills English and Maths exam, while 38% did not. For the student participants in Hope's class, 11 out of 14 students (79%) attained the Level 1 pre-vocational qualification. Yet even so, an examination of national benchmark data highlighted that the course's overall

62% success rate, was lower than the 91% national average. Furthermore, the course's achievement rates showed that 79% of students passed the course, lower than the 95% national benchmark average. The graph below reveals a breakdown of this course data:

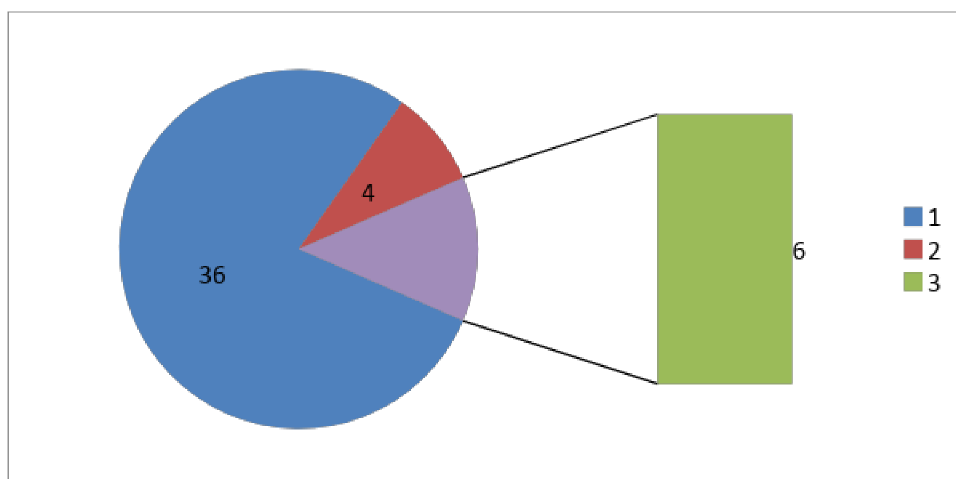
**Graph 1: Achievement data in 2013-2014**




In the above, 33 students (79%) thus passed the course, whilst nineteen students (37%) did not attain the qualification. Accordingly, the retention percentage rate indicated that 79% of students who started subsequently completed the course. However, the course results appeared less impressive when compared with the 96% national benchmark average. According to the benchmark statistics, on a national level, the same provision delivered elsewhere managed to retain a greater number of students enrolled on the course. Whether this was truly the case is questionable. What is certain was that such a high national benchmark average, close to a 100% retention rate for these particular students, provokes scepticism as it portrays a straightforward, simplistic outcome for a type of student group that characteristically struggles to engage and remain in education. Even so, judged against national benchmark data, students on the 2013-2014 cohort were enrolled on a study programme that did not meet national benchmark standards.

The course data for 2014-2015 showed that in this particular year, 45 students enrolled at all the main campus. The overall success rate suggested that 80% of students enrolled on the course completed and achieved the qualification. Though the success rate was higher than the previous year's result, comparatively it was still lower than the previous year's 91% national average data. More specifically, for participants in Gina's class, the success rate was lower, with six out of twelve (50% as compared to the previous year's 79%) completing the course. Moreover, the achievement data for this particular cohort indicated an 86% achievement rate, higher than the previous academic year's 79% pass rate. Even so, it was still lower than the last year's 95% national average (national data at the time was not available). A breakdown of course data showed that 36 students passed, four were withdrawn and there was no outcome recorded for six students, reflected in the graph below.

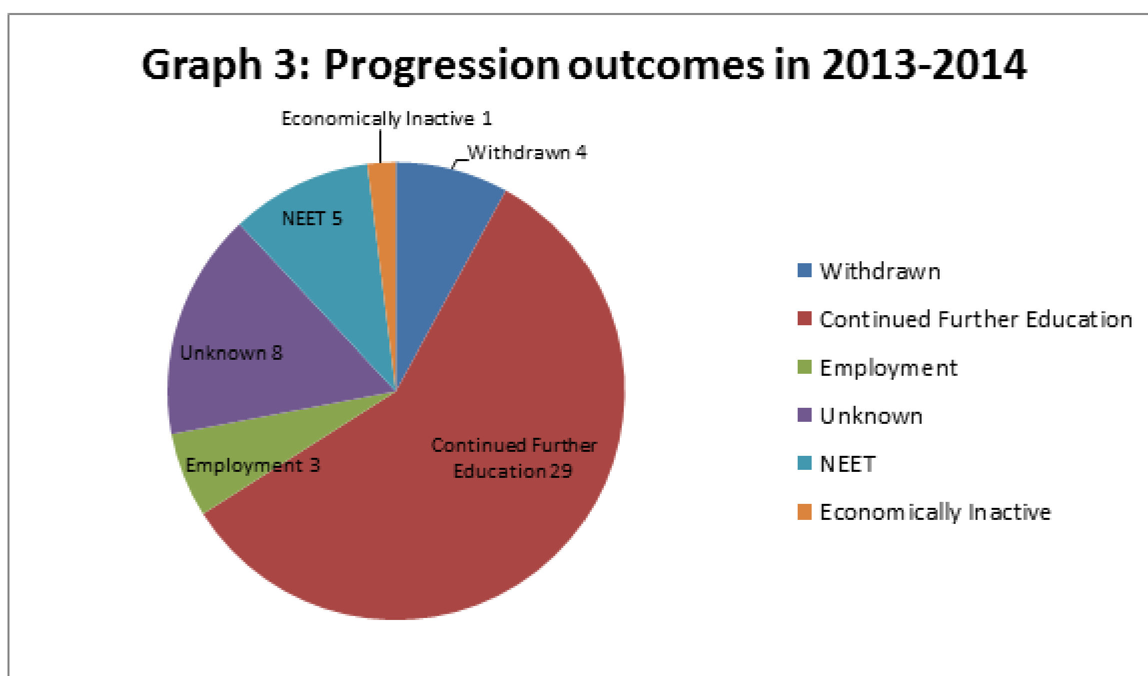
**Graph 2: Achievement Data in 2014-2015**




Noticeably, the majority of students completed and achieved the qualification. The data indicated a 93% retention rate, closer to the previous year's 96% average. The increased percentage rate was partly a direct result of a 4-week taster course implemented by the

course team to vet prospective students before enrolment onto the actual course. Hence, without tightened recruitment policies, perhaps the course results might have been similar to the previous cohort's or worse, had it not been for staff intervention.

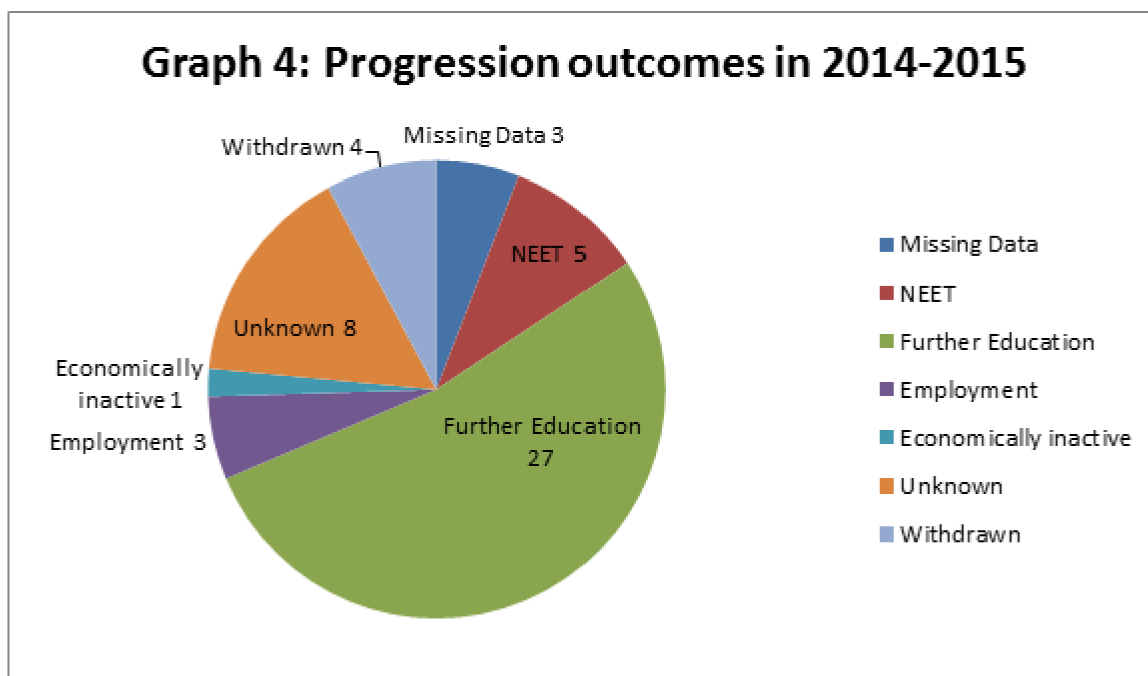
When the overall course data was taken into consideration, there appeared to be a sharp distinction between 'success' rates and progression outcomes for these particular students. Based on success rates alone, the provision presented as a relatively 'successful' course in that the majority of the students attained the qualification. However, when focusing solely on progression outcomes, a contrasting image emerged:




Firstly, although 53 students were enrolled on the course in 2013-2014, only 46 students appeared in the progression data. From this total, the data indicated that nearly 30 students attained some form of positive outcome in employment or further study as per RPA rhetoric and the employability mandate. However, a closer focus on the 27 students in further study showed that 16 out of 27 students (59%) were enrolled on a modified

version of the same course, delivered by the same course team. It meant that instead of sideways or upward progression, a number of these particular students stayed on and were 'recycled' within the course because they could not advance on to mainstream provision. The progression data for 2014-2015 revealed similar findings and also illustrated specific information on the participants' progression ideals and their actual outcomes during their period of study. However, it is important to emphasise error and contradiction in the reporting and recording of data on this course. Based on the statistics on the database, there were students missing from the data as was the case in Cohort X in 2013.

Furthermore, in Cohort Y the 2014-2015 course statistics showed that there were more students recorded in the progression data than in the course's success rates. There was error in the way student outcomes were recorded. For instance, a total of 45 students were recorded in the success rate data, but six extra students were recorded in the progression data from the same cohort of students. Thus, working within these limitations, the following presentation of course data was based on the fifty one students stated on the database for progression, shown below:




Focusing primarily on the 27 students engaged in further study, eight students experienced sideways progression on Level 1 vocational courses, such as Bricklaying, Electrical Installation, Painting and Decoration, Hospitality, Construction Skills and Public Services. However, 19 out of 27 students (70%) had to repeat a modified version of the same course and were unable to progress within *The Site*.

More specifically, for Cohort Y, of the 12 students who participated in the research study, the course data indicated that nine students gained the qualification, two of whom experienced sideways progression onto Level 1 vocational courses. For these two students, enrolment onto another Level 1 vocational course placed them on a direct pathway towards their trade and was therefore considered progression by these two male students. In their circumstances, they were able to cross the metaphorical divide between pre-vocational and vocational learning. For them, engagement in education thus proved beneficial. However, for their counterparts who participated in the study, outcomes

looked negative. Table 1 (below) illustrated that the actual progression outcomes revealed that 75% of the participants were recorded as either NEET or destination unknown at the end of the programme, despite the attainment of the qualification and success rates of the course.

**Table 1.6: Actual progression outcomes versus progression ideals**

| **Cohort Y** | **September 2014 – July 2015** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Learners** | **Gender** | **Ethnicity** | **Achievement of qualification** | **Actual progression** | **Aspiration/ Progression ideals** |
| Jada | F | White | Completed qualification | Unknown | Level 1 Child Care |
| Zette | F | Black | Completed qualification | Unknown | Level 2 Health and Social Care (social work studies later) |
| Laurie | F | Black | Completed no qualification | Unknown | Level 1 Public Services (prison officer later |

| | | | | | on) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kyle | M | White | Completed qualification | Level 1 Construction Skills | Achieved goal |
| David | M | White | Completed qualification | Level 1 Hospitality Industry | Achieved goal |
| Lee | M | White | Completed qualification | Unknown | Unknown |
| Jada | F | White | Withdrawn | Unknown | Unknown |
| Ella | F | White | Completed qualification | Unknown | Level 2 Travel and Tourism |
| Lindy | F | White | Withdrawn | Unknown | Apprentice Animal Welfare |
| Amy | F | White | Completed qualification | NEET | Unknown |
| Leah | F | White | Completed qualification | Repeating Level 1 Achieving | Level 1 Travel and Tourism |

| | | | | Skills Course | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Adam | M | White | Completed qualification | NEET | Learn proper English and then off to Work |

Table 1.6 illustrated that although the participants held what could be considered relatively realistic aspirations to undertake the next 'step-up' in their studies, they found that the completion of the Level 1 employability qualification by no means guaranteed access to mainstream vocational education or apprenticeship training at *The Site*. As previously mentioned, most participants reportedly considered re-engagement provision as part of a bigger goal to make up for 'lost ground'. Although in one respect, the attainment of any type of qualification could be deemed an improvement upon previous academic failure, the majority of students pinned their hopes on the qualification to pave the way to mainstream vocational courses (other than the substantial minority that sought employment). Judged against their progression ideals reflected in Table 1.6, the participants generally held realistic aspirational goals, but only two students were able to achieve these goals. The rest of the students who could not progress did not repeat the modified course; the data suggested that they have since severed ties with the course and *The Site*.

My data challenged taken-for-granted assumptions that 'good' success rates lead to reasonably 'good' progression outcomes. Instead, in relation to these particular students,

there appeared to be a distinct contrast between success rates and actual progression outcomes. The Level 1 qualification did not guarantee straightforward transition that would result in higher levels of progression, hence calling into question the extent to which the qualification held any academic relevance within this particular college. These findings are similarly echoed in previous research with learners on employability programmes; they too experienced great difficulties with progression, students also virtually repeating an identical course (Atkins, 2009; Simmons et al, 2011; Beck, 2015).
My study acknowledged a range of tensions and contradictions between practices and policy discourses which complicated the extent to which students on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course could achieve higher academic or employment outcomes within this particular setting. Contrary to popular belief, participants at *The Site* held realistic aspirational goals, the majority wanting to continue further education on vocational courses or apprenticeship training, but within *The Site* such prospects were diminished for several students. So, although several students on the course reported the need to participate and engage in educational provision to improve on previous educational failures, these plans seemed hindered by wide-ranging structural and institutional factors.

One thing which appeared certain was that the tutors' efforts produced ambiguous outcomes for student participants concerned. Thus, although my findings revealed a range of structural and institutional factors which constrained student progression opportunities, most importantly the tutors' work practices similarly generated complex understandings and precarious progression outcomes for students on the course. For instance, chapter five identified the complex ways decisions were made. The data showed that passing the course by no means guaranteed progression. Despite good intentions, the tutors' work

practices conversely reproduced disadvantage. Students' personal attributes were evaluated in a less than transparent manner and if found lacking, progression was delayed and they were expected to repeat a variant of the same course, or regress to a lower academic level.

Students therefore faced a hidden barrier which prohibited their progression within *The Site*. Given the flexible, random and subjective nature of the tutors' assessments and decisions, it was difficult to draw up a definitive list which would guarantee positive progression outcomes. Hence, as previously mentioned, the educational landscape for these students was precarious, generating ambiguous and unpredictable student outcomes. Similar findings were echoed in previous research when it was reported that the educational outcomes for Level 1 learners appeared to be very complex and uncertain (Atkins, 2009; Simmons and Thompson, 2011).

Likewise, an examination of course statistics represented the argument that despite student engagement on this course, most students were not offered a place on mainstream provision or apprenticeships within *The Site*. Instead, the majority of students repeated a similar version of the course and were effectively warehoused. The problem lies in the fact that the majority of research participants wanted to move on from the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course to mainstream vocational education. However, a range of emerging factors hindered progression ideals, the qualification did not guarantee straightforward transition and neither did it appear to hold academic significance within this particular college. Scholars have recognised broader structural influences and

accordingly argued that various social, economic and cultural factors indeed structured individual agency (Beck, 1992).

In view of my findings, structural constraints, operational policies and practices, along with stigma limited progression prospects, firmly placing relatively 'realistic' aspirational goals out of reach for many participants at The Site. In this way, a substantial proportion of students enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course experienced that engagement in post-16 education may not necessarily have the desired effect, particularly given that scope for higher academic and employment outcomes seemed diminished within *The Site*. Hence, most participants have come to experience a distinct difference between rhetoric and reality; access to essential and desirable provision was limited and heavily regulated within The Site. Admittedly, although this particular re-engagement provision did not essentially facilitate higher outcomes for most students, it did what it was meant to do; in essence, a substantial majority of former NEETs and disengaged youth stayed on and re-engaged in some form of course provision for another year. They were located in a structured and formal academic environment; they were being kept busy and off the streets for part of the day.

**Conclusion**

The central argument of this chapter is that the way this particular course and college was structured acted to filter students deemed ineligible to access and benefit from higher educational opportunities within *The Site* (whether it was the intended purpose or not). Multiple barriers and regulatory systems operated on the Level 1 Achieving Skills course too, an evident obstruction to progression exposed in the tutors' hidden evaluation of

students' social identity. Measures of disqualification were in place at different levels within The Site, even if it meant crossing into the personal domain to justify temporary delays and reinforce social exclusion.

It is clear that tough academic conditions operated on this course and within The Site, instrumentally obstructing most participants' goals to acquire credible qualifications that could perhaps be of particular value to future aspirational goals. Perhaps it was a combination of broader factors, i.e. a saturated employment market, along with 'more determined' students, which resulted in most students staying on to pursue an almost identical course within The Site. However, a substantial minority of their counterparts were recorded as NEET and destination unknown once the course was completed. Either way of looking at the situation concerning the participants reveals that engagement with educational opportunities was considered to be a starting point. However, based on major findings, participation on its own was not deemed enough to secure improved academic outcomes for participants on the course at The Site. Wider structural factors and systemic influences also play a profound role in facilitating students' progression within further education.

The findings further recognise that although government policies aim to introduce more inclusive pathways that offer greater social inclusion, in practice, the way such provision is delivered and experienced challenged these ideals. Instead of being taught actual 'skills to achieve', students appeared to be warehoused. The course provision had low social positioning and was on the periphery of college operations, a situation which, in its

current state, made it questionable whether these particular students were indeed taught 'skills to achieve' within this setting.

Based on the actual experiences of marginalisation and social exclusion experienced by the participants within The Site, the findings support the argument that ultimately employability programmes facilitated 'pre-ordained positioning', helping students find and learn their place in the knowledge economy (Atkins 2013:34). Student participants do not fit 'nicely' into pre-existing, rigid structures embedded within institutions; instead, the notion of conflict, tension and chaos encapsulates the often non-standard academic backgrounds associated with most learners from this particular employability course. Although beneficial, there was the danger that this type of knowledge within itself could become a pathological tool to stereotype, label and 'water-down' provision. Instead, ultimately it should broaden access; enhance teaching and learning standards, whilst providing the 'right' forms of student support. A stronger academic focus on this course was notably required to enable enhanced academic and employment outcomes for student participants.

## Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The *Education Skills Act 2008* and the *Raising of Participation Age* policy claimed that when RPA youth participated in a prolonged period of post-16 education, they were able to attain higher qualifications and skills, resulting in them becoming a skilled workforce which contributes to national economic wealth. However, my key empirical findings suggested that RPA logic mostly applied to a substantial proportion of youth with higher levels of qualifications. Those with lower or no school-leaving qualifications in my study, faced numerous challenges within The Site which diminished their capacity to attain higher academic goals and gain access to vocational education and apprenticeship training in this particular college. In particular, most students enrolled on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course encountered a combination of complex, structural and institutional factors – revealed in warehousing and welfare practices, the arbitrary ways in which GCSEs were regulated and how BKSB diagnostic assessments were embedded within various educational processes and systems assessing students' academic ability and social backgrounds. They reproduced tension, contradiction and disadvantage for most participants.

This particular chapter aims to draw together the three key empirical findings which gave rise to central and original arguments in this thesis. For this purpose, three main sections are highlighted: the research questions and emerging key findings, followed by a discussion on original contributions made during the study, and scope for future research.

**Key findings and issues for consideration**

It was important to note that given the inter-related and complex nature of emerging themes, I could not produce an academic text which reflected a linear response to each research question; also, it is difficult to cover everything. However, I rather wish to draw out and weave together some central issues which emerged as key findings that gave rise to the original contributions of this study.

My overall research findings problematised education and highlighted complications for most former NEET and disadvantaged youth enrolled on the *Level 1 Achieving Skills Course* at The Site. Far from being a straightforward experience, a close examination of my study's major research findings discovered that although most participants held aspirational goals and said that they wanted higher academic grades, the employability course rarely resulted in quality tuition, or the right type of qualifications needed to progress within this setting. The predominant teaching aim was to 'keep students busy', getting them to do 'any kind of work'. Instead of being taught actual 'skills to achieve', students appeared to be warehoused (Cornish, 2017b).

Notably, the education system operated along an unequal hierarchical divide. *The Level 1 Achieving Skills Course* had lowered social positioning and was geographically and metaphorically segregated from mainstream operations at *The Site* as highlighted in chapters one and four. Key empirical findings in chapter five particularly, highlighted how students with no or lower school-leaving qualifications struggled to access GCSE provision and therefore missed a critical opportunity to retake GCSEs, thus, becoming further excluded in this competitive setting which favoured GCSEs as the preferred

academic credentials granting access to higher levels of vocational study and apprenticeship training. GCSE provision was firmly placed out of reach for students with low or no prior GCSE qualifications. In so doing, the study highlighted broader concerns over social inequality and the influences of the credentialist nature of the education system which contributed to the marginalisation of students with lower academic grades. In the present milieu, most participants discovered they were stuck with their existing low grades; in actual reality, scope to improve upon previous low academic results within *The Site* was diminished (Cornish, 2017a).

The key influences of neoliberalism and the government's employability agenda were paramount on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course, visible in BKSB assessments and the Functional Skills curricula. The employability course was designed for youth conceived to be lacking in school-leaving qualifications and the 'right' attitude and behaviour necessary for employment. Chapter five particularly detailed how the BKSB diagnostic tool assessed levels of numeracy and literacy skills, together with a self-assessment which identified any individual shortcomings. There was the inherent expectation that they address these shortcomings within an individual learning plan produced through BKSB so they could develop the required employability skills.

As a consequence, students were expected to undertake both academic and personal works in developing their knowledge, attitude, social skills, literacy and numeracy skills through Functional Skills exams in English and Maths before attaining the overall employability qualification. Of course, the employability course offered these students, most of whom came from complex and disadvantaged backgrounds, a second chance to

develop core employability skills. However, the way the employability agenda was enforced at The Site, presented complications and social exclusionary practices within the institution, constraining these students’ access to a limited pool of essential and desirable provision within mainstream operations.

Despite good intentions, the course tutors’ practices contributed to social exclusionary measures and hidden barriers within The Site which consequently restricted most students’ agency and capacity to acquire essential academic credentials. These findings contrasted with RPA rhetoric which announced scope for ‘upskilling’, ‘equal access and opportunity’ associated with post-16 education. The way this particular RPA re-engagement was enforced at The Site partly led instead to student experiences of warehousing, restriction from GCSE provision and mainstream provision, and subjective assessments on students’ social identity. These educational mechanisms arguably served as varying measures of disqualification which systematically filtered students, blocking and preventing most participants from acquiring credible qualifications.

However, a discussion on the students’ outcomes was fraught with tension and contradiction. The study showed a dissonance between what participants came to expect from participation in the course, and overall RPA aims regarding re-engagement provision. From (most) participants’ point of view, engagement in post-16 education may not necessarily have the desired effect as several participants reported that once they completed the course, they wanted to enrol on a vocational course or apprenticeship; yet they found that they had to repeat a similar employability course the following year and did not attain their aspirational goal within The Site. However, from a policy perspective,

arguably the re-engagement provision was successful in that it was doing what it aimed to achieve: most former NEETs were re-engaged in a particular course (regardless of quality concerns); they were off the street and being kept occupied, were regulated and accounted for and accordingly socially controlled within the education system.

**Original contributions**

The scope of this research fits with an existing body of academic research on disengaged youth enrolled on a low-level course in FE. However, this thesis makes an original contribution in its focus on RPA, a relatively new policy recently imposed in England. The employability course itself is a newly-designed course, forming part of the broader RPA re-engagement provision designed to attract former NEET and disengaged youth. Adopting a case study approach, ethnographic research was conducted to detail what such provision 'looks like' in practice. This in turn, identified key government and institutional policies, coupled with operational systems and practices within The Site to examine how these conditions impacted students enrolled on the *Level 1 Achieving Skills* course. Following this, my thesis conceptualises its findings within the RPA discourse. Taking all into consideration, my thesis confirms existing long-standing ideas about educational processes and systems, but in a new setting drawing on wide-ranging qualitative strategies to engage marginalised youth in this research project.

However, my major research findings identified several educational processes and practices which substantially predated RPA. Concerns over inequality in education existed for many years. My thesis contributes to the refinement of existing academic literature on educational inequality, and detailed the experiences of marginalised youth

enrolled on an employability course, many seeking access to higher levels of employment and training within The Site. Hence, my empirical findings highlighted the warehousing function of the course; its content which is based on ‘busy work’; the sometimes overly-protective tutoring; the lack of meaning progression on the course; and the pressure on tutors and management to meet performance targets and improve their quality ratings with Ofsted. These issues were nothing new, but a focus on RPA offered contemporary academic evidence that for students with low or academic qualifications, there was a restrictive educational offer and less choice within The Site. The central argument of the thesis is that RPA is effectively ‘business as usual’.

Refining existing academic debates, my thesis drew on insights from the key themes highlighted in the literature reviewed. It confirmed current academic evidence and developed key arguments regarding gatekeeping, infantalisation and warehousing. These findings highlighted how the combination of these institutional factors was mostly counter-productive for many students on this particular employability course within *The Site*. My study also drew particular attention to the ways in which BKSB diagnostic assessments were flexibly used on the course. They were used not only to test levels of academic competence through Functional Skills English and Maths, but also to assess students’ social identity and to address individual shortcomings within an individual learning plan before they could achieve the overall Level 1 employability certificate. Yet they continued to face a precarious existence within *The Site*, given that the employability qualification rarely resulted in improved academic or progression outcomes for these students.

Confirming existing studies on the prevailing ethics of competition, this thesis focused on the further education system and advanced contemporary understanding on the effects of a performance culture. This thesis shows that when education provision was rationed under competitive principles, stringent conditions placed Level 1 pre-vocational students in direct competition with higher-qualified individuals competing for access to essential and desirable provision at The Site. The key empirical findings of this thesis confirmed the significance of educational credentials, findings that were in line with previous studies.

**Scope for future research**

Assumptions and stereotypical judgements are generally made about NEET and so-called disengaged youth, proliferated and encouraged by the mass media. However, my empirical findings on this particular re-engagement provision at The Site, indicate a need for further research on a larger scale to discover whether my findings are representative In other words, it must be ascertained whether identical issues are encountered with similar courses at different colleges nationwide.

I firmly believe that a particular focus on re-engagement provision across England is necessary and fundamental. By its very nature, re-engagement provision could offer a critical moment within the education system for youth who previously struggled to reap the benefits from the schooling system. That is, if it is delivered correctly and effectively, while at the same time being honest about assessment criteria and promised outcomes. Further research on a national scale, could enable a closer inspection of re-engagement programmes to identify colleges that deliver ‘good’ practice, but also those that produce

negative student outcomes. Fundamentally, this study calls for a sharpened political focus, inviting academic and government debate for a critical re-think and revamp of re-engagement provision, in order to make it transparent in its motivations and fit for purpose, particularly for students with lower school-leaving qualifications.

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## Appendix 1:

### Research on the Raising of Participation Age (RPA) Policy.

University of Essex

I am looking for STUDENTS who would like to discuss their experiences of being in college. The government has stated that in 2013, young people have to stay in education until 17 years old, and until their 18th birthday from 2015 onwards. I therefore want to hear your views:-

*How will this longer stay in education benefit you?*

*What things sometimes make it difficult for you to attend college?*

*What are your experiences in the classroom?*

*How will your current course help you in the future?*

Answers to these type of questions will help me to understand and explain what are your current experiences are in FE colleges during the latest educational reform.

PLEASE CONTACT ME or tell your tutor if you want to take part in the study. My email address is Carlene.Cornish@colchester.ac.uk or carlenecornish@hotmail.co.uk.



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**Research on compulsory post-16 education**

**Participant consent form**

**The Paradox of the Raising of Participation Age Policy**

- I understand the purpose of the research project and the nature of my involvement in it.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage.

- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.

- I understand that I may be audiotaped during any interview and that I reserve the right to terminate the recording at any point of time during the interview.

- I understand that data will be held confidentially in a secure place in a password-protected computer in the form of hard copies of transcripts and audiotapes. These data will be accessible to the researcher only.

**Signed:-__________________**

(Research Participant)

**Date: ____________________**

**Signed:-__________________**

(Researcher)

**Date: ____________________**

**Consent form: Focus Group Participants**

This consent form is designed to check that you understand the purpose of the study. It checks whether you understand the purpose of the study, and that you are aware of your rights as a participant. This form will thus confirm whether you are willing to take part.

**Please tick as appropriate**

| | **YES** | **NO** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. I have read the leaflet describing the study. | | |
| 2. I have received sufficient information about the study for me to decide whether to take part if I wish. | | |
| 3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any stage. | | |
| 4. I understand that I am free to refuse to take part if I wish. | | |
| | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5. I know that I can ask for further information about the study from the researcher. | | |
| 6. I understand that all information arising from the study will be treated as confidential. | | |
| 7. I know that it will not be possible to identify any individual respondent in the study report, including myself. | | |
| 8. I agree to take part in the study. | | |
| **Signature:** | **Date:** | |
| **Name in black letters, please:** | | |

**I confirm that quotations from the interview can be used in the final research report and other publications. I understand that these will be used anonymously and that no individual respondent will be identified in such report.**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Signature:** | **Date** |

## Appendix 2: Participants' profiles:

### Students in cohort X (2013-2014) participating in exit interviews outlined in Table 1.2:

**Zeke:** A male student who regularly attended college and seemed focused in lessons. During the interview, he told me that he wanted to make the most of his education as he felt he had spoiled his chances in secondary school. He lived locally and his goal was to become a motor mechanic. He applied to do the Level 1 Mechanics course at *The Site* upon completing the course, but several weeks later Zeke learnt that he had not been offered a place and was very upset as he was offered no explanation. He applied at a different college locally and was offered a place on a Mechanics course. He also learnt that with his current qualifications he could have studied the Mechanics course this year already. This was the reason why Zeke felt he wasted a year of his life at *The Site.*

**Sam:** One of Zeke's best friends. He also regularly attended college. His aim was to enrol onto a Level 1 Bricklaying course at the college. He was offered a place on the course and tells me that the employability qualification helped him secure a place on the course.

**Zara:** She lived some distance away and took a train in to college. She was very pleased to learn that she was granted a place to study on the Level 2 Business course. Her subsequent aim was to do the Level 3 course the following year and a business degree thereafter. She believed that the employability course had been a great support.

**Shadia:** Had a poor attendance record and rarely attended lessons. When in class, she benefited from the services of the LSP. Although she applied for a vocational study

programme, she learnt that she had been offered a place on the Work Preparation course, another pre-foundation course. She could not clearly explain the reasons why she was doing another pre-foundation course.

**Liam:** Regularly attended college and was involved in learning activities. He had recently had a knee operation which delayed his plan to search for employment. He felt that the course did not help him at all as he wanted to work, but there were no work-related learning activities which helped him find employment. His father wanted him to work with a family friend with his landscaping business.

**Participants from cohort Y (2014-2015) interviewed and engaged in focus group:**

**Adam:** Though Adam was originally from Poland, he had studied for over 7 years in England and obtained relatively good GCSE grades at school. There were ongoing issues around his college attendance, and when in lessons, Adam often found himself in conflict with fellow students and teaching staff. He explained that his parents encouraged him to do the course to improve his English GCSE grades. Adam was disappointed with the quality and content of the course. His academic grades upon enrolment on the course:

Applied Science: D

Geography: B

History: B

English Language: D

English Literature: D

Maths: D

Science: D

**David:** his student profile has already been provided in chapter five.

**Kyle:** likewise, his student profile has already been provided in chapter five.

**Lily:** Had a sporadic college attendance and was given a student disciplinary to encourage better college attendance. She hoped to do a Level 2 Public Services course, but worried whether she would be at a disadvantage as she was not granted the opportunity to do GCSEs. This being said, she was positive about the provision.

**Elsa: S**imilarly, she had low college attendance and when in lessons, was distracted and disrupted others in the classroom. She voiced her frustration about the inconsistency of teaching standards and the pace of work. Her goal was to enrol on a Level 2 Travel and Tourism course at college once she completed the employability course.

**Tutors who participated in the study as outlined in Table 1.5.**

**Hope:** I spent the first part of the research study (near the end of the academic year) with Hope and her students. She has been working at the college for nearly 5 years, initially as a LSP with 14-16 year old students excluded from school. She changed departments to work as LSP on the Level 1 Achieving Skills Course and became employed as one of the course tutors. She completed her in-service training and attained the Certificate of Education qualification. She works full-time and was the course leader for the provision on two campuses. Her day-to-day responsibilities included overseeing and managing the course, teaching, liaising with external agencies such as the NEET Intervention team in

facilitating student recruitment. She also provided additional academic and pastoral support to students on the course.

**Gina:** My empirical study was mainly conducted with Gina and her students, Cohort Y. She was employed as a full-time lecturer on the course and has course responsibility for her class. She reported to Hope on the progress of her students, with Hope addressing any major student disciplinary issues when required. Gina previously worked for Network Rail, doing rail safety education. She applied for the role of work placement officer on the Gateway and Work Preparation course at college. Shortly afterwards, she changed roles and worked as a LSP on the course. Gina enrolled on the Certificate of Education course. However, she believed that the two year in-service training did not fully train and prepare her for teaching duties with ‘disaffected’ learners. Her greatest sources of support and guidance came from colleagues and relatives who were mainly primary school teachers.

**Eve:** Taught full time on the course. Eve previously worked for twelve years as social work assistant, working with ‘disaffected’ learners who displayed challenging behaviour. She reflected on her teaching experiences prior to working on the course and described these experiences as being very stressful. Eve had also previously worked for a local charity and was assigned teaching and course responsibility for looked-after children in the 14-16 cohort. Eve felt that this particular work experience has given her a good grounding for the type of work required with the students. She has recently completed the Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and was the course leader whilst Hope was on maternity leave.

**Tania:** she was employed as a full-time lecturer and has been working at the college for over 17 years. She started off working as a volunteer teaching the basic skills qualification. Prior to this, she worked in a prison for 5 years teaching literacy. She has a Level 3 Diploma and a Master's degree in Literacy. Tania taught 6 hours per day; this included Functional Skills literacy and numeracy. Last year Tania was on sick leave for over three months due to health and stress-related issues. Upon her return, she found her work conditions had changed and she was now required to travel between the different campuses, teaching different student groups instead of teaching only one student group.

**Aggy:** Has been teaching since 2000, and started off working with adults with learning and physical disabilities at a local college. Afterwards she had various positions with private organisations, working with adults on employability programmes, and teaching pottery to people with mental health and drug and alcohol problems. She also previously worked as LSP, and was working full-time as a course leader at one of the smaller campuses. She was one of two lecturers responsible for overseeing student achievement and progression. Her duties included dealing with student disciplinary procedures and making safeguarding referrals to the welfare team. She also mentors two hourly-paid staff. Aggy described having a tough upbringing, with her parents being alcoholics and leaving school with 2 low GCSE grades. She believed that her upbringing, personal and work experiences equipped her with the required emotional depth to teach these particular students.

**Kirsten: She** was employed full-time as a lecturer, mainly assisting Aggy with teaching and course-leader duties. Prior to teaching at college, Kirsten taught literacy at a local prison. She was currently doing her in-service teacher training.

**Peter:** The only male staff member on the team. He worked full-time, and like Hope, he was a course leader. Prior to his employment at college, Peter was employed as a youth leader and later team manager with the Prince's Trust. He was hired at the college in 2008 and worked as 14 to 16 engagement tutor with students who were on the verge of being expelled from school. From there, he transferred to work on the Entry to Employment (E2E) course. He believed that a combination of his previous work experience, achievement of a PGCE qualification, and his degree qualification in Art and Drama enabled him to use humour and drama to engage students on the course.

**Nina:** Worked full-time in her role as Head of Learning for Living and Work. She explained that the area consists of about 500 students and they range from what she called a 'bottomless' entry provision right up to Level 2 provision. This division offered a broad range of education and training provision predominantly to students with physical and learning disabilities, those with poor or no school-leaving qualifications and those with learning difficulties. It also offers alternative Year 11 provision for those excluded from school. Nina has worked at the college for over 10 years and has completed her two years in-service teacher training. She previously worked in many of these departments as teaching staff before she became the overall manager of this division.

**Dina:** **S**tarted to work at college in 2011 as a work placement officer and afterwards was appointed to the role of Apprenticeship Hub Manager. Dina was employed full-time and had worked for nearly two years in this role. Her responsibilities mainly included the management and delivery of apprenticeship provision in the college. Her role was to supervise a team of people responsible for the active recruitment of apprentices, dealing with employer enquiries, liaising with the faculties, and also managing subcontractors. Previously, she previously worked as an assessor and later as a manager of a children's nursery.