Mature students and their pathways into higher education: a mixed-methods investigation using the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study.

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Declarations

I, Annika Coughlin, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to holistic understandings of educational decisions made in changing historical and biographical contexts. I use a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design utilising only secondary data from the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study (aka The National Child Development Study) and the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study.

I ask: What historical, social and personal factors meant that most people who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school? What changed to enable them to become mature students later in life? What is the meaning of gaining a degree for cohort members? Can new insights be gained by combining and analysing existing data guided by lifecourse theory, in researching mature students' decision-making?

Despite policy discourse stating the main purpose of gaining a degree is for individual economic gain, for mature students the meaning and impact of higher education is multi-faceted. My findings illuminate how decisions to enrol are affected by policy, opportunity, life-stage, sex, social class, educational backgrounds, and relationships with other people. The thesis concludes that education is used by individuals to navigate the dynamic relationship between societal and personal change. The evidence presented demonstrates that it is helpful to sub-divide the category of mature students into older and younger mature participants offering a more nuanced analysis of social class.

Methodologically, this thesis shows the value of using a longitudinal perspective in the study of educational decisions, in contrast with approaches which view them through the lens of a single snapshot in time. It also demonstrates how analysis of rich and varied secondary data can make a substantial contribution to the field's understanding of educational decision-making. I argue that applying a cohesive theoretical framework to empirical analysis facilitates the difficult task of integration in Mixed-Methods Research.

Impact statement

The main beneficiaries of this thesis are those within academia because of its novel design. It provides an example of a rare sequential, explanatory design, using only secondary data, that would be of interest to mixed-methods researchers but also designers of future cohort studies. Most longitudinal, panel or cohort studies are purely quantitative in nature. This thesis has shown the value of including qualitative elements to enable research questions to be answered more holistically. Although my thesis focuses on cohort members and their higher education trajectories, my design could also be adopted for a wide range of other topics.

Additionally, cohort members value the opportunity to share their thoughts rather than be restricted to closed questions all the time (Parsons, 2010). To include periodic biographical interviews with sub-samples could help with retention. The production of narrative case studies could also enable quantitative research findings, which can be difficult for many to understand, to reach wider audiences.

This thesis also provides an example of the application of lifecourse theory to explicitly address C. Wright Mills's (1959) clarion call for sociologists to use the sociological imagination. Before this PhD I had never heard of lifecourse theory. I am surprised it is not taught as standard on sociology courses, especially as it is directly designed to give researchers practical ways to help them think sociologically and conduct their research.

Policymakers may also benefit from this thesis as mature students are back in the minds of government with the proposed Lifelong Learning Entitlement[1] (LLE) which should be taking effect in 2025. The scope of the LLE has already reduced since it was first announced, potentially resulting in a less impactful initiative. I hope that through this thesis, policymakers could better understand the range of motivations for, and longer term meaning of, studying as a mature student to ensure their proposals are bold enough to truly encompass those they claim to impact.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview

Dedication

In memory of my father, Richard Coughlin (1949–2005), who studied sociology as a mature student with the Open University when I was a child, igniting my interest in becoming a sociologist.
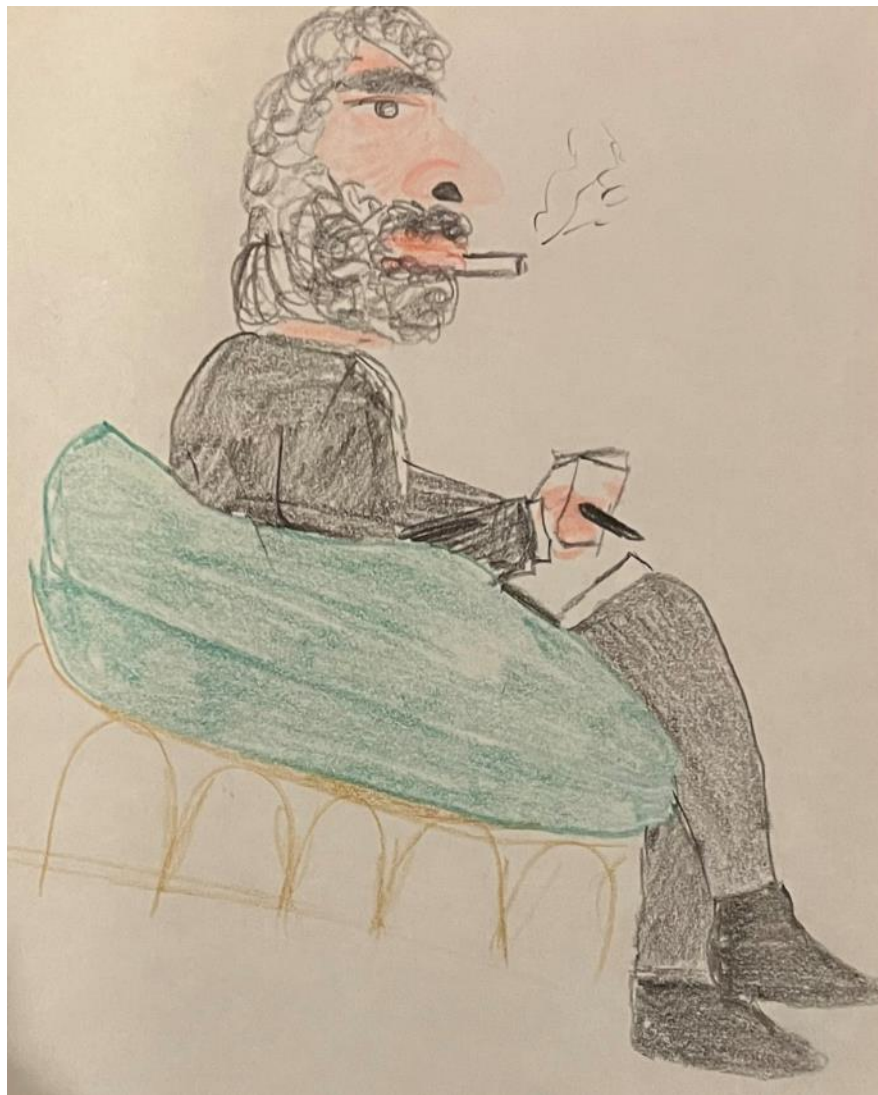
'The Open University student'.
A portrait of Richard Coughlin I drew as a child, circa 1990.

Acknowledgements

It has taken over a decade to complete this thesis. Therefore, there are too many people who have supported me in different ways at the university, online, as well as in my personal life to mention by name. If you are reading this, it is likely that you have been on this journey with me and have a vested interest to finally see it done, so thank you!

Special thanks to my supervisors Professor Alison Fuller and Dr Samantha Parsons who have stood by me throughout this project, sharing their expertise and wisdom not only in the subject matter and handling of complex data but throughout my difficulties in being a doctoral student. Over the years we explored ways and techniques enabling me to resolve my difficulties in researching and writing this thesis, and I am grateful for their patience, honesty and positivity. Special thanks also to Professor Tom Woodin who took over the administrative tasks in my final year.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Jane Elliott who was my supervisor in the first year and who inspired me to explore the 1958 cohort and its mixed-methods potential in the first place; also, Professor Claire Callender who supported my research proposal back in 2013. I am grateful to the staff in the Centre for Longitudinal Studies who helped me understand and access the data, as well as the library and archive staff in the Institute of Education.

Finally, and most importantly, thanks to the 1958 cohort members for generously sharing their lives for researchers to study, especially through the biographical interviews which were often moving, sometimes funny, but always insightful and invaluable to the study of lives in Britain in the 20th and 21st centuries.

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Introduction

The decision to enter higher education can be a complex one, particularly for mature and non-traditional students. The presence of dependent children, marital status, employment status, available time and financial situation are important in the decision-making process (Davies & Williams, 2001; Osborne et al., 2004). Individual biographies are also important such as family tradition, past educational experiences and the socio-economic background of individuals (Mathers & Parry, 2010; Reay et al., 2009). In addition, social networks have a large impact on higher education participation or non-participation (Fuller & Heath, 2008). All these factors must be weighed up as the decision to enter higher education can be viewed as risky – emotionally, socially and financially (Davies & Williams, 2001; Reay, 2003; Waller, 2002).

Higher education is not necessarily the goal that all people are, or should be, aiming for (Thomas, 2001). To decide not to participate when there are opportunities to do so is not irrational (Fuller et al., 2011). Likewise, starting a course and dropping out is not automatically a failure (Quinn, 2010). There are also some negative outcomes of participating in formal education such as anxiety, stress and frustration (Field, 2009). Therefore, to enrol for a degree is not necessarily always a positive decision to make.

Despite these caveats, the research and evidence on lifelong learning suggests that it contributes to social cohesion, equality, wellbeing, economic security, and empowerment (Bynner et al., 2003; Hunt & Atfield, 2019; Schuller et al., 2004). Degrees also produce status and are a social marker (Antikainen et al., 1996) and are important for entry into many better paid and higher status occupations (Dale &

Egerton, 1997). As Pollard (2003, p. 185) observes, higher education is 'one of society's most significant signifying agencies, with a key role in differentiation and the distribution of life chances.'

The dominant policy discourse in the UK around why someone may want to, or should, become a mature student has been underpinned by human capital theory (Egerton & Parry, 2001; Gorard & Rees, 2002; Schuller & Field, 1998). The human capital perspective is future investment focused, with the belief that individuals make rational choices to forgo their earnings in the short-term to study or train to reap the financial benefits in the longer term (Schuller & Field, 1998). Rational decision-making is generally seen as a process involving first, defining the problem and identifying goals, secondly the generation of options and thirdly, the rigorous evaluation of the options generated. Finally, a choice is made between the options based on which one has the most potential in achieving the desired outcome (Adshead & Jamieson (2008). As Gorard and Rees (2002) put it:

> Given the dominant policy consensus about the general direction of economic change towards more knowledge-based forms of production, it follows that a worker will seek to participate in lifelong learning in order to capitalise on the benefits that will flow from skills renewal and development. (p. 15)

At first glance, research that looks at why people decide to become mature students, tend to support an economic perspective. Surveys asking students why they decided to enrol show the top reasons as career development, promotion, for a job in mind, or a future hoped-for job (Davies et al., 2002; Woodley et al., 1987). Secondary reasons relate to personal development and personal fulfilment, followed by an interest in the subject (see Davies et al., 2002; Feinstein et al., 2007; Woodley et al., 1987).

Based on survey data, the reasons for deciding to become a mature student tend to be categorised into 'career', 'personal' and 'other' reasons, but researchers acknowledge that decisions are made in response to both personal and career factors, which are inextricably linked – an 'intricate web of elements' as Pascall and Cox (1993, p. 60) put it. It is this intricate web of elements surrounding decisions to become a mature student that I am interested in exploring in this thesis.

The topic of mature students' decisions has been quite well-researched in Britain, particularly in the 1990s when their numbers were on the rise (see Chapter 4). My thesis makes a significant contribution to the existing literature in three ways.

First of all through my methodology and research design. I use only secondary mixed-methods data from the National Child Development Study (University College London, 2023) and the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (Elliott et al., 2022), whereas most studies in the field of higher education draw upon primary data.

Secondly, because I am utilising secondary data that has been collected over many years, the timescape of my research differs from others. Researching a topic or phenomenon from different temporal perspectives can impact findings and although thinking about time is very complex, it matters in sociological research (Colley, 2010; Elias, 1987). As leading sociologist of time Barbara Adam says:

> It matters whether you place your subjects and their relations in an objective frame of calendars and clock time which positions them temporally in an externally located, socially constructed frame. These frames are stable and fixed […] In contrast, when subjects are placed in their personal frames of life time and family time, and/or times of illness and stress, the situation becomes a very different one. These latter frames are relative and mobile. They move with every new moment, situation and context. Their implied past and future expands and contracts as people move along their life course […]. As researchers we need to be acutely aware of these differences and recognize their effects on investigations and findings. (Adam, 2008, p. 8)

Most studies about mature students are concerned with their issues and experiences whilst enrolling and/or studying on their courses (see Chapter 4). The student views, experiences and reflections are largely confined to the present time when the research was conducted. On the other hand, the focus of my study is on graduates, with some of the National Child Development Study (NCDS) cohort members graduating over 20 years prior to telling their life stories when aged 50.

Thirdly, and linked to this, those researching aspects of becoming a mature student often work in higher education. For example, the participants in Richard Waller's 2006 study included students from his own tutor group. The teacher-as-researcher

tends to want to identify and understand what improvements can be made to the mature student experience within their institution or the sector more generally, but again at the specific, present time. The group being studied therefore tends to be class cohorts rather than birth cohorts as in the case of my thesis.

One disadvantage of class cohorts for the purposes of my study is that participants can be very diverse in terms of age and other characteristics, including not having a shared history. This is in contrast to the key focus of my thesis where all the participants I am studying are part of a birth cohort born in one week in 1958. They are all White British, all broadly experienced the same education system as well as the same political, industrial and social changes. Referring to Adam (2008) quoted above, in my thesis I am able to understand and interpret aspects of mature students' decisions within a socially constructed external timeframe.

In this Introduction chapter, I introduce my methodology and the origins, design and suitability for my thesis of the two studies I am using – the National Child Development Study (NCDS) (University of London, 2023) and the NCDS Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (SPIS) (Elliott et al., 2022).

Secondly, I outline my aims and four research questions. Thirdly, I introduce lifecourse theory (Elder, 1974; Elder et al., 2004), which is a theoretical framework designed with temporality at its core and suited to my thesis aims and design. The mixed-methods research design is outlined in the fourth section, and a summary of each chapter in the fifth. In the final section, I briefly discuss my personal motivations for undertaking this research.

The National Child Development Study

The participants in my study are members of the NCDS, a study which originally involved 17,415 individuals who were born in one week in 1958 in England, Wales and Scotland. The NCDS, also known as the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study, collects information on physical and educational development, economic circumstances, employment, family life, health behaviour, wellbeing, social participation and attitudes. Since the birth survey in 1958, there have been ten further sweeps with around 9,000 cohort members participating in the age 55 survey

in 2013 which is the most recently[2] available dataset deposited in the UK Data Archive (University of London, 2015).

Over the 50 years that this thesis is concerned with (up to 2008), cohort members have seen various changes in the education sector, labour market and other areas of society (Abercrombie et al., 2000; Elliott, 2008a; Ferri et al., 2003; Wadsworth et al., 2011). This makes them a uniquely suitable cohort to study when trying to understand how wider social change and conditions over a 50-year period have affected the decisions of individuals, who were born in the same year, to become mature students but at different points in time.

In terms of their compulsory education, cohort members were born after the introduction of free secondary schooling for all (1944 Education Act). Most took the 11-plus exam and experienced the tripartite system. During their schooling many experienced the shift to comprehensivisation which started in 1965 (see Chapter 3). They were also the first group to remain in school to age 16 because of the Raising of the School Leaving Age implemented from 1972[3].

When aged 16, the majority of the 1958 cohort left school to enter employment or start an apprenticeship (Fogelman, 1985). Transitions from school to work varied by region and for groups of individuals and it is problematic to say that this was a golden age of youth transitions (see Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005b; Vickerstaff, 2003), but for this cohort, employment opportunities for those with or without qualifications were available and the 'job-for-life' ideal was realistic. To study for 'A' levels (or Scottish equivalents) and enter higher education was therefore a pathway taken by relatively few at this time (Connolly et al., 1992; Fogelman, 1976).

However, in 1981 at the age of 23, the 1958 cohort was hit by the economic recession (Makepeace et al., 2003). The period of post-war stability and growth in which they had spent their childhoods through to young adulthood was replaced by a period of restructuring of the economy, industry and the labour market. Changes included the growth of female participation in the workforce (Dex et al., 2008), high

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[2] Data from the tenth sweep (age 61-64, 2020 to 2024) will be available to researchers from autumn 2024, https://www.data-archive.ac.uk/

[3] Although the Raising of the School Leaving Age (ROSLA) to 16 was proposed many decades earlier but delayed for various reasons – see Woodin et al. (2013) for a history.

levels of male unemployment (Gallie, 2000) and changes in economic and political philosophy.

The 1958 cohort lived under the policies of a Conservative government from age 21 to 39 (in 1997, New Labour came to power). Human capital theory underpinned the Conservative government's approach to education, training and workforce development (Makepeace et al., 2003; Woods et al., 2003; Fitzsimons, 2018). As touched upon earlier, from this perspective, individuals are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their futures, including the gaining of new skills and qualifications to enable career advancement and personal development (Ferri et al., 2003; Woods et al., 2003). Cohort members' expectations about how their lives would be lived therefore had to adapt to reflect the changing world around them (Woods et al., 2003).

With these changes more institutional opportunities for further study were made available. University places increased greatly over the lifecourse of the cohort. When the 1958 cohort were born, there were only 24 universities in the UK, nearly 50 years later there were 106 (Tight, 2009). For those without the relevant school qualifications needed to enter higher education, Access[4] to Higher Education courses were introduced (see Chapter 2). The 1958 cohort therefore had options to pursue higher education as mature students whether in polytechnics, colleges of higher education, universities including the Open University, with support to gain qualifications needed for entry.

Twenty percent of the 1958 cohort had gained a degree by 2008 (age 50)[5]. Half of this 20% did so at the traditional age and the other half took up the new opportunities to study as mature students. It is the 10% who became mature students who are the primary focus of my study.

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[4] In this thesis I refer to Access with a capital 'A' when discussing specific and validated Access to Higher Education programmes and access with lower case 'a' when referring to an overall approach to widening participation.

[5] Although it must be noted that the sample of those participating at age 50 with higher-level qualifications will be an over-representation of all cohort members because those more likely to stay members of longitudinal studies tend to have higher levels of formal education. See Elliott et al., (2010) for details on the sampling procedure.

Thesis aim and research questions

The overall aim of this thesis is to contribute to holistic understandings of educational decisions made in changing historical and biographical contexts. This aim is being addressed via four research questions:

1. What historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 70s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school?

2. What changed in society, as well as in individual lives, to enable people who left school during the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?

3. What is the meaning of gaining a degree for 1958 cohort members?

4. Can new insights be gained by combining and analysing existing quantitative and qualitative data guided by lifecourse theory, in researching mature students' decision-making?

I have chosen to use lifecourse theory as the framework for my investigation. I argue that it is the most appropriate framework because it offers a set of concepts and analytical tools for studying and illuminating the complex relationships between biographical and historical time (Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008) – a key part and purpose of the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959).

Lifecourse theory and the sociological imagination

Lifecourse theory developed over several decades as a direct response to C. Wright Mills' call in the late 1950s for sociologists to use the 'sociological imagination' (Elder et al., 2004). The sociological imagination is a way of thinking that 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills, 1959, p. 12). Indeed, this is sociology's 'task and its promise' (ibid). When we think with the sociological imagination, it helps us consider what Mills referred to as our 'personal troubles' as 'public issues'. Since the sociological imagination pays attention to history and social context and is also concerned with the past, present and future, Uprichard (2012) argues that it helps avoid a static, unchanging view of society, which might be the case if researchers were to study only one moment in time or were not to pay attention to the possibility of change at a personal and societal level.

To shift one's view from the micro to the macro and span biographical and historical time is a challenging task for any researcher (Adam, 1995; Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008). Mills provided some guidance on how to think with the sociological imagination but did not suggest any specific guidance that may help researchers in a practical way with their empirical studies (Thompson, 2008). As Shanahan and Macmillan (2008, p. xii) put it:

> Mills was on the right track in asserting that connections among person, place, and time should be studied in their particulars. Such an insight, however, needs further elaboration. *How* can we study such connections? Mills's essay was a call to study society and biography, but it was silent on how such a task might be accomplished.

There are six criteria that are deemed necessary to say a study is designed and carried out from the perspective of lifecourse theory (Mayer, 2009):

- The focus is over long stretches of a lifetime.
- There is a strong assumption that prior life history impacts later life outcomes.
- Changes in lives are investigated through cohorts.
- Changes in lives are investigated across a range of domains.
- Actions are made with consideration of other people.
- Both structure and agency are analysed.

Lifecourse theory also brings together a set of five principles (Elder et al., 2004) which are helpful 'guideposts' (Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008, p. xiii) to the study of lives over time. I list the five principles below with a brief description of the definitions from Elder et al. (2004) in italics followed by my interpretations of the definitions used in my thesis:

1. **Lifelong development**: *Human development and ageing are lifelong processes.* Learning is lifelong rather than a single stage in youth.
2. **Historical time and place**: *The lifecourse of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their lifetime.* Decision-making and opportunities about education are influenced by policy, social attitudes, aspirations and expectations which change over time. Place here refers to

one's place in society (such as by social class and gender role) as well as geographical location.

3. **Timing**: *The impact of a life transition or event is contingent on when they occur in a person's life.* The timing of participation in formal education varies across the lifecourse. To enter higher education at a mature age may involve different decision-making processes and outcomes than at a younger age.

4. **Linked lives**: *Lives are lived interdependently, and social-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.* Decisions to participate in education throughout life are influenced by social networks and family, careers advice and so on. The learners themselves will also impact on others.

5. **Agency**: *Individuals construct their own lifecourse through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.* People make decisions about participating in higher education weighing up available opportunities together with personal circumstances.

In addition to the five principles, lifecourse theory draws upon some key concepts which are temporal in nature. Traditionally within sociology and lifecourse theory, social stability and predictability provides the canvas by which lives are studied and predicted (Dannefer, 2003; Hassard, 1990). The concepts of 'social pathways', 'transitions' and 'trajectories' reflect the idea of moving through life and time in a linear, normative and predictable fashion (Furlong, 2009). As Pallas (2004) explains regarding the application of the lifecourse perspective to studies on education:

> Pathways are of particular interest in their ability to illuminate
> structures – for example, constraints, incentives, and choice
> opportunities – that link different locations within a social system.
> (p. 168)

Although separately, these concepts and principles are not unique to lifecourse theory it is bringing them together, and focusing on how they are interrelated that distinguishes this perspective from other perspectives (Mayer, 2009).

Postmodern theory has impacted how the lifecourse is conceptualised and therefore ideas about how lives can be studied. From the postmodern perspective, destinations are no longer determined by origins, and decisions are no longer shaped or controlled by traditions of social class, gender and culture (Alheit, 1994; Beck et

al., 1994; Giddens, 1991). Instead, postmodern theories place emphasis on reflexivity whereby individuals are expected to review and modify their lives and self-identities in dynamic relation with changes in broader society.

The metaphor of 'navigation' (Evans & Furlong, 1997), the notion of choice biography (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) and the concept of individualisation (Beck, 1992) have been used to explain the process by which people take the opportunity to construct more diverse trajectories for themselves. As Beck explains, individualisation:

> […] means that each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent upon decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing. (Beck, 1992, p. 135)

From a postmodern perspective, because people are seen to need to constantly reflect and modify their life plans '[e]xtrapolating from past events to predict future trends becomes even more risky and all too often misleading' (Bauman, 2005, p. 1).

Influential sociological research into young people's post-school transitions conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, the period when the 1958 cohort were growing up, was largely concerned with predicting life trajectories. The possibility of change in the future was not seen as realistic. For example, Paul Willis' study of 'the lads' in the classic study *Learning to Labour* (1977) portrayed school-hating, working-class young men, who are the same age as the 1958 cohort, as stuck forever in the manual work they entered at age 16. Willis gave a grim view of their futures:

> [N]o matter what the severity of disillusion amongst 'the lads' as they get older, their passage is to all intents and purposes irreversible. […] Ironically, as the shopfloor becomes a prison, education is seen retrospectively, and hopelessly, as the only escape. […] the young worker is likely to have acquired family, home and financial commitments of his own which make an unpaid return to college out of the question. (Willis, 1977, p. 107)

However, Willis' account did not foresee how various changes in society, such as the restructuring of the labour market, the decline of the manufacturing sector, the various recessions as well as the policy changes in higher education all contributed

to new incentives, requirements and opportunities for a wider range of people to return to study as mature students.

Willis never formally conducted research or published articles about how 'the lads' were getting on into their adulthood, losing contact with them in the 1990s,[6] but I found a DVD for A level Sociology students in the Institute of Education library, where we get a rare snapshot into what did happen to them at around age 37:

> **Steve Taylor (interviewer):** So Paul, what did happen to 'the lads'?
> **Paul Willis**: I haven't updated for about three to four years now, when I last got a snapshot of what was happening to them it was quite varied. One had been in jail. One had gone to the Open University and was doing a part-time degree in English, though he didn't complete. Another, by the accident of labour market chance and opportunity had become a manager of a motor components firm. A couple more were unemployed, others in dead-end manual work going through periods of unemployment then jobs. A picture, I believe, one could have more or less predicted from this data 25 years ago. (Willis & Taylor, 1999, 17mins 58secs)

Willis portrays the grown-up lads' outcomes quite negatively, one became a manager but by accident, others unemployed, others in dead-end jobs and one in prison. However, of particular significance to me, one had enrolled in the Open University to study English – something which may come as a surprise to those familiar with 'the lads' and their resistance to studying when at school. Even though he dropped out of the course, what is interesting here is that he decided to enrol. In lifecourse terms, development is lifelong and does not stop when we become adults.

Field et al., (2009) argue that there would be a benefit in creating better links between the study of post-school transitions and educational transitions that occur throughout life. This disconnect between school and lifelong learning transitions is partly methodological (Ecclestone et al., 2010a) and related to the short time frames of studies. For example, research by Hodkinson et al., (1996) focused on the transition from school to work suggest that career[7] decision-making is often studied

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[6] Beyond this, Willis has not kept in contact with the lads or received or sought an update on them (Coughlin, A. (2014, 7th April). ["PhD student query: 'the lads' grown up". Email Communication with Paul Willis].

[7] The use of the term career in sociology refers to the various stages of becoming, not just about work careers. Goffman (1961, p. 119) argues that the term career can 'refer to any social strand of any person's course through life'.

as a fixed snapshot in time and therefore is traditionally seen as a one-off event. Drawing upon Bourdieu they developed a sociological model of career decision making which they called 'careership' which consists of three dimensions:

> There are three completely integrated dimensions to the model. These are (i) pragmatically rational decision-making, located in the habitus of the person making the decision; (ii) the interactions with others in the (youth training) field, related to the unequal resources different 'players' possess; and (iii) the location of decisions within the partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course. (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997, p. 29)

After participating in the Learning Lives project (Biesta et al., 2011) Hodkinson (2008) revisited the 'careership' model and argued that whereas the first two dimensions of their model were still relevant, the third needed development when thinking about careers not just at the youth stage but within adulthood and in relation to retirement.

Their original study focused on young people's career decision-making and turning points in just an 18-month period. Hodkinson (2008) reflected that this time frame was incredibly short as turning points themselves can take this length of time or longer. If a longitudinal approach is adopted, he suggested that the process of how a career decision is made and the longer-term impact of that decision and (re)construction of that career over time can each be seen (see also Goodwin & O'Connor, 2009). He concluded that, it is important to look backwards at what happened before the decision was made as well as focusing on what happens afterwards.

The study of mature students can arguably create a bridge between studies of youth decisions and lifelong learning, as well as a bridge between structured and more flexible conceptualisations of the lifecourse. As Fuller (2007) suggests:

> Focusing on an educational transition, which has been unconventional in terms of age-related expectations, helps to illuminate the (increasingly) reflexive relationship between institutionally mapped pathways, individual lifecourse trajectories and broader social change. (p. 219)

Concepts which reflect change are useful to consider here. Giddens (1991) uses the term 'fateful moments', Thomson et al. (2002) uses the term 'critical moments' and

lifecourse researchers use the term 'turning points' (Elder et al., 2004) – a concept I draw upon in this thesis. Turning points involve a 'substantial change in the direction of one's life' (Elder et al., 2004, p. 8). Becoming a mature student can be regarded as a turning point both at a societal as well as individual level. As Baxter and Britton (2001) put it:

> Mature students are, by definition, a group of people who are attempting to use education to shape their own biographies and identities in a reflexive way. They have self consciously made decisions about themselves and the future course of their lives. Often, these decisions involve a major change from or break with their past lives and identities. (pp. 88-89)

Although insights from postmodernism have meant that lifecourse scholars can no longer take for granted that lives are predictable, the postmodern challenge is seen as having special 'heuristic value' by lifecourse researchers (Dannefer, 2003, p. 654). New insights and understandings about lives over time can be researched, understood and existing models tested and challenged. Therefore, in this thesis, I am drawing upon the lifecourse framework that traditionally prioritises predictability of lives, with aspects of postmodernism such as the unpredictability of lives, as theoretical resources to address my research aim and research questions.

Having discussed how part of the impetus for the development of lifecourse theory was to provide practical ways to employ the sociological imagination, I now turn to discuss how I carried out my study through a mixed-methods research design.

Mixed-methods research design

Most studies from a lifecourse perspective draw upon only quantitative, and often longitudinal data which have been considered the 'gold standard' in lifecourse research (Mayer, 2009, p. 414). Mixed-methods designs have been part of lifecourse sociology since its inception, but practical examples are limited (Cooksey, 2014; Hagestad & Dykstra, 2016). In this thesis, I utilise secondary quantitative data from the NCDS up to Sweep 8 (University College London, 2023) and the qualitative, biographical data, made available as part of the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (Elliott et al., 2022) to explore the topic of mature student decision-making through a sequential, explanatory mixed-methods design.

The NCDS is an 'omnibus' survey, that has been designed to be used by multiple researchers studying multiple topics. Certain topics may dominate the survey at particular sweeps due to the life-stage of the cohort member. Some questions are replicated from other surveys in order to aid comparisons (e.g. with the Census) and others are designed in consultation with researchers, policymakers and funders to take into account specific topics of policy or medical interest at the time (Brown et al., 2010). In this thesis, I draw upon data collected through the NCDS at birth, age 11, age 16 and at different points throughout adulthood[8] up to age 50 to identify when cohort members were awarded their degrees (see Chapter 5).

The Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (SPIS) was conducted in 2008 when cohort members were 50. It is unique amongst cohort studies because along with the quantitative, structured surveys, members also took part in a qualitative interview where they were able to tell their life stories from their own perspectives. As the Centre for Longitudinal Studies website stated:

> This was the first attempt to interview members of a national,
> longitudinal cohort study in depth, with the possibility of linking
> such biographical narratives to structured survey data collected
> throughout the life course. (CLS, 2019)

Like the main NCDS sweeps, although a large proportion of the study was focused on social participation, it was also designed to be used by multiple researchers asking a range of research questions. So far research areas have included volunteering across the lifecourse (Brookfield et al., 2004; Parry et al., 2020), social class identity and social mobility[9] (Miles & Leguina, 2018; Miles et al., 2011; Franceschelli et al., 2015), life crises and identity (Evans & Biasin, 2016) and, work aspirations and career outcomes (Ashby & Schoon, 2012).

During the SPIS, cohort members were not explicitly asked about higher education at any point in the interview schedule. Therefore, as suggested by Research Question 4, this thesis is somewhat experimental in that I am exploring first and

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[8] See the Centre for Longitudinal Studies website for details on each of the data collection sweeps: https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/1958-national-child-development-study/

[9] "Social mobility is a sociological concept that encapsulates the degree to which an individual's or family's social status changes throughout the course of their life as they navigate a social hierarchy" (Elliott et al., 2010, p. 18). In educational research, the focus tends to be on the issues arising for working-class people moving to the middle-class.

foremost if cohort members mention their decisions to study for a degree as a mature student. If so, how do they talk about it, how are decisions embedded in other aspects of their lives, what meaning does holding a degree have for them, what were the outcomes of gaining a degree from their perspective?

It is anticipated that cohort members will provide rich accounts of their lives, including talking about higher education, since participation was not the norm for this cohort. However, researchers who use life story methodologies have observed that most individuals tend not to relate personal events or developments to wider societal change. Instead, they tend to focus on their immediate lives and concerns (Lindsey et al., 2015). It follows that a sociological lens is needed to place individual narratives into their wider social context (Phoenix & Brannen, 2014).

The concepts of the principles of the lifecourse are therefore vital to my empirical approach, analysis and interpretations, particularly as I am using only secondary mixed data and am not able to ask the cohort members direct questions.

The chapters

After this Introduction, the thesis is divided into nine further chapters.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to identify, describe and explain trends of mature student participation from a historical and policy perspective over 40 years, by age, mode of study, sex, and social class. This chapter identifies a gap in knowledge on participation of mature students by more defined age categories as well as by social class. These are two areas I aim to address through my own analyses (see Chapter 6).

In Chapter 3, I focus on the historical, social and policy context of those leaving school in and around the 1970s. The aim of this chapter is to understand from the perspective of those who became mature students later in life, why they did not when they were younger. I focus on participants in existing studies who are of a similar generation as the cohort members. Most existing research focuses on women and working-class mature students, therefore in this chapter I also seek to review studies that have included the experiences of men, and people from non-working-class backgrounds.

In Chapter 4 I explore how research has looked at how the decision to study as a mature student relates to wider social and personal changes. Firstly, I examine how other researchers have investigated mature student decisions in terms of their methodologies and, secondly, I explain how other researchers explain the career and personal reasons for why individuals decide to participate in higher education as mature students. Using information from this and the previous two chapters, I briefly summarise how I build on the extant literature.

Chapter 5 discusses and justifies my methodology and research design. Firstly, I describe the characteristics of the contemporary Mixed-Methods Research field where my thesis sits. Secondly, I outline the data sources and variables drawn upon from the NCDS and SPIS. I present a diagram of the research process and introduce how I integrate the findings from the different data sources to address the overarching research aim. I then turn to a discussion of the three types of analysis I have employed and provide an overview of my ethical considerations.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 focus on my findings. In Chapter 6, I present descriptive statistics in the form of cross-tabulations looking at the association between key independent variables on my degree outcome (dependent) variable. I compare the characteristics of 1958 cohort members who gained a degree young by 23 (1979-1981), young-mature 24-33 (1982-1991), middle-mature 34-42 (1992-2000) and older-mature 43-50 (2001-2008), as well as those who had not gained a degree by age 50. I then conduct two multinomial regression models to examine the associations between the selected variables in more detail. I end the chapter summarising outcomes of my quantitative analyses and how I intend to explore aspects of this information through the qualitative analyses that follows.

In Chapter 7, I concentrate on a sample of 26 cohort members who gained a degree as mature students and utilise categorical coding (Saldaña, 2016) to manage and organise the relevant content contained within their rich biographical interviews. Broadly following the structure of Chapters 3 and 4, I document their post-school transitions and then explore the career and personal factors that led to their decisions to become mature students. I also draw upon handwritten comments from teachers about cohort members that I transcribed from the NCDS 1969 (age

11) sweep (University of London, 2014). Until now, they have not been deposited and made available to researchers.

In Chapter 8, I focus on four cohort members' life stories. Here I turn to holistic-content narrative analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). I reconstruct cohort members' stories to highlights the process of their higher education decision-making, and most importantly the outcome and meanings of these decisions as they reflect on their lives.

In Chapter 9, the Discussion chapter, I remind readers of the original aims of the research. I summarise how my research supports or adds to the existing research and highlight the specific original contributions this thesis provides. Finally, in Chapter 10 I discuss the implications of the research with reference to current policy relating to mature students and offer suggestions for further research.

Motivations for this thesis

The initial motivation behind this thesis was methodological. I had an interest in the NCDS and the potential of combining the quantitative and qualitative data cohort members have provided about themselves over the decades. In 2012 I attended a workshop led by Professor Jane Elliott, the then Principal Investigator of the NCDS. She introduced the mixed-methods potential of the 1958 cohort study including the life story interviews at age 50. She demonstrated how the quantitative and qualitative could be used together. I felt compelled to explore the cohort study further – as Pearson (2016, p. 8) states 'birth cohorts cast a potent spell.'

A second motivation was to ensure that upon completion of the thesis I would be able to view myself as a 'legitimate sociologist'. I have studied sociology from GCSE, A level, BA (Hons) degree, through to an MA in Social Research. I wanted to complete my 'intellectual journey' with a PhD located in sociological perspectives. There were two ways I thought I could best do this. The first was to expand my knowledge and experience of different research methods. Prior to starting this PhD I was a research assistant conducting and transcribing interviews, inputting data from surveys and other general tasks. I had only limited experience of quantitative methods through my degree courses and work. I had never used longitudinal data, had no experience of secondary analysis of qualitative data, and

had only limited experience of simple mixed-methods designs. Therefore, I was also keen to use this opportunity to learn new methods and techniques to become a more rounded researcher.

The second way I wanted to complete my intellectual journey was to tackle head on the challenge set by C. Wright Mills who emphasises how vital addressing the interplay between history and biography is to being a sociologist. As he said:

> No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society, has completed its intellectual journey. (Mills, 1959, p. 12)

A final motivating factor was that both my parents were mature students when they were in their late 30s and early 40s in the late 1980s and 1990s. When I was at school, my father was studying for a degree in sociology and community studies. When he graduated it was then my mother's turn and she studied linguistics. Just one year after she graduated with a first-class degree, I started my sociology degree at age 18 in 1998. For me going to university was normal and a natural next step. Because becoming a mature student was important to my parents and, if we think about the concept of linked lives, brought opportunities for me (and my sisters) to study my first degree as a young student, I believe that it would be a social injustice if these opportunities no longer existed for people who wanted to study later in life. Therefore, I hope my thesis helps contribute to evidence on the continued need for opportunities for people to access higher education throughout their lives.

2

Setting the scene: Mature student characteristics, participation trends and policy, 1976-2015

Introduction

Changes in the higher education sector are connected to changes in the labour market, technological advances, shifting social attitudes, periods of social stability and instability, and views about social justice (McCulloch, 2011). Writing in the early 1970s the sociologist Martin Trow (1973) visualised how the higher education sector would develop over time in relation to some of these changes in society. Some of his predictions seem remarkably accurate and I use them here to introduce and contextualise the 30 years of statistical trends, changing attitudes towards access, and changing policy to be discussed in this chapter.

Trow predicted three stages in the development of higher education[10], which are summarised in Table 2.1. The *elite stage* refers to where only a minority, 0-15%, of young people participate in higher education, the *mass stage* is where around 16-50% of young people and those slightly older after having gap years, participate, and thirdly the *universal stage* is where over 50% of the population participate in higher education and not just when young but throughout their lives. Growth, expansion and the transition through the three forms of higher education, is not simply about this quantitative increase in the numbers of students participating[11], rather, Trow's

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[10] The three stages do not necessarily have to occur in a linear fashion; rather Trow explains that there can be elite aspects operating within a mass system (Oxford and Cambridge co-existing with the Open University, for example), or there may be variations in participation rates within a town, county or country in the UK.

[11] These various age participation indices of course measure the entry and participation rates of young people only (defined as 18/19-year-olds and later 18–30-year-olds) – the Older Mature Participation Index being 'quietly abandoned in the 1990s' (Jobbins, 2004).

model also shows how growth brings with it qualitative changes in terms of the meaning and function of higher education, equality of access, and when in their life a person decides to become a student. This is important to consider when wanting to understand the dynamic relationship between change at historical and personal levels.

Table 2.1: Summary of key aspects of Martin Trow's (1973) model of the development of higher education (HE) for this thesis.

Stage of HE development	**Elite** 0-15%	**Mass** 16-50%	**Universal** Over 50%
Attitudes to access	*Privilege* of birth or talent or both.	*Right* for those requiring certain qualifications.	*Obligation* for the skilled working, middle and upper classes.
Functions of HE	Shaping mind and character of ruling class; preparation for elite roles.	Transmission of skills; preparation for broader range of technical elite roles.	Adaptation of 'whole population' to rapid social and technological change.
The student 'career'	Sponsored after secondary school; works uninterruptedly until gains a degree.	Increasing numbers delay entry (gap years for work or travel); more drop-out.	More postponement of entry, softening of the boundaries between formal education and other aspects of life i.e. lifelong learning. More students have prior work experience and jobs whilst studying.
Access and selection	Meritocratic achievement based on school performance.	Meritocratic plus 'compensatory programmes' to achieve equality of opportunity.	'Open', emphasis on 'equality of group achievement' with students reflecting the population at large.

Adapted from: Brennan (2004), Hazelkorn (2016) and Trow (1973).

The 1958 cohort and others around their age, would have grown up and left school during the elite stage, but throughout their lives experienced changing availability of opportunities as outlined in the mass and universal stages. These changes are linked to quantitative trends in the numbers of young and mature people studying for a degree.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify, describe and explain the trends in mature student participation in higher education over 40 years, by age, mode of study, sex, and social class. I trace and map the participation trends of these different groups with reference to relevant policy reforms. This information provides the historical

context and key societal influences to begin to understand when and why 1958 cohort members were making their own decisions to participate in higher education.

This chapter is organised into five sections. It starts with a description of the official statistical publications I consulted from the UCL Institute of Education Archive. I include here an explanation of the breaks in the data, and a technical note about the differences between data collected on universities, polytechnics and the Open University.

In the second section I compare the patterns of participation of both young and mature students from 1976/77 to 2008/09 offering policy explanations for the trends. Where possible, I examine three age groups that comprise the 'mature student' category available in the official statistics. The vast majority of part-time students are also mature students. Therefore, in the third section I present and explain trends in part-time mature student participation from 1997/98 to 2014/15.

In the fourth section, I show the proportions of men and women on full-time and part-time degree courses over time and by age category. In the fifth section I identify and present the limited data available on participation by age and social class. Finally, I summarise the key messages from this chapter.

The higher education datasets

In 1968, the Universities Grants Committee (UGC) and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals set up the Universities Statistical Record (USR). In 1969, they produced the first of a new series of publications 'Statistics of Education' of which Volume 6 was concerned with universities. Prior to this series, statistics about higher education were published as Command Papers (a document issued by the government) called 'Returns from Universities and University Colleges'. The reason for the new series was partly practical. The Command Papers were printed on smaller pages than the A3 size of the new publications. The UGC wanted to be able to lay out the statistics in a new way to be able to present a greater amount of detail such as subject groups, the inclusion of a time series, more summary tables and generally bringing uniformity to the presentation of all educational statistics from this point onwards (Universities Grants Committee, 1966). From 1980/81, the six volumes were replaced by a new three volume series 'University Statistics'. This

series continued until the academic year 1993/94 by which time it had provided over 40,000 analyses for use by government, universities and other users (Universities Statistical Record, 1994).

Statistics on higher education within polytechnics and colleges[12] were collected by the Further Education Statistics Record. When the polytechnics and collegesgained university status under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) was formed to take over the role of collating statistics on all universities in both pre- and post-1992 institutions. HESA produced a new series of statistics based on what had existed before, but now dealing with much larger numbers of students, staff and institutions. This new publication was called 'Students in Higher Education Institutions' although now the static documents had been superseded by online data collections downloadable as Excel spreadsheets from the HESA website[13].

In 1994/95 HESA produced another series called 'Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom'. This series brings together material and analyses from other HESA publications but also data from UCAS[14], the Student Loans Company, the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey, and the Labour Force Survey. Statistical Bulletins were also produced by the government to highlight some of the most important trends from the main reports in an easy-to-read format.

In summary, the official documents I consulted from the UCL Institute of Education Archive for statistics on age, sex and mode of study, over time, were:

- Statistics in Higher Education (UGC) 1976/77 to 1993/94
- Students in Higher Education Institutions (HESA) 1994/95 to 2008/09
- Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom (HESA) 1997/98 to 2014/15

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[12] The use of 'Polytechnics and colleges' in the Statistical Bulletins, this chapter and throughout the thesis refer to "Higher education provided outside the universities, in polytechnics, Scottish central institutions and all other colleges currently maintained or assisted by local authorities or grant-aided by one of the Education Departments". (DES, 1993, para 41).
[13] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications
[14] Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), an organisation formed in 1992 and formed through the merging of the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) (1961-1992) and the polytechnics admissions system (PCAS, 1986-1982).

- Statistical Bulletins produced by the UK government, 1979 to 1992.

These official documents do not contain data on social class, so other resources were also consulted, as will be explained later in this chapter.

Changes and breaks in the data over time

There are three main changes in the data that effected the creation of the time series[15]. First the end of the binary divide[16] results in the data showing a sudden and large increase in student numbers between 1993/1994 and 1994/1995, therefore HESA do not recommend direct comparisons with the pre-HESA datasets. However, since it is such a large and easily explained increase in numbers, I do use the pre- and post HESA datasets to create a time series (of full-time students) to cover the 1970s onwards. The change is shown as a break in the line graphs.

HESA also warns against direct comparisons between HESA datasets from 2000/01 and those before this year because of the change in the way the 'standard HE population' was defined and counted. The decreases are largely explained by the numbers of visiting and exchange students counted. The increases are largely a result of counting students for a whole year rather than just on 1st December.

First-degree students are one of the categories least affected by the way in which the 'standard HE population' is counted, particularly for full-time students with a change of only 0.7%. There is, however, an increase of 7.4% in the numbers of part-time students with the new population count. Although large compared to the full-time first-degree students, the percentage change is still reasonably low compared to other levels of study, for example 'other undergraduate part-time students' has an increase of 14%. First-degree students therefore are a relatively stable category in terms of being affected by the count changes.

A third change, which has a major impact on the creation of the part-time student time series is that the Open University, which is the largest contributor to part-time student numbers, introduced a system of 'course-based registration' in 1997/98,

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[15] In Appendices 1 and 2 I have included all the data used to create the line graphs displayed.
[16] This refers to when polytechnics and universities were funded and operated separately before the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and therefore student population data and other statistics were also collected separately.

meaning that undergraduate students registered for modules rather than specific named awards. Therefore, the distinction between students registering for an institutional undergraduate credit and those registering for a first degree was removed. This has resulted in a shift of approximately 95,000 Open University students from the 'first degree' category to 'other undergraduate' for this academic year (HESA notes 1997/98[17]). Accordingly, I can only create a time series on part-time students from 1997/98, as to include prior years creates a major distortion of the trends.

A note on the universities, polytechnics, colleges and the Open University

There are three points to note about the data presented. First, up until 1994/95, the statistics do not include the polytechnics and the Open University. After 1994/95 they do. However, a large proportion of students, around half in some years, were studying for first degrees in the polytechnics and colleges. In order to represent the trends of first degrees more fully by including all higher education institutions, I consulted summary secondary statistics from the Statistical Bulletins covering the period under consideration. Secondly, the Open University is categorised as an English university because of the location of its administrative centre even though it teaches all over the UK.

Finally, the definition of 'first-degree' in some earlier pre-HESA statistics on full-time students also included 'other undergraduate' courses. However, since the vast majority of those pursing 'other undergraduate' degrees did so at the polytechnics the numbers of 'other undergraduates' on full-time courses at the universities are so small as to not have an impact on the data presented below.

Now that I have described the technicalities of the available data, I turn to the presentation, analysis and explanation of the trends seen in the student population between 1976/77 and 2008/09, starting with the UK domiciled, first-year full-time students.

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[17] www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/higher-education-1997-98

Young and mature student participation trends: 1976/77 to 2008/09

Figure 2.1 shows a time series from 1976/77 to 2008/09 of the numbers of young and mature (categorised as aged 21+) university students in their first year of a full-time first-degree course[18].

Figure 2.1 Numbers of full-time, first-degree, first-year university students (UK domiciled) by age group from 1976/77 to 2008/09
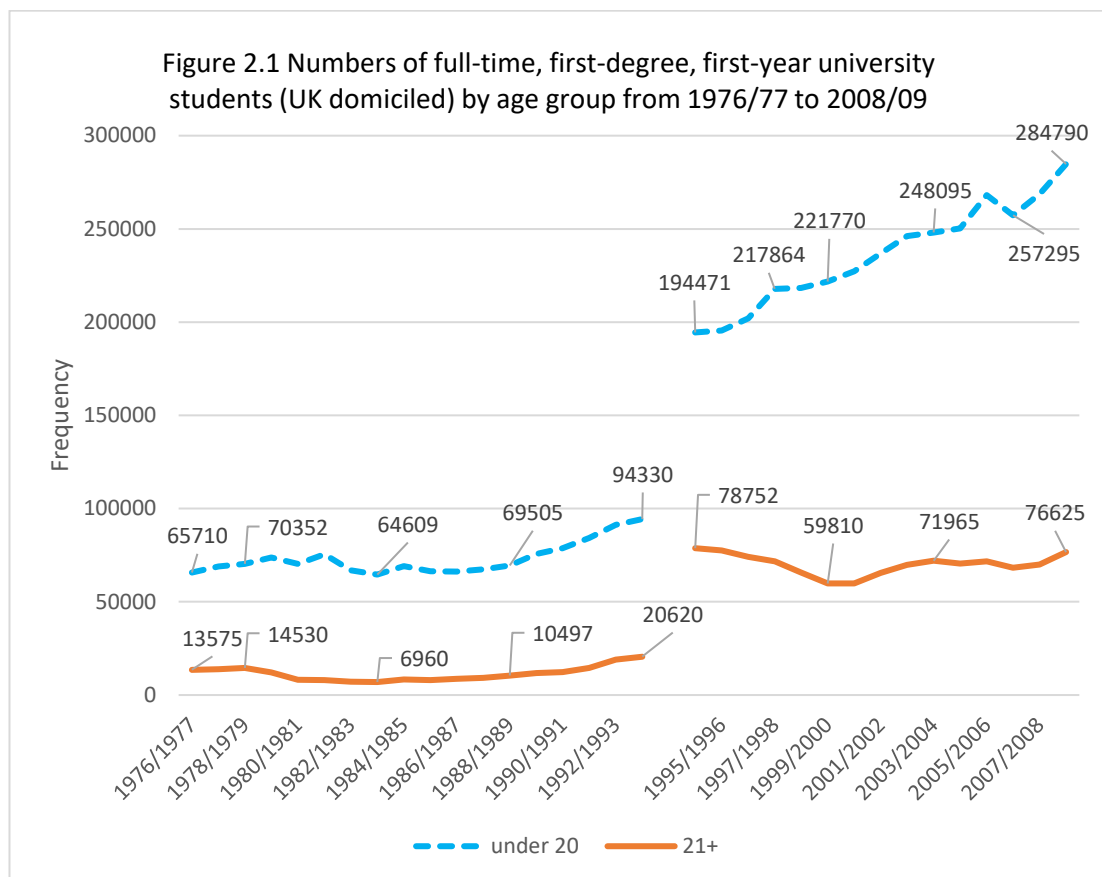
Created from: Statistics in Higher Education 1976/1977 to 1993/1994 (UGC) and Students in Higher Education Institutions 1994/1995 to 2008/2009 (HESA)

From 1976/77 to 1993/94 both young and mature student numbers grew, although not rapidly. In the late 1970s to the mid-1980s the numbers of first-year mature

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[18] Details of students' age was first collected on all full-time and first-year students, from the publication 'Statistics in Higher Education' (UGC) in the academic year 1965/1966. The data presented here is from 1976-1977 to 1993/1994 from that publication and then from 'Students in Higher Education Institutions' (HESA) from 1994/1995 to 2014/2015. Data were collected from UK Domiciled students only. The age categories available are: 18 and under, 19, 20, 21-24, 25 and over. From 1980/1981 onwards, the age group 30+ was included. However, because the numbers of mature full-time students are very small compared to full-time students to be effectively displayed in the line chart, I have grouped the mature students into just one category, 21+, to better enable a visual comparison between young and mature. The 2008/2009 data was the last year in which age was cross-tabulated with gender and therefore the data I present is up until 2008/09 only.

students approximately halved from 13,575 in 1976/77 to 6,960 in 1983/84. In the early 1980s the number of young students decreased by around 10,000 from 75,504 in 1981/82 to 64,609 in 1983/84. By 1993/94 both young and mature student numbers were higher than at the start of the period under consideration.

After 1994/95 when the polytechnics were incorporated into the university sector and the Open University was included, Fig 2.1 shows young full-time student participation continues to rise albeit with a few small dips in some years. The picture for mature students, post-1994/95 is very different with a gradual decline in numbers over the 1990s reaching the lowest point of 59,810 by the end of the decade[19]. The numbers of full-time mature students rise in the new millennium, but slowly, and by 2008/09, the numbers of mature full-time students remain lower than that in 1994/95, at 76,625. In contrast, the number of full-time young students, has increased by a third from 194,471 to 284,790.

The slowing of growth in student numbers in the 1970s and early 1980s can best be understood in contrast with what went before. In the 1950s and 1960s, higher education participation had doubled, and the post-war birth rate bulge was about to hit higher education (Simon, 1991). This expansion was unplanned and uncoordinated (Robbins, 1963) and prompted a committee to be set up by the government in 1961 to:

> […] review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain
> and in the light of national needs and resources to advise Her
> Majesty's Government on what principles its long-term
> development should be based. (Robbins, 1963, p. 1)

The committee produced a report two years later called *Higher Education*, generally referred to as the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963). Chapter VI of the report questioned the idea that there was a limited 'pool of ability' – that is that there is an upper limit on the number of people who are capable of higher-level study. This is something that had also been criticised in relation to the underlying principles of the 11-plus exam and selective school system discussed in Chapter 3 (e.g. Banks, 1955;

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[19] This decline in mature student numbers was a cause for concern for the then Department for Education and Employment as well as the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the impetus behind the study by Davies and Williams (2001) which I shall review in Chapter 3.

Floud, et al., 1973). The messages and recommendations from the Robbins Report proposed a new principle that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' (Robbins, 1963, p. 8)[20].

Consequently, the 1960s saw the founding of new universities to increase provision of student places. It was also in the 1960s when the binary system of higher education was established with the polytechnics offering more student places and courses to develop technological skills needed to meet the needs of the changing society and economy (McCulloch, 2011). Additionally, the Open University welcomed its first students in January 1971, and became a very large provider for part-time mature students.

In the earlier part of the 1970s, government desire for higher education to expand as it had during the 1960s, 'remained the order of the day' (Simon, 1991, p. 405). However, the expected growth in student numbers did not happen as the recession took hold, industrial unrest and nationwide strikes occurred and the global oil crisis resulted in the three-day week. In response to economic crisis in the early 1980s, the Conservative government introduced severe public sector cuts. The political and economic instability meant that potential young students were increasingly opting for employment and potential mature students were opting to retain their existing employment rather than enter higher education (Tight, 2009), especially on full-time courses (DES, 1992b). Spending cuts in higher education included a cap on the number of student places. At this time students did not contribute to their fees meaning that the state paid for each student place. The number of student places fluctuated over time depending on the availability of public funding.

The graduate labour market was also affected by the recession. Fulton (1990) pointed out, that traditionally many graduates were employed 'cannibalistically' (p. 149) by the higher education sector itself. However, with cost cutting measures such as staff redundancies and departmental mergers or closures in the universities, those wishing to pursue a career in lecturing or research for example, had to rethink

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[20] Although the Robbins Report is regarded as a pivotal report in the post-war expansion, see R. Mason (1987) for details about the scaffolding on which the post-war expansion was built prior to Robbins.

their plans (Simon, 1991). The cuts to the public sector also impacted other aspects of the graduate labour market. The public sector, welfare state, health and education sectors were large recruiters of graduates (Paterson, 2011; Tight, 2009). In short, if there were no longer so many graduate level jobs within the public sector, then some potential students of all ages, may have decided not to pursue a degree, at least at this time in their lives.

The numbers of young and mature full-time first-year students in the universities began to rise again in the mid to late-1980s with the peak years of expansion starting in 1988 (Parry, 1997). As seen in Figure 2.1, the numbers of mature students doubled from 10,497 students in 1988/89 to 20,620 in 1993/94 and young students increased by nearly 25,000, from 69,505 to 94,330 over the same six-year period. Three factors contributed to these trends.

Firstly, the shortage of 18–19-year-olds in the population was undermined by a relatively high fertility rate amongst the social groups who are over-represented in higher education e.g. middle and upper classes (Watson & Bowden, 1999). Consequently, demographic factors did not impact the number of 18–19-year-olds entering higher education quite as much as estimated in the early 1970s.

Second, the youth labour market diminished over time and is said to have disappeared by the mid-1980s (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Schoon et al., 2001). Therefore, for school leavers, continuing to higher education to acquire more qualifications may have been seen by some as the most sensible way of securing a well-paying job.

Third, as the country moved out of recession, the graduate labour market improved with unemployment amongst new graduates in 1987 at the lowest level since 1980 (DES, 1987). The rise in mature students from 1988 seen in Figure 2.1 might indicate that some young people who did not enter higher education at 18 because of the cap in numbers and economic challenges, were now doing so as mature students. It might also indicate older people returning to higher education to obtain the qualifications needed to compete with the younger and more qualified people entering the labour market (Fuller, 1999; Warmington, 2003) and to improve their 'human capital' (McCulloch, 2011).

One of the most significant influences on full-time student numbers was the radical reversal in policy mid-way through the 1980s which was kick-started, Watson and Bowden (1999) suggest, by the White Paper, *Higher Education: meeting the challenge* (DES, 1987). In this paper, the economic purposes of higher education took priority because the 'economic performance of the United Kingdom since 1945 had been disappointing compared to others' (DES, 1987, p. 3). This economic focus took over from the more democratic view of education – that is education is a way for people to realise their potential, gain self-fulfilment and enrich their lives (Faure et al., 1972; Mandler, 2020).

Additionally, the overall population of 18–19-year-olds was projected to drop by 1996 (Lane, 2015). If higher education was to expand and the UK was to increase its economic competitiveness by producing more graduates, universities would need to recruit more non-traditional students. The target groups for expansion were young people who had potential to apply but tended not to, young women, and mature students (DES, 1987). One proposition on how to achieve expansion beyond the traditional population was to incentivise universities to alter their admissions procedures and admit students who did not have the traditional A level entry qualifications. This included entry through validated Access courses (DES, 1987; Tight, 2009).

The role of Access programmes

Access programmes of various types have been in existence for decades, for example, Smithers and Griffin (1986) examine an Access to university scheme for mature students established in the 1920s (see also Mason, 1987). In 1978 the government initiated its first pilot Access programmes designed mainly, but not exclusively for adults from ethnic minority communities to enter teaching, social work, nursing, community and youth work to create role models for future British-Caribbean young people (see Phillips, 2007, for a summary of the debates on this topic). After this successful pilot, Access courses were extended with the number of programmes rising from six in 1979 to 130 in 1984. By 2000 there were 1,200 Access programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland validated and registered with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (UCAS, 2001). In Scotland, a

separate scheme existed for Access programmes within the Scottish Wider Access Programme (UCAS, 2001).

The further education and polytechnic sectors were ahead of universities in this respect and were open to the idea of Access before the 1987 White Paper (Cox, 1997; DES, 1987). Polytechnics were more accessible than universities even before the mainstreaming of Access courses and were also cheaper to fund than universities[21], and they grew at a faster rate than the universities during the 1980s[22] (Parry, 2016; Shattock, 2012). Taking all ages together, whereas the numbers of home full-time first-degree students in universities fell during the early part of the 1980s, the numbers in polytechnics and colleges doubled[23].

By 1991, for the second consecutive year, there were more students entering polytechnic and college first-degree courses (119,000) than university first-degree courses (92,000) (DES, 1993)[24]. Polytechnics were also a popular choice for mature students and in 1990, 75% of all mature first-degree students were studying at polytechnics and colleges (DES, 1992a).

Universities also began to attract different groups, and it was hoped that this would bring 'a close' to the universities' 'preference for social selectivity' (Diamond, 1999, p. 9). The 1987 White Paper is described by Robertson (1997) as the 'Access' White

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[21] The universities were funded by central government and the polytechnics and colleges by local government (Parry, 2016).

[22] The growth in students in polytechnics even occurred when there were huge cuts to the teacher trainee places in the 1980s, cuts which affected polytechnics and colleges far more than universities. From the late 1970s it became a requirement for teachers to have a degree. Polytechnics and colleges were the main providers of the B.Ed degree which was introduced in the 1960s and viewed as particularly suited to mature students (DES, 1972). A possible explanation for the growth in polytechnics is students who originally intended to enrol on a teacher training degree in the polytechnics or colleges opted to pursue another degree as an alternative. It may also be a result of students who couldn't get a place in the universities due to the cap on numbers/course closures, finding a similar or alternative course in a polytechnic.

[23] Although the numbers of full-time students increased in polytechnics at this time, the numbers of part-time students in polytechnics decreased. See Statistical Bulletin 7/83 May 1983.

[24] I couldn't see it mentioned anywhere, but my father was originally studying with the OU whilst claiming benefits in the late 1980s / early 1990s. The rules changed and the only way to be able to study and get a grant was to study full-time. He then went to study for a full-time degree at our local college of Higher Education. So, I wonder if some of this increase is due to changes in the benefits system with people claiming benefits having to transfer to a physical and likely local HEI in order to continue studying.

Paper and a landmark document because it legitimated a movement that previously was on the periphery (Diamond, 1999). As Parry and Wake summarise:

> Through policies developed in White Papers like *Higher Education Meeting the Challenge* (DES 1987), government has […] given explicit official support to the principle of wider access by urging higher education to accept vocational qualifications and access courses as equal to the traditional academic qualifications. (Parry & Wake, 1990, p. 1)[25]

The QAA started collecting Access to Higher Education enrolment data from 1999 and showed that in 1999/00 there were 37,729 Access to Higher Education registrations (England and Wales), with just over 17,000 students receiving an Access to Higher Education certificate in that year (Dent, 2011). The data also show that the vast majority (just over 12,000) who received an Access to Higher Education qualification continued onto higher education courses – mainly studying for full-time degrees (Dent, 2011).

The number of students on first-degree courses who came from the Access route is relatively small compared to the size of the student population as a whole. For example, students with Access qualifications accounted for around 2% annually of all UK domiciled first-year undergraduate registrations recorded by HESA (Access to HE, 2003). Although the proportion is small, this population is significant because students on Access courses are more diverse than students who have followed traditional routes to a degree course (Access to HE, 2015). Access courses were therefore an important steppingstone for 'non-traditional' students to enter higher education and help explain the rise in student numbers that started in the mid-1980s, bringing the UK higher education system from an elite to a mass stage (Trow, 1973).

So far, I have discussed and explained the growth in full-time young and mature student numbers from 1976/77 up to the end of the binary divide (1993/94). The 1958 cohort members were aged 21 in 1979 and 35 in 1993. Compared to when they were leaving school in the mid-1970s, there was a marked increase in opportunities for them to participate in higher education by age 35.

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[25] See Burke (2001) for an analysis of the competing discourses around Access programmes.

I now present and discuss the statistical trends of full-time mature students from the mid-1990s to 2008/09, a period in which 1958 cohort members were in their mid to late 30s up to age 50. I pay particular attention to the different ages within the mature student category itself rather than just comparing the group with young students[26]. The data I draw upon to create the line graphs do not provide a breakdown of age beyond the broad grouping '30+', but even though the data are limited I show some differences within the mature student category which are often obscured when looking at just a binary of young and mature (Moore et al., 2013).

Full-time mature students: 1994/95 to 2008/09

Figure 2.2 highlights the post-1994 mature student trends detailed in the second half of Figure 2.1. The 'young student' (the blue solid line in Figure 2.1) has been removed and Figure 2.2 concentrates now on the trends within the finer mature age categories available in the published statistics, that is, 21-24, 25-29 and 30+. First point to note from Figure 2.2 is that, even though it might be expected that the 30+ age group would be the largest given that this encompasses all ages up to retirement and beyond, the largest concentration of full-time mature students is in the 21-24 age category, and this is consistent through time.

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[26] I was not able to do this for the current section because of the relatively small numbers in the mature student category.

Figure 2.2 Numbers of full-time, first-year, first-degree mature students (UK domiciled) 1994/95 to 2008/09

Frequency values shown on chart:

21-24 (dotted blue line): 36717, 27930, 35195, 33500, 38635

25-29 (solid green line): 17547, 12160, 13225, 13555, 15665

30+ (dashed grey line): 24488, 19720, 23545, 21175, 22325

Years (x-axis): 1994/1995, 1995/1996, 1996/1997, 1997/1998, 1998/1999, 1999/2000, 2000/2001, 2001/2002, 2002/2003, 2003/2004, 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2006/2007, 2007/2008, 2008/2009

Created from: Students in Higher Education Institutions 1994/1995 to 2008/2009 (HESA)

Each mature student age category show dips and rises at broadly the same time periods, the different age groups however, have different speeds of decline and growth. All age categories decline in numbers from 1994/95 to around 2000/01 and all show gains until 2003/04 when there is a levelling off until 2007.

There are two main factors that account for the decline in older full-time mature student participation. The first is policy interest shifting over time from mature students to non-traditional but young students and secondly the introduction of fees in 1997 and other financial disincentives.

Explaining the decline in full-time mature student participation

Although the 1987 White Paper, the 'Access' paper (Diamond, 1999) mentioned above, was one of the first to refer to a desire to increase the number of mature students, this policy was not at the forefront of future widening participation initiatives. The focus for expansion turned to young non-traditional groups. For

example, in 1991, the White Paper *Higher Education: a new framework* was published (Secretary of State for Education and Science, 1991). It was here that the first specific target for expansion was set for 30% of young (defined then as 18–19-year-olds) to participate in higher education by 2000 (a target which was reached). Mature students were briefly mentioned in this White Paper to recognise increased participation of mature (and part-time) students and the expectation that progress would continue. However, there was no specific direction on how this might happen (Lane, 2015).

In 1997, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (NICHE, 1997) (The Dearing Report) was published with an amended target, this time for 50% of 'young' (now defined as 18–30-year-olds) to participate in higher education by 2010. The mature student population was identified as very important in relation to improving the skills and qualification levels of the nation as the influence of new technologies was set to grow in all areas of life. The report identified concern about the financial disincentives to mature students.

The financial disincentives to individuals, even before tuition fees were introduced included the cessation of the mature student allowance[27] in 1995 (Davies et al., 1997). Also, around this time, funding for preparation for higher education courses that used to be paid directly to Local Education Authorities gradually disappeared and was replaced with an access fund (ibid), only available to those who were enrolled on a higher education course. No longer were those at the pre-university stage (such as preparation for higher education courses) eligible for financial support. This restricted the 'pipeline' of first-degree students taking their first steps onto a degree via Access and other such Further Education courses.

Despite the Dearing Report's (NICHE, 1997) concern about financial disincentives to mature students, one of its recommendations was that full-time students would need to contribute to the costs of an expanding higher education system through

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[27] Also known as the older students' allowance. It was a means-tested allowance worth around £1000 per year available to students aged 26 or over. In 1992/93 32,500 students were in receipt of the allowance. The mature students' allowance was originally intended to compensate older students for loss of earnings on starting a course. I gathered information about the allowance from records of debates in parliament retrieved from the UK Parliament website using the term 'older students' allowance'. https://websearch.parliament.uk/

the payment of fees (part-time students had always paid fees). Fees of up to £1000, to be paid upfront, were introduced in 1997[28]. Upfront fees were abolished in 2004 and replaced by variable tuition fees of up to £3000 paid back when the graduate was earning over a certain salary threshold. Fees for undergraduates were completely abolished in Scotland in 2007.

For young students, there was a decrease in student numbers prior to 2006/07. This may have been a result of fluctuating population levels but also large numbers of young people rushing to enter university straight after their A levels to avoid the higher fees they would be subjected to if they delayed entry. The decrease in young students after 2006 therefore could have been a levelling off after the sharp increase in previous years (Universities UK, 2014). It is after 2006 when another dip in mature student numbers could be seen in Figure 2.2, with a small rise in the years that follow.

Mature students tend to be debt and risk averse due in part to their family and financial responsibilities (Callender, 2015; Davies & Williams, 2001; McVitty & Morris, 2012). The fluctuations in full-time mature student participation in line with changes in funding regimes is evident in the graphs above. However, the effect of funding regimes on the part-time and therefore mainly mature student participation is particularly striking.

Part-time mature student trends: 1997/98 to 2014/15

Statistical Bulletin 18/92 (DES, 1992a) shows that between 1980 and 1990 there was a 104% increase in the number of part-time home first-degree, first-year mature students in the universities and polytechnics. In 1980, there were 7,100 part-time students increasing to 14,600 by 1990. For the Open University, in 1980 there were 14,400 first-degree part-time mature students and by 1990, there were 18,100 – a growth of 26% (ibid). Davies (1999) showed that between 1994 and1997 in the UK

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[28] This is the period in which I went to university as a young student. Because my sister and I went at the same time, we received a sibling discount. We also both attended our local university, staying at home. Therefore, with the full student loan it was very affordable and the initial upfront fees of £1000 and £3000 to be paid back once earning, were not a disincentive to us.

as a whole, there was a growth of 15.9% in part-time first-degree students (the largest growth, of 41.5% occurring in Wales[29]).

I continue the story of trends in first-degree part-time student trends starting from 1997/98 where data from this point onwards are comparable. Figure 2.3 presents the numbers of part-time students by age group studying for a first-degree at all years of study over a period of around 18 years. The data are inclusive of both home and international students and all years, rather than just those in their first year of study, therefore the numbers are far higher than shown in both Figures 2.1 and 2.2[30]. The top solid yellow line depicts the total number of part-time students in the UK studying for a first-degree over time.

Figure 2.3: Numbers of part-time first-degree students (UK domiciled and International) from all years of study by age
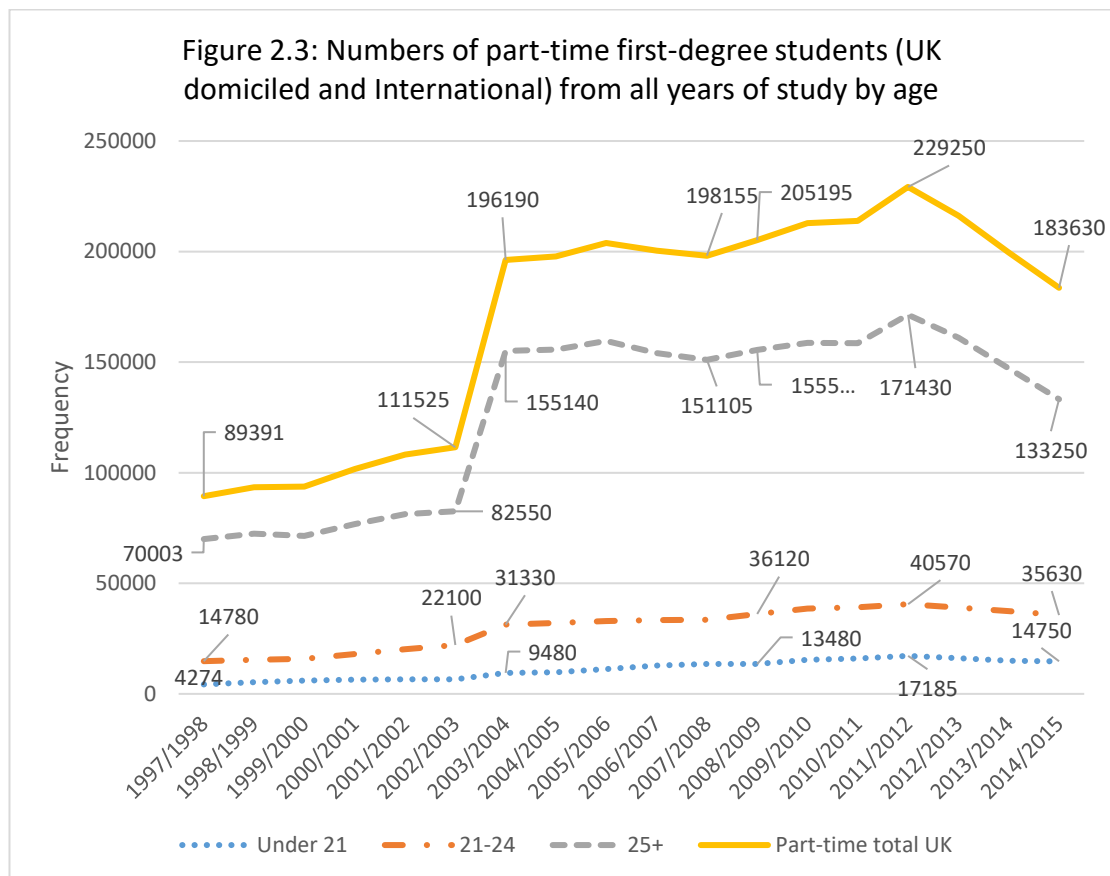
Created from: Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom 1997/1998 to 2014/2015 (HESA)

Starting from 1997/98, there is a rise in part-time student numbers, increasing rapidly by around 85,000 students between 2002/03 and 2003/04. From 2003/04

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[29] Part-time student numbers in England increased by 15.7%, Scotland 9% and Northern Ireland part-time student numbers increased by 20.3%
[30] International students are far more likely to study full-time rather than part-time.

onwards, the numbers of part-time students continue to rise but only slowly, reaching a peak of 229,250 in 2011/12 before dropping again quite steeply by 45,620 to 183,630 in 2014/15. It is this drop from 2011/12 when fees were increased to £9,000, which has caused concern[31] and has driven attempts to reform part-time student policy.

Over a period of around 10 years, from 1997/98 to 2008/09 where full-time students of all ages grew by 27%, part-time students of all ages more than doubled and the numbers of young part-time students trebled, although from a very low starting point. In contrast, in the five years between 2008/09 and 2014/15, part-time student numbers declined by 10% compared to a growth of 17% for full-time students from the same dataset. The largest decline is in the age 25+ category (-14%) with only a small decline of 1% in the 21-24 age group. Part-time young students in this five-year period show a growth of 9% indicating that it is older people who have been most affected by the recent part-time fee increases.

It must be mentioned that although Figure 2.3 shows data for the UK, the pattern is representative of England only. Figure 2.4 presents the data for Scotland and Wales[32]. The trends for Scotland and Wales[33] are very different to the UK/English trends in that there is more of a steady rise in part-time participation from 1997/98 rather than the sharp increase in 2002/03 seen in England.

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[31] When commentators refer to the catastrophic decline in part-time numbers since 2012, the biggest declines have been at the sub-degree level which has seen a 57% decline compared to around 33% of first-degree numbers (Callender & Thompson, 2018). The huge drop in sub-degree courses however does have implications for degree courses as it is these credited and unaccredited as well as leisure courses that provide the stepping stones to people undertaking degrees (e.g. Bynner, 2017)

[32] Like England, the majority of part-time students in Wales and Scotland are also in the 25+ group so I have not provided a breakdown by age category by country.

[33] Northern Ireland is not examined in this thesis but is included in the UK totals.

Figure 2.4: Numbers of part-time, first degree students (all years and all ages) in Scotland and Wales from 1994/95 to 2014/15

Scotland values: 7600, 12700, 11660, 12685, 10970, 10375, 8840, 17500, 17095

Wales values: 3510, 5555, 4215, 3895, 9275, 8870

Legend: - - - Wales part-time all ages ——— Scotland part-time all ages
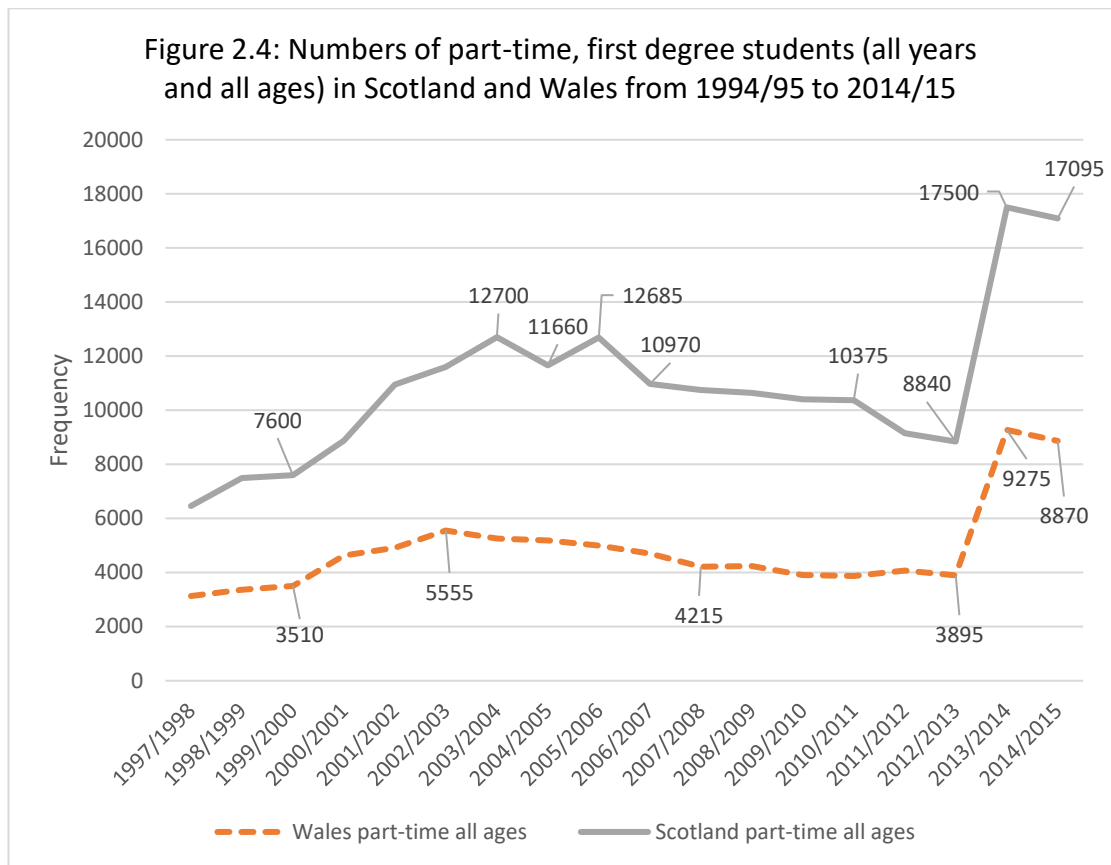
Created from: Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom (HESA) 1997/1998 to 2014/2015

There is stagnation and gentle decline over the 2000s, particularly around and after the recession of 2008, but the most striking feature of Scotland and Wales is that although they were hit harder by the recession of 2008 (Leach, 2017) it is after this that the largest increase in the numbers of part-time students is seen. Callender (2014) explains this difference is likely due to Scotland, Wales (and Northern Ireland) not having government funding withdrawn for part-time teaching and having lower tuition fees. As the administrative centre for the Open University is in England, students, no matter where they live in Britain are reflected in the English/whole UK trends only, so it is not clear what the exact numbers of part-time students are in Scotland and Wales.

Despite the complications of the OU data, the differences between England, Wales and Scotland could be argued to provide a natural experiment (Leach, 2017) enabling the conclusion to be drawn that patterns in part-time and mature student numbers are directly related to funding. This observation was pithily summarised by a collection of chapters by leading researchers into the topic of higher education

funding titled *'It's the finance, stupid!: The decline of part-time higher education and what to do about it'* (Hillman, 2015).

Although the decline in part-time and therefore mature student numbers is an important phenomenon to explore, it is the period of growth in part-time mature student participation which is of most importance to my study. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, part-time student numbers had been growing from at least the 1980s when the 1958 cohort members were in their 20s and early 30s. The cohort were 39 in 1997 where the data in Figure 2.3 starts and age 44 in 2002 when the sharp rise in mature student numbers can be seen. Cohort members were in their mid-40s to 50 when mature student part-time numbers stopped growing.

In this section, I first discuss some of the reasons for the rise in part-time numbers through the 1990s and early 2000s followed by further detail on some of the reasons for the recent decline. This is important for understanding the more favourable contexts and policy climates in which many 1958 cohort members were mature students.

The importance of funding on part-time mature student participation

Tony Blair said in his speech to the Labour Party Conference two years before he became Prime Minister, 'education is the best economic policy there is' (Blair, 1995). This famous statement was also included in the Green Paper *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* in 1998, and it is here where David Blunkett in the foreword emphasised the wider benefits of learning, although Taylor (2009) points out that it is the economic, rather than democratic message that is carried through the rest of the Green Paper.

The economic rationale for lifelong learning was repeated nearly a decade later in the Leitch Review of Skills (HMSO, 2006). This report recommended that 40% of adults should have a Level 4[34] qualification by 2020. To improve skills across the UK, it suggested that adults would need to update their skills whilst working. This

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[34] Different qualification frameworks have been proposed and adopted at different times. In the Leitch Review, a Level 4 qualification was defined as an honours degree or vocational equivalent.

emphasis on learning throughout the lifecourse was very much in line with Trow's (1973) description of the changing function of higher education (Table 2.1).

To gain insights into how national higher education funding might have affected part-time and therefore mature student participation, I have reviewed The Higher Education Funding Council for England's (Hefce[35]) press releases over the 1990s and up to 2010. I searched for initiatives and funds which were directed towards part-time students in response to the Green and White Papers and reports mentioned above.

There are four main factors that I can identify that map onto the trends seen in Figure 2.3. First from 2000/01 through to 2003/04, a £37.5 million premium was made available by Hefce to higher education institutions in recognition of the additional costs of providing for mature and part-time students. Individuals also got a boost with increased hardship funds, fee waivers and student bursaries. Extra funding was also mentioned for the administration of a Mature Bursaries scheme (Hefce, 2001).

Secondly, in the 2000s there was funding for 52,000 extra student places (Hefce, 2000b). Priority was given to universities whose applications were in line with Hefce's priorities at the time to widen access to higher education for part-time study. Out of the 52,000 extra places available, 35,000 were allocated to part-time students. In 2005 there was a further £40 million boost for part-time students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bill Rammell, who was then Minister for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, was quoted in the press release saying:

> Today's announcement means that from 2006 the part-time sector will enjoy significant increases in both fee support for low-income students and a major change in institutional funding. Under this government, part-time undergraduate provision has enjoyed vibrant growth. We have now taken action to protect participation and sustain provision through 2006 and beyond. (Hefce, 2005)

Thirdly, foundation degrees, which are sub-Bachelor Level 5 courses, were introduced in 2000 and designed to be taken part-time by those in employment.

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[35] Hefce is the broker between the government and the Higher Education sector, distributing public money to the universities.

Foundation degrees came with a 10% funding premium to assist universities in creating new provision. Although foundation degrees did not directly affect the trends seen in Figure 2.3, they would be contributors to the pipeline of people continuing their studies to upgrade to a Bachelor's degree. The availability of foundation degrees was expanded in 2004 (Hefce, 2004).

Fourthly, in 2003 and in response to the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), £625 million was allocated for widening participation activities and improving retention, with 10% allocated to support part-time students (Hefce, 2003). Finally, a funding boost was announced in 2007, to enable the creation of places part-funded by the government and topped up by a student's employer. This was designed to address the needs of industry set out in the Leitch Review of Skills (Hefce, 2007).

However, Hefce press releases from 2008/09 indicated a change in priorities. Rather than announcements of funding boosts and new initiatives to aid widening participation in mature and part-time students, the focus turned to a narrower range of projects and allocation of funds. For example, in November 2008 the press release 'How universities can help in the current economic climate' (Hefce, 2008) summarised key points from a brochure published by Universities UK and GuildHE (representative bodies for higher education in the UK), which described ways in which universities could help businesses during the financial downturn. This involved providing continuing professional development t(CPD) courses, incubator spaces and advice (Universities UK, GuildHE, & Hefce, 2008). Presumably, the intention was not only to help business but also to ensure employers would carry on sending their staff onto university courses. Despite these efforts, the number of part-time students receiving financial support from their employer fell by 44% after the 2008 recession (Callender, 2016).

Another example of the narrowing of priorities was that funding for new student places in 2009/10 prioritised full-time undergraduates in subject areas designated by the government to support its 'New Industry, New Jobs' policy, including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Hefce, 2009a). However, these subjects were not so popular with mature students who tended to study health, education

and social science subjects (McVitty & Morris, 2012). The emphasis on full-time study meant that those who could only study part-time were excluded from these opportunities.

Finally, in 2009 funding that had been allocated to the retention budget, which had a strand specifically for part-time students, was transferred to the widening participation budget specifically targeted at young people in schools (Hefce, 2009b).

The factors leading to the decline in part-time numbers from 2012/13 had therefore been accumulating for some time (Callender, 2016, 2017; Davies, 1999; Hillman, 2015; Horrocks, 2017). Universities needed specific incentives and financial support if they were to provide part-time courses (Callender, 2016) and consequently attract mature students.

In summary, trends in mature full and part-time student numbers appear to directly react to the attention they receive in policy and particularly the availability of public funding. When the priorities shift from mature to young non-traditional students, the numbers of mature students drop. A tension emerged between the value of mature and part-time student participation in lifelong learning and broader economic goals, highlighting the inconsistency of policy interest and investment over time (Bennion et al., 2011; Davies, 1999; Tight, 2012).

A large proportion of part-time students are women. However, putting to one side the more recent decline in mature students, women of any age are considered a 'widening participation success story' due to their participation in large numbers as young and mature students (Tight, 2012) as I shall now explain.

A widening participation success story? Mature women students

Although in this section I present data on female participation starting from 1980, the story of women's increasing participation can be seen earlier than this. The historian Carol Dyhouse identifies the 1970s as a 'turning point' (2006, p. ix), as the rate of women on full-time courses (all levels) steadily rose whilst the participation of men remained constant (DES, 1980).

Dyhouse (2006) pinpoints the growth in women's participation from the 1960s and 1970s as connected to four aspects of social change. First, university study became

more attractive to women through the way the new universities[36] marketed themselves, their new curricula topics, such as in the arts, and their non-discriminatory admissions policies. For example, the opening of the Open University, which saw its first graduates in 1973, was heavily marketed to women (The Open University, 1975). The popularity of the OU amongst women meant that it was 'both pilloried for being a 'housewives' university' and celebrated for allowing women an opportunity to enter higher education that would have otherwise been unavailable' (The Open University, 2015, p. np).

Second, the contraceptive pill, legal abortions, and a reversal of the trend for early marriages seen in previous decades led to women gaining more control over their futures with new aspirations for themselves beyond early marriage and children. Third, feminism and equal opportunity legislation played a part in the growth in numbers of women in higher education and the workplace. Before the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, some elite universities and medical schools had quotas on how many women students they were willing to admit. Married women were also discriminated against as they received grants that were far lower than those given to single students.

Fourth, the growth in women students is linked to new and changing employment opportunities for female graduates. In line with the equality legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and Equal Pay Act (1970), more jobs were open to women as employers had to reconsider their recruitment practices.

Despite the increase in enrolments by women in all types of university, their rates of participation in the 1960s and 1970s were still below those for men. In 1976/77 the year when cohort members turned 18, the proportion of young women in their first year of a full-time first-degree course in the universities was 37%[37] of the total university population (Universities Grants Committee, 1966). The Open University

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[36] The 'new' universities were those established in the 1960s in response for the demand for increasing participation. These new buildings, often described as 'plate glass' universities, because they were made of glass, steel and concrete and were in contrast to the traditional 'red brick' universities. Plate glass universities include Sussex, Kent, Essex, Lancaster and Warwick (Tight, 2009).

[37] Since this figure is for full-time students only, it does not include the Open University which mainly has part-time students.

fared slightly better with female applicants at 41.7% in 1975, although this varied hugely by region and subject of study (The Open University, 1975). The 1980s and 1990s however, saw particularly rapid growth in female participation in the universities, polytechnics and the Open University (Fuller, 1999).

The following section elaborates statistical trends in female participation. I present two line graphs. The first shows the proportions of young and mature female students on full-time degree courses (1980/81[38] to 2008/09) and the second shows the proportions of female young and mature students on part-time courses (1997/98 to 2014/15).

Women on full-time courses

Figure 2.5 shows the proportions (percentages) of female full-time, first-degree course students from 1980/81 to 2008/09.

Figure 2.5: Proportions of first-year women students on full-time, first-degree courses over time (UK domiciled), by age group.
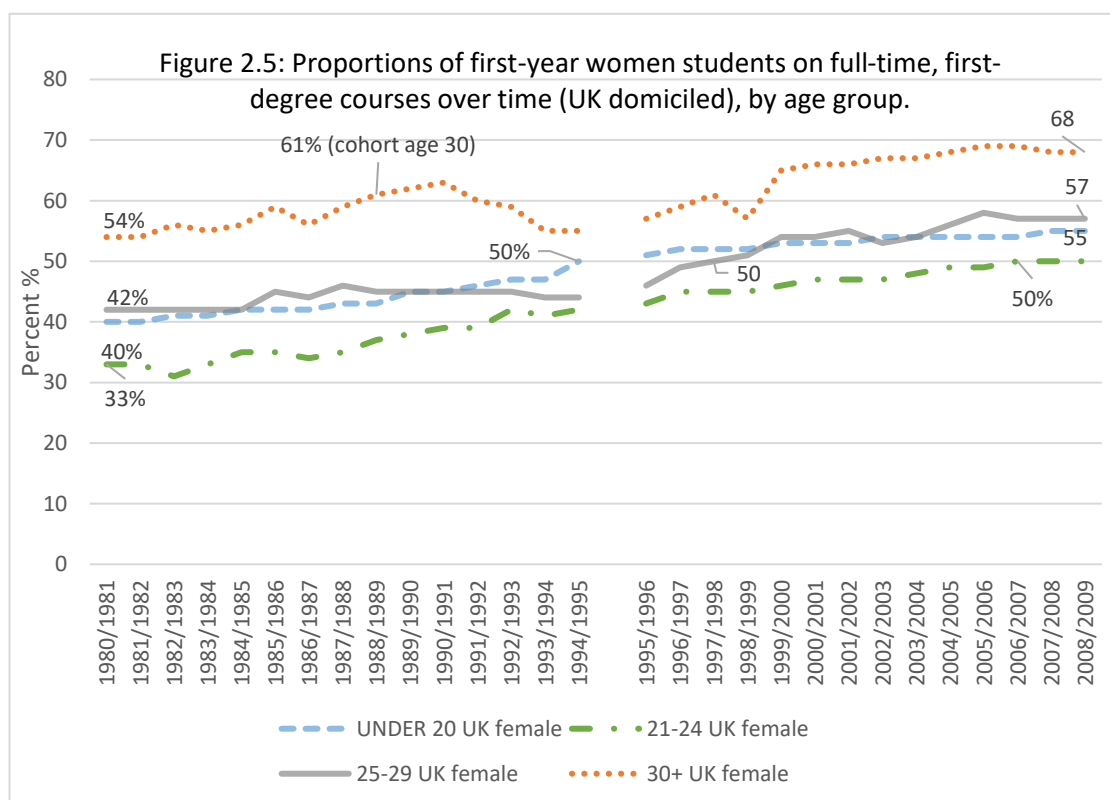
Calculated using data from: Statistics in Higher Education 1980-1981 to 1993/1994 (UGC) and Students in Higher Education Institutions 1994/1995 to 2008/2009 (HESA)

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[38] The 1970s are excluded because prior to 1980/81, the age categories stopped at 25+ and I wanted to take full advantage of where data on older age categories exist. From 1980/81, the category of age 30+ was used.

Although there were fluctuations over time, it is evident that the proportion of women mature students on first-time, first-degree courses has consistently remained at over 50% of the student body in the 30+ age category throughout this almost 30-year period, reaching 68% by 2008/09. Bearing in mind the data here prior to 1994/95 excludes the polytechnics and Open University, it seems that women over the age of 30 were pioneers in participating in traditional universities. In contrast, females in the younger age groups equalised with men much later. Women in the under 20 age group reached 50% of the proportion of first-year students on full-time courses in 1994/95 and their participation in the 25-29 age group reached 50% a few years later in 1997/98.

Women in the 21-24 age group reached equality with men far later than any other age category, achieving 50% in 2006/07. Perhaps the lower proportions of women in the 21-24 age group reflects the higher proportions of men in this age category returning to education for career-related reasons. McGivney (1999) showed how the changing labour market impacted men quite negatively in the 1990s. Young men were more likely to be unemployed than young women and when they were employed males were more likely to be made redundant. Therefore, they might turn to higher education more so than women during their early 20s in order to improve their job prospects.

Aside from reasons related to their role in the family, a possible reason for the high proportion of women found in the older age categories could be due to their participation on Access courses, extending the time between gaining the pre-requisite qualifications needed to study for a degree and their enrolment. Data in Table 2.2 indicates how Access courses were particularly popular amongst older women. To note, the data is partial as it represents only those who completed their Access qualification and enrolled on full-time further study via UCAS.

Table 2.2: The number of people and percentage of females enrolled on a full-time degree, DipHE or HND whose highest-level qualification was an Access qualification 1996-2000.

Age range	1996	% f	1997	% f	1998	% f	1999	%	2000	%
20 & under	994	49	349	53	351	50	393	51	330	52
21-24	3736	51	3091	55	2693	55	2521	53	2527	56
25-39	10387	62	8722	63	7540	66	6791	68	6943	69
40+	2452	68	2041	71	1624	70	1564	73	1602	73
Total	17569	60	14403	62	12208	69	11269	65	11402	66

Source: Compiled by the author using data from UCAS (2001)

Table 2.2 shows that women made up over 60% of the 25-39 age categories from 1996-2000 and nearly or just above 70% of full-time students in the 40+ age categories. The age differences by gender could reflect the different ways in which men and women approached entering higher education. Differences in timings by sex will be discussed further in Chapters 4 and 6.

The data may also reflect a cohort effect because of the kind of schooling experienced by different generations. The 1958 cohort was 38 in 1996 and therefore fit into the two older age categories shown in Table 2.2, depending on the year. The two younger groups (aged 20 and under and 21-24) would have been at school when the GCSE exam replaced the GCE and CSE exams in 1988. In contrast, those born in 1958 and earlier did not all have an equal chance of being entered for school exams (see Chapter 3). A levels were mainly available to those who entered grammar schools. Turning now to women's patterns of participation as part-time students by age category.

Women on part-time courses

The time series on female part-time students by age shown in Figure 2.6 starts from 1997/98 due to the availability of consistent data.
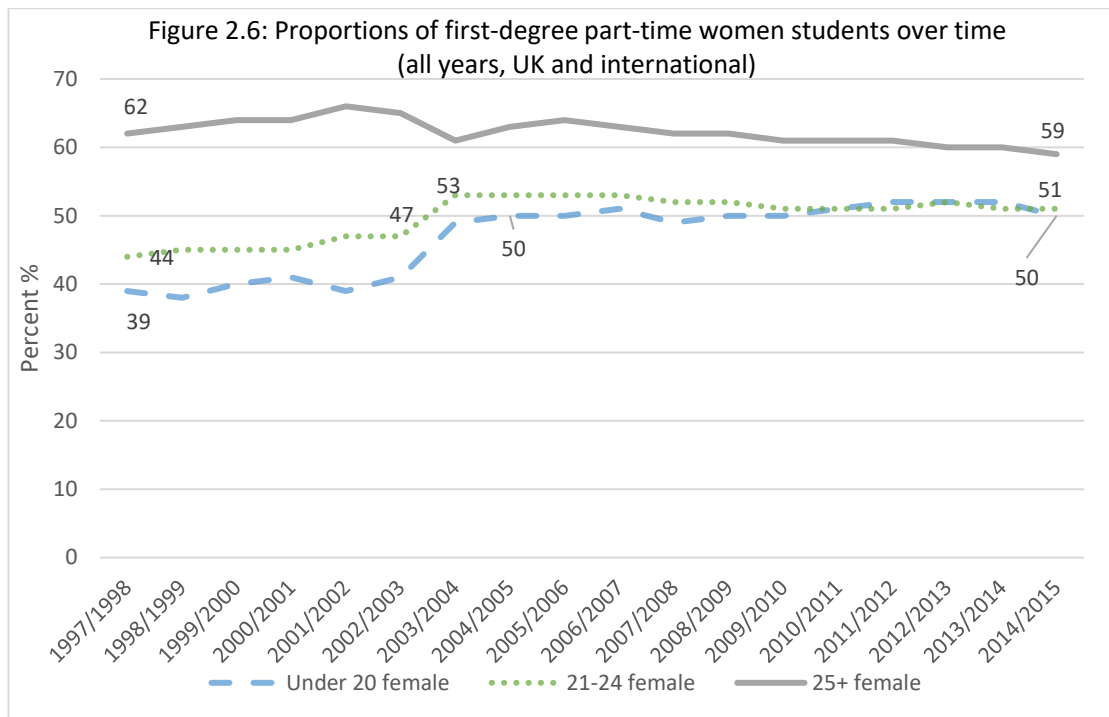
Figure 2.6: Proportions of first-degree part-time women students over time (all years, UK and international)

Figure 2.6 shows that like full-time students, women are found in high proportions in the older age categories as part-time students. The proportion of all students that were female studying for their first-degree part-time, aged 25+ in 1997/98 was 62% and by the end of the period under consideration was still high at 59%.

There is a different pattern for the young and young-mature part-time students. In 1997/98 females made up 44% of all students in the 21-24 age group and numerical parity with males was not reached until around 2003. For the young students, in 1997/98, women made up 39% of all students in the age group and it was not until 2004/05 that the under 20 age group had equal proportions of men and women studying on a part-time first-degree course. One of the possible reasons for the low proportions of younger women on part-time courses are that they are less likely than men to get funded from their employer to enrol on courses (McGivney, 1999).

Summary

The key message about patterns of female participation revealed in this statistical picture, is that women dominate the older age categories and have done so since at least the 1980s (when cohort members would have been in their early 20s), suggesting that their later take up of higher education is indicative of the lack of

opportunity available to them when they were younger. The trends identified reflect not only a change in the higher education sector, but more broadly, the changing 'place' of women in society over time.

Although the national statistics provide great detail about patterns of participation by sex, this is not the case when it comes to social class.

Participation of working-class mature students across time

Social class is and always has been a very difficult and complicated concept to measure comprehensively (Goldthorp et al., 1969; Savage, 2010). One major problem of defining and measuring social class by occupation is that social class groups inevitably change and adjust to changing occupational structures (Blanden & Machin, 2004). This is a particular problem for research such as mine, that seeks to examine change over time.

The official documents and datasets consulted for this chapter, do not include measures of social class partly perhaps because of the difficulties in consistent measurement over time but probably mainly because, as Egerton (2000a) points out, administrative records such as these are not designed to supply data for sociological analysis.

Despite definitional and measurement challenges, various studies using a range of datasets, show that there are differences between the participation rates of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds, and that these differences are consistent across time (Bolton, 2010).

Although there is far less information on the social class of mature students than there is for young students this has not prevented it generally being assumed that mature and part-time students are more likely than young students to be from lower socio-economic groups, non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, Richardson and Stevenson (2018, p. 262) state that *most* part-time mature students come from less well-off or non-traditional backgrounds than younger students. It is difficult to know exactly what data their statement is based on particularly as Williams and Kane (2010) point out, part-time students are one of the

most under-researched groups in higher education (see also Bourner, 1991; Callender & Feldman, 2009; Callender et al., 2010).

Another example is from The Office for Fair Access (OFFA). In 2017, OFFA launched a programme of funding for research into outreach for mature students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds. Again, without reference to evidence, the foreword stated that:

> While we shouldn't be tempted to consider adult learners as one homogenous group, we do know that they are disproportionately more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds than those who enter higher education straight from school (OFFA, 2017, p. 2)

The term 'disadvantaged background' is often used in place of social class in more recent research (Burke, 201; Moore et al., 2013; Trowler, 2015). The term 'disadvantage' in the OFFA studies encompasses part-time adult distance learners; adults without conventional qualifications, ex-offenders, refugees and asylum seekers, people with a history of substance misuse, single parents and local ethnic minorities, students on Access courses, adults in low participation neighbourhoods and adults on low incomes – a very broad range of people.

Although both OFFA and Richardson and Stevenson (2018) may not reference a particular resource to back up their claims, they do cite the *Never Too Late to Learn* report (McVitty & Morris, 2012) which is one of the most recent studies that specifically set out to investigate the characteristics of mature students. This report examined what the authors describe as 'myths' surrounding mature students, including that 'mature students are more likely to be from more disadvantaged backgrounds (p. 10).

To investigate the assumption about mature students' backgrounds, McVitty and Morris (2012), refer exclusively to UCAS data from 2009-2010[39] that indicates a difference in socio-economic status between young and mature students. However, the data presented is for one year only. The mature student category is not broken

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[39] The Never Too Late Report also used data from a bespoke survey and focus group of mature students however, the questions in the bespoke survey and focus group did not include any on social class, either self-defined or some other measure, an omission the designers of the survey regret in hindsight (personal communication).

down resulting in the monolithic category of 21+ (Moore et al., 2013) – whereas the data above already indicates some important difference within the mature student category. Additionally, the data are only gathered about full-time students, whereas as shown, many mature students are part-time; and, since many mature students apply direct to the university, data in UCAS on social class of mature students results in large 'missing' and 'unknown' categories, a caveat made clear by McVitty and Morris (2012)[40].

For the purposes of my analysis, one of the biggest issues with the data is that whereas upon application to UCAS, young students are asked for their parents' occupation as a proxy of socio-economic status, mature students are asked for their own previous occupation before they started to study. This is incredibly problematic from a lifecourse perspective because current or most recent own occupation does not necessarily reflect the individual's social class origins, which is an important factor in influencing educational and employment destinations (as seen in the classic study by Halsey et al., 1980).

However, there is an older study by Egerton and Halsey (1993) using the General Household Survey (GHS) that is relevant to this thesis. First because it offers a rare insight into the social class backgrounds of mature students over time, as measured by father's occupation. Secondly, the time period covers the mid-1980s which is relevant to the 1958 cohort members who would have been young-mature students at this time.

Egerton and Halsey (1993) ask: does age have an ameliorating effect on the lack of opportunity for working-class people to study for a degree when young? The main message from Egerton and Halsey's 1993 paper was that, in the mid-1980s (when 1958 cohort members were in their early 20s), students of intermediate and working-class origins were represented in higher proportions amongst mature

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[40] Even UCAS (2018) in a report on mature students' characteristics and admission cycle patterns do not present any data on mature students' socio-economic status although they do present in some detail the admission patterns of mature students in age categories up to 36+ over a period of 10 years, by gender, ethnicity, region, subject, prior qualifications and even the distance the mature student travels from home to university. Perhaps this lack of presentation of the available data indicates that UCAS do not recommend it as a useful dataset for looking at socio-economic status of mature students.

students than young students (although middle-class were also found in high proportions here too).

Egerton (2000a) revisited the question of the social class backgrounds of mature students again through the GHS but this time from 1984-1992 (when cohort members would have been 26-34). Unfortunately, it was not possible for Egerton to look at a longer time period due to the question of father's occupation ceasing to be asked from 1993.

Using odds ratios comparing young and mature students, Egerton (2000a) showed that people from working-class origins were five times less likely than people from middle-class origins to enter higher education as a young student in the 1980s and early 1990s, with this reducing to three times less likely among mature students. Although this still meant that mature students were more likely to be from middle-class than working-class backgrounds, Egerton concluded that:

> It seems that the educational expansion and reform may have increased opportunities for study for people from manual class origins, but only as mature students. […] Therefore from a perspective of equal opportunities, the expansion has had a small ameliorating effect on class inequalities in participation. (pp. 70-72)

Paterson (2022) came to a similar conclusion in his study comparing three Scottish birth cohorts (including the NCDS). He argued that there was evidence to suggest the operation of maximally maintained inequality (Raftery & Hout, 1993) – that is where during expansion, it is the more advantaged social classes and groups who take most of the new places available (see also Ball, 2003; Power et al., 2003; Woodley et al., 1987).

Concluding remarks

This chapter has traced the trends of mature student participation over a nearly 40-year period covering a large proportion of the young and middle adulthoods of the 1958 cohort. Through mapping the statistical trends onto relevant historical and policy contexts I have shown how government and higher education institutions increasingly became interested in recruiting non-traditional groups. Their rationales

were linked to economic and national skills development, ideas around social justice and widening participation, as well as institutional survival.

Mature students, particularly women and those on part-time modes of study, were contributors to and beneficiaries of the shift from an elite to a mass higher education system (Trow, 1973). The picture is slightly less clear by social class. However, there is some evidence to suggest that a large proportion of mature students came from working-class backgrounds. In Chapter 6, taking advantage of data on household social class of cohort members measured when they were aged 11, I will examine the patterns of participation by this characteristic enabling me to significantly add to the evidence-base on this issue.

My analysis in this chapter has revealed some important differences within the mature student age category. Therefore, in Chapter 6 I seek to generate new understandings of the characteristics and patterns of mature student participation within the 1958 cohort by examining four age categories: young (up to age 23), young-mature (24-33), middle-mature (34-42) and older-mature (43-50) and by sex and social class.

This chapter has provided information about, and understandings of, changing educational, employment and policy landscapes. This forms the backdrop as I turn in Chapter 3 to explore the options available to young people leaving school in and around the 1960s and 1970s, followed by Chapter 4 where I examine the reasons why people decided to return to study in the 1980s to early 2000s and how these individual decisions can be related to wider societal change.

3

Post-school transitions in the 1960s and 1970s

Introduction

Unlike today where to stay on in education up to 18 is the norm[41], the majority of young people growing up in the 1960s and 1970s left school as soon as they were legally able (Makepeace et al., 2003). Analysing the destinations of NCDS members from age 16 to 23, Fogelman (1985) showed that only 9% of cohort members stayed on in full-time continuous education after the age of 16. For young men in the cohort, apprenticeships were a popular destination (34%). Jobs with no education or training were a destination for 37% of young women in the cohort. Only 1% of the cohort did not enter any work, further education or training between the ages of 16 and 23.

Despite the expansion of the higher education sector since the 1960s, the national statistics and policy initiatives, discussed in the previous chapter, revealed that higher education did not become a mass system until the mid-1990s. Young people leaving school in the 1970s and earlier had alternative pathways to follow, with relatively low rates of youth unemployment, especially compared to those leaving school in the 1980s (Micklewright, 1989).

The aim of this chapter is to take a step back in time to when people of similar ages to the 1958 cohort were at school and deciding what to do next. Here the aim is to further understand the historical, institutional, and sociological factors that meant that mature students who grew up and left school in the 1960s and 70s did not

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[41] In England, it is the law for young people to stay on in full-time education, start an apprenticeship, or be in part-time education and training whilst working or volunteering for 20 hours or more until the age of 18.

study for a degree at the traditional age – including those who did have the opportunity to do so but chose not to. The focus here is on individual experiences, therefore most of the mature student studies I draw upon used qualitative methodologies.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, I describe the selective system and its role in sifting and sorting young people into different types of schools. Second, I turn to mature student perceptions, and highlight where they mention inequalities in opportunities based on social class and gender. In the third section, I describe the difference between aspirations and expectations, and introduce the roles of careers advisors, Youth Employment Officers, the school and parents in influencing post-school decisions. In the final section I focus on the mature student literature to explore how mature students reflect upon their childhoods and the various influences at school, home and in the labour market that meant that higher education was not something they pursued when younger.

The selective school system

> Any study of the education of adults must start by looking at the context in which this takes place: that of the education such people have received when they were young. (ACACE, 1982, p. 7)

The majority of children born and growing up after the Second World War in the UK experienced a selective school system, known as the tripartite system. The recommendations for the tripartite system were based on the idea stemming from educational psychology and eugenics, that it was possible to predict at an early age a child's intellectual ability through intelligence tests (Norwood, 1943; Spens, 1938). It was put forward that there were three types of minds, each associated with different characteristics, academic abilities and roles in society.

The Norwood Report (1943) describes the three types. First, there were those who were interested in learning for its own sake, had high reasoning skills, could enter the learned professions and take up higher administrative and business posts. Second, there were those who were technically minded and had 'uncanny insight into the intricacies of mechanism' (p. 3). They would be suited to schooling that geared them for work in crafts, engineering and agriculture. Third, there were those

defined as not being interested in abstraction and not very curious or flexible in their thinking, preferring instead to specialise in single tasks. They were deemed to benefit from a curriculum that prepared them for work in industry and the trades. This third group was described as slow in their physical movement as well as in their overall cognitive development, and Norwood pondered if the raising of the school leaving age would benefit this group to give them more 'opportunities for growth' (p. 4).

The idea that there were three types of minds that required different curricula, gained favour and formed part of the Education Act 1944 (Simon, 1991). The tripartite school system was devised and introduced, with children allocated to different types of schools – grammar, technical[42] or secondary modern – based on the results of an IQ test taken at around 10-and-a-half or 11 years old. This exam became known as the '11-plus'.

By the 1960s, the idea that there were three types of minds, and the related idea that there was a limited pool of young people capable of studying at a higher level fell out of favour (Floud & Halsey, 1957; Simon, 1991). It was the implied idea that going to a secondary modern was a failure that was viewed as most damaging to young people's self-confidence (Banks, 1955; Veness, 1962). This view is effectively expressed in this quotation from a 17-year-old schoolboy for a newspaper essay competition in 1967. He writes:

> "[p]eople used to think in terms of 'secondary grammar' or
> 'secondary' modern schools; but now 'secondary' as applied to a
> grammar school has disappeared and been forgotten. They just think
> 'Secondary or grammar'. That word 'secondary' infers so much."
> (Blishen, 1969, p. 80)

Aside from the lack of parity of esteem in the different types of schools (Banks, 1955), the 11-plus exam was also seen as not providing an accurate assessment of ability. Evidence forming part of the Robbins Report (1963) and justification for the expansion of higher education, pointed out that children with latent abilities were being misallocated to secondary modern schools – and therefore may unfairly miss out on opportunities to go to university. Evidence also indicated that the system was

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[42] Although in practice, few technical schools were built.

socially biased with a disproportionate number of those securing grammar school places also happening to be 'middle class, wealthy or culturally well-endowed' as Benn (1992, p. 145) cited in Crook (2007, p. 150) observed (see also Kerckhoff et al., 1997).

Demand from dissatisfied parents whose children were not getting accepted into grammar schools created a groundswell for change (Kerckhoff et al., 1997; Power et al., 2003; Simon, 1991). From 1965, the government requested through Circular 10/65, that all schools should convert to a comprehensive system. This process of comprehensivisation took a very long time, particularly in England where some parts of the country have never become truly comprehensive. Therefore, even though the majority of 1958 cohort members may have ended their school days in a comprehensive school (they were 16 in 1974) most started their school days in the selective school system (Kerckhoff, 1993; Steedman, 1983), taking the 11-plus in 1969.

Within the selective system as well as in the comprehensive schools, there were sometimes further elements of selection in the form of ability streaming or sets (separating students into different classes based on their academic ability). Like entry into the different schools, an individual's location within the streams or sets had been found to be biased with teachers basing their decisions not just on academic achievement, but on stereotypes and assumptions relating to students' family background and gender (Kerckhoff, 1993).

Allocation to different kinds of schools, or into sets and ability streams affected the curricula a young person received and their opportunities to take exams. Those in the grammar schools and the top streams of some secondary modern and comprehensive schools were able to take O levels, CSEs, or Scottish equivalents, whereas those in lower sets or streams in the comprehensive schools and the majority of those in secondary modern schools did not automatically have the opportunity or encouragement to be entered for public exams (Steedman, 1983).

Further limitations were placed on those in secondary modern schools as these schools tended not to have sixth forms where pupils could study for a further two years and gain A levels – the pre-requisite qualification (in England and Wales) to

progress onto university (Pedley, 1963; Plummer, 2000; Simon, 1991). Pupils in schools without sixth forms who wanted to take further qualifications could potentially transfer to a school which had a sixth form; however, this was administratively very difficult to do. Therefore, many secondary modern pupils did not have the opportunity to pursue A levels, further limiting their chances of entry to higher education (Kerckhoff et al., 1997; Pedley, 1963; Simon, 1991; Steedman, 1983). Generally speaking, passing or failing the 11-plus determined what school you were able to go to, which in turn affected opportunities for gaining the necessary qualifications to gain entry to higher education and in turn, to professional careers.

Quantitative evidence shows that 'failing' the 11-plus and going to a secondary modern school, does not have a long-term negative effect on health and wellbeing measures such as life satisfaction, self-worth, physical and mental health, stress levels and crime and drug use – nor the reverse, going to a grammar school does not have a positive effect on these measures (Jones et al., 2018). However, there appear to be some negative 'legacy effects' (Maringe et al., 2011, p. 50) reported in qualitative studies for those labelled an 'eleven-plus failure' (Alford, 1995, p. 132).

Indeed, for much of the British population growing up after the Second World War the 11-plus has become a shared generational experience (Crook, 2007). Stories of success or failure are part of social history with the topic discussed in radio phone-ins, letters in newspapers[43], TV programmes[44] and mentioned in the autobiographies of celebrities and politicians. It is not surprising then, for mature students of a particular age that the 11-plus exam and selective school system feature in their memories of school and were key barriers to pursuing higher education when young.

Mature students' reflections of the 11-plus

Some mature student experiences and reflections align with the critiques of the 11-plus exam discussed above. However, references to the 11-plus system tend to only

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[43] For example *The Guardian*, 20th October 2015: 'Grammar schools and the feeling of failure' https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/oct/20/grammar-schools-and-the-feeling-of-failure
[44] For example, *The Grammar School: A secret history*, BBC4, first aired 5th Jan 2012.

come from the perspective of mature students from working-class backgrounds. This is mainly because the majority of studies on mature students have tended to focus on the working-class experience. There is limited insight therefore into middle-class mature student experiences of the 11-plus (whether they passed or failed) or experiences of working-class mature students who passed.

Despite these caveats, mature student reflections provide useful insights into the selective schooling and the inequalities by social class and sex that were built into the system. For example, Alford (1995) studied 110 working-class Access students ranging in age from 21-60 at the time of the data collection during 1992-94. His respondents would have been leaving school between 1948 and 1989 (the 1958 cohort were able to leave in 1974). Alford collected information from Access application forms, course interviews, informal discussions, written statements whilst on the course and conducted a series of in-depth interviews. He specifically highlights responses from four students who were aged 37-48 at the time of the research and spoke about the 11-plus exam.

The quotation below comes from a working-class male aged 37 (born around 1957):

> "I always felt that I should have been in grammar school, but I failed the 11 Plus examination, as it was put 'by the skin of my teeth'. Hence when I achieved four grade 'twos' and three grade 'threes' and virtually nobody achieved a grade one, (equivalent to an 'O' level) many of us believed there was a conspiracy. By whom we did not know. But we figured that if 'them' had given us the grade 'ones' that we deserved, then 'they' would be admitting that we really should have gone to the grammar school and that 'they' had made a mistake." (Student No. 6 p. 133)

This student shows the lack of agency and powerlessness that he and his peers felt at this time of their lives.

The next quote is from a 39-year-old female (born around 1955) and it shows how perceptions of self as a poor learner can last for years and can be difficult to shift (see also Rees et al., 1997; Tuckett & Field, 2016; Weil, 1986):

> "I believe the education system failed me as it does so many children. I was a failure at the age of eleven and carried on being one throughout school. I left school at fifteen without qualifications,

carefully avoiding any jobs that would need an entrance test."
(p. 133)

Similar themes to do with the long-term legacy effects of the 11-plus were also identified in Fuller's PhD thesis (1999). Her research included semi-structured interviews with ten working-class mature student participants who left school in the 1970s and were in their 30s and 40s at the time of her fieldwork in 1998. One participant, Peter who was 41 at the time of the research (and therefore born around 1957), reflected on his feelings about failing the 11-plus exam. Like the example above, he believed that he was able to pass:

> "I was, I felt inside that I was disappointed when I failed my 11+
> which I thought I was clever enough to pass and maybe that's what
> affected my secondary education […]". (p. 189)

Like the students in Alford's study, Peter believes that his life would have been different and better, if he had been able to access the opportunities afforded to those who attended the grammar school.

A final example is from a study by Hutchinson and Hutchinson (1986). A questionnaire was sent to 325 female and 68 male mature students on a 'Fresh Horizons' course at an adult education college, London City Lit, between 1976 and 1983. The course was designed for people who wanted to take a steppingstone into education with a view to enrolling in higher education. One woman writes about her experience of the 11-plus exam and sexism in the selective school system:

> "I was told that, although I had passed the 11-plus, there were only
> two places allocated to our school. Three of us passed: I came
> second but the third was a boy so got my place." (p. 33)

Social pathways determined by sex and social class not only feature at the 11-plus stage as once in their allocated schools, the young person's aspirations and expectations would be influenced by the ethos of the school, careers advisors, the Youth Employment Officer, as well as parents.

Aspirations, expectations and post-school transitions

The dictionary definition of aspiration refers to having the desire, longing and wish to achieve something that is currently above one's abilities or position (Abrahams,

2016). Within educational research, the focus on the role of aspirations has largely focused on the 'problem' of working-class families (Loveday, 2014). The narrative from some policy makers, educational institutions and researchers, has tended to be that working-class children and their parents have low aspirations and these need to be raised if more non-traditional groups are to participate in higher education (for overviews and critiques see Abrahams, 2016; Alford, 1995; Loveday, 2014; Rainford, 2019; Reay, 2012).

Loveday (2014) argues that the notion of 'low' or 'high' aspirations is problematic because it does not acknowledge that working-class families may have different aspirations that are just not viewed as valid by middle-class policy makers, researchers, and teachers. As touched upon in my introduction, decisions to not participate in higher education (Fuller et al., 2011), or to enrol but drop out, should not necessarily be viewed as a deficit or a failure (Quinn, 2010).

Definitions that refer to an ability to identify goals and to orientate efforts in the present to achieve future ambitions are therefore generally preferred to definitions based on a hierarchy of low or high aspirations by those keen to challenge the deficit policy discourse (see Abrahams, 2016; Quaglia & Casey, 1996; St. Clair et al., 2013).

Alongside the concept of aspirations, there is the related, but different notion of 'expectations'. Whereas aspirations may refer to the identification of wishes and desires with the aim to achieve them, expectations refer more to the realities of what someone thinks will likely happen (Abrahams, 2016). There is evidence that young people modify their aspirations in line with what they know about the opportunities available to them (Banks et al., 1992; Griffin, 1985; O'Connor & Goodwin, 2007; Roberts, 1968; Willis, 1977).

Sociological research shows that for people born around the same time as the 1958 cohort, the Youth Employment Officer and careers advisors could play an important role in managing pupil's expectations as steering their post-school transitions.

Careers education and the Youth Employment Officer

Careers education was first introduced in schools in the 1960s, but it has only been a statutory duty for schools to provide careers education since 1998 (Andrews, 2008). Young people leaving school after the Second World War and until the early 1970s, may have encountered the Youth Employment Service. Unlike contemporary careers advice and guidance which tends to work with young people to develop their Curriculum Vitae, interview techniques, and life management skills in order to navigate their way through various options (Furlong, 2009), the responsibilities of the Youth Employment Officer were more aligned to a work placement service (Carter, 1966).

The Youth Employment Service was part of the Ministry of Labour which had the remit of guiding young people into the priority industries that had been neglected after the Second World War (Mullett, 2010). The responsibilities of the Youth Employment Service were to: 'disseminate information about jobs; to give vocational guidance; to help place leavers in suitable employment; and to keep in touch with young workers until they reach the age of eighteen' (Carter, 1966, p. 85).

The link between locality and opportunity are key aspects of many studies that look at school to work transitions, particularly when Britain had a larger manufacturing sector (Willis, 1977; Griffin, 1985, Ashton & Field, 1976, Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005a and 2007). What is realistically available in the local employment markets affected what an advisor or Youth Employment Officer could recommend to the students (Fogelman, 1979).

Those researching youth transitions during the 60s and 70s suggest that an oversaturation in the labour market of certain types of jobs is something that careers advisors or the Youth Employment Officer would have to take into consideration. For example, a careers advisor in Griffin's study (1985) pointed out that the number of girls who wanted to become hairdressers outstripped the number of vacancies. Similarly, Vickerstaff (2003) highlighted that in the 1960s, the number of boys from all social classes who wanted to do apprenticeships outstripped supply.

Not only did careers advisors need to be aware of the realistic options in terms of the types and numbers of jobs available locally for school leavers, they also reported

needing to be realistic about what was available to school leavers depending on their social class, sex and ethnicity. Griffin's (1985) study explains how careers teachers avoided placing the school leavers in particular industries where they might be subjected to racism and sexism. This was partly to protect the individual from harassment and discrimination, but also to protect the school from losing an employer if their former pupils made a complaint (see also Carter, 1966).

Different types of schools would also hold different expectations regarding their pupils' careers. The 'scholarship boy' (Hoggart, 1958) is a well-known narrative of a working-class boy who comes from a lower working-class family, wins a scholarship[45] to attend grammar school, goes to university and enters the professions (and ultimately, the middle-class) (see also Jackson and Marsden, 1966).

For girls, however, the story seems somewhat different with far fewer grammar schoolgirls going to university than boys. Deem (1980) offers some insight into why this might be. She discusses that although the ideology of the grammar school may overtly value careers and equal opportunities, the hidden curriculum perpetuated the ideology of wife and mother. Deem argues that, whereas the secondary modern girls may take subjects specifically and explicitly targeted at their future roles as homemakers, grammar school girls were more subtly steered into other women's work such as teaching and nursing. These are two occupations that fitted around the duties of mother and wife in the sense that they were caring roles, but also because the shifts and holidays would fit around children's school timetables (McGuire, 1969; Moreau, 2014).

Some studies show that young people wanted to conform to gender roles. For example, Sue Sharpe's research (1976) indicated most of the girls in her study were keen to work in traditional female occupations, even when some careers advisors suggested a wider range of possibilities. Similarly, Paul Willis's lads (1977) wanted to become manual workers in traditionally masculine occupations and ridiculed other boys who were pursuing alternative pathways, such as office work.

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[45] Before the introduction of free education for all as part of the 1944 Education Act.

The historical period then, needs to be kept in mind when it comes to understanding work aspirations and expectations. For example, Griffin (1985) points out that the conformity to gender roles identified in her study might be partly explained because schemes for young women[46] to take science, technology, engineering and maths subjects and careers did not really start until after the Sex Discrimination Legislation of 1975. Griffin discusses that where some of the earliest schemes did exist for young women to enter engineering apprenticeships, they tended to be tokenistic and the environments intimidating, racist and sexist. Therefore, it might be a more rational decision to stay within familiar occupations.

In summary, aspirations and expectations are two very different concepts and the impression given so far from the literature reviewed is that people growing up around the 1960s and 1970s (and before) may have had wishes and desires but the historical context in which they were living did not always give them the opportunities to pursue these.

I now turn to review studies which include mature student reflections on their transitions out of school and to explore the ways in which their decisions were guided by family, the school as well as structures in society. Their childhood experiences provide an important resource for understanding motivations to enter higher education as a mature student.

Mature students' reflections on their post-school transitions

I draw upon the categories proposed by Green and Webb (1997) to organise my discussion of mature students' reflections on their post-school transitions and how these illuminate understandings of their higher education decision-making. Green and Webb conducted a survey, followed interviews with a sub-sample of 92 respondents to explore the experience of students who applied to do a degree during 1991-1993 via alternative routes into higher education – that is without the traditional two or more A levels (Green & Webb, 1997; Webb et al., 1994).

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[46] To my knowledge, there have been no national or other schemes to encourage men into traditional women's work or to become stay-at-home fathers.

The researchers identified three types of experiences that accounted for mature students' non-continuation into higher education after leaving school. The first, which they labelled 'access denied' can be illustrated with the quote "we weren't expected to become scholars" (Green & Webb, 1997, p. 133). This category included those who did not see themselves as having the opportunity to enter higher education when leaving school. Those who fitted this category were at school when higher education was for a minority, or to use Trow's (1973) categorisations, at the elite stage.

The second group, 'untapped potential' included those who articulated a lack of confidence in their abilities when at school. Some in this group left school with no or low qualifications, others left with good grades, but still lacked confidence. The illustrative quote "I could have done better" (p. 137) is used by Green and Webb (1997) to encapsulate this group.

Finally, the third, and smallest group, were categorised as 'wasted potential', with the quote "didn't like it at all" used by Green and Webb to illustrate the experiences of those in this category. They had academic success at school but actively and knowingly rejected the academic pathway that they were on track to pursue. In order to better represent the findings of other studies beyond Green and Webb's, I prefer to categorise people in this group as 'opportunity rejected' because the term 'wasted' gives the impression that the choice was perceived as wrong, which even in Green and Webb's study, was not the case. Instead, the opportunity to continue their education was rejected by the mature students when young for various reasons and other valid options instead were pursued. This group differs from the others in that they did seem to have a range of options to choose from.

Starting then with those who expressed that access to higher education was denied to them when younger.

Access denied

The mature students' experiences in Green and Webb's (1997) as well as other studies, clearly illustrate the role of social class and gender on restricting opportunities for those leaving school in and around the 1970s. To exemplify, Jane was born around 1957 and was aged 16 in 1973, so very similar to the 1958 cohort.

She went to a Church of England school of mixed ability with streaming. Although she describes herself as not amongst those gaining high academic grades, she stood out somewhat from the majority of the pupils destined for the factory – an option many young people in youth studies research have identified as the least appealing workplace (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2013; Griffin, 1985; Jackson & Marsden, 1966; Sharpe, 1976; Willis, 1977). She says:

> "I wasn't considered one of the more intelligent; most of the children in the school were considered as 'factory fodder', but there were five of us girls for whom the emphasis was that we were considered office potential…That was quite a compliment really. I actually wanted to do drama, science, biology, but it was a case of 'your results haven't been as high as they have in Art and English, commerce and typing, and that this is more suitable for a girl like you – office work." (Green & Webb, 1997, p. 135)

Jane points out that in hindsight she can see how her life was directed by the teachers and school, although at the time she felt flattered that she was viewed as 'office potential'.

In another of Green and Webb's examples, a female mature student from a working-class background went to a secondary modern all-girls school in the 1960s. She discussed how the girls in the school were fortunate in that they could study a wide range of subjects, including maths and science, however, she mentioned that their curriculum also included a lot of needlework, domestic science and mother care. Her memories throw some light onto how the school operated:

> "I think the headmistress was limited by the system – if she had had the opportunity I think she would have pushed us further. Limited also by the parents, because that was what the parents wanted… When we got to 15 – I can't say that anyone was actively encouraged to stay on. Can't remember a visit from careers people. We were never told we ought to stay on, ought to take exams. I was streamed into the top class." (Webb et al., 1994, p. 201)

This mature student discusses a battle with her mother who kept insisting she go into factory work to tide her over until marriage, whereas she wanted to have a career in nursing. As her mother had wanted, she left school at 15 to get a job. The mature student observed during her interview that her mother had still not changed

her views about higher education even though she was now studying as a mature student.

The influence of parents is also evident in studies that include mature students from middle-class backgrounds and indicate that discouragement from continuing in education was not purely a feature of working-class culture. Adshead and Jamieson (2008) studied part-time mature students aged 30-80+ who were born between 1920 and 1971 and left school sometime between 1936 and 1987. They do not explicitly include social class as part of their analysis but the following quotation from a male mature student in his seventies, gives insight into the experience of someone whose family has connections and experience within the professions. To secure a good living was a priority for his parents, rather than going to university:

> "... if I had my way I would have gone on to sixth form and
> university [and] studied anthropology and archaeology ... left school
> at 16 and went into articles ... I was told I'd better be a lawyer –
> parents had connections with a lawyer – certainty of reasonably
> good living ... did what I was told." (p. 149)

Mature students also recollect the influence of gender on their parents' expectations. Britton and Baxter (1999) conducted narrative analysis on 21 mature students' interviews to explore their accounts of how they came to be mature students. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 women and 7 men. They were particularly interested in masculinity (and the interaction with social class), recognising that most studies on mature students focused on women. Stan, speaking about his education and work aspirations when at school says:

> "Well I wanted to do something in the field of nursing, I wanted to
> do something to do with nursing, and I think what mainly crunched
> it was my family did not really see that as being a suitable occupation
> for me…he [father] paved the way for me to be an apprentice in the
> company and it got to the stage when I just went with the flow of
> things." (p. 185)

The discussion so far identifies a range of factors that prevented young people of this generation from going to higher education when young. Adults, whether teachers, careers advisors or parents, seemingly had a strong influence over young people's decisions. The influence of social structures was also quite overt for this

generation where hierarchies of jobs were well understood, and gendered pathways articulated. I now turn to the category 'untapped potential'.

Untapped potential

One of the key themes emerging from young people categorised as having untapped potential, seems to be a sense of boredom[47], ambivalence and lack of engagement with school. It is only in hindsight that mature students realise their potential was not recognised by their school or their parents. Pascall and Cox (1993) undertook interviews with 43 women, born between 1933 and 1958 and aged 21-45 at the time of the first interview. They were all on an Access to Higher Education course in the early 1980s. Their study was not only one of the first to study mature students, but it is also unique in that they re-interviewed the women 10 years later in 1992 to find out the impact of their earlier and later education on their personal development and career progression.

The majority of their participants went to a grammar school and although half of the women came from working-class backgrounds, as defined by their father's occupation, the remainder came from intermediate or professional backgrounds. All the women left school with qualifications which would have enabled them to access higher education. This raises the question of why even this group of highly educated girls attending grammar school did not continue their education?

A very small number of these mature students reflected on their time at grammar school with happiness and pride. However, the majority expressed negative feelings about their schooling including alienation, hostility and boredom. Pascall and Cox (1993) summarise some of their participants' perspectives as follows:

> For Marjorie it was a question of 'get on, do the work', take the exams and get out' and for Michelle the final thought was 'thank God it's all over'. More than one remarked that by the time they left they felt they had simply had enough, that a period of drift had come to an end and, unlike the departure from primary school, leaving warranted no tears. (p. 23)

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[47] Boredom is a concept that comes up time again in youth ethnographies touched upon above as well as in the mature student literature. Hargreaves (1982) explicitly discusses the hidden curriculum in terms of being taught to cope with boredom in preparation for mundane work.

As mentioned above, underlying the experience of schooling for girls was the preparation for their roles of wife and mother (Deem, 1980). This seemed to resonate with the women in Pascall and Cox's study, who they describe as drifting from job to job, waiting until they found a partner, got married and had children (see also Goodwin & O'Connor, 2013). This is a period Pascall and Cox refer to as 'suspended animation' (p. 29).

The idea of 'untapped potential' is often an experience expressed by female mature students, but Waller (2006) studied 16 women and four men enrolled on an Access course in 2001. They ranged in age from 21-52 (so born around 1949-1980) and came from a mixture of social class backgrounds. John was an only child from a lower middle-class family, and 39 at the time of the research. He missed a lot of school because he had epilepsy but nevertheless, he got good Art and Drama O levels and average grades in other subjects. He had an ambition to study Art at university however, he describes his middle-class parents' ambivalence. He received no encouragement or discouragement. Reflecting on this period of his life, his illness, early marriage and entry into heavy manual work, he speaks about wasting opportunities at school which restricted his educational and life chances.

The theme of 'untapped potential' is connected to and overlaps to some extent with the category 'access denied' in that there was not a strong push from parents or teachers, or the motivation from the young person to pursue higher education. Their transitions out of compulsory education seemed somewhat passive and unplanned.

In summary, in this section we can see that parents and teachers had a role in the unplanned and passive nature of their post-school transitions, but also start to see from the mature student the lack of interest, boredom and ambivalence when young as well. Again, this is something to be explored within the 1958 cohort and how this impacted decisions to become a student later in life. I can also expand on the experiences of men as well as those from intermediate and middle-class backgrounds which is slightly limited in the existing literature and skews impressions that it is only working-class individuals who lack aspiration.

A stronger sense of agency however comes through in the mature students' reflections on their post-school transitions in the category, 'opportunity rejected' which I discuss now in the final section.

Opportunity rejected

This final category is where mature students had made active and conscious decisions not to continue into further or higher education when they were young. The reasons for rejecting the opportunity are in some cases related simply to being a teenager. Green and Webb (1997) discuss the case of Jenny, who was 27 at the time of the research and had left grammar school with eight O levels. Jenny alluded to being at a phase of life when she was exploring her own identity. She had dyed her hair pink and did not progress to the sixth form, which was the norm for the school and would have fulfilled her parents' expectations. Instead, she enrolled on a hairdressing course.

A similar theme was observed in Britton and Baxter (1999) who explore the narrative of Lorraine, a mature student from a working-class family. She had the opportunity to go to a grammar school at age 11 but rejected it. She went to the comprehensive and did very well and stayed on in the sixth form. She then considered going into teacher education but also rejected that idea. Lorraine reflects on these decisions and, in part, puts her choices down to being young:

> "[…] I did have a place to go to teacher training college but it wasn't the thing for me at the time, I just wasn't into education then, it's wasted on the young, isn't it, education?" (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p. 184)

However, her main reason for not going on to college was because she met her future husband and decided to focus on her relationship. To prematurely end one's education because of a relationship is a reason more commonly given by women than men, however, there is an example of a man doing the same in Green and Webb (1997).

The final example is useful because it reveals that sometimes a child may have a choice of social pathways in cases when mothers and fathers hold different opinions on what their child should do. This leaves the young person having to decide which

option to follow. Adshead and Jamieson (2008) provide the case of a female mature student in her sixties. She was encouraged to enter higher education, but not from the parent one might expect:

> "My father who had left school at 16…never took any academic qualifications…said 'for god's sake go away and get a degree'…My mother with whom I had a very complex relationship had a degree in the days when it was fairly unusual…she said 'I think you should go out into the world and get your corners knocked off'…I was determined to do whatever she wanted." (Adshead & Jamieson, 2008, p. 149)

There is incongruence, not between parent and child (Schoon & Burger, 2022), but between the two parents. Here the father who does not have a degree encouraging his daughter to study, whereas the graduate mother thinks her daughter would be better off getting a job. The mature student rejects the opportunity presented by her father and instead goes with the opinion of her mother, who, as she states, held greater influence over her at the time.

There are very few examples in the mature student literature to include in the category 'opportunity rejected' which may reflect that transitions in this time period were beyond individual control (Furlong, 2009).

Concluding remarks

In conjunction with the national data presented in Chapter 2, the primary studies reviewed in this chapter help address RQ1 which asks: what historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 70s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school? The historical overview provided in this chapter and insights gleaned from a selection of youth studies and mature student research, have painted a picture of how young people's transitions in the 1960s, 70s and early 1980s were strongly determined by the school system, and norms and values associated with social class and sex at the time.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, young people's transitions from school to the next stage of their lives were theorised during this period as linear, predictable and constrained by opportunity structures (Furlong, 2009; Roberts, 2009). Aligning with this perspective, the review of literature undertaken for this chapter indicates that young

people leaving school in and around the 1960s and 1970s did not seem to have much agency over their next steps. It was unusual for individuals to make choices that differed from the pathways that had been predicted and expected. There is also a difference between the idea of wishes or aspirations, compared to expectations. This is something I consider when selecting my variables and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

This chapter has also highlighted the key roles of the school, teachers, careers advisors and parents on individuals' aspirations, expectations and post-school transitions. This finding can be illuminated through the lifecourse principle of 'linked lives'. These key influences will continue to be explored in my empirical analysis of the 1958 cohort data in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 theorised through the prism of lifecourse theory.

The next Chapter (4) reviews literature which sheds light on what changed in the lives of men and women from all social classes that meant they decided to enter higher education in the 1980s and 1990s as mature students.

4

Mature students in the 1980s and 1990s

Introduction

So far I have analysed young and mature student participation from the 1970s to the turn of the new millennium using national administrative statistics (Chapter 2). In addition, I mapped trends in student numbers onto key policy documents that have been concerned with higher education expansion and funding, illuminating how policy and wider societal changes help explain the increases and decreases in the statistical picture over time. The purpose of this current chapter is to move away from the policy-led explanations turning instead to understanding why at an individual level, people who left school in the 1970s, discussed in the previous chapter, returned to education and became mature students later in life.

In the first section, I briefly examine how mature student decisions have been researched. I point out that despite differences in methodological approaches, researchers tend to identify two overarching and usually intertwined reasons that influence mature students' decisions – personal motivations and career-related reasons. In the second section I focus on personal motivations, whilst in the third I explore the role of career-related reasons.

In the fourth and final section I summarise and conclude this chapter by outlining my key reflections resulting from this review of the existing research and how it impacts my secondary mixed-methods investigation into the educational pathways and decisions of 1958 cohort members.

Researching mature student decisions

Although there was interest in mature students in higher education even before their participation increased in the late 1980s and 1990s (Osborn et al., 1984), finding out why people study for degrees as a mature student was not the main priority of most studies. Rather the focus was on exploring who they were – their characteristics, qualifications, former occupations and how they were progressing on their courses (see for example Nisbet & Welsh, 1972).

However, interest from government departments, institutions and sociological researchers in understanding and explaining why people decide to become mature students has grown, largely because of the fluctuating patterns of participation as outlined in Chapter 2. This has included two studies on mature student participation commissioned by the UK government.

In the first, the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1979 awarded a contract to a consortium of researchers from three universities/polytechnics, at a time when there was concern regarding the anticipated fall in young student numbers (see Chapter 2). One of the objectives was to better understand mature students' personal objectives for studying on both qualifying and non-qualifying courses. The research was conducted during the academic year 1980/81 with its findings published in a book by Woodley et al. (1987).

In the second, and in a very different context, the then Department for Education and Employment commissioned Davies et al. (2002) to find out why there was a decline in mature student entry between 1995/96 and 1998/99 (see Chapter 2). The authors pointed out that patterns of participation had become more complex since the 1980s and early 1990s, both from the 'supply' side, in terms of the curriculum and institutions as well as on the 'demand' side in terms of the changing needs, expectations and aspirations of mature students. The focus of their research:

> […] was the range of structural, institutional, financial and personal factors which might interact and impact on the individual decision making process of mature learners. (Davies et al., 2002, p. 2)

Along with these two studies, there has been a range of smaller survey projects seeking to understand why people decided to study as mature students. No matter

the size, scope and time period in which the surveys were conducted, the results have tended to categorise reasons for becoming a mature student into two broad areas, with the most popular reason being for work, followed by those for personal reasons (see Davies et al., 2002; Feinstein et al., 2007; Woodley et al., 1987). Other much less cited reasons include interest in the subject or 'other' undefined reasons. Aside from being able to provide a general overview of motivations through these categories, surveys are also useful in that they have the potential to enable differences in motivations by personal characteristics to be analysed. This information is useful for targeted outreach and marketing activities at an institutional and local level (McCune et al., 2010), as well as informing national policy and funding arrangements.

There are, however, some recognised limitations to survey research in relation to understanding decision-making. Although surveys tend to show that career-related reasons are given as the primary aim of mature students, career reasons and personal reasons should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. For example, Smithers and Griffin (1986), conducted a postal survey of 312 applicants to a higher education programme in the early 1980s. They asked respondents (who were born between 1915 and 1956): "Why did you wish to enter a university course?" They provided three options to choose from: a) to further career, b) to change career, c) self-fulfilment. Smithers and Griffin commented:

> Although constrained somewhat by the (artificial distinction)
> between self-fulfilment and career considerations, the applicants
> gave a wide variety of reasons for having wanted to go to university.
> (1986, p. 78)

West (1996), who was an advocate for biographical, life story methods at a time when the survey method dominated the social sciences (Richardson, 1990a; Seale, 2004), suggested that not only are survey respondents limited in what reasons they can select, but also that the way survey questions are framed may mean that people select the response that is deemed to be the most socially acceptable and respectable, rather than the one that is most meaningful for them. As individuals are exposed to the explicit and implicit messages from employers and governments about the need to acquire new skills and upgrade qualifications (as discussed in

Chapter 2), West suggests that it is unsurprising that they may primarily report career-related motivations for participating in higher education. He argues that '[i]t is more respectable and acceptable' (1996, p. 2) to talk in terms of jobs and career progression as reasons for higher education study rather than personal motivations, with the latter more associated with enrolment on adult education courses as these tend to be regarded as courses people do for leisure (Field, 2015).

This observation signals a further limitation of survey research – the unsuitability of fixed choice questions to cast light on the meaning of a decision (Parr, 2000). As West argues, a reliance on surveys which emphasise career-related reasons, may mean that:

> […] the most important issue is in danger of being lost: what a new career or return to education represents at a particular juncture in a person's life and why it may be crucial to change direction. (West, 1996, p. 2)

I agree with West and argue that existing survey research is useful to gain insights into the general reasons for higher education participation. However, from a lifecourse perspective, cross sectional and one-off structured questionnaires with pre-defined options are constrained in the extent to which they can illuminate how a range of factors, at different historical and biographical time points, play a part in decision-making as a holistic process.

Survey researchers recognise the limitations to understanding changing contexts and meanings through this method, therefore some survey questionnaires complement structured questions with open-ended questions (e.g. University of London, 2008) and/or follow-up interviews to gain qualitative data (e.g. Davies et al., 2002). Additionally, a range of studies into mature students' decision-making since the 1990s have used small scale, purely qualitative designs in line with the 'biographical turn' in social sciences (Chamberlayne et al., 2000).

In the sections that follow, I draw out the personal and career motivations of mature students from a range of studies that use quantitative, mixed and qualitative methodologies. As in Chapter 3, I also seek to find examples from the literature that mention male mature students and students from a range of social class backgrounds who are not as commonly studied as working-class women.

Personal motivations for higher education participation

Personal motivations encompass a variety of sub-categories in the survey research. These tend to be phrased as future goals or aims including: 'to change the direction of my life'; 'to develop my talents and creative abilities' (Davies et al., 2002, p. 102)[48]; 'wanted an interest to keep my mind active'; 'to see if I could succeed at a course of this sort'; 'to acquire more self-confidence by gaining a qualification' (Woodley et al., 1987, p. 87); 'to develop myself as a person' (Feinstein et al., 2007, p. 35) or simply 'self-fulfilment' (Smithers & Griffin, 1986, p. 167). It is rare for any of the fixed choices to refer to aspects of the past, with the exception of the postal survey by Woodley et al. (1987). Influenced by the hypothesis proposed by sociologists Hopper and Osborn (1975) that people become mature students as a result of the misallocation of the British selective school system (discussed in Chapter 3), Woodley et al (1987) included the option: 'to make up for lack of educational opportunities in the past' (p. 35).

There are some patterns in the characteristics of those who select the various options across the surveys. For example, older-mature students are more likely than young and young-mature students to state that they are studying for self-development, particularly those at the Open University (Jamieson et al., 2009; Woodley et al., 1987). Women, more so than men, are likely to say their enrolment is for personal, rather than work-related reasons. There are some indications from Woodley et al. (1987), that it is those whose father was in the service social class (e.g. managers, professionals) or intermediate social class (e.g. clerical workers) who were more likely than those from working-class backgrounds (e.g. manual workers) to state that they were studying for personal reasons.

In the following sub-section, I review existing studies to look in more detail at the personal reasons to enrol in higher education given by mature students and how these are influenced by time period, social class and gender. I organise the literature

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[48] Davies' study does not include the original questionnaire and since the study is so old, the advice in the book to email the author for a copy is not possible. However, the results they present of the range of reasons given are a mixture from their closed survey question and focus group/interview data.

under the heading 'to make up for the past and to re-shape futures', because this is one of the strongest emerging themes.

To make up for the past and to re-shape futures

In the previous chapter, I mentioned how the notion of 'untapped potential' was used by Green and Webb (1997) to discuss how mature students realised, upon reflection, that they were not encouraged to continue in their education when at school – largely on account of social class and gender constraints prevalent at the time. Untapped potential, unfulfilled potential, latent potential as well as unfinished business are also categories not only used to reflect and understand their past but are also used in many studies to explain mature students' motivations for gaining a degree later in life and to change aspects of their futures.

The reason why this narrative is common in studies about mature students is summed up by Britton and Baxter (1994) in their biographical interview study of 14 women and seven men entering higher education in 1992:

> It is perhaps unsurprising that over half of the sample fell into the category of unfulfilled potential, which is a recognisable cultural narrative of our times. We would suggest that it is linked with the expansion of educational opportunity since the 1960s and the concern since the 1950s over wastage of working-class talent in the education system, which is reflected today in policies to widen access to previously underrepresented groups. (Britton & Baxter, 1994, p. 186)

Along with social class, they also note some clear differences by gender within the 'unfulfilled potential' narrative. Whereas the men in their study spoke of having been on the wrong track after leaving school because they made the wrong career choice, women spoke more about having missed out, and that their learning trajectories had been interrupted or disrupted often because marriage and children took priority over other options (McCune et al., 2010; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013).

It follows that for some mature students, the desire to prove to themselves or to others that they were, and are, capable of higher education comes through strongly in their interviews (a finding also found in Davies et al., 2002). For example, Beaty et al. (1997) wrote about orientations to learning amongst mature students enrolled at the Open University and the University of Surrey in the late 1990s. Under the

orientation they describe as 'personal – extrinsic – compensation' (p. 82), they give the example of a student who said:

> "It's something I've always wanted to do. For personal reasons between me and my parents I didn't go to university when I should have done. I've had a hankering ever since to discover whether or not I could have done it." (p. 82)

Although we do not know the social class or gender of this particular participant, what is of interest here is that they had always wanted to study and had held on to this ambition for many years.

Whereas here the decision to enrol is motivated by a desire to make up for the past, other studies offer a more future focused analysis. For example, Pegg and Di Paolo (2013) conducted interviews with 26 part-time mature students who were using credit transfer to re-engage with higher education. Unfinished business emerged as a key and overarching narrative and 'was a thread that surfaced throughout the interviews' (p. 219). In particular, it was used by the students in relation to desires to develop their 'imagined future selves' (Henderson et al., 2019) and expand their 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, 2008).

In a similar vein, Beaty et al. (1997) use the term 'personal – intrinsic – broadening' to describe those who are entering higher education as mature students in order to test and improve themselves as individuals. Self-reflection because of ageing and life-stage is important here as this example illustrates:

> "I suppose it was waking up one morning and finding I'm 35, sort of male menopause. I can't sit around here watching T.V. for the rest of my life – let's do something." (p. 81)

Beaty et al. (1997) use the notion of 'broadening' to also give the example of mature students, studying at the Open University who were stay-at-home mothers who wanted to become students to keep their minds active. This was an option chosen by twice as many women as men responding to Woodley et al.'s (1987) postal survey with similar results found by Davies et al. (2002). It was also found to be a popular aim of those who had retired (Feinstein et al., 2007; Woodley et al., 1987).

The issue of timing is a key factor to consider when discussing the process by which someone who is motivated by unfinished business returns to education. The

literature shows that women can only seriously consider fulfilling their own potential, making up for a lack of opportunity in the past, or using education for self-improvement once the time, with regard to their family duties, was right (e.g. Osborne et al., 2004). I return to the study by Britton and Baxter (1994) to illustrate this.

Janice had wanted to progress to further education when she was 15 to become a Physical Education teacher, but was discouraged both by her teachers and parents, for reasons related to her working-class background (see also Chapter 3). However, she held onto her educational aspirations for around 20 years before the opportunity finally arose for her to enrol on an Access course, when her parental responsibilities reduced. She said:

> "Well, I had heard of it [Access] quite a few years ago, and then, for one reason, I was having a lot of trouble with one of the children and I knew I couldn't cope with it then, so I put it off and put it off, then I kicked him out, and I thought, 'Right, do something for yourself!'" (Britton & Baxter, 1994, p. 184)

The time became right for Janice to pursue her own aspirations. Her decision and subsequent enrolment could be considered 'fast track' (Webb et al., 1994) because despite her ambition not being realised for over 20 years, once the opportunity arose, she seized it without hesitation. Other studies give examples of students who needed a lot more encouragement and time to realise that they might have untapped or unfulfilled potential. These types of decisions are what Webb et al. (1994) might describe as 'slow track'.

An example of the slower process of building up the confidence to become university students is demonstrated in the study by Davies et al. (2002). The 119 mainly working-class respondents in their mixed-methods study were asked for their perceptions of university since leaving school. Their responses were largely negative including: 'it was like school, and I hated school, 'posh, not for the likes of me', and, 'never came across anyone who went, didn't know about such places'. Their view of university students was also negative. Students were considered 'scruffy', 'drunks and dossers', 'toff children' as well as a group they rarely encountered with one saying, 'there were none where I lived'. The authors remark that only 16% of their

participants held positive views about university when they were younger (p. 76). Indeed, studies, overall, show that mature students from working-class backgrounds had tended to feel that university was 'not for the likes of me' (Marks et al., 2003, p. 37) when they were younger.

Davies et al. (2002) suggest that there were three factors that changed the potential students' negative views from the time they left school and up to the point in which they considered enrolling in higher education: familiarity with higher education; self-belief in academic potential; and changing aspirations.

Familiarity with higher education

The prospective mature students in Davies et al.'s study (2002) became increasingly familiar with higher education through hearing about the experiences of colleagues, friends, siblings, other family members as well as their own grown-up children. Their new views, compared to when they were younger changed, with respondents stating that: 'it's not so elitist', 'people who go later are motivated' (p. 76).

For men, wives have been found to be important positive key influencers, which contrasts with studies which show that husbands tend to be barriers to women's enrolment and their success when on the course[49] (Edwards, 1991; Parr, 2000). Hopper and Osborn (1975) cite a man whose wife was lecturing in liberal studies at a technical college when he met her. She had a degree and informed him of the benefit of studying as a positive experience, for personal and career reasons and most importantly he says, "she persuaded me that I was capable of studying for a degree" (p. 115).

Increasing confidence

The second factor for the change in individuals' views of university (Davies et al. (2002), was that confidence in their own academic abilities grew. One commented: 'I realise I'm not dim' (p. 76). This increase in confidence was often because of some interaction with further education, community education or employer-linked education provision. For some women, their change in attitude and confidence took

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[49] This is also a key theme in the famous stage play *Educating Rita* by Willy Russell (1980), made into a film in 1983. I also noticed this theme when watching re-runs of the first few episodes of BBC TV series *Goodnight Sweetheart* (1993).

many years. These 'slow track' decisions tend to be characteristic of women who enrol on further and adult education courses in a range of subjects, slowly building up confidence as well as gradually gaining clarity about what they might want to study, before eventually enrolling on a specific course (Webb et al., 1994).

For working-class men in Hopper and Osborne's study (1975), trade unions were important in increasing confidence and making them realise that they had potential to study at university. The authors showed how being involved in trade union activities was a way in which factory workers could gain new experiences and skills such as public speaking, planning and argument – skills that they may not have the opportunity to develop or exercise in their routine, manual jobs. This experience led the men in their study to feel encouraged to enter higher education. Hopper and Osborn (1975) also point to the role of older people in the workplace as key influences for working-class men, offering guidance and encouragement as well as 'lucky chance encounter(s)' (p. 115) with university students who had come to work in their factories during the summer holidays, giving them an insight into what higher education was like.

For those in white collar jobs, educational activities were often leisure based. Hopper and Osborn (1975) mention how some of their middle-class male mature student participants would enrol in evening classes with other people from the office. It was here where they would encounter tutors and other students who were influential in encouraging them to evaluate their own abilities and consider themselves as capable of university study.

Changing aspirations

A third factor that led to the mature students' change in their learner identities (Davies et al., 2002), was that they had a change in their own aspirations. Examples include 'I wanted to be one (a student)', 'like my brother' and, 'necessary to achieve my goals' (ibid, p. 76). The theme of regret is expressed by some mature students when they think back to their earlier educational experience. For example, Student No. 56 in the thesis by Alford (1995) is a 38-year-old man. He mentions his regret at his personal lack of interest in education when young, but modifies personal blame

by highlighting the historical, social and cultural contexts which shaped his attitudes at the time:

> "I didn't realise then the value of education, this was the late sixties
> when a factory job - for life - was there for the taking. How I was to
> regret that philosophy!" (p. 150)

Alford (1995) points out that only by coming to terms with past regrets, can people concentrate on the present and change how they want their futures to be.

Another way to reconcile feelings of regret is to encourage others, particularly their own children to not make the same mistakes they did (Edwards, 1993). For example, Student No. 10 (Alford 1995) study is a 37-year-old mother. She assesses how her life might have been different had she stayed on at school. She turns this regret into encouragement towards her son's education:

> "But I regret it now because I know I could do so much better than
> I'm doing now, I encourage my son all the time (he's never wagged
> it) to try hard now it's your future that's at stake - do you want a job
> or a career you enjoy." (Alford, 1995, p. 150)

Similar findings were found in a study by Reay et al. (2002) which concentrated on a sample of students who dropped out of their Access course because of problems related to money, childcare and lack of time to study, although they hoped to return when they could.

Whereas these examples focused on mothers' changing aspirations towards education because of, or for the sake of their own children, Tett (1999) looked at mature students whose own aspirations were affected by the wider community in which they worked. She studied a group of working-class community activists studying at an elite university in Scotland on an apprenticeship style Access scheme in 1994. Like the participants in Davies et al. (2002), all the working-class female participants had negative views of university when they were younger. However, this attitude changed over time, particularly when they realised that they could be role models for the community in which they were working. As one of the participants, a white female aged 45, explains:

> "We can be a role model to those we are working with. They see
> that if we can go on to university, then it's not just for the 'wee

swots'. People from my area don't go to university, we're breaking the mould and still being accepted because we're streetwise to what's going on in the area." (p. 114)

Wanting to enter higher education because of a sense of communal responsibility was a reason unique to working-class mature students in the literature, indicating that some working-class mature students do not always feel comfortable about investing in education for only individual gain (Reay, 2002; Tett, 1999) or at least in articulating it in this way (West, 1996). This insight is in contrast with much of the policy discourse underpinned by human capital theory as mentioned in Chapter 1 and 2.

I now turn to the reasons most often given for participation in higher education i.e. for work or career. As discussed earlier, personal reasons and career-related reasons are not mutuality exclusive and the connection between aspects of the self and work, comes through strongly in the literature.

Work reasons for higher education participation

Through qualitative research it is possible to examine the process by which decisions to participate in higher education as a mature student were reached. To understand both why and how work and career influence individual decisions. I structure this part of the chapter using the headings: requirement to progress in current career; for a career change; to lead to a higher status; and, unplanned career change.

Requirement to progress in current career

Smithers and Griffin (1986) noted that career progression was given as a reason for enrolment by those in a range of professions such as teaching and nursing, engineering, archaeology, librarianship and the police force. The mature students in their study pointed out that they could only go so far in their careers without a degree, and others increasingly needed a degree as a pre-requisite to enter certain careers. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, nursing and teaching were two of the most popular professions girls were encouraged to enter. Over time, a degree was needed within these careers – even for those who had already qualified some years earlier. To illustrate, 44% of the first cohort to enrol at the

Open University were established teachers looking to gain a degree (Weinbren, 2014). With regard to nursing, the Project 2000 scheme, which contracted the training of nurses out to UK universities, became fully operational in the early 1990s and it was from this point that increasing numbers of nurses have been awarded degrees (Carpenter et al., 2012). By 1993 all nursing qualifications were awarded by universities and by 2013 nursing had become a graduate profession (Glasper, 2017).

Lack of qualifications was found to be a barrier for those who wanted to re-enter these professions, having left some years earlier to start and bring up their families. Librarians, radiographers and nurses in Pascall and Cox's (1993) study found that they had become demoted when returning to work because the knowledge and qualification requirements had changed during their absence. The authors wrote: 'On the whole these women were not looking for change, so much as having change thrust upon them' (p. 45).

A male perspective was observed by Marks (1998) who surveyed and interviewed mature full-time students on an undergraduate degree course in Liverpool around 1996. When asked why he came to university, Dave who was 28 and studying sociology and social policy said:

> "Boredom. And a piece of paper […] The piece of paper that could get me the job I could do *without* the piece of paper." (Marks, 1998, p. 153)

Unlike those mentioned above, it was not clear if Dave had a specific future career in mind or perhaps was just aware of the need for a degree in general terms, but Marks offers the following interpretation regarding his response:

> This suggests, if Dave is at all typical, that there may be a level of bitterness inherent in the mature student experience, with some seeing education as a means to an end, but that they are being forced to compete for work on someone else's (employer's) terms. (Marks, 1998, p. 153)

In contrast McCune et al. (2010) showed that students (attending university in 2004) held positive views about having to gain a degree for their work. They remark that students over the age of 31 who had established careers in schools:

[…] spoke of a rich sense of the relationship between their studies and their trajectories in relation to the communities of practice in which they had worked and in which they often planned to continue working once their studies were complete. (p. 696)

They recognised that they needed to be qualified despite having years of experience, but rather than resist or feel resentful, they were keen to learn and gain the qualifications and level of recognition that brings.

For a career change

Both negative and positive reasons can underlie a desire for a career change. Negative reasons include dissatisfaction with a current job, often because it is deemed boring or has no room for progression, whereas a positive reason could be wanting to explore a new career after enjoying time in a different occupation. When mature students in the literature speak about a desire for a career change, quite often this is closely connected to a desire for self-fulfilment, highlighting the interconnectedness between work and personal development discussed earlier in this chapter.

I start first with exploring the negative work experiences that can trigger a return to education. Themes of job dissatisfaction were identified by the men and women on Access courses in Alford's (1995) study. Student No. 36 is a 37-year-old man who was working on an assembly line. Whereas some of his colleagues were able to separate work from other aspects of their life, Student No. 36 was seeking a career that would give him self-fulfilment:

> "Some people can go through their life doing mundane work, switching on and off with the clock card. But regardless of money this is not my idea of job—satisfaction or self— fulfilment. These jobs have to be done but I feel I done my share." (p. 176)

We do not know what job he had in mind, nor what he was studying, but that perhaps he hoped education in general through the Access course, "[…] will be a starting point along a road to a better future". (Alford, 1995, p. 271)

Hopper and Osborn's (1975) study offers further insights into the decisions of working-class men. They give the example of a 24-year-old man from a manual background, who went to a secondary modern and was in the top stream. He left

school at 16 with O levels. He became an apprentice draughtsman, a job he chose partly because it was a company where all his friends were also going to work, but also because he wanted to use his artistic skills. Over time, however, he became disillusioned because he found the work boring and more technical rather than artistic as he had hoped. His work but also personal goals and aspirations began to change. He became more involved in trade union politics and eventually became an active trade unionist, finding the work meaningful and satisfying. His route into higher education was through Ruskin College, an educational institution with close ties to trade unions.

In explaining the decisions made by working-class men, Hopper and Osborn (1975) argued that some of them experienced 'fraternalistic relative deprivation' (p. 86). By this, they meant that the men increasingly became aware of the social injustices in society such as the inequalities associated with the selective school system and the class system. Adult education was a way in which they could pursue their long-term goals, which included being able to make changes to an unjust society through the gaining of qualifications that would enable them to enter relevant, socially focused, occupations (see also Tett, 1999; 2000, as discussed in the previous section).

For others, their careers were not necessarily unsatisfactory, rather, they were seeking a new career that better matched their changing and current identities. In this next example a 39-year-old man, from the study by Webb et al. (1994) had gone to a fee-paying boarding school and both the school, and his parents held very high expectations with regard to his continuing education, yet he chose not to take up the educational opportunities available to him. On leaving school at 18, he went to catering college, which he enjoyed and then went into the catering sector. When his work was threatened with redundancy, he set up his own catering company. When the business became successful, he chose to sell it and subsequently enrolled in higher education. Webb et al. (1994) interviewed him as an undergraduate on a B.Ed in Design and Technology with ambitions to be a primary teacher. When discussing the reasons behind this career change, he remarks:

> "I grew up! Needed a career for the future. I have a daughter of 5+
> years. Midlife crisis? I did a long term analysis, about 1989? Analysed
> my likes/dislikes of jobs, and training, teaching and imparting of

information came out very high and strong." (Webb et al., 1994, pp. 200-201)

In his late 30s, he was an example of someone making a 'fast track' (Webb et al., 1994) decision, because once the decision was made, he rang the higher education institution, had an interview and was accepted.

In a final example I highlight the changing opportunities that exist over time for those who wanted to enter the medical profession. The mixed-methods study by Mathers and Parry (2010) is one of the few that looks at a cohort of mature students who entered medical school later in life with the ambition of becoming doctors. Medicine is a subject and career that tends to be dominated by young people who are following in the 'family dynasty' (Foskett, 2011, p. 96), but Mathers and Parry's focus is on those who came from families and schools where medicine was not a typical career pathway.

To work in the medical sector had been a long-held desire for many in their study and new opportunities arose which made a medical career possible. The case study institutions included two new medical schools that were targeting more diverse students, and a traditional medical school that had a limited number of Access to medicine places. One student, a 40-year-old woman from a working-class background who was already working in the healthcare sector, learned about the opportunity to enter medical school via a television programme that her mother had watched and alerted her to:

> "[…] I thought, Well either you try and if you fail you'll be upset, but you'll get over it. But at least you'll know you've tried. At least you'll know you had one last shot and it didn't work." (Mathers & Parry, 2010, p. 1089)

Her age and life-stage were key factors for her career change and determination to take the plunge, making up for 'missing the boat' earlier on in life and to avoid later regrets.

To lead to a higher status

When mature students mention that a desire for higher status in society and/or in work was a contributing factor to their interest in studying for a degree, it is

necessary to look at their starting point to fully appreciate what higher status means to different groups (Alford, 1995).

The survey results by Woodley et al. (1987) and Davies et al. (2002) suggest that more men than women study for a degree to improve their career, their financial prospects as well as their social standing. However, in line with West's (1996) argument some women may also have this view but are less likely to articulate it. For example, when asked directly if gaining a higher status as a result of education was important to them, the women mature students in Pascall and Cox (1993) are described as modestly saying: 'I must confess it was [important], yes.' And 'I can't deny the fact that others who don't have it are impressed by it and that pleases me' (p. 87).

Warmington's study (2003) is particularly useful in highlighting how the desire for higher status work motivated his sample to enrol on an Access course. The mature students he interviewed were all at a college that tended to attract local students including from some of the city's most deprived wards. They lived in a town that had a high unemployment rate and declining local engineering sector. All were women in low paid and low status work, and many were also reliant on state benefits. Most had negative experiences of school and left with few or no qualifications.

Warmington (2003) asks why these women who had poor previous educational experiences would even consider returning to education, a site which for many was filled with bad memories. In contrast with and in reference to Willis (1977) and McFadden (1995), he refers to the women as disaffected workers rather than disaffected learners. This is because although his cohort may have had negative school experiences, the tensions present in the family and labour market were more pressing than any tensions they may have had about their prior educational experiences. They (re)constructed education as a neutral site in order to make changes to their work situations, viewing the Access course and eventual degree as 'cultural capital passports' (p. 101).

Another key factor was a desire to be a role model for their children, not as students as discussed in the personal motivations section of this chapter, but as workers:

"You know I don't want my daughter growing up saying that, you know, my mum goes to the Post Office to get her money." (Warmington, 2003, p. 105)

Through education, the women were seeking a 'career', rather than a 'job'. They defined a career as offering security, choice, independence and ultimately being viewed as more valuable to employers, in contrast to the 'jobs' they were working in where they felt dispensable.

The men in Hopper and Osborn's (1975) study, associated higher status work with creativity, autonomy and satisfaction. The theme of envy appears in the vignettes of the men dissatisfied with their position in the labour market. They suggest that those from social classes I and II[50] who over time become downwardly mobile, were said to hold feelings of 'egoistic relative deprivation' (p. 86), that is they compared themselves to their peers who were economically more successful and in more prestigious roles. For example, a man, age 26, who was in the intermediate social class II in childhood, went to grammar school and was in the top stream. He left school with O levels. However, he was downwardly mobile and was in social class III(nm) before re-entry into higher education. We do not know why he did not do A levels and go to university when younger nor what his job was, but whatever his reasons, he seemed to have gone against the norms and expectations of his family. He said:

"I have felt very conscious in the past that other people similar to myself are doing much better. Both my sisters did better. One went to university. The other did 'A' levels. I was a bit of a disappointment to my parents." (Hopper & Osborn, 1975, p. 87)

He continues to talk about how his family and cousins were doctors, lawyers, accountants and dentists and felt embarrassed at family functions. For some of the men in Hopper and Osborn's study it seems that gaining a degree was in some way about keeping up appearances and fitting in with the expectations and culture of their family and social class (similarly for some women in Hutchinson &

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[50] Here Hopper and Osborn (1975) are referring to the Registrar General's Social 'Classification of Occupations'. Social class I: Professional occupations; II: Intermediate; III (nm): Skilled non-manual; III (m): Skilled manual; IV: Partly skilled; and V: Unskilled. I discuss this classification system further in Chapter 5, where I explain the classification system used in the NCDS and in my own analysis.

Hutchinson, 1986). Another example from the same study shows reasons for gaining a degree includes making sure they are attractive as a prospective husband on the 'marriage market' (Foster, 2016).

All examples in this section so far have been planned and seemingly carefully thought through. I now turn to the reasons for becoming a mature student that were as a result of unexpected life events that interrupted individuals' careers and work identities.

Unplanned career change

Major life events can impact decisions to study for a degree (Alford, 1995; Parr, 2000). These can be known and planned for e.g. a child will one day grow up and leave home meaning parental responsibility changes, to those which are unexpected and unplanned such as divorce, redundancy, bereavement and other unexpected or significant events that make people reflect and rethink their lives. It is the unexpected turning points, mainly through redundancy, which are the focus of this section. Here returning to formal education was not something individuals felt they would ever have considered if they had not lost their 'job for life'.

Ken went to a comprehensive school and left with no qualifications, not thinking that he would ever need them because he had a stable job working in the brewery like his father (Green and Webb 1997). However, he had an accident at age 26 which meant he could no longer continue working there. He became depressed and said he was 'sitting in the house' (p. 143) for four years. Ken enrolled onto a rehabilitation course and with the encouragement of his tutor enrolled on other courses. He commented:

> "The tutor on the City and Guilds computing course said I could go
> on to a degree. They really influenced my life – it was a gift from
> God, being told I could do this." (Green & Webb, 1997, p. 143)

Whereas Ken is spurred on to explore a new side of himself through education, for others redundancy led to the chance to fulfil a career goal which they had been harbouring for many years but could not have followed earlier in life due to the societal and parental pressures.

Britton and Baxter (1999) give an example of a man who had always wanted to become a nurse, but his father would not let him because it was not seen as an appropriate occupation for a man. He left school to take up an apprenticeship as a wood turner like his father and grandfather before him – a common theme in youth transitions research (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005a). However, Britton and Baxter discuss how Stan "felt forced into becoming a different kind of person from the self he felt himself to be" (p.185). Stan felt that he was sensitive and intelligent, characteristics he says were frowned upon in the masculine world in which he lived and worked. Using the recession in the building industry as an opportunity, he returned to the nursing path he originally wanted to pursue when leaving school.

For some women identified in Pascall and Cox's study (1992), it was not their own experience of redundancy but the threat of their husband's redundancy that triggered a return to education. When Lesley was asked to explain her decision to return to education, she first expressed dissatisfaction with the gendered-career choice she fell into just after school. However, she also points to factors related to her family. Her husband was a manual worker who had to work 12-hour shifts, typically consisting of four-days on, four-days off. He had to leave this job for the sake of his mental health, but this resulted in a huge drop in income. They were struggling financially, and Lesley saw the opportunity to return to education, especially because at this point her children were becoming less dependent. She wanted to do something for herself and discover other aspects of her identity beyond a mother:

> "I don't mean that the children didn't need me anymore but in a
> sense it would have been wrong for me to need them too much – to
> make my life out of them." (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p. 63)

Lesley is an example of one of many women in Pascall and Cox's (1993) study whose decisions and motivations were affected by an 'intricate web of elements' (p. 60) where personal and career factors for deciding to become a student are intertwined. Lesley concludes that her main reason for becoming a mature student, if she had to pinpoint it, was the need to have work should her husband's work fall through. However, the mix of factors highlights the difficulty in having to tick just

one box on a survey asking why you decided to enrol as discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Concluding remarks

In conjunction with the national data presented in Chapter 2 the primary studies reviewed in this and the previous chapter, have highlighted existing evidence and understandings about why individuals become mature students in higher education. In so doing, my analysis so far provides some insights into addressing my second research question: what changed in society as well as in individual lives to enable people who left school during the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?

The main reasons for why people became mature students according to the qualitative studies reviewed above, were related to changing identities and views about who higher education is for (including in relation to social class and gender), to help manage life crises, to navigate entering different life-stages, as well as simply for new work requirements. Some decisions were made quickly whereas others took many years to make and come to fruition. Decisions were sometimes made seemingly in isolation, whereas the role of other people was key for others.

Although a lot of information has been gleaned from the existing literature, I argue there is still scope to add to the topic of mature student decision-making using a different research design perspective. There are six areas that will be developed in my thesis, based on my review of the literature.

First, the connection between an individual's earlier life and their decision to become a mature student was not always possible in every circumstance to glean from the studies. This was because the past was not always a key consideration for the researchers, so questions about earlier education and life experience were not always asked. Researchers also tended to utilise thematic analysis as the interest was on common topics across their samples, not exploring in detail the experience of individuals. To be able to connect across longer periods of the time is a key part of lifecourse studies (Mayer, 2009) and possible to explore in my thesis using longitudinal data and life stories.

Secondly and linked to this is that through my review, I deliberately sought out examples from studies of people born around the same age as the 1958 cohort, or at the least had gone through the selective school system, in order to connect changing historical and policy contexts to individual decisions. The studies reviewed however did not always mention the time period in which their participants were growing up, the precise age of participant, or exactly when the research was carried out. This is common in the sociology of education where it is the contemporary issues affecting class cohorts of mature students that is of interest to researchers – time is therefore taken for granted or not a factor of analysis (Adam, 1995; Deem, 1980). As Ann Phoenix (2014) reflects:

> Like most sociologists, I have studied lives lived in contemporary time. As I look back, I am struck by the particularity of the historical periods in which I undertook the research - which was not at all obvious to me then in the way it is now. (Phoenix, 2014, p. 105)

Therefore, I had to deduce from the publication date and other factors how old particular individuals were in some of the studies. By contrast, age and historical context is important in lifecourse research and my thesis. The use of the 1958 birth cohort enables the time period under investigation to be clearly defined.

Thirdly, rather than studying mature student decisions in their first year of study, as is the case of many of the studies reviewed above, I will be exploring decisions from up to 20 or so years after graduation. This is a different temporal perspective not commonly used in studies about mature students.

Fourth, social class is well observed in the qualitative studies, albeit more attention is given to the working-class experience that other groupings. I sought out examples of middle/other social classes and was able to find and include some. There is scope for more examples of middle and the intermediate social class experiences in my thesis. I would also suggest that in the existing literature, there is a lack of clarity on how class is defined. As discussed in Chapter 2, for lifecourse studies, it is the childhood social class which is most important and as will be explained in Chapter 5, the NCDS enables a specific definition of class to be understood.

Fifth, many studies focused on women. I have sought out examples from male mature students for this review. In my thesis, I can utilise the advantage of the large

quantitative data from NCDS to look further at patterns by social class and gender and explore these further in the qualitative analysis.

Finally, the research has shown the importance of linked lives and changing decisions. I want to see how I can expand on this through the use of data gathered from teachers, cohort members and their parents when at school, rather than rely only on retrospective recollections from the mature students.

The focus of the next chapter therefore is on my research design and methodology where I can consider these issues further and how my research design works towards addressing them.

5

Research design

Introduction

To my knowledge there has been no research on what a mixed method approach to analysing only secondary data can add to understandings of mature student participation in higher education. Research about learning though the lifecourse that draws upon secondary resources tends to use be used in combination with primary data. For example, Gorard and Rees (2002) investigated lifelong learning trajectories in South Wales. They complemented their analysis of oral history archives with a primary questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In the 'Learning Lives' project which explored participation in education and training across time, Biesta et al. (2008) combined primary, longitudinal life story interviews with analysis of secondary data from the British Household Panel Survey. These projects were designed to connect individuals to the social, historical and economic contexts in which their learning took place and they used a range of data sources, data gathering methods and modes of analysis to meet this aim.

The aim of this thesis is also to contribute to holistic understandings of educational decisions made in changing historical and biographical contexts but, in contrast to other studies, I have concentrated purely on secondary data to undertake this task. This chapter sets out my rationale for the overall research strategy, design and modes of analysis I have employed to address my aim and four research questions:

1. What historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 70s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school?

2. What changed in society, as well as in individual lives, to enable people who left school during the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?
3. What is the meaning of gaining a degree for cohort members?
4. Can new insights be gained by combining and analysing existing quantitative and qualitative data guided by lifecourse theory, in researching mature students' decision-making?

The chapter is structured in six sections as follows. I first describe the characteristics of the contemporary Mixed-Methods Research (MMR) field I have aligned myself with. Section 2 outlines the data sources and variables drawn upon a) from various sweeps of the National Child Development Study (NCDS) (University College London, 2023): and b) from the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (SPIS) (Elliott et al., 2022). Thirdly, I present a diagram of my research process, based on one of the core MMR designs, explaining how it has been adapted to take into account the sole use of secondary data. Integration of data is a key part of MMR, and in Section 4, I introduce how the findings from the different data sources can be connected to address the overarching research aim. I then turn to a discussion of the three types of analysis I have employed. Finally, I provide an overview of my ethical considerations.

Contemporary Mixed-Methods Research – an overview

Mixing methods has always been a feature of research in a range of disciplines, but MMR as a distinct mode of inquiry became formalised in the 1990s, with the number of textbooks and specialist journals dedicated to the topic growing rapidly since then (Clark et al., 2021; Creswell, 2014).

Despite the wealth of publications about MMR, some specific gaps have been identified by researchers as still needing addressing. First it has been pointed out that a lot of attention has been focused on the data collection phase to the neglect on how to integrate mixed data (Brannen, 2005; Bryman, 2006; Woolley, 2009), although this imbalance is being redressed by, for example, Bazeley (2018), Creamer (2018) and Lindsey et al. (2015). There has also been criticism about the lack of examples within the mixed-methods literature on how to analyse and integrate

longitudinal data into mixed-methods designs. Instead, the focus has tended to be on cross sectional designs and analyses (for exceptions see Elliott, 2005; Waller et al., 2020). Examples of how to write up and present mixed-methods research that integrates the findings from the different data sources has also been highlighted as a neglected area in MMR (Bazeley, 2018; Brannen, 2005; Bryman, 2016; Creamer, 2018; Elliott, 2005).

Finally, extremely limited attention has been given to how to design and carry out MMR using only secondary data (Watkins, 2022). However, the increased availability of data through the UK Data Archive, as well as the contractual requirement for Economic and Social Research Council grant holders to deposit data for future re-use, means that there is an increasing need to bridge the gap between the MMR core designs and practicalities of researching with secondary data (Bishop, 2005; Corti, 2000, Moore, 2007; Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2022; Watkins, 2022). This chapter and thesis make a unique contribution to this growing area.

By contrast one area of MMR that has received a vast amount of attention, and likely can never truly be resolved, is the longstanding methodological debate around MMR in terms of the (in)compatibility between research paradigms (Bryman, 2016; Gorard, 2010). In this thesis, I situate myself within contemporary applications of MMR, which emphasises points of agreement and practical considerations, rather than philosophical debates and divisions. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010) outline the guiding methodological principles of MMR from this contemporary perspective which I briefly summarise.

Characteristics of contemporary Mixed-Methods Research

Contemporary MMR is characterised by the research question or problem guiding the methods employed rather than philosophical issues around epistemology or ontology – issues which can seem insurmountable and unhelpful, especially for novices (Gorard, 2010; Hammersley, 2011; Seale, 2000). Methodological eclecticism is encouraged, meaning that the most appropriate strategies are selected and integrated to thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest.

Linked to this, there is a shift from binaries to continua (Niglas, 2010) with 'paradigm pluralism' referring to a belief that a variety of philosophical or theoretical

stances are suited to the use of a range of methods. This pluralistic viewpoint is useful because research methods textbooks still tend to reinforce the simplistic idea that someone who works with structured and quantitative data is a positivist and anyone who conducts qualitative research is an interpretivist or constructivist (Gorard, 2010; Hammersley, 2011; Mason & Dale, 2011). There has been longstanding criticism of this binary, including by Cathie Marsh (1982) who was a leading quantitative sociologist in the UK. She argued that developing and using surveys does not make her a positivist – a philosophical concept she suggests is not applicable to sociological research:

> Do you have to buy this unsatisfactory epistemological package to
> get the free gift of survey methods? (Marsh, 1982, p. 51)

Another characteristic of contemporary MMR, outlined by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010, p. 9), is 'an emphasis on diversity at all levels of the research enterprise' from the conceptual to the empirical and from the questions to the conclusions. MMR can address both confirmatory and explanatory questions as well as divergent conclusions[51], within a single study. Diversity within a single study is particularly important for my thesis which poses hybrid research questions (Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008), which are concerned with both macro and micro perspectives and address issues that cover a range of timescapes.

MMR is also characterised by an iterative, cyclical approach to research with integration of data and findings important (Bryman, 2016; Woolley, 2009; Yin, 2006). In my study, an iterative, cyclical approach is key to not only the integration of data and analysis, but an important part of the process of exploring, understanding and selecting the data to analyse in the first place.

Finally, it is generally agreed that there are three core designs associated with MMR– sequential, explanatory and concurrent – with dozens of variations within these. The MMR approach uses diagrams to display the design, which includes the 'procedure for collecting, analysing and reporting research' (Creswell et al., 2003, p. 211). There are also 'rules' for what should be included in a diagram in terms of layout,

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[51] The acceptance of divergent conclusions differs from earlier mixed-methods research where the aim of combining methods was for triangulation and convergence of findings only.

information, use of capital letters and so forth (Creswell, 2013; Ivankova et al., 2006)[52].

Before presenting my MMR diagram and discussing these issues in relation to my thesis, I first describe the data that I have selected from the NCDS and SPIS.

The secondary data used in this thesis

In Chapter 1, I briefly described the history of the National Child Development Study, also known as the 1958 British birth cohort study. I use these two names interchangeably throughout this thesis. In this section, I provide further detail on the data I used in my analysis from both the main NCDS sweeps, which primarily collects structured, quantitative data, and the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study which includes qualitative biographical interviews with 220 cohort members when they were aged 50[53].

Measures selected from the longitudinal, quantitative datasets (NCDS)

There are seven key variables that I used in the first stage of analysis. The outcome or dependent variable is 'age when gained degree'. This measures whether a cohort member gained a degree by age 50, and if so, the age range (and time period) in which it was awarded. The six control or independent variables are: sex; household social class; school type; teachers' assessment of their suitability for further or higher study; attainment in public examinations at age 15/16; parents' aspirations for whether they would like their child to continue their education full-time up to and beyond the age of 18; and, the cohort members own wishes about continuing their education once compulsory schooling had come to an end.

I discuss each of these in turn providing a justification for their selection and a brief outline of what constitutes each variable.

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[52] These 'rules' are: descriptive title; horizontal or vertical display; upper or lower case to signify order of priority; stages as boxes – data collection, analysis; mixing and interpretation as circles of procedures; products or outcomes; concise language; simplicity; single page; depending on the model: timeline, phases, stages, colour coding.

[53] Qualitative interviews were conducted face-to-face, mainly at cohort members' home between Nov 2008 and August 2009 in England and Scotland and the end of 2009 to the first half of 2010 in Wales. Some cohort members were therefore 51 or 52 at the time of the interview.

Age when awarded degree

There is no single existing variable in the NCDS that identifies the precise age when a cohort member gained their degree. I created this measure from the derived highest qualification variables that are available at each sweep of data collection from age 23 to age 50 (1981–2008) (see Appendix 3 and Dodgeon et al. (2011)). The five analytic categories in the new variable are:

- No degree by age 50 (80%)
- Attained when Young: by age 23 [1979-1981] (10%)
- Attained when Young Mature: between age 24 and 33 [1982-1991] (4%)
- Attained when Middle-Mature: between 34 and 42 [1992-2000] (3%)
- Attained when Older-Mature: between 43 and 50 [2001-2008] (2%)

The ages and years refer to when cohort members were awarded a degree, not the date that they started the course as is the case in most of the national statistics (see Appendix 4 for further details). This is important to note and remember when reflecting on the analysis in the chapters that follow.

Sex

This variable was chosen because of the importance of traditional sex-based gender roles on the destinations, expectations and norms of men and women of this generation. Sex is categorised as male (0) or female (1). In the age 50 survey 49% of respondents were men and 51% women.

Household social class

As noted in Chapter 2 the social class of mature students is not routinely collected in official statistics. Where it has been collected, the definition of social class is based on the occupation of the mature student at the time of enrolment. This has limitations from a lifecourse perspective, where a measure of the social class in which individuals grew up holds greater importance in terms of examining social pathways and trajectories and later life outcomes (Halsey et al., 1980; Mayer, 2009).

The childhood social class variable was collected at every sweep up until age 16. I am concentrating on the cohort members' social class at age 11 (1969). At this

sweep, social class was measured as seven-category variable based on the Registrar General five-point categorisation[54] (General Register Office, 1966). It is derived from the father's occupation, or other male head if the father was absent. To reflect a more rounded measure of childhood social class, I have used a composite Household Social Class variable constructed by Elliott and Lawrence (2014), who created the variable specifically for those who want to maximise the mixed-methods potential of the NCDS and SPIS. The syntax is provided at the end of their 2014 publication.

Rather than class being defined only by father's occupation, Elliott and Lawrence's (2014) three-point scale (middle-class, intermediate-class and working-class), also includes household type and mother's occupation – if a manual worker (and only used to categorise people into the intermediate-class). Table 5.1 shows how cohort members' household social class has been defined in this new three category variable.

Table 5.1: Summary of the composite household social class variable created by Elliott and Lawrence (2014) for the NCDS and used in this thesis.

New social class variable category	Father's occupation, 1969 (using RGCS, 1966)		Household tenure, 1969		Mother's occupation 1958 or 1969
Middle-class (21%)	I or II	and	Owner-occupied	-	-
Intermediate (37%)	I or II	and	Renting	or	Manual worker
	IIIa	-	-	-	-
	IIIb or IVb or IVa or V	and	Owner-occupied		-
Working-class (42%)	IIIb or IVb or IVa or V	and	Renting	-	-
Social classes key: I & II professional managerial and administrative; IIIa routine non-manual; IIIb routine manual; IVa routine services non-manual; IVb routine services manual; V unskilled manual (General Register Office, 1966).					

Reflecting the occupational structure of 1960s Britain (Halsey & Webb, 2000; Webb, 2000), the percentages in Table 5.1 show that the majority of the cohort fit into the working-class and intermediate categories with the smallest group in the middle-class (Elliott & Lawrence, 2014).

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[54] For a fascinating history of the development of classifications of occupations, status and class see Rose (1995) and Szreter (1984).

School type at 16

In the age-16 survey (NCDS3) (University of London, 2014), head teachers were asked to select what type of school theirs was from a list of nine types of Local Education Authority (LEA)[55] and five types of school not wholly maintained by a LEA[56]. From this information, I derived a new variable to create the following four categories:

- Comprehensive (57%)
- Grammar (12%)
- Secondary modern[57] (24%)
- Private[58] (7%)

It must also be noted that although at age 16, 57% were attending a comprehensive school, the time period in which individual schools transitioned from a grammar or secondary modern is not captured by this variable. The comprehensivisation process started in 1965 but completed at different rates across the country. Some cohort members may therefore have started their schooling in a secondary modern or grammar school and only spent their final year in the comprehensive, for example.

Teachers' views

Fogelman (1976) using the NCDS showed that students' and teachers' expectations regarding further and higher education were aligned, particularly amongst those who were going onto degree and teacher training courses. In my analysis, I am particularly interested to look at patterns of participation in higher education that fit with teachers' expectations, as well as those whose outcomes differed. This includes cohort members who were regarded as suited to studying for degree but never did,

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[55] (N2102) Comprehensive (Incl. bilateral and multilateral); Grammar (selective senior secondary in Scotland); Secondary modern (junior secondary in Scotland); Technical; All-age; Residential special; Day special; Immigrant centre; other.
[56] (N2103) Independent school (not one catering wholly or mainly for children who are handicapped (sic)); Direct-grant school (grant-aided in Scotland); non-maintained special school; Independent school catering for wholly or mainly for handicapped (sic) pupils; other.
[57] Originally, I had an 'other' category which included the range of private and LEA special schools and technical schools listed in footnote 3 and 4 but the size of this category was too small and heterogeneous to be useful for analysis (N=195). Because the patterns of those in the 'other' category of gaining/not gaining a degree were similar to the secondary modern pupils, then the secondary modern category also includes technical and all special schools.
[58] Independent schools and Direct Grant schools.

or on the other hand, those who were not seen as being suited to a degree but went on to gain one as a young or mature student.

In the age 16 survey, teachers were asked:

> To which one (if any) of the following kinds of full-time further or higher education do you think this child is most suited?

There were eight options[59] for teachers to choose from, and I recoded these to three categories to reflect the focus of my research:

- Bachelor Degree and Bachelor of Education (13%)
- Other part-time or full-time study (all levels) (59%)
- None of these (28%)

School attainment

Research has shown that earlier attainment has an impact on qualifications gained across the lifecourse (e.g. Makepeace et al., 2003). Therefore, I wanted to look at school attainment and impact on when a degree was attained, if at all.

All exam results were collected as part of NCDS4 in 1981 (University of London, 2008a). The number of good grade exam passes a cohort member had attained at the end of compulsory education were grouped as follows:

- No 'good' grade school exam passes (47%)
- 1-4 'good' grade school exam passes (30%)
- 5-9+ 'good' grade school exam passes (23%)

These 'good' grades are equivalent to a GCSE at grades A* to C in Wales, 9 to 4 in England or Scottish equivalents (as of 2022).

Although a cohort member may have no 'good' passes, they may still have passes (e.g. O Level grade D / CSE grade 2 or below) in a range of subjects. However, it is mainly the 'good' school exam passes, particularly in English and maths, which are connected to beneficial outcomes in education, occupations, and wellbeing (see Jerrim, 2023) and therefore the ones I am focusing on here.

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[59] Degree course at a university or polytechnic; B.Ed at a College of Education; Some other advanced (i.e. needing A levels or equivalent) full-time course at a polytechnic or college of further education; Certificate course at a College of Education; Other full-time further education; Part-time education in preparation for a professional qualification (e.g. law, accountancy, etc); Other part-time education; None of these.

Parents' wishes

As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a difference between someone's wishes for their future and what they expect their destinations to be. I am interested here in parents' wishes for their children, whether or not their wishes were realistic. In the age 16 survey in 1974, parents were asked:

Which of the following would the parents like the study child to do?

- Leave at minimum school leaving age (i.e. end of this school year)
- Stay in full-time education beyond minimum school leaving age, but not beyond 18
- Continue some form of full-time education beyond age of 18
- Uncertain

I combined these options to create a two-category variable, as my main interest here is to differentiate between those who held aspirations for their child to continue in education beyond age 18 and those who did not:

- 16-18/uncertain (65%)
- Full-time education beyond 18+ (35%)

Cohort members' wishes

Like the parents, here I am interested in the cohort members' aspirations and wishes for their education, not their expectations. At age 16, close to when they were reaching the end of their compulsory education, cohort members were asked:

After you leave school would you like to:

- Continue with full-time study
- Do a job that involves part-time study
- Do a job that requires no further study
- Don't know

Again as my main interest here is to differentiate between those who held aspirations to continue in education and those who did not, I recoded the four available options into the following two categories:

- Full-time study (28%)
- Job with part-time study/job only/don't know (72%)

Other data from the NCDS

Aside from the NCDS variables which are used in the quantitative analysis of Chapter 6, I also drew upon three other sources of information. First the teachers' predictions about the cohort members' further and higher education and jobs they were likely to enter. The following question from the NCDS Sweep 2 questionnaire (1969, age 11) (University of London, 2014) had not been coded into a quantitative variable:

> (17.a) From your present knowledge of this child and his circumstances: What do you think he is likely to achieve academically at secondary school and/or in further education? b) What kind of job or career do you feel might best suit his abilities or aptitudes? (Please feel free to be as specific or as general as you like).

Upon my request, in 2015, a CLS staff member transcribed 23 of the responses from the microfiche. In 2019, I put in a data enhancement application to get permission to transcribe a further 29 from the microfiche, focusing only on those who gained a degree as a mature student. I utilise the teachers' comments in Chapter 7 and 8.

I also looked at two other pieces of data from the NCDS for context and interpretation: the cohort member's age they thought they would leave school and why they thought they would leave at this; and reasons why cohort members gained their highest qualification – asked at age 33. I only used these two pieces of information for background information and context and do not discuss them further here; but see Appendix 5 for further details.

Data selected from the biographical sub-study

The objective of the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (Elliott et al., 2022) was primarily to investigate the association between social mobility[60] and patterns of social participation in, for example, trade unions, membership of political parties, volunteer and community work. A further objective was to provide archived qualitative data that could be used for secondary analysis along with the existing

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[60] The sample in the SPIS was stratified by social mobility with the aim of conducting interviews with those who were upwardly mobile, downwardly mobile or had a stable social class.

NCDS quantitative datasets. Methodologically, the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study:

> […] represents the first attempt to interview members of a national, longitudinal cohort study in depth, with the possibility of linking such biographical narratives to structured survey data collected throughout the life course. (Elliott et al., 2010, p. 3)

The main part I used was the life story section of the biographical interviews. The biographical interview topic guide consisted of six parts:

1. Neighbourhood and belonging
2. Leisure activities and social participation
3. Personal communities
4. Life history
5. Identity
6. Reflections on being part of the NCDS.

In my analysis presented in Chapters 7 and 8, I mainly draw upon Section 4, the life histories. Cohort members were asked the following: "So could you talk me through your life story as you see it? (Q17) and in question 18 "Have you covered all the major points you want to cover? What would you say have been the key influences and turning points?" Appendix 7 shows exactly how the question was phrased and the directions given to the interviewers. The must-use' words or compulsory phrases were highlighted in bold for the interviewers.

Although I mainly focused on Section 4 in my analysis presented in Chapters 7 and 8, I read all the interviews in depth and extracted relevant information from other sections because cohort members often cross-referenced to different sections of the interview when telling their life stories and answering other questions (Elliott et al., 2010).

In addition to the life stories, I also drew upon other parts of the sub-study package – the life trajectory diagrams, the observer observations and the childhood essays – to help with my analysis and interpretation (see Appendix 6 for details on the full contents of the SPIS package).

The life trajectory diagrams

After Q18 about key influences and turning points in the interview schedule, cohort members were asked:

> If you had to depict your life up to now by means of a diagram,
> which of these diagrams would you choose, or if none of these
> apply, can you draw a more representative pattern in the blank box?'

The life trajectory diagrams (see Chapter 8 and Elliott et al., 2010), were based on the work by Ville and Guérin-Pace (2005). The vertical axis represents the quality of experience and the horizonal its temporal dimension. I used the diagrams and explanations to illuminate if and how gaining a degree featured in the simple graphical representations of interviewees' lives[61].

Interviewer observations documents

Interviewers were asked to write down some observations about the cohort member's neighbourhood, the atmosphere of the interview, if refreshments were offered, if other people were present or in the home, and anything else that might be useful for future researchers to know about. I provide two excerpts in Appendix 8. Using secondary qualitative data inevitably means that the data analyst was not present during the data gathering process. This is seen as a weakness by some who view researchers as part of the research instrument and essential to interpretation and understanding (see Heaton, 2004; Mishler, 1986). However, I would suggest that the interviewer observations bridged this gap to some degree and provided some very useful contextual information to help with my understanding and interpretations.

Childhood essays – imagine your life at 25 (written at age 11)

A total of 13,669 (93%) cohort members who participated in the age 11 sweep of the NCDS wrote an essay about what they thought their life would be like at age 25 (Elliott, 2013a). The majority were written very soon after the cohort member's eleventh birthday and in their final year of primary school. Where available, the

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[61] See Evans and Biasin (2016) and their interesting use of the life trajectories from the SPIS to examine women's identity development.

essays of the 220 cohort members who are part of the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (n=179) were transcribed and deposited by CLS as part of the sub-study collection[62] (Elliott, 2013a).

Although I did not analyse or utilise all the childhood essays, like the interviewer observations, I used them to gain a connection and understanding of the cohort members' personalities, backgrounds and circumstances when they were writing their essays[63]. I felt only one essay was particularly suited for the purposes of my thesis, discussed further in Chapter 8.

Summary of data sources used in the analysis with timeline

As I have shown, there are a wide range of data sources within the main NCDS sweeps and sub-study that I am drawing upon in this thesis. In Table 5.2 I summarise them by broad data type and time period collected corresponding to the age and life-stage of cohort members.

I now turn to explain my mixed-methods design followed by a discussion about how I analysed the data.

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[62] All remaining available essays have now been transcribed resulting in 10,511 essays deposited in the UK Data Archive, study number 8313

[63] I also listened to the BBC Radio 4 documentary which interviewed a few cohort members about their lives and reflections on their essays (BBC Radio 4, 2010).

Table 5.2: Summary of data used in this thesis for context and background as well as for analysis by time period and data type.

Time period	Quantitative data	Qualitative data
Birth *1958*	• Sex	
Childhood **Age 11** *1969*	• Household Social class	• Imagine you are 25 essay • Teacher's predictions for child's academic achievements and career
Adolescence **Age 16** *1974*	• School type • Parents' wishes for child's education • Cohort members wishes • Teacher's thoughts on what FE/HE the child is suited to, if any • Age cohort member expected they would leave and their reasons	
Adulthood **Age 23-50** *1981-2008*	• Whether or not gained a degree by age 50, and if so, when • Attainment in public examinations at 15/16 • Age finished full-time education • First recorded job • Job title at age 50	• Life stories • Life trajectory diagram • Interviewer observations • Reason for gaining a degree by age 33

My sequential, explanatory mixed-methods research design

Within MMR, summarising study designs through a diagram is viewed as important to enable others to understand your project (Creswell, 2013). One of the main difficulties I have found in the MMR literature is finding examples of research designs and diagrams that represent studies that use only secondary qualitative and quantitative data.

Typically in MMR diagrams, the basic sequential, explanatory model using primary data looks as follows:
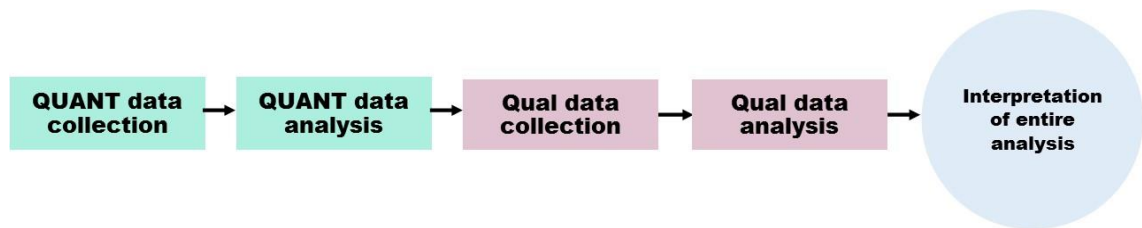
Figure 5.1 Simple sequential mixed methods design, with QUANT as the priority data, based on Creswell (2013).

In this basic model, the quantitative data is prioritised, indicated by the capital QUANT. Only after the quantitative data collection and analysis are the qualitative data collection instruments designed. The purpose of the qualitative data stage in this model is to help explain and interpret the quantitative findings, whether they are designed to be descriptive or hypothesis testing (Ivankova et al., 2006). Integration of the different findings occurs during the interpretation phase when all results are drawn together, typically the discussion section or chapter, represented here by the circle. The arrows represent the sequence in which the data collection and analysis takes place.

Figure 5.2 shows my diagram drawing upon the conventions suggested by Creswell (2013) and Ivankova et al. (2006).

Integration at RQs & theoretical framework stage

| QUANT data selection and analysis | QUAL data selection and analysis 1 | QUAL data selection and analysis 2 |

Integration at interpretation & discussion stage

Sample & Procedures

- 9789 cohort members.
- Descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regression.
- Outcome variable: if and when a degree was awarded by age 50.

- 26 cohort members.
- Structural coding (Saldana, 2016) of life story interviews.

- 4 cohort members.
- Holistic-content narrative analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998) of life story interviews.

Products

- Cross tabulations
- Multinomial logistic regression results tables.

- Table containing biographical data for each of the 26 cohort members.
- Textual discussion with illustrative quotes organised in categories corresponding to RQs 1&2.

- Reconstructed biographies of 4 cohort members with integration of contextual information and data.

Figure 5.2 Diagram to show my sequential mixed methods design.

There are five main adaptations to conventions suggested by Creswell (2013) and Ivankova et al. (2006) for my thesis. First, I have not included any information about data collection in the diagram as only secondary sources were used. Second, because I already had most of the data to hand, the quantitative analysis phase did not strictly occur before the qualitative analysis phase. For example, I read the SPIS biographical interviews at the same time as exploring the NCDS data. However, in terms of when I conducted my formal analysis, I did analyse the data sequentially from quantitative to qualitative and present the findings in this order as Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Watkins says:

> The key to working with two secondary data sources for an explanatory sequential design is to remember that this mixed methods design was intended to be employed sequentially. So, while you may have access to both secondary data sources from the very beginning of the project, you may iteratively review them but work with (i.e., manage) the quantitative data first. (Watkins, 2022, p. 125)

Third, I have grouped data selection and analysis together. I would argue that examining the secondary data, making decisions on what variables or sources to use, and how, is integral to both the research process and analysis. Fourth, I gave equal priority to the qualitative and quantitative analyses, so both are represented in capital letters. Each type of analysis (which I discuss shortly), had different but equal functions and roles to play in answering my research questions. Finally, I wanted to emphasis integration at different phases of the research, and something I discuss next.

Integration in Mixed-Methods Research

Although within the MMR field integration is agreed to be important, the full potential of integration is not always exploited (Sligo et al., 2017). Barriers for integration according to Bryman (2006) include: study designs not being conceptualised in an integrated way from the outset; solo researchers not having skills or confidence in using a range of methods, especially more advanced ones; the nature of the data with some being more striking and useful to the project than others; publication issues such as journals holding methodological biases; and, lack of exemplars or guidance on how to integrate a study at all phases of the research project. On this final point, Yin (2006) points out stages where integration could

occur to help avoid MMR simply consisting of parallel, disconnected studies. In my thesis, I have focused on three main areas of integration in my design.

First, at the stage of the research questions. Yin argues that a mixed-methods study could be 'strengthened if both the quantitative and qualitative methods each addressed some aspect of both process and outcome questions' (p. 43). What I have been most influenced by when designing my research questions is consideration of structure and agency, history and biography, of both macro and micro influences on education decisions. Because of this multi-level focus, my research questions, in the main, are designed to address outcomes, processes and meanings of decision-making.

Having a correspondence between the variables each method is addressing can help here, and this is the second area where my research design is integrated. Inevitably different research instruments are suited to explore different aspects of the study, but if the variables and items under investigation can be kept consistent across the different parts of the study then this helps with integration. Throughout my thesis the same variables have been examined albeit from different angles and level of detail depending on the stage. I have looked at the role of social class, sex, schooling, attitudes and aspirations on decisions during the same historical time period in Britain within the literature review and through each of the steps of my own analysis.

Finally, I aimed to maintain integration in my thesis by having an overarching theoretical and analytical framework to guide all stages of the research design, analysis and writing up of the findings.

One of the advantages of using the NCDS and SPIS is that both studies have been informed by the lifecourse perspective (see Bynner et al. (2001) and Elliott et al. (2010)). Although the NCDS and SPIS are integrated by design, it is up to the researcher to maintain the integration within the selection of variables, the analysis and writing up stages. The writing up stage is an area of integration Bryman (2006) argues is particularly lacking in MMR. My approach addresses this by drawing upon an approach outlined by Elliott (2005, 2008b) who argues for the narrative potential of longitudinal quantitative data combined with the quantitative and qualitative data

in the NCDS and SPIS to create narrative case studies about the lives of cohort members (Elliott, 2013b). I discuss this further below, particularly in reference to the third step in my analysis (Chapter 8).

I now discuss my theoretical perspective and how this has influenced my approach and then summarise the practical steps relating to the management, organisation and analysis of the data.

Philosophical perspective

Philosophical perspectives are 'a system of generalised views of the world, which form beliefs that guide action' (Moon & Blackman, 2017 n.p). Traditionally researchers are expected to decide if they view the world as a singular and coherent entity that can be measured, or as multiple, non-cohering and non-amenable to being measured conclusively (Mason & Dale, 2011). As discussed earlier in this chapter, contemporary MMR rejects these binaries and instead welcomes a diversity of philosophical perspectives within single studies.

In this thesis, I am influenced by Mason and Dale (2011, pp. 3-14) who state that all researchers, whether they explicitly state it or not, see the world in seven main ways. The first four are particularly relevant to my thesis:

1. A world of socio-architectural structures;
2. Of individuals or humans;
3. Of behaviours, actions and events;
4. Of stories and interpretations;
5. An environmental, non-human or sensory world;
6. Of rationalities, connections and situations;
7. As a singular and coherent identity, or as multiple and non-cohering.

I discuss the first four briefly in turn and how they link to how these views of the world have influenced this thesis.

A world of socio-architectural structures

Key words: structures, underlying structures, levels, layers, networks, institutions

In this thesis, the structures of social class and gender as well as other characteristics and experiences of the cohort members are vital to my analysis of who gained a degree and when. I utilise descriptive statistics as well as multinomial regression

analysis to look at the effects of a range of variables on later life outcomes. I also include structures and characteristics when exploring and analysing the life stories as part of my mixed-methods research and integration strategy.

A world of individuals or humans

Key words: individual, cohort, household, population, variables, attitudes, human, subject, subjectivity.

Generally, social science research takes the view that social worlds are made up of individuals and groups of individuals. In this study, the individual is not just a single person, but a person connected to a specific birth cohort, the population of Britain at a particular time period and connected further to the various institutions and policies prevailing at the time. As I am seeking to explore and understand the individual and their personal experiences through analysis of their life stories presented in Chapters 7 and 8, these are always related back to the context of their particular cohort. The context is explored in the quantitative analysis of the data held on 9,789 cohort members presented in Chapter 6, policy discussions in Chapter 2 and throughout the literature reviews in Chapters 3 and 4.

A world of behaviours, actions and events

Key words: behaviour, reactions, effects, events, risk, variables

Research from this philosophical position is interested in charting events and behaviours over time to understand social change and causality. In this thesis, I interpret this way of viewing the world more broadly in line with Mayer's (2009) suggestion that prior life experiences impact later life outcomes, but this does not have to be measured solely through quantitative means.

In this thesis, I am interested in exploring changes in decisions and opportunities to participate in higher education – which for most was unavailable earlier in their lives. Through this I aim to understand the factors – both in the form of information included in the quantitative variables, policy (Chapter 2) as well as the explanations and reasons given by mature students in the literature, as well as in my own research, for this change. The concept of 'turning points' is particularly important here as mature students discuss what key moments or events happened to

influence their decisions to study for a degree. The concept of turning points suggests a shift in direction from one's established or predicted social pathway and is allows for fluidity and individualisation (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003). It is in the context of turning points where decisions are made and where the interconnection between structure and agency and the role of other people in different domains are exposed (Lieblich et al., 1998; Woolley, 2009).

A world of stories and interpretations

Key words: stories, narratives, histories, accounts, perspectives, experiences, traces, interpretations.

From this perspective, stories are part of everyday life, culture and society reflecting aspects of our reality and history at a given time. There is a difference between the concept of 'life story' and 'life history' that needs to be noted here. As Bathmaker (2010, p. 2) puts it, life stories are the starting point in the 'exploration of a life as lived, but life history grounds these stories of personal experience in their wider social and historical context and pays attention to social relations of power'.

The viewpoint of the world as stories and interpretations is particularly useful in my thesis where I am assuming that cohort members will talk about gaining a degree within their life stories because it holds some significance at a personal as well as historical and sociological level. I am connecting cohort members' life stories to life history, including through the quantitative data (Elliott, 2005) and in Chapter 8 present as case studies (Elliott, 2013b) taking experiences beyond the individual person – as is the task of the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959; Richardson, 1990b).

The discussion so far has been concerned with explaining 'the what' – what sources I am using, and 'the why' in terms research design and philosophical underpinnings and theoretical framework. I now turn to 'the how' – the practical aspects of how I conducted my analysis.

In the section that follows, I outline and explain the three main stages of data analysis. I identified patterns across the whole sample of cohort members (N=9,789) in the first stage, reduced to a sample of 26 in the second stage and in the third and final stage, focused on just four cohort members and their narratives.

Stage 1 Quantitative analysis

The main aim of the quantitative analysis is to contribute to answering RQ1 and RQ2.

> RQ1: What historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 70s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school?
>
> RQ2: What changed in society, as well as in individual lives, to enable people who left school during the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?

The analysis involved three steps:

1) Exploratory analysis of the individual variables (outlined above) to identify distributions across categories.
2) Cross-tabulations to look at how the characteristics of the cohort members (as defined by the structural and attitudinal variables included in the analysis) vary by 'age when degree was obtained'.
3) Multinomial regression[64] to show the increased or decreased likelihood (relative risk ratio) of a particular group compared to another group (e.g, females to males), gaining a degree at different points over their life.

I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 (IBM, 2013) and Stata version 16.1 (StataCorp, 2019). Results are presented in Chapter 6.

Missing data strategy

It is common for longitudinal studies to have missing values due to non-response (Silverwood et al., 2020). However, there are consequences for having too much missing data such as lower statistical power and 'decreased representativeness compared to the originally intended target population' (Mostafa et al., 2020, p. 2). Data loss through attrition or non-response in the NCDS tends to be found more amongst men, those from lower social class origins, with lower educational attainment, poor training records and those with less stable employment patterns (Connolly et al., 1992; Hawkes & Plewis, 2006; Nathan, 1999).

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[64] This is a suitable regression for dependent variables that have more than one category as my 'age when gained degree' does.

When all six control variables are included in the final model of the multinomial regressions, the observed sample size with no missing data is reduced by almost half from N=9,789 to N=4,462. Given this, the issue of missing data needed to be addressed. I used the Centre for Longitudinal Studies missing data strategy[65] (Mostafa et al., 2020) for analysis of the cohort. Here multiple imputation is used to deal with attrition and item non-response and to restore sample representativeness, adopting a chained equations approach (White et al., 2011) under the assumption of 'missing at random' (Mostafa et al., 2021; Tarek Mostafa & Wiggins, 2015; Silverwood et al., 2020). All reported analyses are averaged across 20 replicated data sets based upon Rubin's Rule for the efficiency of estimation under a reported degree of missingness across the whole data of around 0.20 (Little & Rubin, 2014) (specifically 0.18).

Stage 2: Coding and categorising the life stories

Aside from the substantive aims of this thesis, I am also exploring the methodological issues to do with re-using the biographical interview data in a study about mature students when questions about their higher education did not form part of the interview schedule. The first step to assessing the usefulness of the data was to examine what was contained within the 220 biographical interviews that formed the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study.

I skim read all 220 interviews to identify how education at all levels was spoken about across the dataset. I then undertook a deeper reading of those who had gained a degree young and mature to explore, in line with my hypothesis if there was anything distinctive about the way they spoke about education. Those who went as mature students spoke more about the process of becoming a student, its impact and meaning on their lives and intertwined their process of deciding to study with other aspects of life more so than other groups.

For the purposes of my study, I was satisfied that the interviews of those who had been mature students had a lot of rich information to interrogate. I also felt that for the purposes of my thesis, the information gleaned from the quantitative analysis

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[65] https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/data-access-training/handling-missing-data/

covered enough of the characteristics and patterns of participation for those with no degree and degree young to fully justify my concentration on when mature students gained their degree. To additionally bring these individuals to life, I also gave the cohort members who I selected to analyse further a pseudonym that I chose from online lists of popular baby names of the 1950s[66] for historical and contextual accuracy (Edwards, 2019).

Throughout the research process, I referred to a spreadsheet which was included within the SPIS package (see Appendix 6) to check cohort members' basic demographic information, and also used it as a place to store notes about the interviews (such as described above), to highlight if I felt particular interviews had potential for further analysis and if not, the reasons why. It was also a useful way to keep a record of my justification for the final sample selection of mature students, which was the next step in this part of my analysis.

Sample selection procedure

The process of selecting the sample of mature students was as follows:

1. From the spreadsheet, I identified the life stories of those who were labelled as gaining their degrees as mature student (n=36). I created folders labelled 'young-mature', middle-mature', 'older-mature' with sub-folders, one with the pseudonym of each cohort member. Each sub-folder contained their transcripts along with their life trajectory diagrams, childhood essays and transcribed teachers' comments.

2. I then read the 36 interviews to conduct an initial check for any that might have been mislabelled as well as to seek information missing for that cohort member from the quantitative data (e.g. school type, childhood social class, job title).

    a. Four were removed from the young-mature category due to their courses being longer (e.g. because of a foundation year). They had started at the traditional age but had graduated later than the norm.

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[66] I do not have any knowledge of their real names. Any pseudonym that is actually their real name, is coincidental.

  b. Two spoke about not having a degree although they had been labelled as having one, so were reallocated to 'no degree'.

3. I then went back to the 184 interviews where the cohort member had been categorised as having a degree 'young', or not having a degree at all, to identify if any of these might have been mislabelled:

  a. Two labelled as 'no degree' were reallocated into the 'young' student category as they spoke about gaining a degree at the traditional age.

  b. Two labelled as 'no degree' reported that they had gained a degree as young-mature (age 24-33).

  c. One was allocated as having a degree by age 23, but in his interview indicated he most likely graduated at age 24 or older so I re-categorised him as 'young-mature'.

4. I carefully read the mature student interviews (sample now n=33) and further categorised them by how much attention to higher education was given in the life stories. I was influenced by the idea of 'magnitude coding' (Saldaña, 2016, p. 86) which looks at the intensity or frequency of something in a text. I did not use content analysis type methods where one counts numbers of words or sentences, rather the codes were applied based on my impressions upon reading the transcripts and relevance for my thesis. The categories which I included as a column on the spreadsheet were as follows:

- **Reject:** Interviews contain hardly any or no content about their decisions to study for a degree as a mature student. Two were rejected.

- **Low:** Limited mention as part of chronological account, as minor part of career progression or as a 'fact' without much further elaboration.

- **Medium:** Some mention and although might not be a large proportion of time and space given in the interview, they discuss that their participation in higher education as having some deeper significance and meaning attached.

- **High:** Process of deciding to study for a degree is highly significant in terms of space taken up in their life stories, sometimes interweaved or central thread in the narratives. Involves some evaluation and articulation of meaning to their lives.

5. I re-read the interviews with 'low magnitude' to make decisions about whether more should be rejected – five were.

Finally, the sample of cohort members who gained a degree as a mature student and whose interviews had good potential for further analysis was reduced to 26.

I decided that structural coding, also known as utilitarian coding (Saldaña, 2016) was most appropriate for the analysis of these 26 interviews. This is because the function of structural coding is to code segments of data that directly relate to and answer the research questions. I needed to bring some order to the handling of lengthy interview transcripts. Below I outline my procedure.

Analysis procedure

I used NVivo version 20 (QSR, 2020) as a tool to select portions of text which directly related to answering RQ1 and RQ2 separating them into two categories. I then read the extracts from both categories to identify the sub-categories. Although I was open to new information, it turned out that the content of the interviews broadly fitted the themes of the existing literature discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, therefore I coded the data as follows:

Category 1: Factors influencing cohort members' post-school transitions
    Education system
    Parents' wishes
Category 2: Deciding to become a mature student
    Personal reasons
        To make up for the past and to re-shape futures
            For self-fulfilment
            When the time was right
            For independence after divorce
    Career
        Career requirement
            Nursing
            Keep up with technological change
        Planned career change or progression
            Keeping up with changing labour market
            To improve finances/job security
        Turning points
            Incident at work
            Career crossroads
            Redundancy

As will be demonstrated in Chapter 7, I integrated some of the longitudinal and quantitative data into the analysis to further connect cohort members' earlier lives with their decisions to become a mature student (Elliott, 2013b). This different temporality and connection with other domains of life was explored in more detail through the final stage of my analysis.

Stage 3: Holistic-content narrative analysis of the life stories

In the third stage of my analysis, I aimed to keep intact the 'intricate web of elements' (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p. 60) involved in decision-making, by using narrative analysis techniques on just four cohort members' life stories. One feature of the type of narrative analysis I employed was to take life stories as a whole, rather than extract and categorise as in Stage 2. The holistic-content mode 'uses the complete life story of an individual and focuses on the content presented by it' (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 13).

The benefit of looking at narratives in a more holistic rather than categorical way, as Lieblich et al. (1998) point out, is to highlight the process by which a person obtained a particular position. Narrative analysis of life stories focuses attention on how the narrator connects and makes meaning between an individual's earlier life events, and, how their decisions, other people, social change, have created the person they are at the time the story was told. Therefore, it is an appropriate analytical technique to answer RQ3: What is the meaning of gaining a degree for cohort members?

Sample selection

There were three criteria for selection of the sample to undergo narrative analysis. First and foremost, the cohort members had to mention the process by which they decided to become a mature student, and the impact and meaning that studying for and gaining a degree had on their lives. There were four cohort members whose life stories held the most potential to illuminate educational decision-making through narrative analysis, and offered good, clear, strong examples of one or more of the lifecourse principles. A second consideration was the ability of the cohort member to be able to narrate well and freely and to be comfortable with the task.

Thirdly, I wanted to ensure a representation of characteristics of the mature students. I included two young-mature, one middle-mature and one older-mature student. The selected sample of four includes two men and two women, two individuals from working-class and two from intermediate-class backgrounds. Unfortunately, I felt that none of the interviews from middle-class mature students met my first criteria.

Analysis procedure

I have reconstructed the life stories of the four cohort members to highlight their narratives around becoming a mature student. Reconstruction refers to 'the analytical work done by a researcher to strip or peel off textual and narrational elements from a narrative, leaving only the chain of events and characters involved in them' (Shenhav, 2015, p. 27). Shenhav discusses some ways in which this can be undertaken but also notes that there is 'no mechanistic, stepwise method for reconstructing the events that constitute the story from the text' (p. 29).

Lieblich et al.'s (1998) discussion of the various voices needed when reading and working with life stories is helpful:

> Working with narrative material requires dialogical listening (Bakhtin, 1981) to three voices (at least): the voice of the narrator, as represented by tape or text; the theoretical framework, which provides the concepts and tools for interpretation; and a reflexive monitoring of the act of reading and interpretation, that is self-awareness of the decision process of drawing conclusions from the material. (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 14)

In brief, my process of reconstructing the narratives involved reading the texts numerous times. I noted in the margins where aspects of the stories were illustrative of particular lifecourse principles such as agency, timing, linked lives and the lifecourse concept of turning points (see Chapter 1). After an initial reading of each transcript, I summarised in one sentence the main lifecourse principle(s) I felt was exemplified in the interview.

I then proceeded to summarise the lengthy interviews. From the first few readings I was able to write a synopsis, maximum length of two-pages, of the key events in their lives, some demographic information from the Excel spreadsheet mentioned

above (Elliott, 2013b) and importantly, topics related to their education, utilising the lifecourse principles to aid my understanding. I asked questions about who helped make the decision to enter higher education as a mature student (linked lives), when the decision occurred in their lives (timing), was there anything about the social, political and social circumstances that influenced their decisions or provided a backdrop (historical time and place), and, what was the meaning or impact of this decision. Once summarised, I referred back to these short, manageable documents on a regular basis during the more in-depth analysis required for the writing up the associated findings and insights presented as Chapter 8.

All of the above stages came with their own challenges in terms of managing, organising and analysing the data. However, one of the challenges of reconstructing and presenting someone's life, particularly in Step 3 was the ethical responsibility (Richardson, 1990b). Although secondary data is deposited using strict protocol in terms of anonymisation and other ethical considerations, I still had a responsibility in how I analysed and wrote about individuals' lives. I now discuss this in the final part of this chapter.

Ethical considerations

Since I am utilising only secondary data, I have no control over the research methods and techniques the researchers have used to collect the data since the study began, in 1958. However, of prime importance in longitudinal studies is to maintain the trust of cohort members and to ensure that ethical considerations and approaches to informed consent change over time in line with developments. For an overview of the history of the ethics within the NCDS as well as examples of information sheets and consent forms signed by cohort members, see CLS (2014).

Most of the data in the NCDS is quantitative in nature with anonymisation relatively straightforward compared to anonymisation in qualitative research which can be more complicated due to topics spoken about in depth which may reveal identities, names of other people, locations and sensitive issues. During my thesis, I adhered to all the necessary policies and signed all the relevant forms to access the data (see Appendix 9 for the UK Data Service Agreement Form), connect variables with the

qualitative interviews and access the microfiche[67]. I also had to undertake mandatory training on Information Governance[68] and renew this yearly.

I constantly considered that a cohort member could read my thesis, other work I might publish, or we might cross paths in everyday life (I have already bumped into a 1946 and a 1970 cohort member, disclosed to me as they asked me what my thesis was about). I wanted to make sure that my interpretations and reconstructions of the 1958 cohort members' life stories were as accurate and faithful as possible – of course allowing for my own interpretations and application of the lifecourse theoretical framework.

To re-visit my work with fresh eyes after some time had passed, and after comments and questions from my supervisors, was ethically important. I found that upon a second or third reading I had misunderstood what someone had said, made an inaccurate connection between events or had written about it in ways which were unclear.

In life stories, it is also important to remember that it is not just the person telling the story that features in their narratives. They would be discussing friends, family, parents, children, teachers, colleagues and so forth. As shown in Chapters 7 and 8, some cohort members talk about negative aspects of their childhood. Some get upset when they feel they criticise their parents. Again, I wanted to make sure that how I re-presented the way in which cohort members spoke about other people and their role in their educational decisions was accurate, but respectful, non-judgemental, and only mentioned if and how it related to their educational decision-making.

In summary, throughout this thesis, I considered my 'narrative privilege' (Adams, 2008, p. 180) as I constructed stories and gave my interpretations about other people's lives (and the people they talk about), who most likely will not read my

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[67] To access the microfiche I had to go into a safe setting room in the CLS which was not overlooked, has a special password access, plus where you cannot save data onto a personal drive. I also had access to the UCL Data Safe Haven which is an online portal where data can be deposited and shared in a secure way.
[68] For further details: www.ucl.ac.uk/isd/information-governance-training-awareness-service

work, would not write a response, and who certainly would not have the opportunity to ask me about my life in return.

6

Factors influencing if and when cohort members were awarded a degree

Introduction

One of the key assumptions of the lifecourse perspective is that prior life history impacts on later life outcomes (Mayer, 2009). In classic studies in the sociology of education and youth transitions discussed in Chapter 3, the role of structural factors, especially social class and gender roles, on work and educational trajectories have provided key areas of investigation and theory development. Researchers have identified and theorised the ways in which ideologies around the expected destinations for different social groups are reproduced through the ethos of the school attended, teachers, parents, and the young person themselves, resulting in fixed social pathways (Willis, 1977; Sharpe, 1976; Deem, 1980).

However, research concerned with mature students, and research which revisits sociological theories about youth transitions (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2009) shows how people do change their predicted trajectories. The studies reviewed in Chapter 4, some of which draw upon postmodern sociological theories, illustrate how a mixture of social and personal change create new opportunities for learning for those previously excluded from higher education (Fuller, 2007).

Through my review of the national statistics and policy (Chapter 2) I identified that despite considerable research and reports focusing on widening participation in higher education amongst non-traditional groups, there was actually very limited statistical data available on mature students' higher education participation over time by social class background.

The studies by Egerton (2000a) offered some insights into mature student trends by fathers' social class concluding that although class inequalities were still present, the expansion of higher education in the period 1982-1992 did increase opportunities for people from working-class origins to gain a degree later in life. Although the data I am using are not directly comparable to that used by Egerton (2000a), the first objective of this chapter is to build upon her analysis by using the data available in the National Child Development Study (NCDS) to offer new empirical evidence on the social class backgrounds of mature students, and to see if the general trends continued, at least for the 1958 cohort.

I use Elliott and Lawrence's (2014) refined household social class variable (see Chapter 5), which has more clearly defined categories than the variable available within the NCDS. My second objective here is to understand in more detail the characteristics of those from working, intermediate and middle social class backgrounds who gained a degree at different points in the lifecourse.

The third objective is to investigate the role of other childhood factors and characteristics on the patterns of gaining, or not gaining a degree, at some point in cohort members' lives up to age 50. The variables I have chosen are directly related to key findings from my review of the mainly qualitative studies discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. The (independent) variables chosen measure social class, sex, school type, school qualifications and educational aspirations and expectations of parents, teachers and the cohort member at age 16 (for details see Chapter 5).

Using descriptive and regression analysis, I explore the association between each of these independent variables on if and when a cohort member gained a degree (dependent variable), and the extent to which they moderate the effect of social class and sex on degree outcomes. In particular, I am interested in exploring mature students' characteristics and patterns of participation by age. This category is often treated in the national statistics as a monolith of age 21+ (Moore et al., 2013), which does not reflect the relationship between timing and life-stage on decisions.

The final objective of this chapter is to identity patterns as well as 'outliers' of particular interest for follow up in the qualitative analysis. As explained in Chapter 5, connecting the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the data available in the NCDS

and Social Participation and Identity Sub-study (SPIS) is a key part of my research design.

The chapter is organised in two main sections. First, I present the descriptive statistics in the form of cross-tabulations looking at the association between the independent variables on my degree outcome variable. I then turn multinomial logistical regression modelling in section two. Here I examine the associations between my selected variables in more detail, identifying the probability of a cohort member belonging to a particular group (e.g. social class, sex, type of school, etc.) being awarded a degree at different points in the lifecourse and historical time, when other characteristics are taken into account. In the final section I summarise my findings and point to how these findings inform the qualitative analyses that follow in chapters 7 and 8.

Section one: Descriptive statistical analysis

This section presents and discusses the main points deriving from two main tables containing descriptive statistics about cohort members and their degree outcomes. Table 6.1 focuses on the patterns across the different variables by when cohort members gained (or did not gain) their degree and should be read from left to right (rows). Table 6.2 focuses on patterns within each age category and should be read from top to bottom (columns).

It must be noted that due to rounding, percentage totals do not always add to 100%. The tables below are based on the full sample, n=9789, following imputation of missing data (see Chapter 5).

Table 6.1: Distribution of NCDS sample by the age and time period in which they were awarded a degree.

	No degree	Degree		By 23 (1979-1981) Young	Between 24-33 (1982-1991) Young-mature	Between 34-42 (1992-2000) Middle-mature	Between 43-50 (2001-2008) Older-mature	Total
All % (N=9789)	80	20		52	21	17	11	101%
Sex								
Male	80	20		54	26	14	6	100
Female	81	19		49	15	19	16	99
Social class								
Middle	61	39		64	20	9	6	99
Intermediate	79	21		50	22	18	11	101
Working-class	91	9		29	20	30	22	101
Type of school								
Comprehensive	85	15		45	22	19	13	99
Secondary Modern	90	10		25	22	29	24	100
Grammar	54	46		63	17	14	6	100
Private	50	50		68	21	6	5	100
No. of 'good' school exam passes								
None	95	5		18	20	35	27	100
1-4	85	15		28	22	29	21	100
5-9+	43	57		67	20	8	5	100

(vertical label between Degree and By 23 columns: Proportions within those with a degree)

Continued on next page…

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Continued Table 6.1: Distribution of NCDS sample by the age and time period in which they were awarded a degree.

	No degree	Degree		By 23 (1979-1981) Young	Between 24-33 (1982-1991) Young-mature	Between 34-42 (1992-2000) Middle-mature	Between 43-50 (2001-2008) Older-mature	Total
Teacher: HE/FE suitability								%
Degree/BEd	**31**	**69**		74	18	5	3	100
Other PT/FT course	**83**	**17**		37	23	24	16	100
None at all	**97**	**3**		11	20	39	30	100
Parents: Wishes for CM Education								
FT Ed after 18	**60**	**40**		61	22	10	7	100
Leave at 16-18 / Uncertain	**91**	**9**		28	18	32	22	100
Cohort Member: Own wishes								
Cont. with FT study	**55**	**45**		65	20	10	6	101
PT/Job/DK	**90**	**10**		30	22	27	20	99

The column between "Degree" and "By 23" reads vertically: Proportions within those with a degree

Table 6.2: Characteristics of cohort members within each no degree / degree category.

	N	%	No degree	By 23 (1979-1981) Young	Between 24-33 (1982-1991) Young-mature	Between 34-42 (1992-2000) Middle-mature	Between 43-50 (2001-2008) Older-mature
All	**9789**	**100**	%	%	%	%	%
Sex							
Male	**4797**	**49**	49	52	63	42	29
Female	**4992**	**51**	51	48	37	58	71
Social class							
Middle-class	**2056**	**21**	16	52	41	24	25
Intermediate	**3622**	**37**	36	37	41	41	39
Working-class	**4111**	**42**	48	11	18	36	37
Type of school							
Comprehensive	**5579**	**57**	61	38	48	50	51
Secondary Modern	**2349**	**24**	27	6	12	20	25
Grammar	**1175**	**12**	8	34	23	23	16
Private	**685**	**7**	4	22	17	6	8
No. of 'good' school exam passes							
None	**4601**	**47**	56	4	12	26	29
1-4	**2937**	**30**	32	12	25	41	43
5-9+	**2251**	**23**	12	84	63	33	28

Continued Table 6.2: Characteristics of cohort members within each no degree/degree category

	N	%	No degree	By 23 (1979-1981) Young	Between 24-33 (1982-1991) Young-mature	Between 34-42 (1992-2000) Middle-mature	Between 43-50 (2001-2008) Older-mature
Teacher: HE/FE suitability	**9789**	**100**	%	%	%	%	%
Degree/BEd	**1175**	**12**	5	62	38	13	13
Other PT/FT course	**5776**	**59**	61	37	57	74	73
None at all	**2839**	**29**	34	1	5	13	14
Parents: Wishes for CM Education							
FT Ed after 18	**3426**	**35**	26	85	75	45	43
Leave at 16-18/Uncertain	**6363**	**65**	74	15	25	55	57
Cohort Member: Own wishes							
Continue with FT study	**2643**	**27**	19	78	58	36	31
PT/Job/Don't know	**7146**	**73**	82	23	42	64	69

Age when gained degree

Table 6.1 shows that amongst the cohort members who took part in the survey at age 50, 80% did not have a degree when interviewed. Concentrating on the 1 in 5 who have a degree, over half (52%) were awarded theirs as a young student, 21%, when they were aged 24-33 (young-mature), 17% when they were in their mid-to late 30s and early 40s (middle-mature), leaving 11% who gained their degree between 2001 and 2008 aged 43-50 (older-mature). Overall, the majority of cohort members who had a degree, were awarded it at the younger end of the age range and this is in line with the patterns described in Chapter 2, at least for those on full-time courses.

Household social class

Of the cohort members that took part in the age 50 survey, 21% had middle-class backgrounds, 37% intermediate-class and 42% grew up in a working-class household (Table 6.2). Despite the working-class being the most highly populated category for the 1958 cohort, Table 6.1 shows that only 9% of working-class cohort members gained a degree by the age of 50 compared to 39% of middle-class cohort members. The intermediate-class sit somewhere between the two with 21% of cohort members from this category having gained a degree by age 50.

What is of most interest here, is not just the proportions of cohort members from different social class backgrounds who did or did not gain a degree, rather it is the age distribution and time period when this occurred. Reading across the row, Table 6.1 shows that 64% of middle-class cohort members gained their degrees young (by 23, 1978-1981) compared with only 6% as an older-mature student (43-50, 2001-2008). A similar pattern is observed for the intermediate-class. The trend for the working-class is very different, with the distribution across the four age categories being much more even: 29% gaining their degree young, 20% young-mature, 30% middle-mature and 22% in the older-mature category.

Looking within the age categories in Table 6.2, only 18% of the young-mature graduates were from working-class backgrounds, with equal proportions from the middle and intermediate-classes (41% each). Regarding the older-mature categories, a quarter are from the middle-class and here it is the intermediate-class (41%) which

are found in the highest proportions closely followed by those from the working-class (37%).

The information from my analysis of the NCDS here provides new insights related to differences within the mature student category by social class and historical time period which was not possible to be seen in the national, administrative data discussed in Chapter 2.

Sex

Table 6.1 shows similar proportions of male and female cohort members with a degree by age 50, at around 20% each. Table 6.2 shows only a small difference between men and women gaining their degrees at the traditional age. This is somewhat surprising since in Chapter 2, using the national statistics I highlighted that young women were very under-represented on degree courses in the 1970s and right up until the mid-1990s. However, the patterns here are not directly comparable to the national data because the NCDS includes cohort members who gained their degrees in colleges of higher education, polytechnics and the Open University, which were not included in the national statistics until 1994/95. It is in these higher educational institutions where numbers of women were equal with men and by the end of the 1980s where women were found in higher proportions (DES, 1992b).

On the other hand, the finding from the national statistics that indicates women being more highly represented as mature students than men is mirrored in the NCDS data. Table 6.1 shows that for men, the majority of degrees are gained in the 'young' (54%) and 'young-mature' (26%) categories, whereas for women, although nearly half also gained a degree at a young age, the rest are spread quite evenly across each of the 'mature' categories ranging from 15-19%. In short, the distribution across the older age categories is more uniform for women than men, whereas men's participation is more front loaded. This is likely explained by men gaining qualifications within and for work, whereas women have different lifecourse patterns, often fitting around family and childcare commitments (Allatt et al., 1987; Jenkins, 2006)

Type of school

Table 6.1 shows that 85% of NCDS members who were at a comprehensive school at age 16 and 90% of those in secondary modern schools do not have a degree by age 50. The picture is very different for those who went to a grammar or private school with 46% of grammar school students and 50% of private school pupils having gained a degree by age 50.

Looking across Table 6.1 at the age distributions of when the degree was obtained, 63% of grammar school students had gained their degree by age 23, 17% in the young-mature category, 14% in the middle-mature and just 6% in the older-mature category. The pattern for private school pupils was similar. Patterns for comprehensive school students also showed a higher proportion being awarded their degrees as a young student (45%) and declining at each mature age category, although not as steeply as in the grammar and private school. For those who attended a secondary modern school, the age at which their degree was obtained is spread more evenly across all four age categories, with a quarter gaining theirs as a young student, 22% young-mature, 29% in the middle-mature category and 24% in the older-mature category.

Table 6.3 shows that the distribution of men and women by school type was very similar. However, there is a clear association between social class and type of school attended with a higher proportion of middle-class cohort members found in grammar and private schools than the intermediate and working-class, illustrating the inequalities in the selective school system as discussed in Chapter 3.

Table 6.3: Distribution of cohort members across different types of schools by sex and social class.

	N	%	Comp.	Secondary Modern	Grammar	Private	
All	**9789**	**100**	**57**	**24**	**12**	**7**	**100%**
Sex							
Male	**4797**	**49**	58	24	11	7	100
Female	**4992**	**51**	57	24	13	6	100
Social class							
Middle-class	**2056**	**21**	41	16	23	21	101
Intermediate	**3622**	**37**	57	25	13	5	100
Working-class	**4111**	**42**	66	27	5	1	99

Attainment at age 16

Most cohort members (77%) either had no 'good' passes in public examination passes sat at the end of compulsory education (47%) or had between 1 and 4 good passes (30%) (Table 6.2). For those with the highest number of good passes, two-thirds (67%) gained their degree in the youngest age category. This pattern is expected given higher education entry requirements with those doing well at school more likely to continue their full-time education. A minority (5%) of cohort members who did not gain any good grade school level qualifications, did gain a degree at some point in their lives: 18% as a young student, 20% young-mature, 35% when middle-mature and 27% when older-mature (Table 6.1).

Given the sociological interest in the relationship between education attainment, social class and school type, Table 6.4 examines these associations within the 1958 cohort.

Table 6.4: Distribution of the number of 'good' school exam passes by sex, social class & school type.

	N	%	None	1-4	5-9+	
All	9789	100	47	30	23	100%
Sex						
Male	4797	49	49	29	22	100
Female	4992	51	45	32	24	101
Social class						
Middle-class	2056	21	23	30	47	100
Intermediate	3622	37	42	34	24	100
Working-class	4111	42	64	27	9	100
School type						
Comprehensive	5579	57	52	31	17	100
Sec Modern	2349	24	64	28	7	99
Grammar	1175	12	9	31	60	100
Private	685	7	11	28	61	100

There are clear differences in attainment by social class amongst the cohort, with 47% of middle-class cohort members gaining the highest number of good exam passes compared to just 9% of working-class cohort members. Clear patterns are also found by school type with just 7% of secondary modern and 17% of comprehensive school pupils gaining a high number of good passes at 16 compared

to around 60% of both grammar and private school pupils. The differences by sex are minimal.

Teachers' assessment of suitability for further or higher education

Teachers viewed 12% of cohort members as being suited for a degree and 59% of cohort members as suited to a range of other full- or part-time study. The low proportion of pupils deemed suited to study for a degree is reflective of the time, when only a minority attended higher education and where a greater range of other options and opportunities to enter jobs without a degree, or indeed any formal qualifications, existed. For those assessed as suitable to study for a degree, 69% did indeed gain a degree by age 50, with the vast majority doing so by age 23.

Quite a large proportion of cohort members (29%) were deemed not suitable for any form of further or higher education at all by their teachers when aged 16 (Table 6.2). However, Table 6.1 shows that 3% of these did gain a degree by age 50: 11% as young student, 20% young-mature, 39% middle-mature and 30% in the oldest age category. I explore the experiences and circumstances of one cohort member who falls into this category in Chapter 7.

Table 6.5 presents other characteristics of the cohort members in each of the three 'teacher assessment of suitability' categories.

Table 6.5: Distribution of cohort members by teacher assessment of their suitability for further study post-16 by sex, social class and school type.

	N	%	Degree/BEd	Other PT/FT	None	
All	9789	100	12	59	34	100%
Sex						
Male	4797	49	13	58	29	100
Female	4992	51	12	60	28	100
Social class						
Middle-class	2056	21	30	59	10	99
Intermediate	3622	37	12	65	23	100
Working-class	4111	42	4	53	43	100
School type						
Comprehensive	5579	57	9	59	33	101
Sec Modern	2349	24	2	61	37	100
Grammar	1175	12	34	60	6	100
Private	685	7	44	51	4	99

There are only small differences between the teacher assessment of suitability by sex, but clear differences by social class are evident. Only 10% of middle-class cohort members were deemed unsuitable to any form of further education compared to 43% of working-class cohort members. In terms of suitability for a degree, only 4% of working-class cohort members were considered suitable compared to 30% of middle-class cohort members. The intermediate-class sits somewhere in-between. There are also differences by school type with far higher proportions of cohort members attending private and grammar schools viewed as suited to a degree than those attending secondary modern or comprehensive schools. The patterns by school type fit with what is known via the literature regarding school ethos and qualifications discussed in Chapter 3, although the findings by teacher expectations, social class and degree outcomes are new within mature student research.

Parents' wishes

Table 6.2 shows that 35% of parents would like their child to stay on in full-time education after 18. This may seem like a high proportion given that this is 1974, however, the variable asked parents for their wishes, not their expectations[69] about what is likely to happen (see Chapter 5).

Of the 35% of parents who wished for their children to continue in full-time study, 40% gained a degree, with 61% doing so as young students.

Although parents' wishes correlate quite strongly with degree outcomes, Table 6.1 shows 28% of cohort members whose parents wished for them to leave before 18 or who were not sure, gained a degree by age 23, perhaps indicating some agency on the part of the cohort member, or influences from other people[70] and sources. Additionally, 32% of those whose parents did not wish for them to stay on past 18,

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[69] My own analysis (not shown) shows that the proportions of parents who <u>expected</u> their child to stay on past 18 is approx. 24% .

[70] It might be in some cases the mother (for example) filled out the survey and may have had different views from the father. As shown in an example by Adshead and Jamieson (2008) discussed in Chapter 3 and in my own analysis in Chapter 7, both parents do not always have the same view on what their child should do post-school.

were awarded a degree aged 34-42 in the 1990s and a further 22% as an older-mature student.

Table 6.6 shows there are no differences in terms of parental wishes by sex of the cohort member, which is somewhat surprising given the literature shows that parents, according to the recollections of mature students, did have different expectations about their sons and daughters (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Green & Webb, 1997; Vickerstaff, 2003). However, there are clear social class differences with more middle-class households (64%) wanting their children to stay on rather than leave at 18 compared to 19% of working-class households.

Table 6.6: Parents' wishes for their child's further study by sex, social class and school type.

	N	%	FT after 18	Leave at 16-18/DK	
All	**9789**	**100**	**35**	**65**	**100%**
Sex					
Male	**4797**	**49**	36	64	100
Female	**4992**	**51**	34	66	100
Social class					
Middle-class	**2056**	**21**	64	36	100
Intermediate	**3622**	**37**	37	63	100
Working-class	**4111**	**42**	19	81	100

Cohort members' wishes

The majority of cohort members did not aspire to continue in full-time study after school, with 73% preferring to combine part-time study with work, have a job with no study, or did not yet know (Table 6.1). Amongst those who did wish to continue with full-time education, the majority gained a degree and, as Table 6.1 shows, 65% did so as a young student. This indicates a correlation between those with firm goals for their post-compulsory education and their outcomes. Table 6.2 reveals that a small proportion (10%) of cohort members did not express a firm desire for continuing in full-time education of which 30% gained a degree by age 23 in 1981, 22% did as a young-mature student, 27% as middle-mature and 30% older-mature.

Table 6.7 shows the other characteristics of cohort members by their response to being asked about their wishes for their further and higher education after school. Here we see evidence of a difference in the wishes between males and females.

Nearly 10% more girls than boys aspired to continue in full-time study, whereas more boys than girls wanted to just have a job, a job with part-time study, or were not sure.

Table 6.7: Cohort members wishes for their further study after school, by sex, social class and school type.

	N	%	Continue with FT study	PT study/Job/not sure	
All	9789	100	27	73	100%
Sex					
Male	**4797**	**49**	22	78	100
Female	**4992**	**51**	32	68	100
Social class					
Middle-class	**2056**	**21**	52	48	100
Intermediate	**3622**	**37**	29	71	100
Working-class	**4111**	**42**	13	87	100
School type					
Comprehensive	**5579**	**57**	23	77	100
Sec Modern	**2349**	**24**	18	82	100
Grammar	**1175**	**12**	49	51	100
Private	**685**	7	59	41	100

A higher proportion of middle-class 16-year-old cohort members wanted to continue with full-time study compared to the intermediate and working-class, and as expected, higher proportions of those in grammar and private school wished to continue their education than those in secondary modern and comprehensive schools.

So far, the descriptive statistics have shown patterns and differences by social class, sex, school type, parents, teachers and cohort members' aspirations on whether a cohort member gained a degree by age 50, and if so, when. Most importantly, by breaking down the mature student category into three age groups, the similarities and differences of those who were awarded their degrees at different life-stages and historical time periods have been illuminated. I shall further discuss the significance of this later in this chapter and in Chapter 9 (Discussion).

Turning now to explore the strength of the associations between all the categorical variables described so far, on if and when cohort members were awarded their

degrees. In particular, the multinomial regression models that follow enable further comparisons and contrasts between groups to be made.

Section two: Multinomial Regression analyses

In the next stage of the analysis, I estimated a series of stepwise multinomial regression models (8 in total). The central aim of this modelling was first to understand if and how each of the variables attenuate (reduce) the association with social class and sex on attaining a degree, and secondly, how the variables worked together in the final model (Model 8) to predict who gained a degree (or not) and at what age.

Results are shown in Table 6.8 for age when gained a degree compared to those without, and its association with household social class, and in Table 6.10 for age when gained a degree and its association with household social class amongst those who had a degree.

For both analyses, Model 1 shows the association with social class and degree outcomes. Model 2 social class and sex. Model 3 to Model 7 build on Model 2, each including an additional control variable, and Model 8, includes all variables (examined further in Tables 6.9 and 6.11). In summary:

- Model 1: social class
- Model 2: Model 1 + biological sex
- Model 3: Model 2 + school type
- Model 4: Model 2 + number of good passes in public examinations at age 16
- Model 5: Model 2 + teacher expectations
- Model 6: Model 2 + parent education wishes
- Model 7: Model 2 + cohort member education wishes
- Model 8: Model 2 + all measures

In both analyses, Model 2 is used as the baseline model, which controls for both social class and sex. Results for Model 2 in Tables 6.8 and 6.10 are shaded to enable any changes that occur to the association between the outcome measure and social class and sex when each additional variable is added in the subsequent models (Models 3-8), to be more easily identified. The complete results for the two final

models are displayed in Table 6.9 (age when gained a degree compared to those without) and Table 6.11 (age when gained a degree compared to those who gained a degree young).

All four tables (6.8-6.11) report Relative Risk Ratios (RRR). A RRR shows the 'relative risk' of a group of individuals experiencing an outcome (e.g. gaining a degree) compared to individuals in another (reference) group. If the RRR is greater than 1, the risk of experiencing the outcome is increased; when the RRR is equal or close to 1, then there is no difference in the 'risk' of the outcome happening; and when the RRR is less than 1, the 'risk' of experiencing the outcome is decreased.

For the outcome measures – gaining a degree – in Table 6.8 (and 6.9) the reference group is those who do not have a degree by age 50; in Table 6.10 (and 6.11) the reference group is those who gained their degree young.

For the key covariates in the modelling, social class and sex, the 'relative risk' of the working and intermediate-class gaining a degree is compared against the middle-class (reference) group; for sex, the 'relative risk' is for women compared to men. When discussing the final models, the reference group for the other measures is indicated in Tables 6.9 and 6.11.

The tables also include significance levels, which indicate the strength of the association between gaining a degree and social class or sex, and 95% confidence intervals around the RRR. The numbers show the lower and upper limits where 95% of the time, the true value, or true effect, will lie. If 1 is crossed, the number is not statistically significant.

Table 6.8: Gaining a degree as a young or mature student compared to not gaining a degree at all by age 50. RRR [95% CI]. (N=9.789)

	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 4a	Model 5a	Model 6a	Model 7a	Model 8a
Comparing being awarded a degree by age 23 in 1981 with not having a degree by age 50 (2008)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	.07*** [0.05, 0.09]	.07*** [0.05, 0.09]	.12*** [0.97, 0.16]	.21*** [0.16, 0.28]	.18*** [0.14, 0.24]	.15*** [0.12, 0.19]	.14*** [0.11, 0.18]	.46*** [0.34, 0.62]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	.31*** [0.27, 0.37]	.31*** [0.27, 0.37]	.45*** [0.38, 0.54]	.55*** [0.46, 0.67]	.52*** [0.43, 0.63]	.47*** [0.40, 0.56]	.45*** [0.38, 0.53]	.85 [0.69, 1.05]
Female compared to male	-	.87* [0.76, 1.00]	.81** [0.70, 0.94]	.68*** [0.58, 0.81]	.84* [0.71, 0.99]	.86* [0.74, 1.0]	0.58*** [0.49, 0.68]	.59*** [0.49, 0.71]
Comparing being awarded a degree between age 24 and 33 in 1982-1991 with not having a degree by age 50 (2008)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	.15*** [0.11, 0.21]	.15*** [0.11, 0.21]	0.22*** [0.16, 0.31]	.35*** [0.25, 0.50]	.30*** [0.21, 0.42]	.29*** [0.21, 0.41]	.25*** [0.18, 0.35]	.63** [0.43, 0.91]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	.44*** [0.34, 0.56]	.43*** [0.34, 0.55]	0.56*** [0.44, 0.72]	.68** [0.52, 0.88]	.62*** [0.48, 0.80]	.62*** [0.48, 0.79]	.56*** [0.44, 0.72]	.93 [0.71, 1.22]
Female compared to male	-	.56*** [0.45, 0.69]	.54*** [0.44, 0.67]	.47*** [0.37, 0.58]	.55*** [0.44, 0.68]	.56*** [0.45, 0.69]	.42*** [0.34, 0.53]	.43*** [0.34, 0.54]
Comparing being awarded a degree between age 34 and 42 in 1992-2000 with not having a degree by age 50 (2008)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	.48*** [0.35, 0.67]	.49*** [0.35, 0.67]	.62** [0.43, 0.89]	.79 [0.56, 1.11]	.69* [0.49, 0.96]	.64** [0.46, 0.89]	0.60** [0.43, 0.84]	1.02 [0.71, 1.49]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	.76 [0.56, 1.04]	.76 [0.56, 1.04]	.88 [0.63, 1.21]	.98 [0.71, 1.34]	.89 [0.65, 1.22]	.89 [0.65, 1.22]	.86 [0.63, 1.18]	1.10 [0.79, 1.53]
Female compared to male	-	1.34** [1.07, 1.69]	1.30* [1.04, 1.64]	1.22 [0.97, 1.54]	1.32** [1.05, 1.66]	1.34** [1.07, 1.69]	1.21 [0.96, 1.52]	1.17 [0.92, 1.48]
Comparing being awarded a degree between age 43 and 50 in 2001-2008 with not having a degree by age 50 (2008)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	.50*** [0.35, 0.73]	.51*** [0.35, 0.73]	.62* [0.41, 0.92]	.75 [0.51, 1.10]	.71 [0.48, 1.04]	.65* [0.44, 0.96]	.57** [0.39, 0.84]	.96 [0.63, 1.46]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	.69* [0.48, 1.00]	.70 [0.48, 1.00]	.79 [0.54, 1.16]	.84 [0.57, 1.23]	.81 [0.56, 1.18]	.80 [0.55, 1.17]	.75 [0.51, 1.09]	.96 [0.65, 1.42]
Female compared to male	-	2.39*** [1.77, 3.21]	2.35*** [1.74, 3.17]	2.21*** [1.64, 2.99]	2.34*** [1.74, 3.17]	2.39*** [1.77, 3.21]	2.25*** [1.67, 3.05]	2.24*** [1.65, 3.04]

***significant at .001 level; **significant at .01 level; *significant at .05 level

Models: **1a:** Social Class; **2a** Social Class + Sex; **3a** Social Class + Sex + School type; 4a Social Class + Sex +School quals; **5a** Social Class + Sex + Teacher expectations; **6a** Social Class + Sex + parents' wishes; **7a** Social Class + Sex + CM wishes; **8a** all variables

Findings: Gaining a degree versus not gaining a degree by age 50

Model 1a shows the likelihood of cohort members who grew up in working-class and intermediate-class households gaining or not gaining a degree at different points in the lifecourse, relative to middle-class cohort members (the reference category). We see that cohort members from working-class backgrounds have a significantly decreased risk (RRR<1) of gaining a degree at any age compared to their middle-class peers. This pattern is also observed for those from intermediate-class backgrounds, with the exception in the age 34-42 age category where the association is not statistically significant.

In Model 2a, we see that relative to those not gaining a degree by age 50 women are less likely than men to gain a degree young or young-mature but have an increased probability of gaining a degree in comparison to men aged 34-42 (RRR=1.34 p<.01). Women have more than double the likelihood compared to men of gaining a degree aged 43-50, relative to not gaining a degree by age 50 (RRR=2.39 p<.001). The addition of sex into the modelling has no discernible impact on the association between social class and the relative risk of gaining or not gaining a degree by age 50, indicating that both social class and sex are independently associated to the relative likelihood of gaining or not gaining a degree by age 50.

In Model 3a, when type of school is included, the associations remain similar. The working-class, and intermediate in the young and young-mature categories, have a reduced risk of gaining a degree by age 50 compared to the middle-class, although the strength of the statistical significance is reduced in the two oldest categories and becomes insignificant for the intermediate-class. The effect of sex also remains the same in all age categories.

In Model 4a when school qualifications are added, the effect of sex remains in all but the middle-mature category where it becomes statistically insignificant. Social class remains statistically significant, with both the working and intermediate-class having a reduced likelihood of gaining a degree compared to the middle-class in both the young and young-mature categories. However, the reduced risk for working and intermediate-class cohort members becomes insignificant in the older

age categories, indicating that social class differences are influenced by the number of qualifications at the end of compulsory education.

Model 5a introduces teacher views alongside social class and sex. Although the association with social class is reduced in magnitude, the working and intermediate-classes still have a significantly reduced risk compared to the middle-class of gaining a degree in any age group. There is no reduction in the association between sex and degree status when teachers' views are added.

Parents' wishes are added to social class and sex in Model 6a. Again, there is no attenuation of the risk associated with being female when compared to Model 2a and only a very small attenuation on the association with social class for the working and intermediate-class in the youngest age category and just the working-class in the young-mature category.

Model 7a includes the cohort members' own wishes at age 16 on remaining in education, and here we find that sex becomes insignificantly associated with gaining a degree in the middle-mature age category as does being in the intermediate-class in the older-mature category.

In the final model, Model 8a, all variables are included. Here we find that the reduced risk of gaining a degree for working-class cohort members remains in the young and young-mature category compared to middle-class cohort members, but the association for those from intermediate-class backgrounds becomes statistically insignificant now in the young as well as all other age categories. As in previous models, women have a reduced likelihood of gaining a degree in the two youngest categories than not at all and have a far increased risk relative to men of gaining a degree in the oldest-mature category compared to not gaining one by age 50. Table 6.9 gives the full set of results for Model 8a.

School type has a role to play on likelihood of gaining a degree with grammar and private school educated pupils more likely than their comprehensive school peers to gain a degree young than not at all by age 50.

Table 6.9: Model 8a (all variables), comparing those who were awarded a degree as a young-mature student compared to no degree. (N=9,789)

Age when degree awarded *(ref: No degree by age 50)*	Young Degree between 21-23 (1979-1981)	Young-Mature: Degree between 24-33 (1982-1991)	Middle-Mature: Degree between 34-42 (1992-2000)	Older-Mature: Degree between 43-50 (2001-2008)
	RRR [95% CI]	RRR [95% CI]	RRR [95% CI]	RRR [95% CI]
Household social class *(ref: middle-class)*				
Working-class	0.46*** [0.34,0.62]	0.63** [0.43, 0.91]	1.02 [0.71, 1.49]	0.96 [0.63, 1.47]
Intermediate	0.85 [0.69, 1.05]	0.93 [0.71, 1.22]	1.10 [0.79, 1.53]	0.96 [0.65, 1.42]
Sex *(ref: Male)*				
Female	0.59*** [0.49, 0.71]	0.43*** [0.34, 0.54]	1.17 [0.92, 1.48]	2.24*** [1.65, 3.04]
School Type *(ref: Comprehensive)*				
Grammar	1.59*** [1.24, 2.02]	1.11 [0.78, 1.55]	1.85*** [1.29, 2.65]	1.30 [0.81, 2.08]
Sec modern	0.69* [0.47, 0.99]	0.87 [0.58, 1.31]	1.06 [0.76, 1.48]	1.31 [0.88, 1.96]
Private	1.45* [1.07, 1.95)	1.27 [0.87, 1.85]	0.94 [0.51, 1.74]	1.29 [0.71, 2.34]
Number of good school qualifications *(ref: None)*				
1-4	2.09*** [1.40, 3.13]	1.99** [1.30, 3.03]	1.90*** [1.36, 2.66]	1.86*** [1.27, 2.72]
5-9+	11.38*** [7.72, 16.76]	6.42*** [4.11. 10.3]	3.00*** [2.01, 4.49]	2.34*** [1.44, 3.80]
Teacher views for FE/HE *(ref: Degree)*				
Other pt/ft course	0.29*** [0.23, 0.37]	0.49*** [0.37, 0.67]	0.91 [0.60, 1.39]	0.69 [0.40, 1.76]
None at all	0.09*** [0.4, 0.19]	0.24*** [0.13, 0.46]	0.48* [0.27, 0.85]	0.35** [0.17, 0.70]
Parents' wishes *(ref: FT education after 18)*				
Leave at 16-18/DK	0.43*** [0.33, 0.55]	0.40*** [0.29, 0.55]	0.78 [0.58, 1.05]	0.73 [0.50, 1.06]
CM wishes *(ref: Continue FT education)*				
PT/Job/NS	0.29*** [0.24, 0.37]	0.49*** [0.37, 0.64]	0.74* [0.55, 0.99]	1.03 [0.71, 1.49]

***significant at .001 level; **significant at .01 level; *significant at .05 level

School attainment increases the risk of gaining a degree by age 50 with cohort members leaving school with 1-4 or 4-9+ good school qualifications far more likely to gain a degree at any age then not at all, compared with someone who did not gain any good grade school qualifications.

There is a reduced risk of gaining a degree at any age if the cohort members' teacher did not view them as suited to study for a degree. Similarly, and finally, there is also a reduced risk of gaining a degree at any age if the parents or cohort member themselves did not express ambitions to continue in full-time education.

The analysis above shows the association between a range of variables and gaining a degree by various age points compared to those who did not obtain one by age 50. The key variables which impacted whether a cohort member gained a degree at all by age 50 is the number of good school qualifications, and sex.

I now refine the modelling and concentrate solely on the 1 in 5 cohort members who had a degree by age 50, comparing those who gained their degrees as mature students, compared to those who gained their degree when young (the reference category).

Findings: Gaining a degree young versus gaining a degree mature

Model 1b (Table 6.10) shows the likelihood of cohort members who grew up in working-class and intermediate-class households gaining a degree at different points in the lifecourse, relative to middle-class cohort members (the reference category). Amongst those with a degree, we see that cohort members from working-class backgrounds are twice as likely to gain their degrees young-mature (RRR=2.21, p<.001) than young, and over seven times more likely to gain their degrees middle-mature and older-mature (RRR=7.13 p<.001 and RRR=7.42 p<.001) than young, compared to the middle-class. A similar pattern is found amongst the intermediate-class who are twice as likely than the middle-class to gain a degree in any of the mature student categories than when young.

Table 6.10: Gaining a degree as a mature student compared to gaining degree as a young student. RRR [95% CI]. (N=1,936)

	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b	Model 4b	Model 5b	Model 6b	Model 7b	Model 8b
Comparing being awarded a degree between age 24 and 33 in 1982-1991 with being awarded a degree young, by 23 (1981)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	2.21*** [1.49, 3.27]	2.14*** [1.44, 3.18]	1.82** [1.21, 2.73]	1.74** [1.16, 2.60]	1.68* [1.12, 2.52]	1.91** [1.27, 2.85]	1.76* [1.17, 2.67]	1.37 [0.89, 2.10]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	1.40** [1.07, 1.83]	1.38** [1.06, 1.81]	1.28 [0.97, 1.68]	1.26 [0.95, 1.67]	1.21 [0.92, 1.61]	1.31* [1.00, 1.73]	1.29 [0.98, 1.70]	1.12 [0.84, 1.50]
Female compared to male	-	.66*** [0.52, 0.84]	.68** [0.54, 0.87]	.69** [0.54, 0.88]	.65*** [0.51, 0.83]	.67*** [0.52, 0.85]	.73** [0.57, 0.94]	.74* [0.57, 0.95]
Comparing being awarded a degree between age 34 and 42 in 1992-2000 with being awarded a degree young, by 23 (1981)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	7.13*** [4.86, 10.48]	7.43*** [5.04, 10.95]	5.38*** [3.55, 8.16]	4.46*** [2.93, 6.77]	4.45*** [2.94, 6.72]	4.54*** [3.02, 6.83]	4.83*** [3.21, 7.27]	2.38*** [1.49, 3.80]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	2.44*** [1.75, 3.41]	2.47*** [1.76, 3.46]	2.04*** [1.43, 2.91]	1.93** [1.35, 2.75]	1.88*** [1.32, 2.68]	1.94*** [1.36, 2.76]	2.09*** [1.48, 2.95]	1.39 [0.95, 2.04]
Female compared to male	-	1.67*** [1.28, 2.18]	1.75*** [1.33, 2.31]	1.87*** [1.40, 2.50]	1.67*** [1.25, 2.22]	1.78*** [1.35, 2.36]	2.19*** [1.64, 2.91]	2.21*** [1.61, 3.02]
Comparing being awarded a between age 43 and 50 in 2001-2008 with gaining a degree young, by 23 (1981)								
Working-class compared to middle-class	7.42*** [4.84, 11.40]	8.05*** [5.20, 12.47]	5.79*** [3.62, 9.25]	4.49*** [2.82, 7.15]	4.76*** [2.99, 7.57]	4.77*** [3.00, 7.56]	4.89*** [3.08, 7.75]	2.34** [1.38, 3.96]
Intermediate compared to middle-class	2.22*** [1.51, 3.28]	2.28*** [1.54, 3.37]	1.88** [1.24, 2.84]	1.71* [1.12, 2.60]	1.75** [1.16, 2.62]	1.77** [1.18, 2.66]	1.87** [1.24, 2.81]	1.25 [0.80, 1.95]
Female compared to male	-	2.99*** [2.14, 4.16]	3.28*** [2.32, 4.62]	3.41*** [2.39, 4.86]	3.0*** [2.12, 4.25]	3.19*** [2.27, 4.50]	4.09*** [2.87, 5.82]	4.35*** [2.97, 6.36]

***significant at .001 level; **significant at .01 level; *significant at .05 level

Models: **1a:** Social Class; **2a** Social Class + Sex; **3a** Social Class + Sex + School type; **4a** Social Class + Sex +School quals; **5a** Social Class + Sex + Teacher expectations; **6a** Social Class + Sex + parents' wishes; **7a** Social Class + Sex + CM wishes; **8a** all variables

In Model 2b, we see that relative to those gaining a degree young, women are less likely than men to gain a degree young-mature but have an increased probability of gaining a degree aged 34-42 (RRR=1.67 p<.001) and 43-50 (RRR=2.99 p<.001). As in the previous models using the full sample (Table 6.8), the addition of sex into the modelling has no discernible impact on the association between social class and the relative risk of gaining a degree young or mature, indicating that both social class and sex are independently associated to the relative likelihood of gaining a degree as a young, young-mature, middle-mature or older-mature student.

In Model 3b, when school type is included, the associations remain similar. The impact of social class is reduced but still highly significant in most cases except for the intermediate-class in the young-mature category which becomes insignificant. The effect of sex remains similar in all age categories.

In Model 4b, when school qualifications are added the effect of sex remains in all age categories. The addition of school attainment decreases the effect of social class although social class is still statistically significant in all age categories except for the intermediate-class in the young-mature category which becomes statistically insignificant.

Model 5b introduces teachers' views alongside social class and sex. The addition of teachers' views makes social class insignificant for intermediate-class in the young-mature age category. However, the effect of social class still holds for working-class and intermediate-class in all other categories, although the magnitude is reduced. The impact of sex is not affected by the introduction of teachers' comments in Model 5b.

In Model 6b, parents' wishes are added to Model 2b. There is a reduction in the risk associate with social class across all age categories, particularly in the working-class compared to middle-class category. There is no attenuation of the risk associated with women compared to Model 2b.

Model 7b includes the cohort members' own wishes at age 16 on remaining in education. Here we find that the intermediate-class in the young-mature category

becomes insignificant. The effect of class is also reduced across all age categories, although they are still statistically significant. The impact of sex is still highly statistically significant in all age categories. Finally, in Model 8b, all variables are included.

Here we find a reduced but still significant risk of working-class cohort members gaining a degree in the 34-42 and 43-50 age categories compared to middle-class cohort members. However, the association for those from working-class backgrounds in the young-mature category, and for those with intermediate-class backgrounds in all the mature age categories, becomes statistically insignificant. This indicates that social class is one key factor for working compared to middle-class cohort members in becoming a middle or older-mature student compared to young.

As in the other Models, women have a reduced likelihood of gaining a degree in the young-mature category but have a far increased risk relative to men in the middle and older categories, compared to gaining a degree at the traditional age.

Table 6.11 gives the full set of results for Model 8b.

School type has a part to play on decreased likelihood for those who went to a grammar school compared to comprehensive in the young-mature category and an increased risk of becoming an older-mature student for cohort members who went to a secondary modern.

Model 8b shows a decreased risk for cohort members with 5-9+ good qualifications gaining a degree as a mature rather than young student. The association between those who have 1-4 good school qualifications and age when gained degree is not statistically significant.

Views of teachers that the cohort member was suited to other part- or full-time courses or no further study increase the risk of gaining a degree as a mature rather than a young student. For example, cohort members deemed not suited to any further study have more than five times the likelihood (RRR=5.19 p<.01) of gaining a degree in the middle-mature category than someone viewed as suited to study for a degree at the traditional age.

Table 6.11: Model 8b (all variables), comparing those who were awarded a degree as mature students to young. (N=1,936)

Age when degree awarded *(ref: Degree awarded young, between 21-23 (1979-1981))*	Young Mature: Degree between 24-33 (1982-1991)	Middle-Mature: Degree between 34-42 (1992-2000)	Older-Mature: Degree between 43-50 (2001-2008)
	RRR [95% CI]	RRR [95% CI]	RRR [95% CI]
Household social class *(ref: middle-class)*			
Working-class	1.37 [0.89, 2.10]	2.38*** [1.49, 3.80]	2.34** [1.38, 3.96]
Intermediate	1.12 [0.84, 1.50]	1.39 [0.95, 2.04]	1.25 [0.80, 1.95]
Sex *(ref: Male)*			
Female	0.74* [0.57, 0.95]	2.21*** [1.61, 3.02]	4.35*** [2.97, 6.36]
School Type *(ref: Comprehensive)*			
Grammar	0.69* [0.49, 0.98]	1.06 [0.70, 1.59]	0.72 [0.43, 1.22]
Sec modern	1.24 [0.72, 2.15]	1.58 [0.94, 2.68]	2.00* [1.11, 3.62]
Private	0.85 [0.58, 1.25]	0.58 [0.29, 1.21]	0.79 [0.41, 1.53]
Number of good school qualifications *(ref: None)*			
1-4	0.86 [0.48, 1.54]	0.78 [0.45, 1.36]	0.77 [0.43, 1.37]
5-9+	0.50* [0.29, 0.86]	0.22*** [0.12, 0.39]	0.18*** [0.10, 0.32]
Teacher views for FE/HE *(ref: Suited to study for a degree)*			
Other pt/ft course	1.68*** [1.24, 2.27]	2.98*** [1.95, 4.57]	2.23** [1.28, 3.90]
None at all	2.67* [1.05, 6.78]	5.19*** [1.97, 13.71]	3.92** [1.38, 11.09]
Parents' wishes *(ref: FT education after 18)*			
Leave at 16-18/unsure	0.92 [0.64, 1.33]	1.88* [1.24, 2.84]	1.84** [1.15, 2.95]
CM wishes *(ref: Continue FT education)*			
PT/Job/NS	1.69*** [1.23, 2.32]	2.67*** [1.87, 3.87]	3.68*** [2.36, 5.75]

***significant at .001 level; **significant at .01 level; *significant at .05 level

Parents' views are statistically significant in the middle and older-mature categories with a cohort member having an 88% (RRR=1.88 p<.01) and 84% (RRR=1.84 p<.01) increased risk of gaining a degree as a mature rather than young student if their parents did not express that they wanted them to stay on in full-time education.

Finally, across the mature age categories, cohort members who wished to study part-time, get a job or who were not sure when asked at 16, have an increased risk of gaining their degree as a mature rather than a young student compared to those who expressed a desire to stay on after school.

Discussion

At the outset of this chapter, I highlighted that one of the key assumptions of the lifecourse perspective is that prior life history impacts on later life outcomes (Mayer, 2009). Structural and other factors experienced in youth impact an individual's educational trajectory and outcomes. Despite the prominence of social class as an explanatory factor within the sociology of education, there was actually very limited statistical data available on mature students' higher education participation over time by social class background (see Chapter 2). Additionally, the existing literature tended to be small scale qualitative studies where social class tends to be unclearly defined (see Chapters 3 and 4). This chapter therefore has contributed to new insights into the social class background of mature students and how social class impacts the age in which a cohort member obtained their degree.

I mentioned that Egerton (2000a) found that the expansion of higher education provided opportunities for those from working-class backgrounds to gain a degree as a mature student up until 1992. My descriptive findings in the first half of this chapter support and extend this, showing that those from working-class and intermediate-class cohort members are found in high proportions in the middle (age 34-42, 1992-2000) and older age categories (43-50, 2001-2008). The regression analysis in the second part of the chapter showed that when all other variables are considered, social class is still a key factor in the increased likelihood

for working-class compared to middle-class cohort members gaining a degree as a mature rather than young student. On the other hand, it seems that other factors, particularly sex and school qualifications are more important on likelihoods of if and when a degree is obtained for cohort members from intermediate, compared with middle-class backgrounds.

By using a more nuanced social class categories in my analysis, I would argue that new insights are gained into the characteristics of mature students. Elliott and Lawrence (2014) argue that their three-point measure is particularly useful in defining the intermediate-class. Based on a range of characteristics and reflections from cohort members about their social class identities as part of the SPIS interviews, they suggest that many of those fitting into the intermediate-class could be considered as more 'advantaged working-class', rather than viewing them as '*not* working-class' (p. 26).

Having better knowledge of what constitutes the intermediate-class, also means that those who fit more squarely in the middle and working-class categories are more clearly identified for those using the NCDS or studying people of a similar age and generation to the cohort members.

This chapter has also shown that as well as social class and sex there are other key factors that impact if and when a cohort member is likely to have gained a degree. School qualifications appear to be particularly important on degree outcomes across all the young and mature age categories analysed. My findings support those of Jenkins et al. (2003, p. 1712) also using the NCDS and assert that, 'learning leads to learning'.

Parental interest (operationalised in various and sometimes problematic ways, see for example Herman & Reinke, 2017) has been found in numerous studies, including those using the NCDS to be an important influence on a child's educational attainment (e.g. Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012). However, as Jenkins (2017) points out, although the influence of parents and teachers on immediate post-school transitions are well established, the impact later in the lifecourse is not so well

evidenced through quantitative research. Parental views are also limited to research participants' recollections in the studies reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4.

By breaking down the mature student category, in this chapter, I have been able to explore the association with parental and cohort member wishes and teacher predictions on degree outcomes up until age 50. The middle-mature and older-mature category had high proportions of cohort members who did not wish to stay on at school past the minimum age, who were not expected to gain a degree by their teachers, or who did not have parents with strong views for them to stay on. Their becoming a mature student later in life suggests, quantitatively, the impact of changing learner identities, changing aspirations as well as new opportunities and work requirements on patterns of participation as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, and which will be explored further in the next two chapters of this thesis.

Finally, the analysis in this chapter has also raised some points to take forward into my qualitative analysis. I am particularly interested in 'outliers'. For example, what can we learn about the experiences of cohort members whose teachers did not deem them suited to a degree, but gained one nevertheless? Or those who were deemed suited but did not fulfil this expectation until later in life. Why did they not obtain one at the traditional age, especially if at a grammar or private school and/or from middle-class background where this may have been a more natural next step? What about those who left school with no 'good' grade qualifications but gained a degree as a mature student? Considering most research is focused on women, and working-class women in particular what can we learn about the stories of men who gained their degree in the oldest age category? Insights on these and other questions will be explored though the qualitative analysis of 26 cohort members' life story interviews in the next chapter.

7

Cohort members' pathways into higher education

Introduction

There is scope to make a novel contribution to the literature in Chapters 3 and 4 that connects cohort members' pasts – their schooling, childhoods, families, post-school transitions – with the process of deciding to become a mature student. I do this through adopting a different temporal time frame to most other studies about mature students. Instead of looking at reported reasons for wanting to become a mature student either at the time of, or shortly after the decision had been made, I look at educational careers and the process of decision-making as reflected upon by individuals up to 25 years after they were awarded their degrees.

The previous chapter painted a novel quantitative picture of the impact of social class, sex, school type, school qualifications, educational and work aspirations, on the age when 1958 cohort members gained their degrees. The aim of this chapter is to further examine how these and other factors impacted decisions to become a mature student, this time using words from the cohort members themselves, collected when aged 50.

I take advantage of the data available within the NCDS to connect information from the childhoods of 26 cohort members with the reasons given for their decisions to become a mature student expressed in their life stories (see Chapter 5 for details). I am particularly interested in exploring the circumstances of those who went against their predicted trajectory or social pathways and did not become young students, and those who were not viewed as being suited to

higher education but went on to gain a degree later in life. What if anything, do they talk about in their life stories personally and socially that enabled or contributed to this change?

Since the previous chapter showed that there were important sex differences between men and women and degree outcomes, Table 7.1 contains information on the 12 men and Table 7.2 on the 14 women whose life story interviews I have analysed. The tables include individual information from the variables included in the quantitative analyses (column headers 2-6 shaded in yellow), along with some additional data (the final four column headers shaded in blue). For everyone listed in the tables this additional data includes a teacher's prediction of their academic attainment at secondary school and beyond, and teachers' suggestions for what career they might be suited to, both asked when the cohort member was aged 11 in 1969. I have also provided information on the age they completed full-time education and their first job. Details on the quantitative and qualitative sources are provided in Chapter 5.

After discussing the most significant features of the tables, I then move onto presenting and discussing factors which influenced post-school transitions and what cohort members talk about in relation to why and how they decided to become mature students as they reflect on their lives at age 50.

Table 7.1: Characteristics of a sample of 14 male cohort members who were awarded their degrees as a mature student.

Pseudonym/ Job title at age 50	Social class (age 11)	School type (age 16)	No. good school quals	Parent wished CM to stay in FT Ed past 18? (age 16)	CM wanted to stay on in FT ed? (age 16)	Teacher: FE/HE suitability (age 16)	Teacher: Academic prediction (age 11)	Teacher: Job area predictions (age 11)	Age left full-time education	First job
Men with degree awarded young-mature: between 23 and 33 (1982-1991)										
Harry P1170 Clinical Psychologist	Middle-class	Comp	5	Yes	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	✕	✕	19	Psychologist
Clifford P1416 Company director	Middle-class	Comp	1	Yes	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"CSE"	"Impossible to say"	16	Other craft and related occupation.
Alex P489 Telecomms	Middle-class	✕	4	No/ Uncertain	✕	Other full or part-time study	"Scottish Certificate of Education 'A' – University"	"Too early - but professional"	17	Clerk
Gareth P1404 Teacher	Middle-class	Private	✕	✕	✕	✕	"He should achieve good C.S.E. results but would probably find the G.C.E. course too difficult"	"Some form of engineering"	18	Counter clerk and cashier
Roy P741 Solicitor	Intermediate	✕	7	No/ Uncertain	✕	✕	"If things go well at home and the father continues his interest [NAME] could do extremely well"	"it will depend entirely on the guidance he receives in the next few years"	29	Other food, drink and tobacco process operative
George P487 Newsagent owner	Intermediate	Comp	✕	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"3 years General Course"	"Tradesman of some kind"	24	Other engineers and technologist.
Derek P426 SEN co-ordinator	Intermediate	Grammar	9+	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Degree/ BEd	✕	✕	18	Welfare, community and youth worker
Simon P760 Joiner	Working-class	Comp	9+	✕	Yes	Degree/ BEd	"Depends upon his application. He should obtain G.C.E or higher"	"Scientific or technical"	18	Laboratory technician

Note: '✕' indicates missing data.

Pseudonym/ Job title at age 50	Social class (age 11)	School type (age 16)	No. of good school quals	Parent wished CM to stay in FT Ed past 18? (age 16)	CM wanted to stay on in FT ed? (age 16)	Teacher: FE/HE suitability (age 16)	Teacher: Academic prediction (age 11)	Teacher: Job area predictions (age 11)	Age left full-time education	First job
Table 7.1 (cont.): Characteristics of a sample of 14 male cohort members who were awarded their degrees as mature students										
Men with degree awarded middle-mature: between 34 to 42 (1992-2000)										
Patrick P433 Systems Engineer	Intermediate	Comp	5	No/ Uncertain	✗	Other full or part-time study	"I think he will successfully complete a grammar school course as far as 'O' levels"	"I cannot say"	21	Other scientific technician
Peter P052 Housing officer	Working-class	Sec Mod	3	✗	✗	✗	We do not think he will achieve CSE standard"	"Not able to make a worthwhile comment at this stage"	16	Other craft and related occupation
Men with degree awarded older-mature: between 43-50 (2001-2008)										
Geoff P357 Financial advisor	Middle-class	Sec Mod	none	Yes	No/ Uncertain	None at all	"Not up to C.S.E. level"	"Manual worker - parents own a café, expect he will join his parents in this business."	16	Other manager in farming, forestry and fishing
Ian P217 Proprietor	Intermediate	Comp	2	✗	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"He should be capable of following a technical course for 3 years. Could be considered a likely candidate for O levels"	"Might be fitted for shop work since his easy manner would enable him to be at home with the public; he might however be suited to a trade"	16	Electrical engineer

Note: '✗' indicates missing data.

Pseudonym/ Job title at age 50	Social class (age 11)	School type (age 16)	No. good school quals	Parent wished CM to stay in FT Ed past 18? (age 16)	CM wanted to stay on in FT ed (age 16)	Teacher: FE/HE suitability (age 16)	Teacher: Academic predictions (age 11)	Teacher: Job area predictions (age 11)	Age left full-time education	First job
Women with degree awarded young-mature: between 23 and 33 (1982-1991)										
Penny P1301 Nurse	Middle-class	Comp	5	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	✗	✗	✗	17	Nurse
Ruth P1125 Teacher	Middle-class	Comp	6	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Degree/ BEd	"GCE 4-6 subjects"	[blank]	18	Nurse
Joan P696 Programme Co-ordinator childcare course	Intermediate	Comp	5	Yes	Yes	Other full or part-time study	"She should be able to follow an academic course through secondary school & into university, obtaining a degree"	"Teaching Profession or in the theatre"	18	Sales assistant
Susan P009 Civil Servant	Working-class	Comp	2	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	✗	"Reasonable C.S.E results"	"Not known"	16	Clerk
Karen P031 Events steward	Working-class	Grammar	5	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"Should do well in a Secondary Technical School. Has ability to secure good G.C.E."	"Office work, nursing"	18	Cleaner, domestic
Women with degree awarded middle-mature: between 34 to 42 (1992-2000)										
Elaine P306 Occupational Health Advisor	Middle-class	✗	1	Yes	✗	✗	"In languages & English & oral work - good prospects. A respectable CSE and CGCE in this field"	"Supervisor in a store, organising, as long as there is some degree of independence, & she is not a mere cog."	18	Waitress
Jean P320 Not working	Middle-class	Grammar	7	Yes	✗	✗	✗	✗	24	Nurse
Pamela P305 Solicitor	Intermediate	Grammar	7	✗	Yes	Other full or part-time study	"Possible 5 'O' levels"	"Not easy to say possibly nursing or clerical work"	17	Legal service and related occupations

Table 7.2: Characteristics of a sample of 16 female cohort members who were awarded their degrees as a mature student

Note: '✗' indicates missing data.

Continued Table 7.2: Characteristics of a sample of 16 female cohort members who were awarded their degrees as a mature student

Pseudonym/ Job title at age 50	Social class (age 11)	School type (age 16)	No. of good CSEs	Parent wished CM to stay in FT Ed past 18? (age 16)	Cohort member wanted to stay on in FT ed? (age 16)	Teacher: FE/HE suitability (age 16)	Teacher: Academic predictions (age 11)	Teacher: Job area predictions (age 11)	Age left full-time education	First recorded job
Women with degree awarded older-mature: between 43-50 (2001-2008)										
Nicola P1267 Ecologist/ PhD student	Intermediate	Grammar	None	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"Capable of reaching university"	"Professional status"	33	Clerk
June P348 Project Manager	Intermediate	Grammar	3	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"At least five G.C.E.'s at 'O' level and will almost certainly go on to some higher education e.g. college of Education"	"[Name] is capable & determined and would do well in a profession e.g. Teaching"	17	Routine laboratory tester
Dawn P1281 Senior Nurse	Intermediate	Comp	1	✗	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	Should obtain a good C.S.E. result, or possibly 3 or 4 'O' levels	"Nursery nurse or teacher's aide. Would like to be a teacher but I doubt if she would obtain a good enough exam result to be accepted at Training College"	17	Nurse
Barbara P082 Family Court Advisor	Intermediate	Grammar	6	Yes	Yes	Other full or part-time study	"She will be successful in exams but maddeningly careless in her daily efforts"	"Something singular - individual T.V. or News Reporter - but not one of a Team"	20	Other secretary, personal assistant, typist, word processor operator
Valerie P318 Social work consultant	Working-class	Comp	2	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	✗	"Certainly C.S.E. grades"	"Some form of office work"	16	Social worker, probation officer
Wendy P378 Community nurse	Working-class	Comp	None	No/ Uncertain	No/ Uncertain	Other full or part-time study	"Does not show any great academic quality"	[Blank]	16	Clerk

Note: '✗' indicates missing data.

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The sample – key features

In this section I draw attention to points of interest about the individual cohort members presented in Table 7.1 and 7.2.

First to note are the teachers' comments for the three cohort members who left school with no good qualifications – Geoff, Wendy and Nicola. Geoff's teachers felt at age 11 that he was "[n]ot up to C.S.E. level" and Wendy's teachers commented that she "[d]oes not show great academic quality". Nicola on the other hand was viewed as "capable of reaching university" but also left school with no good school qualifications. All three were awarded their degrees in their mid to late 40s in 2001-2008. As Chapter 6 has shown, school qualifications was a key factor on gaining a degree at any age, including as a mature student so these three are certainly 'outliers' here. Key questions that come to mind are: what happened to Nicola during her final years of school to make her not achieve academically as expected? and, do any of the respondents speak about their school days and teacher expectations in their life stories?

Second to note are the teachers' assessments of Derek, Simon and Ruth who were the only three viewed as suited to gain a degree when asked in the age 16 survey. The three were awarded their degrees as a young-mature student, but what prevented them from enrolling at the traditional age?

A third cohort member of interest is Roy who gained his degree as a young-mature student. The data is missing from Roy's teachers at age 16, but at age 11 the teachers note the importance of the role of his parents on his academic success:

> "[i]f things go well at home and the father continues his interest
> [Roy] could do extremely well".

At age 16 his parents replied 'not sure/no' to their wishes for him to stay on past 18. Does Roy say anything about the influence of his parents on his educational decisions that might shed light on his educational trajectory and why the teachers felt parental guidance was so important for him?

Fourthly, as shown in Chapters 2 and 6, more women than men are found in the oldest age categories, and this is also reflected in the samples displayed in the tables

above. In the older-mature category, Nicola and Wendy stood out for further exploration. At age 11, Nicola was seen as capable of reaching university by her teachers, but at age 16 her teachers did not mention university and neither her parents nor Nicola herself mention a desire to stay on. She left grammar school with no good school qualifications. Wendy's teachers viewed her as not showing any "great academic quality" at age 11 and, like Nicola, she left school with no good qualifications. What do both these women say about schooling and changing circumstances that led them to return to study gaining their degrees sometime in the early 2000s? Do gender roles factor in their stories as seen in the experiences of women mature students in Chapters 3 and 4?

Ian and Geoff are the only two men in this sample who were awarded their degrees in the older-mature category, which as shown in the previous chapter is a category containing far more women than men. I discuss Ian in Chapter 8. For this chapter, Geoff is particularly interesting as not only is he found in the oldest category, but he is the only one predicted not to reach CSE level by his teachers. Indeed, he left school with no good grade exam passes. What led him to gain a degree at an older age?

Finally, we saw in the previous chapter that working-class people were found in smaller proportions in the young-mature than middle and older-mature categories compared to the middle and intermediate social classes. However, Simon, Susan and Karen, who are all from working-class backgrounds, gained their degrees in the young-mature category so reside in this minority. In addition, what can be learned about the experiences of middle-class and intermediate-class cohort members who became mature students? These groups are infrequently studied in the widening participation in higher education literature (Chapter 3).

I now turn to these and other questions through my analysis of the 26 interviews.

Factors influencing cohort members' post-school transitions

In a similar vein to the analysis in Chapter 3, in this section, I have organised the data into two topics. First, I draw out the role of the education system, and by association, teachers' and careers' advice on the way in which cohort members

discuss their post-school transitions and decisions. The second topic is parents' aspirations and expectations and how these influenced their children's decisions. Within both I focus on how cohort members talk about their own aspirations and wishes when they were young and the role of the school and family on shaping, encouraging or discouraging their ambitions. Where appropriate, I draw on some of the extra information included in Tables 7.1 and 7.2, as well as the 'Imagine you are 25' essays they wrote when age 11 (see Chapter 5).

Success or failure in the education system

The 1958 cohort were caught up in the transition between the selective and comprehensive school systems. The previous chapter showed that 57% of cohort members were in a comprehensive school at age 16, a type of school which in theory was designed to give all its students the same opportunities. However, there were still 24% of cohort members who were in a secondary modern and 12% in a grammar school at age 16. As mentioned in Chapter 3, researchers have noted that the mature students in their studies would mention the 11-plus in their interviews, particularly if they felt it had had a negative impact on their academic confidence or career opportunities throughout later parts of their lives (Alford, 1995; Fuller, 1999). Some cohort members in my sample also mention passing or failing the 11-plus but because the interviews were not directly asking about their education, the way in which some talk about the significance of passing or failing was intertwined with other domains of life.

For Karen and Nicola, the grammar school was significant as a place of refuge from unhappiness at home. Karen won a scholarship to an all-girls' Catholic school. She reflects positively about passing the 11-plus and her time at school:

> "[M]y school was a lifeline for me, I felt safe in school. It was when I went home I just couldn't, you know, it was the thought of going home that used to frighten me. So I'd buy books and my love of learning has come from my school and the nuns." (Karen, working-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Nicola also reflects on her enjoyment of attending the county girls' grammar school but is unsure if it was the school or being away from her stepmother that made her reflect on the experience so positively.

Table 7.2 shows that at age 11 Nicola's teachers stated that she was "capable of reaching university" and entering professional work but she left at 16 with no good school qualifications. Considering their love for school and learning, neither Nicola nor Karen spoke about why they did not continue their education. However, they mention what they did next. Nicola talks about leaving school at 16 to work in a bank. She says she enjoyed the work but was strongly steered by her stepmother to go into banking rather than follow her interest in science. Karen's transition is slightly less clear, but from the Table 7.2 it seems that she did stay in education until 18. In Table 7.2 we can see that her first recorded job was domestic service or cleaning and in her interview she talks about becoming a nursery nurse – a job suggested by her school teachers in 1969.

Jean also mentions the 11-plus in her life story. Unlike Karen and Nicola she did not pass, but did attend a selective Catholic school. Like some mature students in the research by Alford (1995) and Fuller (1999) Jean recollects the unfairness of the 11-plus system. She notes that most people in the school who took a regional variation of the exam failed it, whereas those who took the main Manchester version passed. Jean describes how her father fought for her to attend the selective school despite her failing:

> "[…]out of the eight of us who sat the exam only one person passed, and everybody passed the Manchester one, so me dad, God love him, kicked up stink […] so even though I hadn't passed my 11 plus they said I could go. That was one major saga." (Jean, middle-class, degree awarded between age 34-42)

Jean gained seven good qualifications aged 16 and her parents recorded that they would like her to continue in full-time education past the age of 18 (Table 7.2). Unlike Karen and Nicola, Jean briefly mentions her decision not to continue to university. After doing well at school, she describes how she went to the sixth form, but it is here that she just "trundled through" lacking enjoyment. Consequently, she decided not to progress to university but to train to be a nurse like her mother. This decision contrasted with her peers:

> "I sort of trundled through the Sixth Form, I was never a Grade A student but I managed, and then of course everybody was like filling UCCA forms in and I just didn't want to go to university and so I

applied to a hospital to do me general training." (Jean, middle-class, degree awarded between age 34-42)

In contrast to studies where mature students expressed the desire to pass the 11-plus, passing was not viewed as the ideal or desired outcome for Penny and Barbara. Middle-class Penny failed the exam meaning that she did not enter the grammar school. She does not specify the type of school entered but presumably it was a secondary modern. Her school transitioned into a comprehensive school during her time there, and she views the turn to comprehensive status in positive terms, suiting her learning needs well. Penny went to train as a nurse, a profession mentioned in her essay at age 11, so may have been a destination she aspired to for a long time:

> AT age oF 25 my work would be nurse. My interests would be horse riding I would Live on a FArm and I a horse for riding oTHers inTerSTS would be Looking after animals. Work nights as a nurse Home liFe would be doing work then go to work at Hospital and get home 7 o clock. 3 nights do work aT Hospital doing neddlework. […] [71].

Barbara who grew up in the intermediate-class passed the 11-plus. She mentioned that this was to her mother's delight, but Barbara did not feel the same way:

> "I passed my 11 plus, that was a real awful--, I mean I passed it but it was such--, my mother has got such a class issue about school and it's almost like, thank God you haven't got to go to a secondary modern, like, you know. And actually that part of my education I hated. I would have much preferred to have gone to secondary modern […]." (Barbara, Intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

She gives two reasons for why she did not like grammar school. Firstly, it was all-girls and, secondly, the pupils were all expected to become doctors or teachers. In contrast, she wanted to become a personal assistant (PA), something she remarks that her career's teacher could not understand:

> "[…] I remember them saying, "You won't need typing if you're going to be a teacher or a lawyer," or whatever it was […]." (Barbara, intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

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[71] To note, misspellings, capital letters have been kept intact in the transcribed essays. See Elliott, 2013a for explanations.

The comments from her teachers at age 11, gave some indication of Barbara's independent character. Her teacher said: "She will be successful in exams but maddeningly careless in her daily efforts" and suggested Barbara should not work as part of a team – suggesting something like a career as a TV or news reporter.

Vickerstaff (2003) suggests that when middle-class mature students reject their academic and professional career trajectories, it is as a form of rebellion; but Barbara does not frame her opinion in that way. She left school with six good grade exam passes and could have continued onto A levels like her peers, but she valued the role of PA in its own right. Defending this decision, Barbara describes how administration and typing skills have become vital for everyone in all professions, including the legal sector where she worked at the time of the interview.

There were two cohort members who went to secondary modern schools that had not yet transitioned to comprehensives by the time they left at age 16. Peter mentions his secondary modern in the opening to his life story:

> Interviewer: [W]ould you mind telling me your life story as you see it?
>
> Peter: Working-class, left school at 16. Yeah, secondary modern sort. Got a job as [an] apprentice. (Peter, working-class, degree awarded between age 34-42)

He uses the phrase "secondary modern sort" to suggest that to leave at 16 and enter an apprenticeship (for him with the Coal Board) was typical of those from his working-class background and school type. His teachers at age 11, do not express much faith in his academic ability saying, "We do not think he will achieve CSE standard", although he did leave at 16 with three good qualifications. Peter does not elaborate further about his education in the secondary modern.

Geoff was also a secondary modern student. In contrast to Peter, he expresses his feelings about school saying: "schooling was rubbish, couldn't care less". When Geoff was 11 his teacher commented he was not capable of reaching CSE level and when age 16 he is the only cohort member in the sample whose teacher said was not suited to any form of further or higher education at all. The following extract paints of picture of hating some aspects of school, whilst appreciating others:

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"I used to hate it [school]. Rugby was good because it was--, you didn't have to use your brain a lot of the time, used to hate school completely, I was in a remedial class, it was brilliant, we used to go to [PLACE10, East of England] and we--, […] They would--, everybody else would be doing work, we used to go out for the day, it was kind of like the thickos we'll put them in a group." (Geoff, middle-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

Geoff's teachers at age 11 viewed him as "Not up to C.S.E. level" and felt that he was suited to working in the café which his parents owned. He left school at 16 with no good educational qualifications and entered farm work. The interviews revealed that Geoff, like Karen and Nicola, were experiencing an abusive home life. Whereas for the two women, school was an enjoyable refuge, in which they felt motivated to learn, for Geoff this was not the case.

The 11-plus exam, school type, school ethos, teachers and careers' advisors have been mentioned by cohort members as impacting their plans for further education and work. These school experiences were intertwined with the role played by parents and home life on cohort members' thoughts for their post-school transitions. In the next section I focus on how individuals discussed the influence of parents' aspirations and expectations on their post-school decisions.

Parents' aspirations and expectations

Seven of the sample of 26 had parents who indicated that they would like their child to stay on full-time past the age of 18. It is worth noting that full-time education past 18 does not just mean a degree at university or polytechnic as there are other courses that parents could have had in mind when answering this question. However, the aim of the discussion that follows is to see how cohort members speak about and explain the role of their parents on their schooling and post-school transitions to understand if and why some may have gone against their parents' wishes to stay on.

Continuing with Geoff, in Table 7.1 we see that his parents wanted him to stay on in full-time education past the age of 18. When Geoff speaks about his home life, he gives no indication that his parents were interested in his education and draws direct attention to the effect of their workload and his father's alcoholism on his lack of academic progress:

"[S]chooling was non-existent, we never got any homework help so I just bummed out of school, I just kind of can't be bothered. So I never did very well at school, so I'm not blaming them, I'm just--, that's the way we were working in a business and they were working hard to make money but unfortunately he was drinking it all so that was quite a big--, that was quite a big thing in our life." (Geoff, middle-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

In contrast, Roy refers to his father's involvement in his education. Roy grew up in the intermediate social class. The importance of his father to his potential academic success was identified by the teacher when Roy was age 11 who wrote: "If things go well at home and the father continues his interest, [Roy] could do extremely well" (Table 7.1). However, Roy's father died when he was studying for his A levels affecting his progress:

"Then I went to the [SCHOOL1] for six years, actually left half way through my A Levels, I perhaps shouldn't have done but it just coincided with the time of my father died, so I suppose I went a bit wayward at the time." (Roy, intermediate-class, degree awarded between 23-33)

When probed about the death of his father and its impact on his education, Roy observed that he had had enough of education, and stayed on post-16 due to parental pressure. He describes how his father was a disciplinarian and put a lot of pressure on him to make sure he had a good education and job prospects so that he could provide for a future family. Roy mentioned that his sisters did not have the same expectations put on them. His father's death meant it was easier for him to drop out of A levels, "[…] he wasn't there to crack the whip basically." (Roy, intermediate-class, degree awarded aged 23-33).

Susan (to be discussed in Chapter 8), Joan and Valerie also mentioned the theme of gender roles and what this meant in terms of parental expectations. Table 7.2 indicates that Joan's teacher felt that she (at age 11) had potential to obtain a degree and perhaps become a teacher or maybe to work in the theatre. At age 16 her teachers did not mention a degree but viewed her as suited to some other full or part-time education – she achieved five good grades. Both Joan and her parents expressed an interest in her staying on in full-time education. Subsequently, Joan spoke about how she did not get the A level grades needed to continue onto the

university course of her choice. She identified three primary reasons for her failure. First a mix up at her college regarding her music exam, second the pressure she put on herself which caused her stress, and third, the lack of encouragement from her parents.

Joan contrasts the way her mother brought her up to how she encourages her own children in their education, challenging them when they have not done their homework. Her insights into intergenerational change provide a useful context in understanding the particular and different opportunities and expectations by gender for the 1958 birth cohort.

Similarly, Valerie describes how her working-class father was "staunchly motivated" for the boys to continue their education, but slightly less so for the girls as he felt it was likely that they would get married, with their husbands providing for them. At age 16, Valerie's parents did not state that they wanted her to remain in education past 18 but from her own recollection was that although the boys were more encouraged, her parents still wanted her to continue. She rebelled against this idea choosing marriage instead:

> "[…] when I was 17 I was very headstrong, decided that the guy I'd got in a relationship with, whether my parents liked him or not I was going to do what I wanted to do, as you do at 17. I married him when I was 20, which was a big mistake." (Valerie, working-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

Parental expectation was also an important part of Harry's recollections about his middle-class childhood. His father was a teacher, and his parents were keen for him to stay on beyond 18 (see Table 7.1). Leaving school with just an average number of qualifications he is very reflective and discusses how he lacked motivation. In hindsight he thinks that he may have been depressed. Harry described how he had no self-belief. Although it might be expected that his father would take an active role in his son's education, from Harry's perspective, this does not seem to have happened. He decided to go to art school, but acknowledges that this was a passive, rather than an active choice that aligned with others in his peer group who did not know what else to do:

> "[…] I think that's what happens to a lot of kids in that they end up going to art college, not really, you know, that they like art, but no clear intention that that's what they're gonna do." (Harry, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Like Harry's, Gareth's parents placed great value and emphasis on education, but he mentioned that they were somewhat absent from giving him direct advice and guidance during his schooling. He failed the 11-plus and said his parents paid for him to attend a private boarding school, which he thinks must have been a big financial sacrifice for them. Gareth chose the school based on there being a picture of football in the prospectus. Gareth enjoyed freedom (from parental influence) associated with being at boarding school and thought this contributed to his diminishing enthusiasm for education and lack of direction when it came to post-school transition:

> "[…] did moderately okay at O levels, did not very well at A level, I'd had enough of education, eventually I just stumbled into banking." (Gareth, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Lack of planning, limited parents and teachers involvement and a generally happenstance feeling of their post-school transitions was also mentioned by Clifford and Patrick. Patrick grew up in the intermediate-class and went to a comprehensive school. He decided to go to technical college as part of a process to join the Merchant Navy. The interviewer asked if there was any particular input from his parents on his decision:

> "They just wanted me to do something (laughs), they didn't want me just--, when I left college--, when I'd left [inaudible], they were surprised--, my father said he was surprised 'cause he thought I was just going to sign on the dole and do nothing. […] [T]hey didn't have a high opinion of me academically, I didn't work--, I didn't want to be at college, I didn't want to be at school at sixth form, I didn't have a choice. (Patrick, intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 34-42)

This lack of specific attention and guidance from parents was also mentioned in June's and Dawn's life stories. Neither wanted to criticise their parents, but circumstances meant that they could not give their children the required attention and guidance. June discussed how being part of a very large family and busy

household meant that the children tended to fend for themselves relying on the support of siblings and cousins rather than parents.

June expressed how she felt guilty and became emotional in the interview for even bringing up the lack of attention she was given as one of many siblings. Dawn also became emotional when remembering her close relationship with her father, and after her mother left the family when she was 11 years old. Subsequently, Dawn took on the role of mother looking after the home and her younger sibling whilst her father went out to work. The interviewer asked what her school life was like:

> "I looked after my brother and, you know, I used to do the cleaning,
> try and do the cooking when I was young, you know, before going
> to school I used to light the fire (laughs). […] I didn't think school
> was difficult, I didn't--, I didn't do very well in school, I didn't--, I
> know I could have done better, but I didn't do very well in school."
> (Dawn, intermediate-class, degree awarded between 43-50)

Dawn left school and went to train as a nurse, a profession to which her teachers felt she might be suited when asked in 1969 and one which she was still employed in at age 50.

Finally, following in parents' footsteps was a theme identified in Chapter 3 as playing a part of post-school transitions. This theme did not come up as regularly in the cohort interviews but was mentioned by Jean who followed her mother into nursing[72], and Derek who pursued a career path in accountancy commenting that his father worked in a similar role.

Summary

In similarity with the literature reviewed in Chapter 3, the general feeling when cohort members describe their schooling and post-school decisions is quite passive. School ethos, teachers' and careers advisors' views intersect with social class and gender roles in steering cohort members onto a particular pathway, with few going against the grain. Parents seem to have been the main influence on their decisions rather than teachers. The statistical data in the previous chapter revealed a pattern

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[72] See also Penny's childhood essay on p. 178 where she writes in some detail about a nursing career. Cohort members who took part in a radio programme (BBC Radio 4, 2010) mentioned how their stories were often written based on the lives they saw others in their family lead, and this could be the case for Penny.

between parents from the three social classes and their wishes for their children's destinations. However, as mentioned in Chapter 3, there is not an easily observable common working-class, middle-class or intermediate-class experience with regard to parents and home life coming through the individual stories. In contrast, individual differences in experiences seem more easily differentiated by gender.

The next section focuses on the process of deciding to become a mature student.

Deciding to become a mature student

In Chapter 4, I reviewed studies that looked at the reasons why mature students decided to enrol for a degree. Two main reasons were given across a range of quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods studies – for personal reasons and for career-related reasons.

In the discussion that follows, I take advantage of my temporal position in that unlike most of the studies about mature students where motivations are related to hoped-for outcomes, I highlight cases where these aspirations came to fruition. To identify if personal reasons were fulfilled is complex, as there are an 'intricate web of elements' (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p. 60) that influence decisions. Consequently, I provide some analysis and interpretation of individual outcomes in this chapter but explore these in more depth in relation to four cohort members in Chapter 8.

Personal reasons

Personal reasons seem to revolve around the notion of making up for the past and reshaping futures, with themes such as self-fulfilment and timing characterising cohort members' decision-making narratives.

Self-fulfilment here refers to studying for a degree as a means to achieve a personal goal or ambition as well as in order to change or address an aspect of life or 'future selves' (Henderson et al., 2019). The degree in these instances is part of personal development and as a way for individuals to prove to themselves (or others) that they are capable of higher-level study (Beaty et al., 1997; Davies et al., 2002).

This theme was evident in several cohort members' narratives. For example, Joan felt that she had underachieved academically as she missed out on her place at university due to her A level results. After leaving school, she had relationships with

men much older than herself, developed an eating disorder and blamed herself for her parents' divorce. She felt out of control. Joan found an old bible where she had written goals to herself, one of which included going to university. Influenced by her sister and the message to herself written years prior, she applied to university choosing – music and art – subjects she had studied at A level. Joan secured a place and enrolled at the same time as her younger sister who was attending at the traditional age. She joined Christian societies at university and met her future husband who shared her values. Participating in higher education was part of a process that led Joan to change her life and take a different path. At the time of the interview, she was working as a Further Education teacher and programme co-ordinator on a childcare course.

As alluded to above, Karen had an unhappy home life and school was her refuge. At the time of the interview, Karen had just started therapy to work through her mental breakdown due to the abuse she experienced as a child. For Karen, gaining a degree as a young-mature student was a chance to improve her life following a period of mental ill health which contributed to her giving up her training to become a nurse at the traditional age. Karen says that her degree was a "a big changing point for me" (Karen, working-class, degree awarded aged 23-33).

When Dawn's daughter was old enough, she decided to study for a degree through her workplace where she worked as a nurse. She graduated sometime between the ages of 43-50 and was working as a senior nurse at the time of the interview. For Dawn the degree was linked to self-development:

> "I mean your priorities change, when I had a child my priorities
> were my daughter, but I still had to go to work, hmmm, but I went
> to work, I never developed myself, I never sort of went on to do any
> further education then. But as she got older and went to school, I
> sort of did my degree then and sort of developed myself then."
> (Dawn, intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

The desire for self-development was also a strong reason given by Harry for his return to education. Starting a government youth training scheme was a key moment he recounted in his life story. Here he met people who encouraged him, in contrast with his father's lack of interest when he was at school. The following

quotation shows that his initial reasons for enrolling were to develop personally but this then led onto a career:

> "[Meeting people who believed in me] had a huge impact on me, and that made me want to go university I think to develop. And I wanted to go--, I went and did Psychology. 'Cause I actually realised there was something wrong with education at that point, and I actually realised--, you know, I think I believed I was quite--, I didn't have anything to offer, I was stupid, and I actually realised I'd done a lot better academically." (Harry, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Although the information gleaned from the interviews is limited, the stories of Harry, Joan, Karen and Dawn above illustrate how decisions to enrol were linked to quite complex issues, in particular their past self-confidence, identity as a learner and relationships with parents.

The next two topics continue the theme of time, highlighting the importance of how women's roles within the domain of family and relationships impacts the timing of decisions. Again, there is a link to personal development, but these cohort members indicate the relevance of timing on their decision to become a mature student.

Nicola left school at 16 and went to work in a bank. She married and became a housewife for many years. Nicola mentioned that she had an opportunity to study for a degree when her own children were very young but declined this offer on the grounds that the time was not quite right in terms of her parental responsibilities. After leaving the bank and a period of working night shift jobs stacking shelves in a supermarket when her marriage ended, she got a job in an optician's. A training course reignited her interest in science, and this led to her revisiting the idea of returning to study.

Nicola described the moment (collecting her son from university for the final time) she made the decision to become a student, providing an interesting example of how long-term goals can be achieved when the time is right:

> "[…] I was driving home and I thought, that's the last time I'm going to come over here and that was quite sad, and I just thought, I'm going to do a degree. Got home, [PARTNER] said, "Glass of wine?" I said, "Yes please," "Another glass?" I went, "Yes please,"

and I'm thinking, oh yeah, "I'm going to do a degree," [partner said] "Well I think that's bloody marvelous." So I did my degree, so my (younger) son was in [PLACE15, South East England] doing his degree and I was doing my degree [inaudible]." (Nicola, intermediate-class, degree awarded between 43-50)

At the time of the interview, she was studying for a PhD in a science subject, a subject she loved but had been discouraged from pursuing by her stepmother decades earlier.

Valerie decided to gain a degree for both career and personal development reasons. She mentioned a key point at age 26 when she had been through a divorce. This experience made her realise the importance of being financially and emotionally independent – something she said her father had wanted for her when she was making her post-school transition, but which she had rebelled against. She observed:

> "I separated and divorced and then I realised that I wanted something out of life for myself, and I wanted to achieve it myself, which I did do." (Valerie, working-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

At the time of the interview, Valerie had a successful career as a social work consultant having studied social work at university part-time.

Personal development was the primary way in which cohort members in the above examples weaved the process of deciding to study within their life stories. I now turn to where cohort members spoke more explicitly and predominantly about their decisions to study for a degree being related to their career.

Career-related reasons

Although survey research might distil the range of career-related reasons into distinct categories such as 'career progression' or 'career change', like the personal motivations discussed above, career-related reasons are varied and interconnected to other aspects of life. In this section, I discuss three broad career-related reasons identified by cohort members: first, those that were simply because of a career requirement, secondly decisions that were planned and thirdly, decisions that were unplanned.

Career requirement

Smithers and Griffin (1986) noted that people in teaching and nursing, engineering, archaeology, librarianship and the police force tended to enrol as mature students because their professions increasingly required a degree. There was evidence of this in the cohort members' stories particularly for women working in nursing and men working in areas of rapid technological change and other areas of innovation.

Elaine, Jean and Penny were all nurses, who gained their degrees as mature students for work-related reasons. Elaine and Penny both spoke about completing various diplomas and a degree through work, slotting study around their family commitments. Jean undertook qualifications to specialise in health visiting and successfully gained her certificate and degree in that area. All three expressed the process of becoming a mature student as part of their developmental career trajectory rather than a turning point in their lives.

Alex and Geoff also mention higher education as part of their job requirements. However, unlike the nurses, they spoke about the irony of having to undertake qualifications for their work, given that they had had enough of education at school with Geoff leaving at 16 and Alex at 17. As Alex says:

> "I couldn't stand the sight of--, the thought of more years of education, […] I had a break between doing the HNC, or finishing the HNC and I can't for the life in me remember how much of a break it was, it wasn't--, it was maybe a year or two of a break, I thought to hell with this, I'm really going to do a degree. So I went and did a degree, went and did the honours, all be it part-time. And I thoroughly enjoyed it […]." (Alex, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Geoff also gained a degree via his work in financial services where he was still working at the time of the interview. Having succeeded in education as a mature student Geoff reflects how if he had had more support, rather like Harry above, he could have achieved more when younger.

Unlike some of the mature students in the studies by Pascall and Cox (1993) and Marks (1998), these cohort members did not express any resentment at having to study a degree for work, and the two men found it enjoyable upon reflection.

Planned career decisions

When making his post-school decisions, Clifford had to make a choice between following his passion for horses – a topic which features heavily in his essay at age 11 – or choosing something he perceived as more realistic and sensible. He chose the 'sensible path' and entered an apprenticeship. His decision to study for a degree was recounted as equally strategic. This quotation illustrates how each decision he made is with careful consideration of changing and emerging business trends:

> "By that time I was managing director of a defence company and--, and I did that for a while and then I thought then--, kind of in the early '90s it was all brand; everything was--, you know, the real people and the real money were all brand, people who could create a brand, manage a brand and everything like that, so I thought--, so I went off and I got a degree in marketing from the--, the [INSTITUTE1]. And after that everybody seemed to be--, the ones that--, the real money was in--, those people that had got MBAs, so I went and did a Master's in--, in business and worked for an industrial computer company as an operations director then." (Clifford, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Patrick left school to go to technical college with an aim to join the Merchant Navy. All of his jobs including and since the Navy have been in the area of engineering. In 1995 he graduated with a degree from the Open University choosing modules in computing and mathematics:

> "The good thing about working for big companies is that they allow people who are like me to specialise in things, therefore, I can specialise in things that I find interesting as long as it fits in with what every--, what the company needs you to do." (Patrick, intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 34-42)

Like Clifford, Patrick's choices were directly related to work. He had flexibility in what he could study choosing topics he enjoyed illustrating the close connection between education for personal fulfilment as well as for fulfilling work.

George, Roy and Wendy's decisions to gain a degree were influenced by the desire for a career with stability and higher wages. Wendy left school and went into work as an office clerk. Later she got a job as an auxiliary in a hospital and felt that she could do the work of a nurse. Nursing is one of the most popular courses taken by mature students and especially women (McVitty & Morris, 2012). In her life story,

Wendy says that her primary reason to gain the degree was to change careers and earn a better income.

However, it was the death of her son that gave her the drive to work full time and study at the same time. She described hardly sleeping and completing her essays in the early hours of the morning. She qualified as a nurse where she was still working and thanks her late son for this life changing career move:

> "I can't now and I can't imagine how I did it. And, you know, [both talking at once]--,[…] But it did--, that obviously served a purpose for me because it got me through that initial, you know, and in a way now I know that I can thank [SON1] for that. Doing, you know, the nursing which is something that I love doing now". (Wendy, working-class, degree awarded between 43-50)

I think that if Wendy was filling out a survey asking her why she studied for a degree it is likely she would have said for work or career change. However, through her story it becomes apparent that her motivations were also a response to grief – something perhaps only captured here because of the life story format.

Roy dropped out of his A levels when his father died and got a labouring job before marrying at 20 years old. When Roy was 24 he felt that he needed to pursue a career and decided to come back to the UK after a period of living abroad, and study Law. As a steppingstone to fulfilling his ambitions, he returned to work as a general labourer whilst studying for his A levels, which took 12 months. He was then able to enrol on a Law degree. He reflects on his decision as follows:

> "[…] if you want any kind of future you've got to go and do something with your life, I would have been stuck in dead end jobs, so that's when I got to about mid-20s, I thought I've wasted enough time because I was looking back thinking, well it's like six years now since you've left school and you've not really progressed anything, so." (Roy, intermediate-class, awarded degree between age 23-33)

Unplanned career decisions

This section starts by introducing cohort members who experienced an incident at work that led them to drastically alter the direction of their careers. Secondly, I discuss those who reach a career crossroads where the decision to study for a degree

became an option. Then finally, I look at those who mention redundancy as playing a part in reevaluating their lives and deciding to study for a degree.

Barbara was working in an office when her male colleague, who she described as bullying and bigoted, criticised her typing. Barbara snapped and left the office. However, on the way out she bumped into another colleague who suggested she take some time off work while they addressed the issue with the male colleague. She took this advice and on one of her days off decided to see a careers advisor and sat a psychometric test:

> "[…] and he (the careers advisor) said, "Well it's come up you should be a social worker," so I applied then and there to be a social worker […]." (Barbara, intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

She describes her experience of training to be a social worker as "fantastic" and "fascinating" and worth the financial sacrifice she had to make to fund the course. Her story is quite interesting in that when young, she went against the career advice of her school by becoming a personal assistant rather than a teacher or lawyer, but as an adult she readily embraced the careers advice she received.

A situation in the workplace also led Gareth to enrol in higher education. As discussed above, Gareth described how when young, he had had enough of education and "stumbled and went into banking". He describes how he did quite well in this career and was promoted, but it was when his desire for a further promotion did not work out that he decided to study for a degree:

> "[G]ot a promotion and then started to get itchy feet and I… spat my dummy out because I wanted a promotion [laughs] and they told me I could have a--, a move to a branch 30 miles away but they wouldn't pay me more money, so I thought, right, okay, I'll teach you that, I'll go some--, do something else, which of course is a very sensible thing to do, and I thought, right, I'll go and do a degree and then I thought, what's the easiest degree I can do, teaching, because you spend your time teaching, you don't have to do anything else, how naïve was that?" (Gareth, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

Both these examples highlight the role of emotion – anger, frustration – in decisions to study.

Ruth was at a career crossroads but unlike the others above her decision-making seemed passive. She left school to become a nurse but quit after two years as her mother had died of cancer and she wanted to be at home with her father and rest of the family. She got a job but after a while was bored and decided to follow her boyfriend into university. Ruth contrasts her younger and older self, reflecting on how naïve she had been:

> "[…] I was just like a little sheep, very shy and just followed. And then got my degree, got married and went to live abroad for a while with him." (Ruth, middle-class, degree awarded between age 23-33)

June also describes making her decision to study when at a career crossroad, although hers was an active and not a passive choice. June left school, got married young and, with her partner, worked for 20 years or so in their successful hospitality business. A turning point came when they sold the business, and she had the choice either to start a new business or enter higher education as a mature student. She chose the latter. When asked what might have been the reason or influence on the decision to study June says:

> "[…] I think there must have been something somewhere that I think--, there's something wrong here, you're missing something, you've not finished, you've not done your studying." (June, intermediate-class, degree awarded between age 43-50)

In similarity with studies of mature students, particularly housewives, those in 'low skilled' work and retired people (Beaty et al., 1997; Feinstein et al., 2007; Woodley et al., 1987), June felt she was not keeping her mind active, there was unfinished business, and she would like to try and fulfil her academic potential. Although June reflects on these reasons, she also contradicts herself by discussing how she is not sure exactly what her reasons were:

> June: […] I don't know, but no I don't really- I can't really think of anything that made me do anything in particular. I think things just happen to you, you know, you get on with them [inaudible]. And I think that--, I think perhaps that's why sometimes you struggle to think what am I doing next. I do have a sense of what am I gonna do next, what comes next, but I've no idea how to generate that change. I think it just--, it must just happen or something.

> Interviewer: Well that's--, and I--, yeah I can't offer any response to that, that's interesting 'cause you made your switches but there's been no particular catalyst or--,
>
> June: No.

This contradiction and uncertainty indicates that turning points and changes are not always immediately obvious or easy to articulate, something noted by Hodkinson (2008).

Redundancy and impact of recession were important reasons for some cohort members to participate in higher education as mature students. For Peter, it was redundancy in conjunction with his increasing interest in politics and industrial relations that provided the catalyst for his enrolment on a degree course. Peter was first an apprentice and then employed in the engineering workshops with the Coal Board. He developed an interest in politics at the time of the high-profile year-long miner's strike of 1980/1981. His views on Margaret Thatcher "I hated her" and his membership of the Labour Party led him to intensify his interest in politics. In approximately 1989 when he was around 30/31 years old, like many people in the mining industry, he became redundant and decided to take the opportunity to study:

> "Worked for the Coal Board--, well, in engineering workshops, I wasn't down the pit, and then er… got a bit more politicised and then when I got made redundant, wanted a further education."
> (Peter, working-class, degree awarded between age 34-42)

Peter started his further education via an Access course run by his trade union college. As discussed in Chapter 2, Access courses were rapidly becoming popular in the late 1980s and 1990s. After this two-year course he moved to another part of the country to study for a degree in Law. After graduating, he started a career in the local authority as a housing officer, a job he was still doing at the time of the interview. He chose the degree out of interest with the knowledge that having a degree would lead to him having enhanced career prospects and opportunities.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the role of the past, present and hoped-for future outcomes on decisions to study for a degree beyond the traditional age through the stories of cohort members. I wanted to see if and how social class,

gender, schooling and aspirations and expectations, analysed quantitatively in Chapter 6, were mentioned in their life stories, and if so, how these factors influenced decisions to become a mature student.

Building on what has been identified in literature explored in Chapters 3 and 4, this chapter has also shown that cohort members study for a range of intertwined reasons. For some it was to reconnect with aspects of their former selves in terms of academic interests or achievement that they could not pursue when younger. As the cohort got older and become more independent, they now had the agency to make their own educational and career decisions. Decisions were often made with the help or influence of friends, colleagues and others indicating the importance of linked lives as well as human agency on decisions.

Changing external factors were key for others, particularly for those in professions such as nursing that latterly needed degree qualifications. Recessions and redundancies were also significant external drivers. Decisions were therefore in some cases directly linked to the changing historical, economic and occupational contexts.

Differences by gender were quite prominent in some of the life stories, for example, the timing of the decision to become a student was particularly important for women with children who waited for the right moment to study even though the idea might have been formed many years earlier. Social class as a factor on individual decisions was not so clear cut. Unlike the quantitative analysis in Chapter 6, cohort members' decision-making narratives resisted clear categorisation by middle, intermediate or working-class backgrounds, showing the value of adopting a mixed-methods approach.

Age and life-stage are often linked and provided explanations for the differences in men and women's participation in the national statistics (Chapter 2) and NCDS variables (Chapter 6). However, I would also suggest that there is no clear-cut young-mature, middle or older-mature student experience on decision-making that comes through in the analysis in this chapter. Rather it is personal circumstances related to life-stage that were important which were not always directly attributable to age. For Roy it was his mid-20s when he felt he needed to do something with his

life, Valerie was only 26 when she got her divorce and made changes, but for Nicola it was when one of her sons had graduated from university and her second son started his degree that she decided to enrol. In mine and the studies reviewed in Chapter 4, it is only women, never men, who mention role of their children's life-stage on impacting their decisions.

The purpose of the categorical coding method (Saldaña, 2016) used to analyse the data in this chapter has been to organise and manage the data sources in order to address RQ1: What historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school? and RQ2: What changed in society, as well as in individual lives, to enable people who left school during the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?

As outlined in Chapter 5, the cohort members were not asked about their higher education, rather all the direct quotations included above derived from individuals' responses to the open-ended question 'tell me your life story as you see it'. Therefore, one of the aims of this chapter was not only substantive, but also methodological to see if there was any significant mention of higher education in their life stories. In short, even though individuals were not asked to talk about becoming a mature student, the amount of data collectively gathered from the 26 interviews, as well as the data from the NCDS presented in tables 7.1 and 7.1 has provided rich and deep evidence, that augments the primary studies reviewed earlier in this thesis.

Taking a different temporal time has also enabled me to explore what happened to the cohort members and some indications of the impact of their degrees on different domains of life, notably careers, but also relationships and their personal wellbeing. I have started to answer RQ3: What is the meaning of gaining a degree for 1958 cohort members?

However, to look at meanings and processes was not the main aim or strength of the categorical coding employed here. It is through the holistic-content narrative analysis method (Lieblich et al., 1998) presented in the final analysis chapter, where connections, meanings and processes can be better observed.

8

Narrating the meaning of becoming a mature student within the life stories of cohort members

Introduction

According to Elder et al. (2004, p. 8), a 'turning point' involves a 'substantial change in the direction of one's life, whether subjective or objective'. Objectively, the decision to participate in higher education as a mature student could itself be considered as a turning point given that studying outside of the expected age range is viewed in the research literature as non-traditional. However, subjectively, the individual may not recognise it as such. As Thomson et al. (2002) point out, the significance of the event has to be recognised by the individual themselves.

One of the assumptions underpinning this thesis is that for the 1958 cohort, participating in higher education as a mature student would be significant enough to be mentioned in their life stories beyond a simple chronology. The 26 stories I analysed in the previous chapter varied from two lines to a few paragraphs in terms of how much cohort members talked about higher education. For some, studying for a degree was a turning point in itself, whilst for others it was connected to a range of significant events in their lives such as redundancy, divorce and bereavement (see also Tuckett & Field, 2016). It is the idea of the significance and meaning of becoming a mature student that I explore in this chapter through the stories told by four cohort members (see Chapter 5 for justification for why these four were selected).

I present the four life stories intact, rather than organising them into topics and categories, to draw out and highlight the way in which education is interconnected

with other aspects of life; how decisions are made in changing personal and societal contexts; the turning points which led to, or were a result of their decision to study; and, finally, their reflections on the long-term meaning or impact of education on their lives.

I start first with Susan, then Pamela, followed by Simon and end with Ian.

Susan – a story of higher education and social class identity

Working-class, comprehensive school, degree awarded young-mature 23-33 (1982-1991)

I begin Susan's story with her essay written at age 11. It is striking to note the signifiers of (upper) middle-class life in terms of clothing, furniture, university aspiration, occupation, and her imaginary children's private education. The significance of this will become clear as I continue to retell her story:

> When I am 25. I hope to have three Children. A boy and two girls. A nice house and a husband to work in a oFFice doing tipeing. I would like to earn about ten pounds a week. And my husband to earn 20 pounds a well. My house have Fitted carpets, all the way through and a FirePlace with coloured bricks and little glass slelves on it. For ornaments with a design across the top of it. I would have it wallPapered all the way through. A gas fire a coloured television with BBC 1 and 2. a telegram. a sideborard and a display cabinet. And all luxuarys of a house. I have my hair in a French roll. and I would be very smart. My husband would have his shoes polished. and he would work in a oFFice too. I would have my children sent to private schools. and if they were cleaver anouf I would send them to a children speacal night school. I would have a car and I would go to the hair dressers every week. I would have a night job at a school and help to teach French if I was cleaver at French then. I would go to a university to be a French teacher. I would then have a house with big windows and glass sliding doors. My bedrooms would have an air Ventalater inside them. and I would have silk cartains up at the windows. We would have a wardrobe with a big mirrow inside it, and a book cabinet our house would have fancy lamp shades and nice coloured lamps. A palour with a coat stand in it. and an umbreala stand. A cristall chandelar and a My house would have a bathroom, with a small ventalater to stop the steam, then I would have everthing new and we would have a garage and a speacal Back entrance Path and a big gate painted Gold yellow and light green and hope to be very happy.

Susan organised her life story chronologically beginning with her childhood. She was born into a working-class family, living in a council house with her sister and

both parents in Northwest England. Her father was a factory worker until she reached the age of about 10, when her sister was born. After the baby's arrival, Susan's parents ran a pub, and she spent a lot of time babysitting whilst her parents worked in the evenings. This was something she resented as it meant she was unable to have much free time to spend with friends. This slightly troubled relationship with her parents was a theme that reoccurred throughout her life story.

Leaving comprehensive school with two good grade qualifications at age 16 (see Table 7.1 in Chapter 7), Susan entered office work, as she predicted in her essay at age 11. As Griffin (1985) pointed out, office jobs were the first full-time employment for a significant proportion of young working-class women in the 1970s. After a relationship with her first boyfriend ended, at age 19 in 1977, Susan met someone new and after a very brief time together experienced a life changing event:

> "[S]omething terrible--, well it was really, really, really bad for me, it was life changing for me […] I got pregnant within the space of two weekends, and mum and dad wanted me to have an abortion and I said no I couldn't, just couldn't."

In the late 1970s, the average age to have a first child was 24, and only one in ten female 1958 cohort members had their first child by age 20 (Ferri & Smith, 2003). Susan's pregnancy at 19 was therefore uncommon in her peer group. To have a child outside of marriage, and to be a lone parent was also still relatively unusual. In the 1970s, lone parenthood became a key concern for policy, in particular with regard to family poverty (Schlesinger, 1977). As lone parent families grew, working-class lone mothers in particular became scapegoats for a range of social problems (Gagnon, 2016; Skeggs, 2004). In line with this attitude, Susan's parents, and particularly her father, were ashamed and unsupportive. Indeed, Susan was pressured into giving her son up for adoption, which caused her much distress. It was this anguish that made her mother reconsider the adoption route. As Susan recounts:

> "[S]he said to me, "If you want that baby go and get him." So I did, I went and got him, but me dad had already said, "If she doesn't go I'm going," and me mum had said, "Well you'll have to go then 'cause I can't put her on the streets.""

Susan moved out using her savings as well as some financial support from her mother:

> "So luckily I've always been quite good with money and I had enough for a deposit for that first little house."

Despite her mother's support, shame was still a factor in their relationship:

> "[...] me mum used to throw it at me I'd really, you know, shown myself up. And it were a really bad thing in the '70s to be an unmarried mother."

Susan continued working in a range of office-based roles to support herself and her son. It was during this time when her decision to return to education began:

> "So anyway when he got to four, [SON1], I asked could I do nine 'til three and they said no, 'cause they said I couldn't do that, so the chance came up for voluntary redundancy so I thought I'll take it then, because I didn't know what I was going to do."

This segment from Susan's interview illustrates how the historical context of the early 1980s impacted her decision. Firstly, there was a lack of flexible working legislation, which was not implemented until 2002 (giving parents and carers the right to request flexible working[73]). Secondly, it coincided with a recession resulting in redundancies across the UK (Ashton & Bynner, 2011).

After the opportunity for voluntary redundancy came up, the next step in her decision-making was informed by a serendipitous interaction with a new colleague:

> "And then I was working, we got shifted into another office, it was really strange, I was sat and this girl was telling me that you could go back to college, you could do this, that and the other [...]"

Table 7.1 showed that in 1969 when Susan was 11, her teachers had felt that she was capable of achieving 'reasonable CSE results'. However, the table also indicated that at age 16, her parents did not think that she should stay on in full-time education past the age of 18. Susan compared the encouragement from her colleague to the different expectations of her parents when she was making her post-school choices:

> "I knew I was reasonably clever but mum--, like the teacher at school wanted me to stay on and me mum, "Oh no, they get

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[73] This was extended in 2014 to include all employees including those without caring responsibilities.

married, they have kids" and all this lot, but she thought I was reasonably clever."

Whilst my evidence has shown that both parents and teachers are influential on post-school decision-making, in Susan's case, the former appeared to have more influence than the latter. As an adult, Susan's meeting with her colleague is not discussed in great detail, but it can be seen as an important turning point in her life story. Once the seed was planted and the decision to take voluntary redundancy was made, Susan's re-engagement with education seemed to happen quickly and easily, and on a 'fast track' – to use the concept from Webb et al. (1994), she became a 'young-mature' student. Susan observed:

> "So I thought all right then I'll give it go. So I went to college and there was no problem, I did the Foundation and then I got accepted to do a Degree and I did the Degree, and then I went and did the Post-Graduate training for teaching, I did Post-Graduate secretarial, I didn't pass that though."

The ease with which she enrolled on courses, one after the other, reflects both her academic ability, but also a time in which higher education policy was focused on increasing the participation of women returners to study and work (Hutchinson & Hutchinson, 1986). Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the cost of higher education to the individual was also quite favourable to a single mother. Susan would have experienced no fees on full-time courses (and relatively affordable fees on part-time and OU courses). Grants were available and there were a range of opportunities in a range of higher educational institutions, not just universities, in contrast with the picture in later periods (see Chapter 2).

Susan met her husband during her first-degree course in the mid-1980s and gave birth to their daughter whilst still as student. Susan did not talk much about her marriage, rather the first important event she mentioned regarding this stage in her life was getting divorced after a few years.

Education played a role in the separation. Susan described how she encouraged her husband to study for a degree in nursing as he was unhappy at work – here she was the influential person prompting someone else to enter higher education as a mature student. However, it was on his degree course that her husband met someone else,

contributing to the end of their marriage. Susan "was devastated" but "got over it like you do".

The next phase in Susan's story focused on the realm of work. At the same time as her youngest child started school in the early 1990s, and her son was nearly a teenager, she began her career. Prior to the breakup, Susan was working in the civil service, where she had opportunities to have a range of jobs. From this point in her story, education featured prominently in terms of her mission to ensure her children were better supported academically than she had been from her parents.

The impact of Susan's return to study was more than just the gaining of qualifications. Her foundation course and degree had modules in the sociology of education, which included publications that used the NCDS data. What stood out for Susan, was the research that showed that educational success was not innate, rather it could be impacted by family size, housing and poverty (e.g. Wedge & Prosser, 1973). This was in contrast to how her working-class father had felt about the relationship between social class and intelligence.

At the very beginning of the interview, during the section on housing, Susan first mentioned how throughout her life she compared herself to people who lived in more prestigious areas, lived in private rather than council housing, were educated and had high status jobs. I noted above that housing and status also dominated her essay at age 11, illustrating her struggle with social position from a young age. Wanting to prove herself worthy was also one of the motivations behind her engagement with lifelong learning and acquisition of higher-level qualifications. As Susan said:

> "I always thought stupidly, that they were better than us and so that's why I've been achieving, and I'm not really a very confident person, even though I've done quite a lot of exams and have quite a lot of qualifications I'm still not--, […]I've just done a Graduate Diploma in Law, but it doesn't make me--, it doesn't seem to have been the magic formula, I don't know whether--, what it is."

Throughout the interview Susan mentioned instances of low confidence, especially in relation to being working-class, but by the end of the interview she appeared to recognise the significance of her own academic achievements. In particular, she

contrasted the views of her parents (particularly her father) regarding academic ability and social class, and her own changing views:

> "I mean this is where I have to prove my dad wrong, 'cause he always thought because we were from the working-class, and I know from now your study and from what I've done that he would be classed the lowest of the low. I don't mean that in a funny way 'cause he was class five[74] – so the expectations of--, so I know I've excelled the expectations of what I should have done basically. But he always genuinely thought--, 'cause he even said that to me, when I said I was going to go studying and he said to me, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," and he also said, "You can't put brains where there are none," so I proved him wrong, do you know what I mean, I proved him wrong."

Susan suggested that having academic knowledge gave her resources as a parent, for example, by enabling her to help the children with homework. When her daughter was studying for her GCSEs around the early 2000s, Susan enrolled in an adult education GCSE maths class, a subject she had previously found difficult:

> "And they said to me "it's only a remedial teacher," I said, "Great, that's fine, that's for me." Anyway, when I got in the class there were people that were personnel managers, there were [Masters] and everything and they couldn't do maths. He was fantastic teacher. I got it, I got this Grade C. […] I did it, a fantastic teacher. And most of the classes--, they commented on what the class was like, 'cause there was loads of us, and we all stayed the whole way through which you don't get very often."

Susan highlighted the fun atmosphere and diversity of this adult education class, which led her to take more classes for leisure.

Susan's daughter was academically successful, and at the time of the interview had graduated at the traditional age and started a career as a scientist. Her son did "reasonably well at school", which Susan was surprised about partly because he went through a rebellious phase leaving home at 16 and getting into trouble with the police. However, after a period of time in work he returned to education and gained a degree, as a mature student.

Susan's ended her life story by reflecting on her feelings about her role in her

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[74] Unskilled Manual occupation on the Registrar General Classification Scheme (General Register Office, 1966)

children's educational success:

> "So I'm pleased about that, that on my own I've--, the kids have
> turned out all right so I'm chuffed about that."

I conclude Susan's story by turning to her life trajectory diagram and her reasons for selecting it. She mentioned that her life has been full of internal and external battles, and this is reflected in her choice of life trajectory diagram number three (Figure 8.1), which shows a series of upward steps.
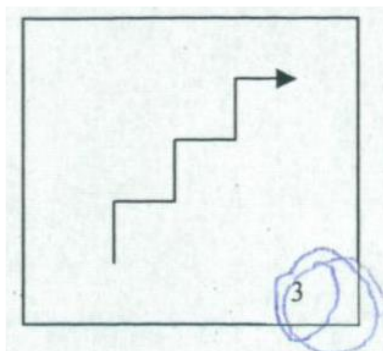
Figure 8.1 Susan's life trajectory diagram.

Explaining why she chose this diagram, she said: "When I've done something wrong I've gone onto the next level and I've fought and I've managed to get up to the next level. All the time I seem to do that."

One of the key battles seen throughout her interview was to do with issues around her academic ability, social class, status and the role of her parents in this. The meaning of education and higher education for Susan was significant in breaking a negative cycle within her family.

The lifecourse principles that resonate strongly in Susan's life story were historical time and place (social class and gender), linked lives (with her parents, significant individuals and own children) and agency. Susan's whole interview, not just the life story section, was framed around her attempting to find a coherent social class identity (Skeggs, 1997) and marrying up the idea that she can be working-class and educated. When younger, her parents' views were most influential on her choices. However, over time, coming into contact with other people, as well as becoming more independent, enhanced her agency and changed in views about higher

education as a working-class woman. In turn, Susan's decisions impacted on the next generation of her family, with higher education becoming an accessible option for her children.

Pamela's story also starts with a theme of social mobility and change within a family.

Pamela – a story of becoming confident and independent

Intermediate-class, grammar school, degree awarded middle-mature 34-42 (1992-2000)

Pamela structured her story chronologically, covering the key life-stages of childhood, school, work and marriage. She started by briefly mentioning her place of birth in the North West of England and that she had one sibling before turning to the topic of her parents, their housing and social mobility:

> "We lived on a council estate, my dad kind of had a--, don't know really, lorry driving jobs, that kind of thing, my mum worked in a shop, but it was in early '60s and the people were looking at buying their own houses. I know my mum and dad worked and worked and worked, just to--, got me emotional now [starts to cry]. Sorry."

Pamela got upset when talking about her parents during the interview. The emotion was partly related to her mother's death which had occurred seven years previously and her admiration for her father and the rest of the family who pulled together during "a black time in our lives". I would suggest that Pamela's emotion indicated the positive relationship she had with her parents, and this is reflected further in the role they take within her life story.

Returning to the theme of social mobility, Pamela connected her parents' ambitions for home ownership to the historical context:

> "[I]t was a big thing. Moving from this council house to our first house and Mum and Dad--, we felt that--, 'cause their parents had never owned their own house."

In contrast to Pamela's parents and grandparents, when the 1958 cohort reached adulthood and were looking to leave home the concept of home ownership had become more normalised. Indeed, the stock of council and social housing had reduced, particularly as a result of the Right to Buy scheme introduced in 1980 (Smith & Ferri, 2003).

Pamela provided further detail on the process of social mobility experienced by her parents. They worked to save up for a deposit on a house, which they then lived in for around three years. Pamela's father changed jobs and fulfilled his ambition of starting a career in sales. Together Pamela's parents saved enough money to move again:

> "So we moved to a bigger house in [PLACE11, North West England], so a better area and a bit bigger house."

Pamela's parents' ambition was not just restricted to their housing or location. It was also reflected in their attitudes towards their daughter's education:

> "[M]y parents fought to keep me in the same primary school because I moved to a different area, but I was about ten and my mum said no, she said, "I don't want you to move out, Eleven Plus is so important and moving schools it might just--," and she really had--, she fought to keep me at the same primary school, and I did pass my Eleven Plus."

Passing the 11-plus meant that Pamela could enter a girls' grammar school that had a very good reputation. However, Pamela was not happy there and her story then shifted from her parents to her experience at school and her self-esteem. One reason given for this unhappiness was because, similarly to Susan, she compared herself academically to her peers. Whereas in primary school Pamela described feeling confident and top of the class, in the grammar school there were other girls "who were much brighter than me, and it didn't come quite so easy." Nonetheless, as Table 7.2 in the previous chapter showed Pamela achieved seven good grade exam passes at 16, and reflected that in hindsight she was glad she went to grammar school because of the good education.

Regarding the transition into post-compulsory schooling, Pamela discussed how she decided not to stay on for 'A' levels and instead went to evening classes to study Italian. However, she "[d]idn't really stick at it.". On advice from a fellow student, Pamela enrolled on a secretarial course with languages. Again, this course was not right for her:

> "[I] absolutely hated it. It was a two-year course, and then I'm not sure what happened, and never really learnt to type, I couldn't cope with that at all."

The post-school period of Pamela's life seemed unplanned and there was no mention of any particular guidance from anyone. She did not mention her parents' views at this time and there were no data on their wishes in the NCDS survey at age 16. Data from her teachers noted that Pamela was suited to 'other full or part-time study' and Pamela herself did want to stay on past the age of 16.

What does stand out at the post-school phase, and in contrast to Susan's story, is that Pamela had multiple options and exercised some agency. She seemed free to explore different courses and pathways and to decide if and when to quit, without pressure from anyone else. Pamela left the two-year secretarial course at the end of the first year and got a job in an office. It is here where the next stage of her life story began, with the meeting of her first husband at work.

Pamela observed that the decision to get married at 19 to a much older man, was motivated by a lack of confidence in herself, her appearance, as well as a lack of experience of interacting with men due to going to an all-girls' school. Some parallels could be drawn in how she discussed her decision to get married with her enrolment on different courses, not quite enjoying or completing them. Painting a vivid picture of her unhappiness on the night before her wedding day, Pamela said:

> "I knew it was a mistake, I knew the night before I married him it was a mistake and wished I could've changed my mind but--, I can remember looking around the bedroom, my bedroom, seeing all these wedding presents all these people had bought for us, thinking I can't possibly let them down, got to go through with it. And my parents, I know, would have been delighted if I hadn't. So you kind of make the best of it and the weeks turn to months and months turn into years, kind of accepted it."

Her parents reappear in this quotation, and we get a sense that they were there in the background making their views known, but Pamela decided again, to make her own choices. Up to this point she had been dissatisfied with most of her decisions, but when expecting her first child, she expressed determination to take some control over her future:

> "[…] I decided I didn't like my job, gave up my job when I had my first child 'cause it was a bore, it was just a boring office job and I was there for five years. Vowed that when I returned to work I wouldn't go back to a job like that, I'd do something else."

Education was a key part of the process by which Pamela sought to improve her job prospects. In 1980, when aged 22 and a stay-at-home mother, she started evening classes. Over time and during one further pregnancy, Pamela successfully completed A levels in History, English and Law. When her first child started school, she decided to enrol on a degree course in Law. Like Susan and many women in the mature student literature (for example, Webb et al., 1994), timing in relation to children was key to her enrolment. Pamela said that she did not have a clear career in mind when she chose Law, rather she was just interested in the subject, however her degree did lead to a career as a solicitor. When Pamela left university, she got a job in a small law firm, completing all the necessary additional law qualifications by 1998 when she was 40. She has had a successful career although mentioned that her firm experienced difficulties in the 2008 global recession (Ashton & Bynner, 2011; Pemberton, 2011) causing some anxiety with regard to work stability.

However, according to Pamela, the main and most significant consequence of becoming a mature student was not her career, but that it prompted her to leave her husband. As she explained:

> "But it was at the end of my first year of university when I decided to leave my husband because I'd actually been in the outside world and seen what it was like, and couldn't cope with living the lifestyle--, my husband was older than me, I lived a very, very different life to the life I have now. No friends, no social life. [...] Didn't encourage friends, had a very regimented lifestyle and once I'd broken free from that and had freedom during the day to sit and talk to other students, and enjoyed the course and felt liberated and excited and so on, I just couldn't cope with the hum drum life that I'd got."

Pamela's parents played a key part in supporting her during this turning point. They provided childcare when she was studying and helped financially so that she could buy her own flat during the recession in the 1990s (1992/93) (Pemberton, 2011). Pamela made an interesting point about becoming herself again after the divorce:

> "And then eventually--, it was a difficult time when my marriage broke up, it didn't change overnight, it was quite an emotional time and a difficult soul-searching time, but I think eventually some of the real me came back out again."

Pamela described herself as friendly, bubbly and social "just like my dad". She mentioned that this side of her personality had been suppressed during her teenage years and particularly when leaving the junior school for the grammar school where her confidence decreased.

When asked to select her life trajectory diagram (see Figure 8.2), Pamela was recovering from the emotions brought up during the life story regarding her parents as she described the last few years of her mothers' life. The interviewer and interviewee do not therefore discuss in detail why this diagram was chosen.
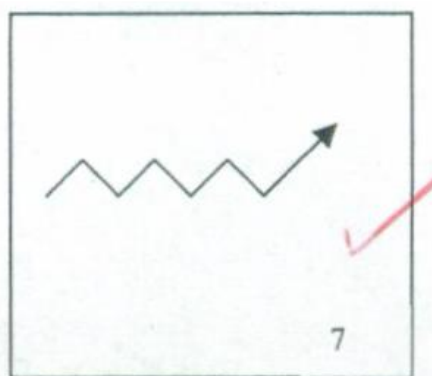
Figure 8.2 Pamela's life trajectory diagram.

However, Pamela neatly summarised the key influences and turning points in her life in another part of the interview, which could be interpreted as some of the peaks on the life trajectory diagram:

> "Hmmm, going to university was obviously a turning point, 'cause that led to the breakdown of my marriage and going to university led to me being qual--, you know, doing the job I'm doing. And also the breakdown of my marriage had enabled me then to marry the man I'm married to now, which gives me the social life I've got now, 'cause I'm sure, had I stayed married to my first husband, the first part of this interview would've been nothing like it was."

What is interesting here is the reflection on an alternative life and what could have been if she had not made that decision to make some changes in her life, particularly with regard to studying.

I chose Pamela's biography because it is an example of increasing agency over a lifecourse. Her story shows the processes by which she realises what she does and

does not want in terms of work, relationships and social life, and the role that becoming a mature student played in transforming her life. She uses the term "liberated" to describe how she felt about being at university compared to the "hum drum" of her life as wife, mother and office worker. Pamela's story of mature studentship is similar to that in the existing literature, in that some women of this time period who got married, had children and gave up work, felt that they were unfulfilled in their role as mother and wife, using education as a way to escape boredom (for example, Parr, 2000).

The principles of timing and temporality are also important in Pamela's story. It is only as she gets older, and having experienced office work and an unhappy marriage, that she starts to make positive and strategic decisions to change her trajectory and express her identity.

Simon – sustaining a consistent identity

Working-class, comprehensive school, degree-awarded young-mature 23-33 (1982-1991)

Simon approached his life story chronologically. As he put it: "cause I'm a bloke". Simon covered the domains of childhood, schooling, work and relationships in his narrative.

Simon grew up in a working-class family in Liverpool and was living in Wales at the time of the interview. During Simon's childhood, his father was away a lot as he was in the Navy whilst his mother stayed at home to look after her seven children. Around 20% of women born in the 1930s and 1940s in England and Wales had four or more children by the time they were 45, compared to just 10% of women in Simon's birth cohort (ONS, 2018), so although his large family size was relatively unusual, it was not that uncommon compared to more recent times. Simon described having a great childhood, playing in the fields, woods and industrial areas for hours on end with his siblings and friends.

Although Simon did not speak at great length about his parents, he mentioned their positive attitudes towards education:

> "And then as I've got older, good education, the one thing my dad
> did, I mean I was close to him at one time but he drank a lot and
> gave my mum a couple of fists and things so makes it a bit pear

shaped and that. And--, but he did instil the importance of a good education, he was a sea captain on a ship, yeah, so--, and so--,"

Simon described having a high level of confidence in his own academic abilities, starting with passing the 11-plus exam:

> "But it was easy to pass the 11 plus because where we went, they gave us practice papers and--, the week before we did the 11 plus [laughs], so you would have to be thick not to pass the 11--, but I'd have passed it anyway."

Simon entered the grammar school, which turned into a comprehensive during his first year. He remained in the top sets throughout his school career. The interviewer probed to ask what he enjoyed at school. Simon responded by saying that he did not exactly enjoy school, rather he found it easy and "sailed straight through".

Simon gained a high number (9+) of good school qualifications at 16 and, as Table 7.1 in the previous chapter showed, his teachers stated that they felt he was suited to study for a degree. As my analysis in Chapter 6 indicated, only 4% of working-class cohort members were deemed suited by their teachers to study at degree level, so Simon was part of a very small minority. However, going to university at the traditional age did not come to fruition as Simon failed all but one of his A levels.

His parents were going through a divorce while he was in the sixth form. This was at a time when divorce rates were rising after the 1969 Divorce Law Reform Act, became operative in 1972 (Wadsworth et al., 2011). Studies using the NCDS have indicated that one impact of divorce on young people included lower educational attainment and behavioural problems (Elliott & Vaitilingam, 2008). Simon, however, did not accept this view as an explanation for the decline in his academic performance, instead attributing it to his individual choice to socialise and not study:

> "[M]y mum and dad were going through a divorce at the time and all the school teachers thought, well, that was the reason why you're not doing as well and all that and they were absolutely soft, you know. Not my politics but there were too much social do-gooders because it was nothing to do with that, we were 17, 18 and we were going out clubbing it and out every night and not doing any work and that was the only reason why […]."

Simon had applied to go to university to study Civil Engineering, but because he did not get the required A level grades, he could not take up the place. He was not too disappointed as he had applied partly to avoid going to work, partly because it was what all his friends were doing, and partly because it was expected of someone with his ability:

> "If you have got a bit of 'nous', that's what you do. Not thinking, I want to do this or that, I didn't have a clue, it's like kids now, my daughter's the same."

Unlike his daughter in the first decade of the 2000s, an 18-year-old in the 1970s with good qualifications at 16 and one pass at A level could enter a reasonably buoyant youth labour market and had many other options when making their post-school transitions (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).

Simon mentioned that he knew he would fail his A levels as "I hadn't done the work for the exams", and therefore, also applied for a range of jobs. Five or six of the companies he applied to offered him a position. Simon chose a job in the health sector as a laboratory technician, where he had the chance to gain sub-degree level, qualifications on day release. When he was 23, he developed the desire to go to university. The following extract described his decision-making process:

> "Well I left--, when I was working there, I got my qualifications and everyone left or died and it was just boring and there was a girl there who was about 32, 33 and she was ancient to me then, yeah, you know, and I looked at her and she's worked in the same room all her life, I can't do that, and they brought out a […] report which is where you had to wear, it was all health and safety, it was all that stuff, that you were gowned up, gloved up and everything all the time, it just wasn't--, I thought, I can't do this forever, working in this room, working my way up to be him [both laugh], so there was a recession on and I thought, well, I'm going out, so I applied and went to university, went as a mature student […]."

This extract showed that four main factors influenced Simon's decision. First of all, like Pamela, he was bored with his particular line of work; second he disliked the working environment; third, progression routes were limited; and, fourth, the recession gave him an incentive to explore other options

Simon enrolled on a full-time social studies course at a traditional university, which he dropped after a month to switch to psychology, which he did not like and in his third year, he was allowed to choose modules in chemistry, genetics, physics or environmental biology. Simon chose environmental biology – not because he had a career in mind, but because the subject appealed to him: he found it "fascinating".

Simon completed his degree, gaining a 2:1 believing that he could have gained a first-class degree (which was rare at the time) if he had tried a bit harder. After graduating, Simon said that his degree led to a "fantastic career". University was also important in that it was where he met his now ex-wife and the mother of his child.

Simon's life story shifted back to his engagement with the realm of work, but this time as a graduate during the 1990s. Simon disagreed with any suggestion that becoming a mature student was a difficult decision or related to 'bettering' himself, something which he said prospective employers always assumed, perhaps on the basis of hearing policy and university recruitment messages of the 1980s and early 1990s. Simon, like Susan, was a young-mature student, meaning that he gained his degree just before the massification of the 1990s, and as (Pascall & Cox, 1993) argued, was part of a pioneer group. Simon said about his interviews:

> "[E]very job I went to, when they got through and I told them what I'd done, they said, "God, that must have really taken a lot of courage to go as a mature student," but they weren't asking me, that was a real leading question, so I'd just go straight in there, "Yeah, yeah, but I mean, you know, when I did that I wanted to better myself," and all that and I just came out with a load of absolute crap, but it wasn't, you know, that was--, I didn't feel that it was true at the time […]."

The rest of Simon's life story included detail about him excelling in different jobs, shifting careers from science to sales and eventually setting up his own shop-fitting businesses. These were all moves which were carefully considered:

> "[…] it wasn't all just, let's go with the flow, there's a load of that, but it was a bit of fore planning."

Simon's life story returned to the present where he was re-starting his joiner/shop-fitting business from scratch after declaring himself bankrupt as a knock-on effect of the 2008 global financial crisis.

His hand-drawn life trajectory diagram (Figure 8.3) shows an upward trajectory at the earlier part of his life, which includes studying for a degree.
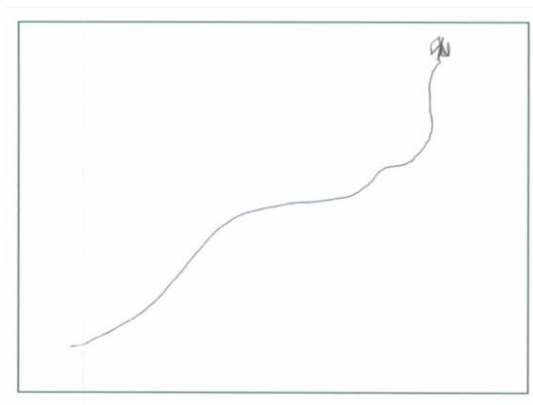
Figure 8.3 Simon's life trajectory diagram.

Within his life story Simon described gaining a degree as a "high spot" of his life, partly because of the enjoyment of learning, but also because of the career it led to. The diagram flattens slightly, which Simon explained depicted him becoming bankrupt. After a period of adjustment to the bankruptcy, and at the time of the interview, his current and future life is depicted as optimistic – represented by the steep vertical rise.

Simon's life story is a good example of the principle of agency, but unlike Pamela, his sense of agency and identity is consistent across his lifecourse and throughout his life story. He expresses independence and responsibility for all the choices he has made, including not going to university at the traditional age, as well as enrolling later on as a young-mature student. Simon rarely mentions the role of other people in his decision-making, apart from a general steer from his parents regarding the importance of education at the beginning of the interview, following his peers with regard to applying for the Civil Engineering course when 18, and the people in the lab who he was determined not to become. Aside from these moments, Simon presents himself as fully agentic and independent of other influences.

Social class does not feature as a factor in his life story, indeed Simon asserts that he rejects the concept "I think class is just a load of 'bollocks'". Although he does not believe in the concept of social class, I would suggest that he provides a useful different narrative around working-class mature students. Often the literature

focuses on working-class educational experience from a deficit perspective (Loveday, 2014), which coheres to some extent with Susan's story, including the lack of support from parents and her need to prove to herself that she was academically capable. Simon, with his confidence and strong sense of agency, as well as disagreeing with the idea that becoming a mature student was a brave decision, resists the deficit perspective. This confidence also intersects with gender in that Simon arguably shows a traditional, confident masculinity. Men are not as well represented in the mature student literature, so again, Simon's story provides contrasting evidence to that which tends to be reported.

Ian – a story of becoming a different person

Intermediate-class, comprehensive school, degree-awarded older-mature 43-50 (2001-2008)

Ian's interview was conducted in Scotland in Winter 2008 when he was 50. Unlike the other three cohort members, Ian does not structure his life story chronologically. Rather, he carefully considered how he would approach his account before settling on the theme of his changing beliefs:

> "I could take it from a perspective of beliefs because my beliefs have changed as in, you know, I've got--, I have a--, I think I have a greater self-awareness now than I ever had when I was younger."

There was a strong theme in Ian's life story about an aggressive type of masculinity throughout much of his life and how over time, he used education to reflect upon and change this aspect of his character.

Ian started by mentioning the area in Scotland where he grew up, and where he was taught to fight and defend himself. He pointed out that although his neighbourhood did not tend to have knife carrying gangs, it was still an environment where:

> "[Y]ou've got to learn to defend, you've got to learn to adapt and so you've got then to put on a front to say, I can do this, I can do that…"

Ian drew parallels between his childhood and the next part of his life story, when he joined the Navy, describing it as "very macho and hard and gritty". He joined the boxing team, mainly to avoid other duties and to get perks such as getting to the front of the meal queue. Ian referred to being in the boxing team as a "double-

edged sword" in that he became very good at boxing but had to "put up macho barrier" and maintain a reputation. He became a diver and worked on telecommunications but felt that his reputation as a boxer had become more dominant that his skills in these other areas.

Ian said that his reputation of being hard, became a "self-fulfilling prophecy" and when he left the Navy, "I did think I was a wise-ass [...] and my behaviour was of a wise-ass". He discussed that at this time, he did not realise that a lot of the conflicts he got involved in were due to himself.

> "I used to say, "Christ, I--, why do I meet so many numpties that want to go fighting?" But I realise now that--, I created a lot of that because I actually stood there and stared back. Whereas somebody staring at you, if you just don't continue to stare often--, very often nothing happens."

Ian explained that he was "kind of cloned" to react to potential conflict in bars but also in workplace environments because of his socialisation in the Navy. He would immediately turn to aggression, using his physical appearance and verbal attacks to dominate others, rather than try to problem solve in other ways. At times, Ian mentioned how he would reflect on his behaviour and feel disappointment:

> "[...] there's me an engineer in communication, data communications at the forefront of technology, blah, blah, blah, and yet how am I dealing with problems? I'm dealing with the same thing--, the same way I did when I was in the Navy."

Ian reflected that this aggressive personality was "not him" and started to explore different tools of self-discovery. This took a number of years and included hypnosis, meditation, spirituality and vegetarianism. The key date he repeated throughout the interview was 1995 when he was 37. It was in this year that he decided to study for a psychology degree with the Open University. A time which coincided with national growth in part-time first-degree students (see Chapter 2).

The part-time degree in psychology, with the other subjects explored through self-study, were transformational for Ian, particularly in helping him to break away from the aggressive masculinity developed in his childhood neighbourhood and reinforced during his time in the Navy. He became more aware of his thoughts and behaviour:

"[A]ll of these things became a way for me to realise that, wow, you know, I can take more control of my life, I can see how I can actually take charge more. And that was a great feeling of emancipation."

Ian mentioned three other events which all contributed to the process of him becoming a mature student. First was the experience when Ian was helping a friend who worked for a charity with children with learning disabilities. He was paired with a child who he did not feel he connected with because the child did not communicate in typical ways. However, when the trip was over, the child ran up to him and said: "Will I see you again, will I see you again?" Ian was taken aback and went to visit the club that his friend ran and where the children and young people attended. People were hugging and were open with their emotions "and it was all this kind of things that I just never had been open to before, unconditional love." He realised that other people thought in different ways to him and this opened him to viewing the world from a different perspective.

Secondly, in a later section of the interview, Ian revealed more about what he was like at school and why the timing had to be right before he was ready to engage with any further study. He left with one O level in woodwork, suggesting that the reason that he did not succeed at school, was because he did not see the relevance:

"[A]t school I didn't see the rationale for some of the studies, so therefore I got bored quick and therefore I reacted and therefore we got into trouble and therefore, blah-de-blah. And so I wasn't a model pupil in that respect […]."

However, he associated one of the key turning points and highlights of his life with studying physics and electronics as part of his first job since leaving the Navy. The subject matter interested him, and he could see its purpose because, rather like psychology, it helped him better understand the world, but this time from a physical rather than psychological perspective.

Thirdly, in his 20s he had encountered a woman who was studying psychology and who had attempted to talk to him about his personality and behaviour. At that time, he had not been open to discussion:

"In retrospect. I always felt [bad], I thought God. There was somebody saying, wow, that's interesting why you're like this and

why you're like that and I was in denial. […] I mean I was saying,
what a lot of sugar and, you know. […] You know, giving it every--,
[…] Thought process to show why I wasn't what she was saying.
But I was just being so defensive, that's all I was doing."

When reflecting on how he was before and after his transformation, Ian mentioned being embarrassed. He admitted that he had held views which were sexist, racist and homophobic. Ian felt that having previously held these views meant that, subsequently, he had greater insight into how and why people think and act in certain ways. This knowledge could help others change:

"But if I can help them become more aware 'cause I think awareness
for a human being is one of the greatest assets we can have."

Ian's life trajectory diagram (Figure 8.4) is quite detailed and a useful way to end his life story because it neatly brings together how he depicts what he describes as his "personal growth".

The gentle upward slope at the bottom of the diagram represents when he was meandering through life, a time he says he was content and enjoying himself. The little bump on this slope represents a positive career moment when he was studying engineering and electronics in the Navy that provided him with his first career. Then "all of a sudden it's almost--, almost vertically upwards it climbs". This turning point is when he realised he had to make some life changes. The study of psychology played a big part in his behavioural change. Ian chooses to depict this major turning point, with a tick (✓) to indicate positivity, rather than a cross (x) to indicate a pivot used in the pre-drawn diagrams.
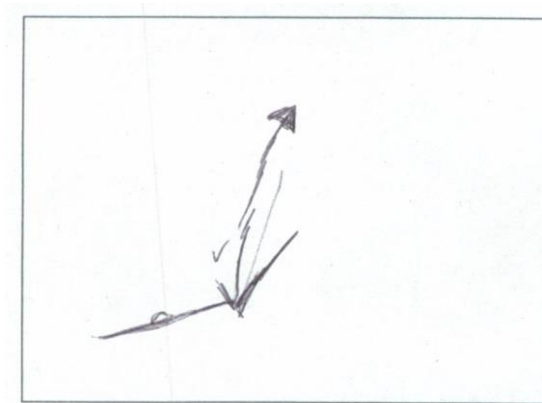
Figure 8.4 Ian's life trajectory diagram.

Ian is keen to point out that he views his future optimistically, moving upwards but his development is still in progress, represented by the upward facing arrowhead. As Ian concludes:

> "I think I'm a--, and I'll--, on a journey of discovery and--, and I'm-, I've gone through a nice big chunk of it but I'm still learning a lot more."

Like Simon, Ian's story provides another male perspective on mature student decision-making. Ian's life story stands out as an example of the lifecourse principle of lifespan development in conjunction with timing and linked lives. Ian is very clear and reflective about how he utilises self-learning as well as formal higher education in his journey of self-discovery and change. He is very reflective on the timeline, specifically the year 1995, and the people involved in the processes leading to his transformational change. Studying informally, as well as for a formal degree, was key to this process.

Conclusion

Schuller et al., (2004) argue that those involved in higher education, be they policymakers, providers, or researchers, tend to focus on participation rates as indicators of the benefit of study – at both a national and individual level. To get more people into higher education is viewed as having primary importance, with 'the outcomes assumed to be positive' and 'more or less self-evident.' (p.5). The meaning of higher education therefore is not as well researched or understood as participation rates. Whereas participation rates are relatively easy to research and measure the longer term meaning of their participation is not: meanings are complex involving various factors that are difficult to operationalise and disentangle.

The idea of 'becoming' is useful to think about in summarising the process, meaning and outcomes of gaining a degree for mature students (Waller, 2005). Throughout this thesis, I have written about 'becoming a mature student', and largely this was in the sense of transitioning e.g. from worker to student, mother to student, from student to employee. Becoming, however, also has another meaning in terms of 'becoming somebody' personally, educationally and occupationally' (Ecclestone et al., 2010b, p. 7). This chapter has built on literature discussed in Chapter 4 (e.g.

Alford, 1995; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Biesta et al., 2011) highlighting the range of ways cohort members used higher education as a means to become somebody new, to become the person they always were but were not able to develop or sustain at an earlier stage of their lives, or to maintain a coherent identity in times of change and uncertainty. Higher education participation for Susan, Pamela, Simon and Ian first and foremost was much more than a way to achieve a career goal – as is the rhetoric of much of the policy discourse touched upon in Chapter 2. Rather, the meaning of higher education for these cohort members was helping them navigate changes occurring at a societal and personal level; aiding them to achieve change in their own life; supporting the development of their identity, and enabling a move in their social class position.

Although in this chapter I was only able to look at the life stories of those from intermediate and working-class backgrounds, taking the information from the cohort members' life stories in Chapter 7 as well as the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 4, I would suggest that the use of education to manage change is the case for individuals irrespective of sex and social class background. This highlights how these individuals construct their own biographies, demonstrating the relevance of postmodern influences on conceptualisations of the lifecourse, and the role of structure and agency on decisions (Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) as touched upon in Chapter 1.

This is the final chapter of my three-stage empirical analysis of the NCDS and SPIS data. I now turn to draw all the findings together and summarise how I have fulfilled my overall aim of this thesis and addressed each of my four research questions.

9

Discussion

> No social study that does not come back to the problems of
> biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society, has
> completed its intellectual journey. (Mills, 1959, p. 12)

At the outset of this thesis, I stated that my aim was to contribute to holistic
understandings of educational decisions made in changing historical and
biographical contexts. The lifecourse perspective was used as my framework
because it was designed to directly address C Wright Mills' challenge for researchers
to employ the sociological imagination and connect history and biography, structure
and agency to the study of social phenomena. For my study, this meant
understanding the 'intricate web of elements' (Pascall and Cox, 1999, p. 60) that
inform educational decisions in changing times.

I argued that the lifecourse framework, used within a mixed-methods research
design, enables a holistic approach to the study of how lives are lived, unfold and
are embedded in social structures, roles and relationships, historical contexts and
society – all of which 'may continually be in flux' (Shanahan and Macmillan, 2008, p.
280).

Key to the lifecourse perspective are the five principles which guide enquiry and
have already been outlined in Chapter 1 and repeated here. The definitions below in
italics are from Elder et al., (2004) followed by my interpretations of the definitions
used in my thesis:

1. **Lifelong development**: *Human development and ageing are lifelong processes.*
   Learning is lifelong rather than a single stage in youth.

2. **Historical time and place**: *The lifecourse of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their lifetime.* Decision-making and opportunities about education are influenced by policy, social attitudes, aspirations and expectations which change over time. Place here refers to one's place in society (such as by social class and gender role) as well as geographical location.

3. **Timing**: *The impact of a life transition or event is contingent on when they occur in a person's life.* The timing of participation in formal education varies across the lifecourse. To enter higher education at a mature age may involve different decision-making processes and outcomes than at a younger age.

4. **Linked lives**: *Lives are lived interdependently, and social-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.* Decisions to participate in education throughout life are influenced by social networks and family, careers advice and so on. The learner themselves will also impact on others.

5. **Agency**: *Individuals construct their own lifecourse through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances.* People make decisions about participating in higher education weighing up available opportunities together with personal circumstances.

In this thesis, I posed four research questions, the first two were designed to address the idea of embeddedness and lives in flux through comparing transitions out of school with transitions into higher education later in life. In RQ1 I asked:

> What historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 70s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school?

Research Question 2 asked:

> What changed in society, as well as in individual lives, to enable people who left school during the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?

Whereas the main aim of RQ1 and RQ2 was to describe the contexts and backdrops of the specific periods under investigation and how these impacted individuals' decisions or participation trends, the purpose of RQ3 was to shift to the interpretive level of analysis. From the lifecourse perspective, at the interpretative or micro level,

the interest is in how changes in context and behaviours are associated with a person's subjective understanding, and how people make sense of these changes (Shanahan and Macmillan, 2008). Therefore, RQ3 asked:

What is the meaning of gaining a degree for 1958 cohort members?

Finally, I was also interested in methodological issues. I argued that new insights could be gained into a relatively well researched area by adopting a different temporal and methodological approach to prior studies. Therefore, in RQ4 I asked:

Can new insights be gained by combining and analysing existing quantitative and qualitative data guided by lifecourse theory, in researching mature students' decision-making?

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how, and the extent to which, my research has fulfilled the overarching research aim of contributing to holistic understandings of educational decisions made in changing historical and biographical contexts. To facilitate this exploration, I have structured the discussion around each of my four research questions.

RQ1: What historical, social and personal factors meant that mature students who grew up in the 1960s and 70s did not study for a degree soon after leaving school?

What is historically significant about the sample of 1958 cohort members is, although some discussed not being sure of what to do once they left school, none talked about having trouble finding work or other education or training opportunities. The Raising of the School Leaving age in 1972, meant that the 1958 cohort were the first school leavers in Britain who had to stay on for an extra year until they turned 16. Micklewright (1989) points out that industries were therefore 'starved of their previous stream of 15-year-olds' (p. 28). This led to 1958 cohort members, and people of a similar age discussed in Chapter 3, having many job opportunities compared to school leavers in the late 1980s who were negatively impacted by industrial change and the sharp decline in the youth labour market (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).

The sample of 26 cohort members who became mature students and whose life stories I analysed in Chapter 7 and 8, experienced a range of further education and

training opportunities or went into work. Some stayed on in the sixth form to study A levels or Scottish Highers, others enrolled on secretarial courses, nursing training or apprenticeships. Other destinations included the navy, the civil service, retail, banks, clerical work and farming. There was not the same need to gain a degree for work as there is today.

Only 10% of cohort members therefore gained a degree as a young student (Chapter 6). This statistic is not surprising given that higher education at the time in which they were studying was in its 'elite' phase, with limited places available (Trow, 1973). As discussed in Chapter 2, higher education was generally only available to those who passed the 11-plus exam and entered the grammar school where they were more likely to take exams and gain the qualifications needed for university entry (Steedman, 1983).

Although cohort members were part of a transitional group with most finishing their compulsory education in a comprehensive school, differences in proportions of 'good' school qualifications by school type were observed in Chapter 6. Those in grammar and private schools were far more likely to gain a high number of good grades than those in comprehensive or secondary modern schools. My analysis showed that having a high number of good grade school qualifications was an extremely important factor for cohort members gaining a degree at any age, but particularly as a young student.

Analysis in Chapter 6 shows clearly the different degree outcomes by social class on if and when a degree was obtained by age 50, with middle-class students far more likely to gain a degree young, as well as at any age, than those from working- or intermediate-class backgrounds. Social class is of course also intertwined with school type, school qualifications and aspirations of teachers and parents.

Working-class parents are often associated with not wanting to, or being able to, encourage the full academic potential of their children (see for example Loveday, 2014 and discussion in Chapter 3). This was certainly the case for Susan who featured in the stories in Chapter 8, as well as the data presented in Chapter 6 which showed that working-class and intermediate class parents were less likely to express wishes for the child to stay on past the age of 18, compared to middle-class parents.

However, the experiences of cohort members discussed in Chapter 7 also show the diversity of attitudes, support and encouragement from parents across and within social classes. Roy, from an intermediate-class background talks about his father over-pressuring him to succeed academically and that this had a negative effect on his motivation and academic attainment. By contrast, Harry whose middle-class father was a teacher did not offer any steer or support, according to his recollections. Barbara also from a middle-class family discusses how she would have preferred to go to the secondary modern rather than the grammar school in order to become a personal assistant. Demonstrating the lifecourse principle of agency, she did train to become a personal assistant when she finished school, despite this being viewed by her parents and school as respectable work for working-, but not middle-class girls (Sharpe, 1976).

Research into the impact of parental ambition or incongruence between the aspirations of parents and young people are growing areas of study (Schoon & Burger, 2022) and these examples add some insights into this area of research. The concept of 'linked lives' therefore should be thought of both in terms of positive as well as negative associations.

To summarise my response to RQ1, traditionally within the sociology of education, youth studies as well as in lifecourse sociology, the emphasis has been on exploring, explaining and predicting social pathways along the lines of class and gender (Dannefer, 2004). Researchers interested in youth transitions in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Ashton & Field, 1976; Willis, 1977) were not examining or concerned with individual experiences, instead they focused on explanations and theories that emphasised structural processes (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005). Although my quantitative findings are in line with these conceptualisations, the qualitative analysis and historical overview shows how personal circumstances, labour market opportunities, homelife, influential people and own aspirations were also important contributors to their post school decision-making. I would suggest that by utilising the lifecourse principles to examine and interpret diverse quantitative and qualitative data, as well as using a more nuanced measure of social class (Elliott & Lawrence, 2014) I have avoided over emphasising the role of structure on decisions in the late 1970s and 1980s, when cohort members were leaving school and in their early 20s.

RQ2: What changed in society, as well as in individual lives, to enable people who left school in the mid-1970s to become mature students later in life?

Field et al., (2009) and Hodkinson (2008) argue that there would be a benefit in creating better links between the study of post-school transitions and educational transitions that occur throughout life, in order to view decision-making from a longer-term perspective. I have aimed to do this in my thesis.

Throughout their adulthoods, 1958 cohort members have seen various changes in social and economic conditions that increased the need and desire for people to gain new qualifications across the lifecourse (Fuller, 1999). In Chapter 2, I used Trow's (1973) model of the expansion of higher education to frame explanations for the changing patterns of participation in higher education over a nearly 40-year period since cohort members left school. His predictions, which have been shown to be quite accurate, identified changes in attitudes towards access to higher education shifting from a privilege to a right, and then becoming an obligation in periods of rapid social and technological change. The student 'career' shifts from being uninterrupted from school to university to a softening of boundaries between formal education and other aspects of life. Some adults without the pre-requisite qualifications have had second or new chances to study at a higher level and help diversify the characteristics of the student population (Brennan, 2004; Hazelkorn, 2016).

Policy discourse for why someone should upgrade their skills and qualifications throughout life, has been based on human capital theory (Lane, 2015). As discussed in Chapter 2, justification for the shift from government grants to student loans for example, proposed the argument that students will reap the financial benefits of their educational investment when they graduate and enter higher paid work (Egerton & Parry, 2001; NICHE, 1997). For some mature students in Chapter 4 and some cohort members in Chapter 7, the reason for enrolling for a degree was clearly related to an employer or industry requirement (Davies et al., 2002; Marks, 1998; Pascall & Cox, 1993). Whereas cohort members Geoff and Alex at first resented the requirement to gain qualifications, the case of Clifford was particularly striking in the way he strategically selected and gained qualifications in order to enter

the advertising industry and then IT which he describes in Chapter 7 as financially lucrative occupations when he was studying in the 1990s.

This thesis has also shown, like other studies about mature students (Alford, 1995; Parr, 2000), that decisions are not always, like in the case of Clifford, strategically planned and can sometimes be a result of unexpected crises or turning points. Cohort member Valerie enrolled to gain independence after a divorce, Wendy used the degree to blot out the pain caused by the death of her son and Barbara experienced a negative incident at work which pushed her suddenly to see a career's advisor and change the direction of her life. Although their degrees were linked to career changes, it would not be accurate to say they studied for a degree purely or directly to invest in their own human capital.

My thesis therefore, reinforces the conclusion made by Biesta et al., (2011) that learning and the gaining of qualifications helps people adjust to changed circumstances and can often be used as a way to navigate personal crises such as ill health, bereavement, migration, divorce or a desire to change their way of life.

Underlying any individual decisions, the organisations and systems in place (such as funding) to enable people to make these seemingly personal choices need to be recognised. The trade union was important for cohort member Peter in Chapter 7, who worked at the Coal Board during the miners' strikes of the 1980s. Adult education and evening classes, including Access courses, were also important steppingstones into higher education for some mature students, helping build confidence in their academic abilities, discover which subjects they liked, as well as enabling the acquisition of the pre-requisite qualifications for degree level study.

What has stood out, but by way of its absence in most cohort members' stories, was that only two individuals mentioned the direct cost of studying as a challenge when they were mature students. This lack of discussion of finances might be because of the lapse in time between enrolment and the interview at age 50, such that any financial struggles had been somewhat forgotten. Alternatively, it could have been that the costs were not overly high (compared to the contemporary position) or were perhaps paid for by an employer (see Chapter 2).

Since the emphasis of postmodern conceptualisations of the lifecourse is on 'the agency side of the classic sociological dynamic' of the individual and society (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005, p. 422) the principles of agency and timing, in conjunction with historical time and circumstances, were useful lenses by which to understand decisions.

Part of RQ2 and my thesis was to understand what changed in lives, but another part was also utilise the advantages of the NCDS data to explore differences in characteristics and experiences within the mature student category, and not just between young and mature students as in the national statistics. The use of the NCDS data has enabled me to investigate patterns of participation by social class, differentiated not only by working and middle-class categories but also by the intermediate group.

Although Chapter 6 showed that social class was a key factor in the increased likelihood for working-class compared to middle-class cohort members gaining a degree as a mature rather than young student, sex and school qualifications are more important on likelihoods of if and when a degree is obtained for cohort members from intermediate, compared with middle-class backgrounds.

Elliott and Lawrence (2014) suggest that many of those fitting into the intermediate-class could be considered as more 'advantaged working-class', rather than viewing them as '*not* working-class' (p. 26) and I think this is an important distinction if one wants to properly examine the success of widening participation initiatives on the most disadvantaged or under-represented groups.

From the quantitative data I was able to show that high proportions of cohort members from intermediate and working-class backgrounds obtained their degrees in the middle and older mature student categories, ameliorating some earlier inequalities (Egerton, 2000). As mentioned in Chapter 2, information about the social class backgrounds of mature students is extremely limited. This thesis therefore has contributed to new insights into the social class background of mature students and how social class impacts the age in which a cohort member obtained their degree.

Data on the gender of young and mature students on the other hand, were collected as part of the national statistics reviewed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 2, I highlighted that young women were very under-represented on degree courses in the 1970s and right up until the mid-1990s. I found that this pattern was not reflected in the NCDS because the NCDS data includes cohort members who gained their degrees in colleges of higher education, polytechnics and the Open University, which were not included in the national statistics until 1994/95. It is in these higher educational institutions where numbers of women were equal with men and by the end of the 1980s where women were found in higher proportions (DES, 1992b). Therefore, my thesis has suggested that perhaps for this cohort at least, gender role differences at a young age are not as stark as the national figures from the 1980s, when all types of higher educational institutions are taken into account.

The NCDS data did reflect the patterns in the national statistics regarding gender, with women found in much higher proportions as mature students. For those who became mature students the concepts of timing and linked lives were particularly insightful when considering the decision-making of women whose choices tend to be impacted by other people, especially their children. For example, the quantitative data showed that cohort member Nicola was seen as being suitable to study at degree level by her teachers when she was age 11 in 1969. However, she did not continue her education past the age of 16, married young and had children. Nicola described how she had many opportunities to study when her children were growing up, but decided to wait until they were older. It was only in her 40s that she finally took the opportunity to study for a degree in science and follow this as a career – returning to something she had been interested in doing when at school. At the time of the interview at age 50, she was studying for a PhD. This and similar examples reinforce the value of longitudinal research as they reveal how long it can take for decisions or aspirations to study to come to fruition (Webb et al., 1994), as well as the differences between the lifecourse patterns of men and women.

RQ3: What is the meaning of gaining a degree for cohort members?

The meaning of gaining a degree is often closely aligned to the perceived or hoped for benefit or outcome given by students for why they decided to enrol (Feinstein et

al., 2007). As Henderson et al., (2019, p. 2) discuss with reference to the concept of 'possible selves': '(t)he implied graduate future is ever-present'. Therefore, meanings can be deduced from the existing literature in terms of wanting a change of career, a more stable job, financial independence, personal development or fulfilment, to prove to self and others that they can do it and a whole host of personal, community and career related reasons mentioned in Chapter 4 and 7 and in response to RQ2 above.

However, meanings and significance of events differ according to time frames. What may have meant one thing (or held minimal significance) at the time it occurred, can take on new meanings in hindsight 'as subsequent events retroactively transfigure it' (Freeman, 2010, p. 9). As West puts it with regard to students:

> Stories, it is suggested, are products of the present: the narrative of
> the diffident beginner in higher education can be quite different
> from a story of self, others and one's place in the world […] years
> later. (West, 1996, p. x)

Just as it is unusual for young people in youth research to be revisited years later to see if predictions about their lives had come true, it is also extremely unusual in academic research for mature students to be followed up when they are graduates to see if their hoped for outcomes came to fruition, or to understand what the longer term meaning of a degree has been on their lives. My thesis has contributed to knowledge in this area by exploring the life stories of cohort members who graduated 20 years or so before they were interviewed.

On the basis of my analysis in Chapters 7 and 8, I would argue that the meanings of gaining a degree are diverse and wide ranging, and can be categorised in two broad ways – as transformational and/or sustaining (Schuller, et al., 2004).

Within policy, research, the media, and university marketing, higher education is often portrayed as transformational. As Britton and Baxter (1999, p. 180) point out, the transformational potential of higher education is one of the 'publicly available cultural narratives' and draws upon narratives of the self which are central to modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991).

'Transformation' through education can refer to a radical change to a person's whole identity and life – as seen in the example of Ian's life story where he describes an epiphany in his 30s leading him to transform his behaviour, attitudes, and values. However, it does not always have to refer to such a life changing event. As Schuller et al., (2004) discuss regarding the meaning of transformation:

> 'At its most spectacular an educational light has been switched on and the individual experiences some kind of Damascene conversion, but there are many less wholesale transformations where only a part of the person's life is affected.' (p. 26)

Examples of transformations, or personal morphogenesis (Alford, 1995) are often focused on the lives of working-class people negotiating changes to their class identities that can come with social mobility (Bowl, 2003; Franceschelli et al., 2015). The potential tensions associated with this were certainly evident in Susan's account presented in Chapter 8.

The transformational impacts of higher education on women are also a familiar narrative in British society and popular culture. For example, the well-known play *Educating Rita* by Willy Russell, encapsulates the change higher education brought to women of the 1958 cohort's generation (the character Rita was also born in the late 1950s), particularly in the domains of family, heterosexual relationships and work. Susan noted how her degree was a vital part in her financial independence and toolkit for bringing up her children as a single mother and Pamela perceived that becoming a student enabled her to become the fun and sociable person she was before her unhappy teenage years and marriage.

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Male perspectives are relatively unusual in mature student literature, but I was able to explore the narratives of two in Chapter 8. I would suggest Ian provides a rare example of the process of in-depth reflection on how his performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000) impacted his and others lives around him. He consciously enrolled on a psychology degree with the Open University in the mid-1990s when he was in his late 30s, as part of the process of understanding and transforming himself. The examples of Ian and Susan (who studied social studies),

show how the actual subject studied can hold great importance in transforming lives, as well as being a student in general.

The transformational effects of higher education are important when wanting to argue for a renewed interest in incentivising universities to provide part-time courses and provisions for mature students (see Chapters 2 and 10). However, in their research into the wider benefits of informal and formal learning throughout the lifecourse, Schuller et al. (2004) point out that the sustaining effect of education is also important but is not as often recognised or celebrated as the transformational effects. They say this is partly because it is not easily visible.

Schuller et al., (2004) argue that the sustaining effect can be thought of in terms of preventing some sort of negative or unfortunate changes in their lives, particularly their mental health and wellbeing. However, they also point out that education isn't a shield from negative experiences or change. Rather it is:

> …a means of managing the experience in some more of less purposive fashion. It gives a sense of purpose and direction, even if not necessarily in any conscious or explicit sense, and in so doing converts experiences into something more positive than they would otherwise have been. (p. 30)

For Simon, although education was meaningful and an important part of his life story, his story is not one so much about transformational change, rather there was a theme of how education was used to sustain parts of his identity during times of personal and societal change. The degree featured in Simon's story as a resource for enabling him to maintain and present an identity of an intelligent, independent person with a successful career – despite experiencing adversity such as not getting into university at the traditional age, and redundancy and bankruptcy during his working life including at the time of the interview which took place around the time of the 2008 recession.

I would suggest that the meaning of higher education can be both transformational and sustaining – the two concepts may not be mutually exclusive and are connected to time and change over time. For example, throughout the course of telling her lifestory, Susan speaks about her low self-esteem regarding her educational credentials and intelligence, largely on account of the negative view of her abilities

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espoused by her father. However, by the end of her interview after she has reflected and discussed the transformational impact of her education, particularly on how she brought up her children, she discusses a reconciliation with her identity as a proud working-class woman. She did not want to become or identify as middle-class. Rather she concluded that she can be working-class and education – a stark contrast to her fathers' views. The method of analysis was important in answering RQ4. I would argue that the life story method and the holistic-content narrative method I used (Lieblich et al., 1998) was important in illuminating the complexity of decisions and their meanings on lives. As Schuller et al., point out:

> […] the learner may not at the time even realise the significance of the experience, but recognises it only in retrospect. This unrecognised change will be rarer in the case of transformations, which usually implies significant change over a limited period in ways that are subjectively acknowledged, than it will be in relation to the sustaining effect. (p. 26)

When telling a life story, the teller and the listener/reader are all 'engaged together in the same task of trying to understand important life experiences' (Mischler, p. 245). This is in contrast to surveys and research which restrict responses to pre-defined categories as discussed in Chapter 4. As Richardson (1990b) argues:

> When people are asked why they do what they do, they provide narrative explanations, not logico-scientific categorical ones. It is the way individuals understand their own lives and best understand the lives of others. Experiences are connected to other experiences and evaluated in relation to the larger whole. (1990b, p. 23)

Although some transformational, sustaining or other benefits and impact of higher education may be reported immediately in research, others take a longer time to become identified (Hodkinson, 2008). Therefore, the full extent of the impact of higher education on lives is not always observable in studies which focus on current mature students with no longer-term follow-up. I would argue that if Simon, Susan, Ian or Pamela were asked in their first or even final year of study what the benefits or impact of their study has been, their responses would be different to what has been revealed through their life stories, when they were not even asked about their studies, and articulated many years after graduation.

This brings me onto my final question which is a methodological one.

RQ4: Can new insights be gained by combining and analysing existing quantitative and qualitative data guided by lifecourse theory, in researching mature students' decision-making?

Analysis of longitudinal quantitative birth cohort data has been considered the gold standard method to use in lifecourse research (Mayer, 2009). This is because, along with maturation of birth cohort studies, technological advances have enabled sophisticated statistical analyses of the effect of earlier conditions on later life outcomes to be carried out (Bynner, 2016; Elder & Giele, 2009). However, it has been recognised amongst lifecourse researchers, that combining both qualitative and quantitative methods is the solution to studying lives more holistically, but this does not often happen, as Hagestad and Dykstra say:

> To arrive at a better understanding of macro-meso-micro links, we feel that a combination of methodological approaches is the route to follow. Mixed-methods are often espoused, but not often practiced in life course research. (Hagestad & Dykstra, 2016, p. 150)

If using mixed methods in lifecourse research is uncommon, then as discussed in Chapter 5, to use only secondary data within Mixed-Methods Research (MMR) is exceedingly rare (Watkins, 2022).

In this thesis, I combined the rich longitudinal cohort data from the National Child Development Study, with the qualitative materials from the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study, to build on and add new insights into what is already known about mature student decision-making. I suggest there are six main insights gained from this thesis and my methodological approach.

First, the participants' lives in my study have not been presented as static. As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, youth research has traditionally utilised theories that predict trajectories based on social class, school type and gender norms (e.g. Willis, 1977). A shortcoming of this approach is that research participants' transitions and perceived futures are only viewed through the lens of a specific time. We rarely learn what became of them. Similarly, although mature student research incorporates aspects of participants' past and hoped-for future lives, the overall focus tends to be concerned with the experiences and circumstances of students related to the present time of the study, typically the first year or so of the mature students' degree (see

Chapter 4). Importantly, most sociological research does not explore what happened to the mature students after graduation, or the longer-term impact and meaning higher education may have had on lives. By adopting a diachronic concept of time – that is a concern with how decisions are developed and evolve through time – I have shown that analysis of existing longitudinal data can expose decision-making as a process that can take many years, involve other people and have impacts on career, self-development and identity long after graduation.

Second, I was able to access and analyse information from parents and teachers that normally in mature student literature is not available. Using the information from parents and teachers alongside the life stories, added insight into cohort members' decisions to become mature students in two ways. First, where there was congruence between parents', teachers' and cohort members' expectations to stay on in education but for various reasons they did not gain their degrees when young, and secondly, where teachers did not feel the cohort member was suited to higher education, but subsequently developments in the individual's life meant that they did gain a degree later as a mature student. Drawing on secondary data from significant others collected when cohort members were children and teenagers has provided important evidence that illustrates the influence of 'linked lives' on individual decision-making over time.

I could have conducted further quantitative analysis exploring further relationship between variables, or even a quantitative narrative of a cohort member's life (Elliott, 2005). However, relying solely on the survey data would not have generated evidence about how cohort members themselves explained or evaluated the impact and influence of teachers and parents on their decisions. Similarly, solely accessing life stories would only have provided information about how cohort members perceived their parents' and teachers' views, which can often be misinterpreted or unknown (Plummer, 2000). By combining different data sources from different time periods, I have been able to make a distinctive contribution to understanding the influence of linked lives on decision-making.

Third, focusing on a single cohort has been beneficial in that the historical, political and social context could be more easily mapped onto the lives of cohort members

as they aged. This is relatively unusual in studies about mature students because, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 5, most studies draw upon mixed age class cohorts. In this thesis, the sociological task of understanding the relationship between the individual and society was not complicated by a range of ages and contexts.

Fourth, and linked to this, the benefit of examining a single birth cohort was that similarities and differences within and across groups could be explored. Through the variables and statistical analysis (Chapter 6), I looked at the different characteristics of cohort members within the mature student category to compare with those who gained their degrees young as well as those who did not have a degree by age 50. Although it is also problematic to assume that the 'traditional', young group is homogeneous (Power, et al, 2003), the over 21 group represents a vast age group from 21 to 100, or perhaps more realistically around age 50, where most people have completed all formal education (Biesta et al., 2008).

Moore et al., (2013, p. 132) recommend that policy makers avoid monolithic categories used in widening participation research and policy such as age, and 'acknowledge 'the diversity of diversity'' to target specific interventions as well as to reveal ''hidden' sub-groups within larger cohorts' (ibid.). The diversity of this group cannot therefore be represented simply by the category 'over 21' or 'mature', reducing them to a sub-group or 'species' (James, 1995) and defined by what they are not (Woodrow, 2001). In this thesis, I broke down the mature student category into three groups which enabled differences to be identified by school type, qualifications, aspirations and expectations but most importantly social class, which is lacking in national statistics about mature students (see response to RQ2 above).

Fifth, having access to a relatively large quantitative sample meant that I could explore issues surrounding structural and other determinates of participation across time through the quantitative analysis in Chapter 6 and augment through the qualitative data. I deliberately extracted examples from groups underrepresented in the existing mature student literature – such as men and those from intermediate and middle-class backgrounds. Additionally, I could further explore the experiences of 'outliers' such as Geoff whose teacher felt that he was not suited to any further or higher education, but did gain a degree as a mature student.

Sixth, the Social Participation and Identity Sub-study has collected data from people whose stories may never have been heard (Elliott, 2013). One example is Joan who spoke about studying as a mature student for her nursing career. Tragically, her career was cut short due to a car accident changing her life, something she was upset about during the interview. It is unlikely, I would suggest, that she would have come forward to be interviewed for a traditional study about mature students. Similarly, the researcher who interviewed Peter notes in their observations (Appendix 8) that they were not able to build much of a rapport, and he tended to not elaborate on his responses. However, although the amount of information gleaned from some interviews was relatively small, taken together their stories were still usefully utilised in this thesis.

Parsons (2010) analysed cohort members' views about being part of the NCDS, some expressed how important it is for them as a study participant to feel like they are making a difference, no matter how small. One cohort member was quoted as saying:

> … if it's going to help someone in the future or if it's going to give them an idea of why something's happened or why something could possibly happen in the future, I think it's great… If I can just be a very small part of that then brilliant. (Parsons, 2010, p. 8)

Referring to Hyman's (1972) philosophy for secondary analysis of surveys, Elder, et al., (1993, p.11) point out that researchers have the challenge of 'making the best of what one has'. to answer their research questions. Cohort studies are expensive and time consuming, and qualitative elements particularly so. To be able to make the most of data gathered from cohort members who have committed to this survey regulary since birth I would suggest is an ethical duty.

Finally, my thesis has contributed new insights to the MMR field by providing an example of how to integrate different forms of data in a sequential, explanatory mixed-methods research design using only secondary data. Integration in MMR is an area viewed as problematic and difficult to do (Sligo et al., 2017). In my thesis, I have focused on three main areas of integration following Yin (2006) (see Chapter 5). First, at the stage of the research questions where each question address aspects of process as well as outcomes; secondly correspondence between the variables

across each stage of analysis; and third, by having an overarching theoretical and analytical framework to guide all stages of the research design, analysis and writing up of the findings and conclusions.

Returning to the sociological imagination

There are many reasons for wanting to find out how and why mature students decide to participate in higher education. It might be to find out how to better market courses to attract mature students (see for example Harker et al., 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015); to use a basis for identifying and targeting mature students in outreach activities (see, for example, OFFA, 2017) and; to identify and remove some of the relatively simple barriers that make participation difficult such as financial arrangements, admissions procedures and childcare provision (Davies et al., 2002; Mathers & Parry, 2010; Moreau & Kerner, 2012). Government has sponsored research to help them understand trends in the higher education sector and intervene through new policy, funding boosts and other initiatives (Davies et al., 2002; Woodley, et al., 1987). Other studies into student decisions are motivated by more theoretical (e.g. Fuller, 1999), critical and sociological concerns taking a particular critical stance to understand the impact of widening participation policy on underrepresented groups (e.g. Burke, 2012).

Despite the topic of mature student decision-making being relatively well-researched, particularly in the 1990s when their numbers were growing, West (1996) pointed out that:

> [O]ur understanding of student motivation is limited because learners themselves have rarely been encouraged to reflect, in a flexible and longitudinal way, on their reasons for educational participation and learning in the context of past as well as present lives. (p.1)

Sociologists do not always utilise a historical perspective in their analysis. As Elias (1987) argues, sociologists have a tendency to 'retreat into the present' and do not think in terms of processes. C. Wright Mills (1959), boldly stated that:

> To fulfil their tasks, or even to state them well, social scientists must use the materials of history…All sociology worth of the name is 'historical sociology' (p. 162).

The sociological imagination is the ability to connect personal issues to larger social issues. As anticipated, most individuals within my thesis, apart from the evocative case of Susan, did not explicitly evaluate their lives and decisions in terms of social class, gender divisions, historical and policy contexts. Instead, they tended to focus on their individual lives and concerns (Lindsey et al., 2015).

Therefore, my mixed-methods design in conjunction with the lifecourse approach, has been beneficial to the holistic study of mature student decisions in changing historical and biographical time. Individual narratives have been firmly placed into their wider social contexts (Phoenix & Brannen, 2014) and their stories viewed through the lens of both structure and agency and history and biography.

I have also fulfilled my personal motivations discussed in Chapter 1, to continue my intellectual journey to becoming a well-rounded sociologist, both in terms of learning new methods and analysis techniques, but also tackling the fundamental promise to employ the sociological imagination to the study of lives.

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Contemporary applications and future research

Over the period of investigation in this thesis, and therefore a large part of the lives of 1958 cohort members, the higher education sector in Britain experienced a shift from an elite system towards a speedy 'phenomenon of massification' (Altbach et al., 2009). In the mid to late 1980s and through the 1990s, mature students were high on the political agenda and numbers grew steadily, mainly on part-time courses. The following quotation reflects the policy optimism and the importance of opportunities for study being made available for adults:

> The importance of adult continuing education is now widely - albeit belatedly - accepted. Many individuals want or need education in middle life, sometimes because they had no earlier opportunity and sometimes to make good deficiencies in their previous education. Overlapping with them are the many who need updating, retraining or new skills - for example in business management – in order to remain competent members of Britain's increasingly technological workforce. The Government's intention is that both these broad categories should be well served, and it has promoted programmes on both accounts. (Department for Education, *Higher Education Meeting the Challenge* 1987 pp. 11-12)

My thesis focused on individuals who were making decisions to become mature students, or were already enrolled, around the period referred to here. It was a time where there was financial investment and policies encouraging more people to become students at any age, primarily in order to keep up with rapid social change, but also for personal fulfilment.

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, part-time, and therefore mainly mature participation declined rapidly from 2011. The disincentives to individuals as well as

for higher educational institutions to cater for mature students had been accumulating for some time (Callender, 2015; Davies et al., 1997; Hillman, 2015). The second quotation reflects a more recent policy desire to repair some damage done:

> Over the last 15 years, there has been a gradual narrowing of options and opportunities for mature students. Part-time study – especially under 50 per cent intensity – has been hollowed out. Digital and online courses have yet to fill the gap. For those who cannot study full-time because of other commitments, this lack of part-time provision means that higher education is not a viable option. Rectifying these issues will require involvement from the government, universities and colleges, and the OfS. (Office for Students (OfS) *Improving opportunity and choice for mature students* May 2021, p.8).

In 2021, an Office for Students report (OfS, 2021) indicated that demand for higher education from mature students was on the rise, with applications to full-time undergraduate study increasing by 24%. It is thought by the OfS that this increase is partly due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic where people reconsidered how they wanted to live their lives. In particular, nursing applications by the over 35s rose by 39% with the OfS suggesting that this could be people being inspired to work in healthcare after seeing the essential role of the sector in the height of the pandemic.

Demand is expected to rise further when changes to the student loan system take effect in 2025. This includes a Lifelong Loan Entitlement[75] for individuals to use on modular or full-time study at higher and further education providers. The Equivalent or Lower Qualification requirement will also be abolished meaning people can study for a qualification equal to or below what they already have rather than only qualifications higher than those already acquired. These policy and funding changes have potential to enable more people to become mature students, perhaps even for a second or third time.

Although viewed as a welcome sea change for those working in the area for decades, the new scheme is also viewed with some uncertainty in terms of how it

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[75] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview

will work in practice (Standen, 2023; Wolstencroft & Whitfield, 2023)[76], especially since historically universities need extra incentives and provision to accommodate part-time students (see Chapter 2). Whatever the outcomes of the reforms, there is seemingly a renewed interest in mature students from the government, institutions, and academic researchers (Broadhead, 2023). This thesis therefore is timely.

Thesis relevance to contemporary issues

It is important to understand the past in order to understand the present and predict the future as 'policies tend to turn full-circle over time' (Sacker & Schoon, 2007, p. 876). My research has potential to contribute to present and future policy regarding mature students' decision-making and the longer-term benefits of studying throughout the lifecourse. The findings demonstrate the value, meaning and importance of higher education for adults who chose not to study for a degree straight from school; those who could not go due to lack of institutional opportunity; those prevented from attending due to personal circumstances; and those who felt excluded from higher education on account of social class and gender norms of the time.

In addition, this thesis illuminates the longer-term impact of policies on patterns of participation, including intended and unintended effects on the groups they were designed to affect. The impact and meaning of having a degree are long lasting and wide-ranging and therefore creating and maintaining opportunities for studying at any point in time should not be neglected (Callender, 2015). Although it was not the aim of my thesis, the analysis of mature student stories has also shown the value of adult education, Access and further education as steppingstones to higher level study. Higher Education cannot be invested in, to the neglect of adult and further education (Bynner, 2017; Field, 2015).

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[76] Indeed as this policy is new and still under development, information on how the scheme will work is in constant flux. As of February 2023 updates suggest that individuals will receive a loan entitlement equivalent to four years. Therefore, if they already have a degree which included a student loan and took three years, they therefore only have a loan equivalent to one year which reduces somewhat the potential for someone being able to afford to gain a second degree as they would have to pay for the remaining two years. Those over 60 would not be able to get the loan for tuition fees, but may be entitled to a maintenance loan to help with living costs whilst studying.

This thesis has also made a distinctive contribution to debates about the usefulness and value of secondary research methodologies. The Economic and Social Research Council, via their Secondary Data Analysis Initiative is keen to develop the capacity of researchers to be able to use the range of existing datasets available both in the UK and internationally, many of which have not been exploited to their full potential. The research design and methodological approach taken and discussed in detail in my thesis can serve as an example to future researchers. It has helped illuminate the potentials and pitfalls of using mixed methods secondary data to answer research questions for which the dataset may not have been specifically or originally designed to answer.

Statistical models and approaches dominate specialist journals (Joshi, 2019), conferences (Cooksey, 2014) and handbooks on how to apply the lifecourse approach (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2004; Mortimer et al., 2016). This thesis adds to the growing literature that documents how lifecourse theory can frame and be applied to the analysis of a diverse range of data and mixed methodologies, within social science research (for example see Worth & Hardill, 2015).

In summary, although this thesis largely focuses on the past, I would argue that this thesis has relevance within a contemporary context. Having a holistic understanding of mature students' educational decisions and how lives are lived from the 1958 cohort study, inform current conditions and contexts in three main ways. First, the research in the thesis speaks back to narrowly economistic views of the value and purpose of higher education. Mature students have fallen off the policy agenda yet again, but the data show how important it is to have the opportunity to progress to higher education as a mature student. Secondly, the research provides evidence of the wider benefits of learning throughout the lifecourse not just for individuals but also their families and others around them. Third, the qualitative data in particular, indicates how education can contribute to the capacity for constructive reflexivity, that is a reflexive understanding of the world and an individual's life within it, enabling change and progress throughout their lifetime.

Further research

I would suggest that researchers may like to (re)visit theirs or others' quantitative studies that use the NCDS and use the life stories and other aspects of the available qualitative data to build on, or further illuminate, their findings. As Elliott suggests, quantitative researchers using the NCDS may like to dip into the SPIS data to help them look beyond the variables:

> "I'd hope that [people] with quantitative expertise would read maybe just a few of the transcripts, so that they get more of a sense of holistic lives, rather than lives split up into variables, and that will help them to frame some good research questions and some models that they could then estimate using the quantitative data." (Elliott, 2012b)

I would like to further my research by analysing some of the biographical interviews of those who gained their degree young as well as those who had not gained a degree by age 50. I would use the same techniques outlined in Chapter 5 to explore the data, and if there were any suitable interviews, apply narrative analysis techniques as utilised in Chapter 8 to analyse their life stories. This would facilitate comparisons between the lives of those who gained a degree young, those mature and those without.

Another area in which I would like to further my research is to extend the data in the line graphs in Chapter 2 to the current time. The focus of my thesis was up to 2008, although for context I did mention and present data on the decline in part-time students up until 2015. However, the Office for Students (2021) noted a shift in the mature student population with larger numbers becoming full-time students than seen previously. This, they explain, is because the funding environment is more favourable for full-time than part-time modes of study. To continue to add and extend the line graphs would be useful for anyone who would like to compare young and mature student participation trends over the last 45 years or so in an accessible format.

Similarly, I would like to complete the task of transcribing the teachers' comments made in 1969 about cohort members further/higher education potential and predicted jobs (see Chapter 7) so that these can be added to the SPIS package. I

could not complete this due to complications arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and access to the microfiche.

Finally, there are some intriguing insights provided in the NCDS age 50 survey which asked cohort members what they imagined their lives would be like age 60 (University of London, 2012), mirroring the imagine you are 25 essays written at age 11 (Elliott, 2012a). I briefly explored the 7,383 responses, via a key word search in Word.

Although responses were quite brief, adult education and higher education were mentioned by at least 60 cohort members as part of their imagined futures. The proposed Lifelong Learning Entitlement currently excludes those over 60, indicating that the scheme is designed primarily with economic purposes in mind, rather than promoting lifelong learning in its truest sense. However, the responses indicate that cohort members still want to study and begin new careers in their 50s and 60s as this quotation shows:

> "As I have just accepted a place on a Textile Foundation course I would hope that I will have gone on to do a degree in Textiles and at 60 am proving [sic] a career either as a teacher or in another textile field." N21221H

Some wrote about wanting to study to fulfil a lifelong dream, for personal fulfilment and for fun. Others mentioned wanting to study for a degree even though they already have one. As the population of the UK ages, future researchers may like to look further into the decision-making process of people who are reaching or have reached retirement age but want to become university students at degree, postgraduate and PhD levels. There are opportunities for researchers to take a longer lifecourse approach to the study of mature studentship, and to build on my analysis of the 1958 cohort.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Data for time series 1976/77–2008/09

First-year, full-time, UK domiciled first-degree undergraduates by sex, age group and location of institution. Used to create Figure 2.1.

	England				Wales				Scotland			
	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%
1976/1977[1]	60421		21127	35	5482		2049	37	11420		4600	40
Under 21	50158	83	17887	36	4388	80	1745	40	9476	83	4000	42
21-24	6510	11	1815	28	645	12	159	25	1153	10	338	29
25+	3753	6	1425	38	449	8	145	32	791	7	262	33
1977/1978	63466		22573	36	5931		2455	41	11533		4642	40
Under 21	52907	83	19226	38	4693	79	2021	43	9740	84	4089	42
21-24	6776	11	1917	28	738	12	261	35	1063	9	310	29
25+	3783	6	1430	38	500	8	173	35	730	6	243	33
1978/1979	64752		23855	37	6151		2433	40	11988		4934	41
Under 21	53775	83	20043	37	4859	79	2045	42	10036	84	4323	43
21-24	6937	11	2141	31	778	13	220	28	1154	10	310	27
25+	4040	6	1671	41	514	8	168	33	798	7	301	38
1979/1980	66167		25575	39	5778		2383	41	11825		5034	43
Under 21	56987	86	22120	39	4844	84	2095	43	10085	85	4444	44
21-24	5527	6	1806	33	472	8	114	24	990	8	283	29
25-29	3632	6	1638	45	460	8	174	38	747	6	307	41
Unknown	21	0	11	52	2	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
1980/1981	59716		23606	40	5394		2262	42	11277		4900	43
Under 21	53831	90	21172	39	4716	87	2011	43	10031	89	4402	44
21-24	3096	5	1017	33	297	6	93	31	625	6	211	34
25-29	1274	2	581	46	159	3	59	37	301	3	102	34
30+	1515	3	836	55	222	4	99	45	320	3	185	58
1981/1982	63809		25090	39	5539		2305	42	11842		5105	43
Under 21	57920	91	22586	39	4835	87	2046	42	10779	91	4716	44
21-24	2968	5	1015	34	321	6	95	30	536	5	162	30
25-29	1287	2	591	46	171	3	64	37	218	2	62	28
30+	1634	3	898	55	212	4	47	0	309	3	165	53
1982/1983	56161		22720	40	5022		2178	43	10373		4631	45
Under 21	50973	91	20585	40	4331	86	1903	44	9424	91	4293	46
21-24	2732	5	876	32	317	6	98	31	447	4	120	27
25-29	1105	2	486	44	147	3	57	39	221	2	76	34
30+	1351	2	773	57	227	5	120	53	281	3	142	51
1983/1984	54419		21954	40	4550		2090	46	10184		4466	44
Under 21	49398	91	19814	40	3941	87	1825	46	9157	90	4085	45
21-24	2492	5	853	34	271	6	85	31	482	5	136	28
25-29	1094	2	486	44	152	3	66	43	232	2	75	32
30+	1435	3	801	56	186	4	114	61	313	3	170	54
1984/1985	55034		22651	41	5077		2332	46	10395		4497	43
Under 21	49393	90	20215	41	4377	86	2020	46	9327	90	4069	44
21-24	2510	5	919	37	277	5	93	34	515	5	170	33
25-29	1159	2	525	45	157	3	67	43	240	2	90	38
30+	1672	3	992	59	266	5	152	57	313	3	168	54
1985/1986	54795		22570	41	5247		2434	46	10263		4549	44
Under 21	49279	90	20036	41	4492	86	2080	46	9161	89	4115	45
21-24	2651	5	971	37	310	6	101	33	504	5	147	29
25-29	1213	2	552	46	173	3	84	49	245	2	97	40
30+	1193	3	1011	61	272	5	169	62	353	3	190	54

Table continued on next page (1986/87 to 1993/94)

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	England				Wales				Scotland			
	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%
1986/1987	55055		22795	41	5222		2433	47	10454		4647	44
Under 21	49096	89	20164	41	4456	85	2105	47	9176	88	4151	45
21-24	2772	5	963	35	333	6	100	30	621	6	199	32
25-29	1338	3	608	45	181	3	85	47	289	3	99	34
30+	1849	3	1060	57	252	5	143	57	368	4	198	54
1987/1988	56513		23973	42	5136		2472	48	10819		4874	45
Under 21	50250	89	21126	42	4335	84	2106	49	9467	88	4339	46
21-24	3000	5	1094	36	337	7	107	32	631	6	181	29
25-29	1417	3	646	46	205	4	103	50	340	3	135	40
30+	1846	3	1107	60	259	5	158	61	381	4	219	57
1988/1989	59293		25348	43	5193		2454	47	11251		4946	44
Under 21	25051	88	21945	42	4232	81	1975	47	9731	86	4390	45
21-24	3399	6	1292	38	375	7	140	37	692	6	193	28
25-29	1704	3	773	45	234	5	117	50	374	3	134	36
30+	2139	4	1338	63	352	7	222	63	454	4	229	50
1989/1990	64246		28212	44	6371		3191	50	12127		5535	46
Under 21	56117	87	24270	43	5263	83	2649	50	10507	87	4912	47
21-24	3900	6	1528	39	468	7	191	41	683	6	215	31
25-29	1820	3	849	47	277	4	124	45	385	3	128	33
30+	2409	4	1565	65	363	6	227	63	552	5	280	51
1990/1991	66847		29817	45	6600		3328	50	12562		5576	44
Under 21	58320	87	25650	44	5514	84	2784	50	10751	86	4876	45
21-24	3927	6	1561	40	435	7	162	37	845	7	274	32
25-29	2044	4	945	46	277	4	140	51	369	3	109	30
30+	2556	4	1661	65	374	6	242	65	597	5	317	53
1991/1992	72580		32820	45	7314		3738	51	13562		6259	46
Under 21	62542	86	27948	45	5861	80	3041	52	11515	85	5454	47
21-24	4575	6	1834	40	567	8	229	40	928	7	291	31
25-29	2340	4	1086	46	373	5	178	48	469	3	164	35
30+	3123	4	1952	63	513	7	290	57	650	5	350	54
1992/1993	80319		37340	46	8637		4717	55	15253		7215	47
Under 21	67370	84	30922	46	6613	77	3663	55	12588	83	6098	48
21-24	5779	7	2397	41	813	9	383	47	1207	8	438	36
25-29	2945	4	1466	50	459	5	226	49	578	4	207	36
30+	4225	5	2555	60	752	9	445	59	880	6	472	54
1993/1994	84602		38777	46	8996		4688	52	15219		7107	47
Under 21	37894	83	32095	46	6993	78	3676	53	12562	83	5988	48
21-24	3737	7	2454	40	726	8	344	47	1048	7	384	37
25-29	2057	5	1647	50	503	6	222	44	691	5	256	37
30+	2137	6	2581	60	744	8	446	60	918	6	479	52

	England				Wales				Scotland			
	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%
1994/1995	**224463**		109648	**49**	**16456**		8488	**52**	**27274**		13680	**50**
Under 21	**157341**	70	78459	**50**	**11966**	73	6416	**54**	**20806**	76	10749	**52**
21-24	**30837**	14	12796	**41**	**2168**	13	943	**43**	**3171**	12	1316	**42**
25-29	**15014**	7	6675	**44**	**917**	6	382	**42**	**1406**	5	595	**42**
30+	**20918**	9	11553	**55**	**1398**	8	744	**53**	**1888**	7	1020	**54**
Unknown	353	0	165	47	7	0	3	43	3	0	0	0
1995/1996	**224215**		111207	**50**	**14566**		7681	**53**	**28597**		14790	**52**
Under 21	**158047**	70	79531	**50**	**10941**	75	5914	**54**	**21737**	76	11525	**53**
21-24	**30263**	13	12820	**42**	**1599**	11	715	**45**	**3224**	11	1451	**45**
25-29	**14800**	7	6919	**47**	**755**	5	360	**48**	**1515**	5	643	**42**
30+	**20722**	9	11774	**57**	**1253**	9	679	**54**	**2121**	7	1171	**55**
Unknown	383	0	163	43	18	0	13	72	0	0	0	0
1996/1997	**226277**		114634	**45**	**15778**		8443	**54**	**28788**		15496	**54**
Under 21	**163110**	72	82861	**51**	**11825**	75	6527	**55**	**22520**	78	12247	**54**
21-24	**28506**	13	12632	**44**	**1655**	10	712	**43**	**2673**	9	1284	**48**
25-29	**14004**	6	6894	**49**	**855**	5	398	**47**	**1437**	5	665	**46**
30+	**20498**	9	12176	**59**	**1436**	9	804	**56**	**2157**	7	1299	**60**
Unknown	159	0	71	45	7	0	2	29	1	0	1	100
1997/1998	**238079**		122769	**52**	**17169**		9113	**53**	**29469**		15632	**53**
Under 21	**176221**	74	90759	**52**	**13089**	76	7024	**54**	**23694**	80	12746	**54**
21-24	**27859**	12	12551	**45**	**1811**	11	811	**45**	**2387**	8	1045	**44**
25-29	**13128**	6	6556	**50**	**847**	5	419	**49**	**1378**	5	664	**48**
30+	**20012**	8	12370	**62**	**1420**	8	859	**60**	**2000**	7	1172	**59**
Unknown	859	0	533	62	2	0	0	0	10	0	5	50
1998/1999	**230451**		119891	**52**	**16606**		8780	**53**	**29040**		15672	**54**
Under 21	**176651**	77	91876	**52**	**13109**	79	7031	**54**	**23262**	80	12657	**54**
21-24	**25064**	11	11240	**45**	**1518**	9	638	**42**	**2598**	9	1205	**46**
25+	**11288**	5	5796	**51**	**700**	4	336	**48**	**1273**	4	611	**48**
30+	**17190**	7	10863	**63**	**1261**	8	764	**61**	**1903**	7	1197	**63**
Unknown	258	0	116	45	18	0	11	61	4	0	2	50
1999/2000	**230280**		121220	**53**	**16460**		9060	**55**	**28390**		15520	**55**
Under 21	**180120**	78	94280	**52**	**13050**	79	7340	**56**	**22820**	80	12580	**55**
21-24	**23520**	10	10740	**46**	**1510**	9	630	**42**	**2430**	9	1100	**45**
25-29	**10250**	4	5560	**54**	**660**	4	310	**47**	**1110**	4	560	**50**
30+	**16230**	7	10580	**65**	**1220**	7	770	**63**	**2030**	7	1280	**63**
Unknown	160	0	60	38	20	0	10	50	0	0	0	0
2000/2001	**233880**		124670	**53**	**17035**		9495	**56**	**29015**		15675	**54**
Under 21	**184515**	79	97765	**53**	**13370**	78	7535	**56**	**23090**	80	12545	**54**
21-24	**23780**	10	11090	**47**	**1710**	10	785	**46**	**2675**	9	1250	**47**
25-29	**9460**	4	5110	**54**	**655**	4	345	**53**	**1205**	4	605	**50**
30+	**16040**	7	10650	**66**	**1300**	8	830	**64**	**2040**	7	1270	**62**
Unknown	85	0	55	65	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	100

	England				Wales				Scotland			
	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%
2001/2002	**245880**		131465	**53**	**17915**		9865	**55**	**30645**		16630	**54**
Under 21	**191935**	78	101780	**53**	**13665**	76	7585	**56**	**24395**	80	13380	**55**
21-24	**26525**	11	12515	**47**	**1890**	11	875	**46**	**2920**	10	1335	**46**
25-29	**9800**	4	5390	**55**	**785**	4	445	**57**	**1155**	4	565	**49**
30+	**17540**	7	11735	**67**	**1570**	9	960	**61**	**2150**	7	1335	**62**
Unknown	80	0	45	56	5	0	0	0	25	0	15	60
2002/2003	**256985**		137165	**53**	**18795**		10325	**55**	**31675**		17420	**55**
Under 21	**199415**	78	105905	**53**	**14330**	76	7895	**55**	**25070**	79	13880	**55**
21-24	**29185**	11	13595	**47**	**2025**	11	945	**47**	**3085**	10	1460	**47**
25-29	**10350**	4	5545	**54**	**790**	4	420	**53**	**1230**	4	630	**51**
30+	**17980**	7	12085	**67**	**1645**	9	1060	**64**	**2285**	7	1450	**63**
Unknown	55	0	35	64	5	0	5	100	5	0	0	0
2003/2004	**259710**		140425	**54**	**19345**		10585	**55**	**32190**		17690	**55**
Under 21	**201110**	77	107945	**54**	**14550**	75	8035	**55**	**24945**	77	13765	**55**
21-24	**28760**	11	13760	**48**	**2260**	12	1015	**45**	**3395**	11	1645	**48**
25-29	**10625**	4	5810	**55**	**895**	5	480	**54**	**1400**	4	700	**50**
30+	**19005**	7	12800	**67**	**1640**	8	1055	**64**	**2450**	8	1580	**64**
Unknown	210	0	110	52	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2004/2005	**261520**		142455	**56**	**19400**		11045	**57**	**30580**		16805	**55**
Under 21	**203880**	78	109950	**54**	**14640**	75	8140	**56**	**24075**	79	13250	**55**
21-24	**28590**	11	13895	**49**	**1975**	10	1030	**52**	**3050**	10	1530	**50**
25-29	**10930**	4	6180	**57**	**925**	5	560	**61**	**1290**	4	650	**50**
30+	**18075**	7	12405	**69**	**1855**	10	1315	**71**	**2160**	7	1375	**64**
Unknown	45	0	25	56	5	0	0	0	5	0	0	0
2005/2006	**278930**		151660	**54**	**19785**		11210	**57**	**31595**		17860	**57**
Under 21	**220505**	79	118740	**54**	**15185**	77	8385	**55**	**24440**	77	13665	**56**
21-24	**28820**	10	13925	**48**	**1945**	10	1020	**52**	**3335**	11	1760	**53**
25-29	**11250**	4	6415	**57**	**935**	5	570	**61**	**1465**	5	845	**58**
30+	**18320**	7	12560	**69**	**1720**	9	1235	**72**	**2355**	7	1590	**68**
Unknown	35	0	20	57	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2006/2007	**266195**		145585	**55**	**20170**		11335	**56**	**30565**		16800	**55**
Under 21	**211065**	79	114355	**54**	**15330**	76	8470	**55**	**23680**	77	12815	**54**
21-24	**27300**	10	13510	**49**	**2190**	11	1080	**49**	**3290**	11	1715	**52**
25-29	**10875**	4	6180	**57**	**1010**	5	605	**60**	**1390**	5	760	**55**
30+	**16925**	6	11525	**68**	**1640**	8	1180	**72**	**2205**	7	1510	**68**
Unknown	30	0	15	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2007/2008	**278640**		152375	**55**	**20465**		11475	**56**	**30380**		17190	**57**
Under 21	**221975**	80	120440	**54**	**15665**	77	8650	**55**	**23385**	77	13155	**56**
21-24	**28980**	10	14395	**50**	**2145**	10	1065	**50**	**3385**	11	1775	**52**
25-29	**11180**	4	6365	**57**	**985**	5	585	**59**	**1555**	5	885	**57**
30+	**16495**	6	11170	**68**	**1670**	8	1175	**70**	**2050**	7	1370	**67**
Unknown	10	0	5	50	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	100
2008/2009³	**298110**		162940	**55**	**21020**		11845	**56**	**32740**		18550	**57**
Under 21	**235655**	79	127925	**54**	**16385**	78	9100	**56**	**24895**	76	13990	**56**
21-24	**31690**	11	15600	**49**	**2150**	10	1120	**52**	**3855**	12	2065	**54**
25-29	**12570**	4	7145	**57**	**990**	5	580	**59**	**1795**	5	1020	**57**
30+	**18185**	6	12265	**67**	**1495**	7	1045	**70**	**2195**	7	1475	**67**
Unknown	10	0	5	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Appendix 2: Data for time series 1994/95 to 2014/15

Numbers of students (incl. international) in UK countries studying for a first-degree (all years) by age, sex and mode of study 1994/1995 to 2014/2015. Data compiled from Table 3 1994/1995 to 2008/2009 and Table 4b 2009/2010 to 2014/2015 Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom (HESA).

England	Full-time				Part-time				All modes			
	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%
1994/1995	669774	81	331789	50	152218	19	78181	51	822169	100	410060	50
Under 21	366338	55	185452	51	2867	2	1141	40	369225	45	186597	51
21-24	196329	29	91755	47	15630	10	6579	42	212022	26	98359	46
25+	106124	16	54118	51	133138	87	70170	53	239365	29	124349	52
1995/1996	693426	80	346346	50	177081	20	92686	52	870830	100	439203	50
Under 21	377944	55	192865	51	3394	2	1505	44	381369	44	194382	51
21-24	201735	29	95234	47	16878	10	7673	45	218699	25	102946	47
25+	112917	16	57874	51	156138	88	83086	53	269255	31	141080	52
1996/1997	708039	80	358143	51	171768	20	91778	53	879964	100	450004	51
Under 21	392117	55	202173	52	3733	2	1542	41	395863	45	203718	51
21-24	201563	28	95867	48	16065	9	7402	46	217685	25	103290	47
25+	113877	16	59881	53	151557	88	82566	54	265520	30	142506	54
1997/1998	726577	90	371960	51	76132	9	43309	57	802907	100	415366	52
Under 21	414500	57	215431	52	3630	5	1387	38	418168	52	216826	52
21-24	199739	27	95726	48	12683	17	5433	43	212498	26	101198	48
25+	109950	15	59279	54	59515	78	36312	61	169548	21	95640	56
1998/1999	733197	90	379673	52	78581	10	45457	58	811927	100	425191	52
Under 21	434203	59	228256	53	4391	6	1681	38	438604	54	229944	52
21-24	197138	27	94815	48	13119	17	5722	44	210319	26	100557	48
25+	101330	14	56358	56	60771	77	37884	62	162178	20	94276	58
1999/2000	731510	90	382430	52	78640	10	46260	59	810260	100	428750	53
Under 21	445710	61	236390	53	5140	7	2040	40	450850	56	238430	53
21-24	194350	27	93970	48	13600	17	6110	45	207990	26	100090	48
25+	91020	12	51880	57	59640	76	37960	64	150720	19	89880	60
2000/2001	739020	90	389295	53	84250	10	50105	59	823550	100	439570	53
Under 21	454150	61	242485	62	5120	6	2215	41	459590	56	244705	53
21-24	199765	27	97460	49	15325	18	6960	45	215205	26	104475	49
25+	84855	11	49235	58	63245	75	40775	64	148255	18	90120	61
2001/2002	759030	90	400895	53	88260	10	53480	61	847780	100	454620	54
Under 21	464425	61	248770	54	5440	6	2140	39	469945	55	250940	53
21-24	210270	28	102405	49	16895	19	7870	47	227350	27	110345	49
25+	84140	11	49635	59	65735	74	43360	66	150100	18	93145	62
2002/2003	792205	90	419020	53	90440	10	53755	59	883055	100	473000	54
Under 21	481455	61	258545	54	5340	6	2210	41	486865	55	260785	54
21-24	223430	28	108950	49	18735	21	8715	47	242325	27	117740	49
25+	87095	11	51435	59	66120	73	42680	65	153395	17	94235	61
2003/2004	817705	82	434780	53	173990	18	103045	59	992320	100	538195	54
Under 21	495225	61	267600	54	8080	5	3995	49	503375	51	271630	54
21-24	230725	28	112755	49	27600	16	14510	53	258580	26	127385	49
25+	91430	11	54270	59	138110	79	84415	61	229840	23	138900	60
2004/2005	836975	82	447460	53	177010	17	106035	60	1014645	100	553850	55
Under 21	507785	61	275670	54	8545	5	4350	51	516430	51	280065	54
21-24	235090	28	115465	49	28420	16	15060	53	263760	26	130640	50
25+	93930	11	56225	60	139845	79	86485	62	234085	23	142905	61

England	Full-time				Part-time				All modes			
	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%	Total	%	Female	%
2005/2006	867520	83	466015	54	182485	17	110465	61	1050875	100	576985	55
Under 21	532590	61	289805	54	9630	5	4840	50	542285	52	294680	54
21-24	237905	27	117725	49	29240	16	15415	53	267525	25	133330	50
25+	96915	11	58435	60	143480	79	90120	63	240815	23	148830	62
2006/2007	879450	83	474245	54	181385	17	109525	60	1061545	100	584155	55
Under 21	542650	62	295620	54	11310	6	5875	52	554015	52	301525	54
21-24	239810	27	119680	50	30205	17	15990	53	270350	25	135835	50
25+	96905	11	58895	61	139750	77	87590	63	236970	22	146685	62
2007/2008	903580	83	488610	54	179805	17	106915	59	1083385	100	595530	55
Under 21	562470	62	307680	55	11855	7	5860	49	574325	53	313540	55
21-24	244395	27	122485	50	30240	17	15755	52	274635	25	138240	50
25+	96680	11	58430	60	137655	77	85260	62	234330	22	143690	61
2008/2009	933470	83	504295	54	187455	17	111360	59	1120925	100	615655	55
Under 21	586500	63	321165	55	11935	6	6065	51	598435	53	327225	55
21-24	248000	27	123800	50	32865	18	17225	52	280865	25	141025	50
25+	98940	11	59325	60	142585	76	88035	62	241520	22	147355	61
2009/2010	982565	83	530810	54	195260	17	114690	59	1177825	100	645500	55
Under 21	612375	62	335100	55	13765	7	6950	50	626140	53	342050	55
21-24	267215	27	134310	50	35165	18	18135	52	302380	26	152445	50
25+	102950	10	61385	60	146285	75	89575	61	249235	21	150965	61
2010/2011	1019220	84	549255	54	196460	16	114795	58	1215680	100	664050	55
Under 21	635225	62	346455	55	14155	7	7355	52	649375	53	353810	54
21-24	279155	27	140640	50	35710	18	18455	52	314865	26	159100	51
25+	104835	10	62155	59	146575	75	88965	61	251410	21	151125	60
2011/2012	1076115	83	581150	54	213010	17	124490	58	1289125	100	705640	55
Under 21	673200	63	367395	55	15360	7	8160	53	688560	53	375555	55
21-24	293940	27	148290	50	37350	18	19235	51	331290	26	167525	51
25+	108960	10	65465	60	160240	75	97065	61	269200	21	162530	60
2012/2013	1076195	84	583780	54	200270	16	116390	58	1276470	100	700175	55
Under 21	667120	62	366100	55	14220	7	7575	53	681340	53	373675	55
21-24	299850	28	150820	50	35795	18	18630	52	335640	26	169450	50
25+	109220	10	66855	61	150220	75	90175	60	259440	20	157030	61
2013/2014	1095175	87	597435	55	166945	13	96175	58	1262120	100	693610	55
Under 21	682430	62	375965	55	12600	8	6565	52	695030	55	382530	55
21-24	304090	28	153950	51	31970	19	16440	51	336065	27	170390	51
25+	108640	10	67520	62	122375	73	73165	60	231015	18	140685	61
2014/2015	1099325	88	603690	55	152050	12	86715	57	1251375	100	690405	55
Under 21	704675	64	389355	55	12345	8	6200	50	717020	57	395555	55
21-24	288040	26	146815	51	30410	20	15630	51	318455	25	162445	51
25+	106600	10	67520	63	109290	72	64885	59	215895	17	132405	61

Please email me for the Excel spreadsheet version Annika.coughlin@gmail.com

Appendix 3: Syntax for the creation of the 'age when degree obtained' variable

SELECTING A VARIABLE FROM EACH DATASET SWEEP AND MERGE INTO ONE DATASET***

**20th January 2015.

**making HQUAL at each sweep datasets.

**age 23.

SAVE OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_jan2015\ncds4_hqual.sav'

 /keep ncdsid in1981 newghsq

  /COMPRESSED.

**age 33.

SAVE OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_jan2015\ncds5_hqual.sav'

 /keep ncdsid in1991 hqual23 hqual33

  /COMPRESSED.

**age 42.

***instead of writing special syntax, taken variable where data has been run. This variable has not been deposited in original archive data.

**age 46.

SAVE OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_jan2015\ncds7_hqual.sav'

/keep ncdsid in2004 nd7aghm1 nd7hghm

  /COMPRESSED.

**age50.

SAVE OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_jan2015\ncds8_hqual.sav'

/keep ncdsid in2008 ND8ACHQ1 ND8HAGHM

  /COMPRESSED.

**merging my open NCDS4hqual file with ncds56hqual.

DATASET ACTIVATE DataSet7.

MATCH FILES /FILE=*

  /FILE='E:\spss_merging_jan2015\ncds56hqual.sav'

  /BY ncdsid.

EXECUTE.

**the above file is now saved as master file.

**now bringing in (merging) ncds7. (The code below is different to above because the dataset was already open. But I need to still run it. but cannot run in future because SPSS does not know what dataset9 as needs path.

```
MATCH FILES /FILE=*
  /FILE='DataSet9'
  /BY ncdsid.
EXECUTE.
```
**this is ncds8.
```
MATCH FILES /FILE=*
  /FILE='DataSet10'
  /BY NCDSID.
EXECUTE.
```
**next step, run frequencies to check all is correct and as they are in original datasets.
```
FREQUENCIES VARIABLES=in1981 newghsq hacghm33 in1991 ghmaca00
in2000 in2004 nd7aghm1 nd7hghm in2008
    ND8ACHQ1 ND8HAGHM
  /ORDER=ANALYSIS.
fre N8SC N8NS8 .
CROSSTABS
  /TABLES=degree2 BY N8CMSEX
  /FORMAT=AVALUE TABLES
  /CELLS=COUNT ROW COLUMN
  /COUNT ROUND CELL.
```
***HOW TO MAKE THE DEGREE2 VARIABLE MORE ACCURATE ***

11/02/2015

***Although I have created a variable that enables me to show the numbers of people in each age category, this variable is still quite crude because someone who is in the category 'by_42' meaning they got their degree by age 42 does not necessarily mean they got it between the age of the last survey 33 and 42. They may have got it by 23 but have only just answered this question at age 42.

*** Also the range of age between 33 and 42 is large. It would be useful to get more precise detail on exactly what year the degree was awarded because a more refined categorisation would be more insightful.

*a more refined version of the date CMs got their degree.

*including degree other degree higher degree and PGCE (AC: Sam et al had originally derived the variable degree(see data note on CLS website). Sam went back to this derived variable to see what was included in the category 'degree'.

*Since degree meant more than an undergraduate degree we had to replicate this throughout for consistency.

*The reason why we had to go through this whole process is to fill in the blanks of who got a 'degree' at different time because the data in the NCDS may for example have a certain number of people with a degree by 42,

* but that does not mean that they all gained it between 42 (the last sweep and 46, rather they may have not been in the 42 sweep and may have got their degree in the 1970s. The figures for each category were therefore not accurate.

compute degree3 = -1.

if (in2008 = 1) degree3 = 0.

if (degree3 = 0 and (newghsq = 1 or newghsq = 2)) degree3 = 1.

if (degree3 = 0 and hacghm33 >= 5) degree3 = 2.

if (degree3 = 0 and n6when <= 1981) degree3 = 1.

if (degree3 = 0 and (n6when > 1981 and n6when <= 1991)) degree3 = 2.

if (degree3 = 0 and n6when > 1991) degree3 = 3.

if (degree3 = 0 and n7when = 1991) degree3 = 2.

if (degree3 = 0 and (n7when > 1991 and n7when <= 2000)) degree3 = 3.

if (degree3 = 0 and (n7when > 2000 and n7when <= 2004)) degree3 = 4.

if (degree3 = 0 and n7when = 2005) degree3 = 5.

if (degree3 = 0 and n8when = 2000) degree3 = 3.

if (degree3 = 0 and (n8when > 2000 and n8when <= 2004)) degree3 = 4.

if (degree3 = 0 and n8when > 2004) degree3 = 5.

missing values degree3 (-1).

variable labels degree3 'age ncds CMs got a degree - refined'.

value labels degree3 0'no degree' 1'by 23' 2'by 33' 3'by 42' 4'by 46' 5'by 50'.

fre degree2 degree3.

**using what year awarded degree etc variables.

*these variables give the earliest year they got one of the degrees - for those who had multiple.

*calculated for Sweeps 6, 7 and 8.

compute n8when = min(n8ewh121,n8ewh136,n8ewh151,n8pgceen).

variable labels n8when 'ncds8: year CM awarded degree'.

fre n8when ND8ACHQ1.

crosstab ND8ACHQ1 by n8when.

fre n7ewh121 n7ewh136 n7ewh151 n7pgceen.

compute n7when = min(n7ewh121,n7ewh136,n7ewh151,n7pgceen).

variable labels n7when 'ncds7: year CM awarded degree'.

fre n7when.

fre edyear66 edyear71 edyear81 pgcewhen.

compute n6when = min(edyear66,edyear71,edyear81,pgcewhen).

variable labels n6when 'ncds6: year CM awarded degree'.

fre n6when.

**where variables are saved.

SAVE
OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_MASTER_Feb2015\MASTER_HqUAL_UNREFINED\ncds6_degreedate.sav'

 /keep ncdsid n6when

 /COMPRESSED.

SAVE
OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_MASTER_Feb2015\MASTER_HqUAL_UNREFINED\ncds7_degreedate.sav'

 /keep ncdsid n7when

 /COMPRESSED.

SAVE
OUTFILE='E:\spss_merging_MASTER_Feb2015\MASTER_HqUAL_UNREFINED\ncds8_degreedate.sav'

 /keep ncdsid n8when

 /COMPRESSED.

*showing the value of the degree 3 variable - as we have moved a number to lower ages.

crosstab degree2 by degree3.

*to get more details use this command - it will list ncdsid and any other information held in variables I am interested in.

temporary.

select if (degree2 > 0 and degree3 = 0).

SUMMARIZE
  /TABLES=ncdsid
  /FORMAT=VALIDLIST NOCASENUM TOTAL
  /TITLE='Case Summaries'
  /MISSING=VARIABLE
  /CELLS=COUNT.

compute degree3 = -1.

if (in2008 = 1) degree3 = 0.

if (degree3 = 0 and (newghsq = 1 or newghsq = 2)) degree3 = 1.

if (degree3 = 0 and hacghm33 >= 5) degree3 = 2.

if (degree3 = 0 and edyear66 <= 1981) degree3 = 1.

if (degree3 = 0 and (edyear66 > 1981 and edyear66 <= 1991)) degree3 = 2.

if (degree3 = 0 and edyear66 > 1991) degree3 = 3.

if (degree3 = 0 and n7ewh121 = 1991) degree3 = 2.

if (degree3 = 0 and (n7ewh121 > 1991 and edyear66 <= 2000)) degree3 = 3.

if (degree3 = 0 and (n7ewh121 > 2000 and edyear66 <= 2004)) degree3 = 4.

if (degree3 = 0 and n7ewh121 = 2005) degree3 = 5.

if (degree3 = 0 and N8EWH121 = 2000) degree3 = 3.

if (degree3 = 0 and (N8EWH121 > 2000 and edyear66 <= 2004)) degree3 = 4.

if (degree3 = 0 and N8EWH121 > 2004) degree3 = 5.

missing values degree3 (-1).

variable labels degree3 'age ncds CMs got a degree - refined'.

value labels degree3 0'no degree' 1'by 23' 2'by 33' 3'by 42' 4'by 46' 5'by 50'.

fre degree2 degree3.

temporary.

select if (degree2 = 5 and degree3 = 0).

SUMMARIZE

  /TABLES=ncdsid newghsq hacghm33 ghmaca00 nd7aghm1 ND8ACHQ1
numdeg n7ewh121 N8EWH121

  /FORMAT=VALIDLIST NOCASENUM TOTAL

  /TITLE='Case Summaries'

  /MISSING=VARIABLE

  /CELLS=COUNT.

compute n8hqdis = 0.

if (degree2 = 5 and degree3 = 0) n8hqdis = 1.

temporary.

select if (n8hqdis = 1).

fre ND8ACHQ1 N8WHQU06 N8WHQU07 N8WHQU08.

temporary.

select if (n8hqdis = 1).

SUMMARIZE

  /TABLES=ncdsid N8ANYQUL N8WHQU01 N8WHQU02 N8WHQU03
N8WHQU04 N8WHQU05 N8WHQU06 N8WHQU07 N8WHQU08
N8WHQU09 N8WHQU10

N8WHQU11 N8WHQU12 N8WHQU13 N8WHQU14 N8WHQU15
N8WHQU16 N8WHQU17 N8WHQU18 N8WHQU19 N8WHQU20
N8WHQU21

N8WHQU22

/FORMAT=VALIDLIST NOCASENUM TOTAL

/TITLE='Case Summaries'

/MISSING=VARIABLE

/CELLS=COUNT.

Appendix 4: What is contained within the age when degree obtained variable?

1. What other qualifications do cohort members have?

The 'no degree by age 50' category must never be interpreted as having no qualifications at all nor interpret those without a degree by age 50 as being in anyway deficient. For context, the table below shows a breakdown of the highest qualifications cohort members gained by age 50 (academic and vocational combined) to show the range of qualifications cohort members have by age 50. The majority fall into the NVQ level 4 category (30.8%) which contains a large range of higher-level vocational qualifications such as nursing diplomas as well as academic degrees. This is expected given that cohort member here are age 50 and many of these qualifications would be gained through work with individuals progressing up the qualification scale over time. Level 2 has the next largest proportion of cohort members (25.4%), which are the school level qualifications, although they can be taken at any time and cohort members may have achieved some of these later in life. Level 2 also includes the apprenticeship and various other vocational qualifications. The third largest proportion of cohort members have Level 3 qualifications (17.2%), which includes A levels. In the 1970s, the minimum entry requirement for higher education was two A levels and as a side note, the cohort members with these qualifications could be regarded as those with potential to enter higher education as they have/had (as requirements do fluctuate) the qualifications required for higher education entry (see Fuller et al., 2011). Fourth are those with Level 1 qualifications as their highest level gained by age 50 (11.3%) followed closely by those with no formal qualifications at all by age 50 at 11%. So in summary, 89% of cohort members have some formal academic or vocational qualifications. By age 50 only 11% have no formal qualifications at all. For further detail on the gaining of these qualifications in adulthood see Jenkins (2013).

Highest academic or vocational qualification achieved by cohort members by age 50 (N=9783, missing = 6) Using variable ND8HNVQ and the NQF.

NVQ Level	General (Academic)	Vocational and occupational	% (frequency)
5	Higher Degree	NVQ level 5; PGCE	4.4 (426)
4	Degree, HE Diploma	BTEC Higher Certificate/ Diploma, HNC/HND, NVQ level 4, Professional degree level qualifications, Nursing/ paramedic, Other teacher training qualification, City & Guilds Part 4/Career Ext/Full Tech, RSA Higher Diploma	30.8 (3013)
3	A level, AS levels, Scottish Highers, Scottish Cert of 6th Year Studies	Advanced GNVQ, BTEC National Diploma, ONC/OND, NVQ level 3, City & Guilds Part 3/Final/Advanced Craft, RSA Advanced Diploma, Pitmans level 3	17.2 (1681)
2	GCSE grade A*-C, O levels grade A-E, CSE grade 1, Scottish standard grades 1-3, Scottish lower or ordinary grades	Intermediate GNVQ, BTEC First Certificate, BTEC First Diploma , NVQ level 2, Apprenticeships, City & Guilds Part 2/Craft/Intermediate , City & Guilds Part 1/Other, RSA First Diploma, Pitmans level 2	25.4 (2481)
1	GCSE grade D-G,CSEs grades 2-5, Scottish standard grades 4-5, Other Scottish school qualification	Foundation GNVQ, Other GNVQ, NVQ level 1, Other NVQ, Units towards NVQ, RSA Cert/Other, Pitmans level 1, Other vocational qualifications, HGV	11.3 (1101)
None	None	None	11 (1081)

2. *What lies within the category 'degree'?*

'Degree' does not just mean a straightforward Bachelor degree, rather, lying within that label sits 'PGCE', other degree-level qualifications such as 'graduate membership of professional institutes' and the higher degrees 'Master's' and 'PhDs'. However, only the first 'degree' is counted and taken into consideration. So, if a cohort member has a PhD and a Master's and a Bachelor for example, it is the first

one awarded (logically, a degree) that gets taken into consideration. Also, if a cohort member had more than one undergraduate degree, it is their first-degree that is taken into account. The variable does not include any sub-degree qualifications like foundation degrees or higher-level vocational qualifications.

The mode of study is not relevant here, so part-time and full-time are included together. There is no differentiation here between the type of the higher education institutions, so it includes degrees obtained at polytechnics, colleges of higher education and the Open University, as well as traditional universities.

3.   Who is included in the sample?

Only cohort members who participated in the age 50 sweep are included in my data analysis, starting with both those with or without a degree (n=9,789) and then focusing in on only those with a degree (n=1936). This means there may be data on a graduate in, for example, the age 46 sweep but if they were not a participant in the age 50 sweep then they do not form part of my analysis. If they were in the age 50 sweep but had not been part of the NCDS since they were 16, they are included in the sample and analysis. If they do not have a degree, then they are given the label 'no degree by age 50'. No one is excluded or missing in the age when gained degree variable.

There are however 1,706 people missing in the household social class variable, so when age when gained degree is cross-tabulated with social class, the sample size reduces to 8,083 for the total sample and to 1,628 when looking at only those with a degree cross-tabulated with household social class.

4.   How do I understand the label 'age when gained degree'?

When reading the tables to be presented, it must be borne in mind that the data are on cohort members who have actually been awarded a degree (and who were in the age 50 survey, see point 3 above), not the date that they started the course, not those who started but did not complete and nor those who were current students at the age 50 survey. So for example, someone who fits the 'degree by age 33' category could have started their degree when they were 25 but did it part-time over nine years on the Open University and were awarded it at age 33. For the people gaining a degree by age 23, we can assume that for the vast majority, these courses would

have been full-time perhaps only with a gap year, and for the Scottish graduates a four year course, but all which would have been started before age 21 (the administrative cut off point between young and mature), and most likely at the traditional age of 18 in 1976 (or 17 for some Scottish students or high achieving English and Welsh students). I have deliberately placed three pieces of information in the age when gained degree categories, that is the young/mature label e.g. 'middle-mature', age range e.g. '34-42' and years e.g. '1992-2000'. This is to make visible the chronological age and to link it to life-stage, the young/mature label as age is socially constructed into these sorts of categories when we talk about students and finally the year or decades so that historical and social period is at the forefront. This study and the patterns that are shown in the tables are very specific to this cohort. Current patterns of participation (2015) are very different, so it is important to keep the context in mind.

5.   *What is the rationale behind the chosen categories?*

After defining and creating the 'degree' aspect of the variable, the next step was to decide on how age would be defined. For the sweeps up to age 33, data were not collected about the precise year in which the qualification were awarded. However, after the age 33 sweep, much more detail was gathered about the courses including the month and year they were awarded the qualification. It would therefore have been possible to create a continuous variable showing the years in which individuals gained their degree from 34 to 50 and then for me to create categories of my choosing. I may have chosen slightly different cut off points for my age group categories, perhaps to mirror Woodley and Wilson (2002) whose categorisations my age groupings are based on, but this would have been a difficult task. I decided that since I was likely to transform a continuous variable into categories anyway, that it would be simpler to leave the age categories to fit in with the natural cut off points of the sweeps. Also, if I want to place my results with other contextual information about the cohort or others who have looked at learning through the life course (e.g. Dale and Egerton, 1997; Jenkins, 2013), then it made sense to keep the age categories in line with the sweeps as they also have done. Besides this, the natural cut off points coincidentally fit in relatively neatly with the decades and life-stages as mentioned above.

Two categories were collapsed – the 'older-mature' category is a combination of Sweeps 7 and 8, rather than have two small categories '43 to 46' and then '47 to 50', as it seemed more sensible to combine them together.

Appendix 5: Other data drawn upon from the NCDS

1) Why leave school at 16, 17 or 18+

Nearing the end of their compulsory schooling cohort members were asked in the NCDS3 (1974) survey:

> (N2729) At what age do you think you are most likely to leave school?

- 16 (59%)
- 17 (8%)
- 18 or over (26%)
- Uncertain (8%)

A follow-on question asked:

> (N2730) Are any of the following important reasons for leaving school at this age? Ring the numbers to which are important to you.

- I have always taken it for granted
- I need to earn as soon as possible because my family needs the money
- I want to earn a wage and be independent as soon as I can
- I don't like doing school work
- I want to do the same as most of my friends
- My parents' advice
- I can't study what I want to study at school Teachers' advice
- I have a particular course or job in mind which I don't have to stay on at school to do
- I want to get married in the next year or so
- I want more qualifications
- I like school life
- I want to go somewhere else to finish my education
- I can't think of anything else to do
- I'm not good enough to stay on.

I conducted a basic analysis to get a sense of different responses by the age individuals felt they would be leaving. The table below shows the top five reasons given for the three age groups. The main difference was that those who (probably) left at 17 or 18 wanted to stay on to gain qualifications and followed advice from teachers and parents, whereas those who (probably) left at 16 wanted to gain independence and work and did not mention influential people. The latter group

sometimes also had negative reasons for leaving, such as not feeling good enough, disliking school and not having other study choices. I used this information to augment my contextual understanding about their decisions.

Top 5 reasons cohort members stated they wanted to leave school at their chosen age.		
Leave at age 16 4439 individuals giving 13680 responses	**Leave at age 17** 561 individuals giving 1436 responses	**Leave at age 18+** 1903 individuals giving 4881 responses
Be independent	Qualifications	Qualifications
Has job in mind	Has job in mind	Likes school life
Not good enough	Be independent	Parents' advice
Dislikes school	Study elsewhere	Study elsewhere
Study choice limited	Parents' advice	Teachers' advice

2) Why did you study for a degree (by age 33)

In the 1991 NCDS5 study (University of London, 2008b), when cohort members were aged 33, they were asked about the qualifications they had gained since the last sweep at age 23 (1981), and their reasons for studying. I concentrated on the responses where their first or second highest qualification gained was a degree. The phrasing of the question at age 33 was as follows:

> (N501119) Did you start this course mainly because you needed it for the job you were doing or taking up at the time, because you thought it would lead to a better job later, or mainly for another reason?

As discussed in Chapter 3, fixed choice questions in surveys tend to focus on the career-related reasons and as can be seen in how the question was asked, the NCDS is no exception. A basic analysis of the data shows that of the 303 cohort members who stated that they have gained a first-degree since the last survey, 10% stated it was for a better job, 54% needed to for their current job, and 36% for 'other' reasons[77].

The 'some other reason' was a handwritten answer which had been coded by the research team at the time of the original survey into the following categories:

---

[77] Other reason 1, N508661; Other reason 2, N508663; Other reason 3, N508665).

- For job at the time	- To get new skill
- For better job later	- For other course(s)
- To gain promotion	- Compulsory for job
- Moving to other job	- Place on course
- Improve job chances	- **Some other reason**
- **Interest, etc**	- **Irrelevant, etc**

Although the original coders made decisions to categorise the 36% 'some other reason' responses in the way presented above, I wanted to gain further insight on the 63 responses that had been coded into the categories: 'interest, etc', 'some other reason' and 'irrelevant, etc' which I thought could illuminate personal rather than career-related reasons. Hence, I put in a further CLS Data Enhancement application to access the microfiche and explore the handwritten comments. From this, I was able to access and type up 43 responses which I have sorted into four categories.

Enjoyment, fun, personal satisfaction of gaining a degree

- For enjoyment
- For fun
- Thought it would be fun and I always wanted a degree.
- I just wanted to learn about things.
- Personal satisfaction
- Satisfaction of obtaining a degree (worked part-time during this period).
- Because I wanted to do it.
- It was something I wanted to do.
- Personal benefit. Seeking cultural awareness.
- I wanted to go to university. I wanted to do it.
- After leaving college I wanted to keep my mind active as I had moved and didn't know anybody.
- For personal achievement. My sister has a degree and I wanted to achieve or equal her achievements.
- Wanted to get a degree.
- My own satisfaction really, and that's all.
- I was bored with what I was doing.
- Fed up with being a nurse. I thought I'd have a change for a while.
- I was fed up with the job I was doing at the time – a repetitive nature.
- To have 3 stimulating years and to find a career I would enjoy.
- For my own satisfaction, should certainly help with applying for a job in the future.

Specific subject interest for its own sake

- Wanted to do it for its own sake. Gain skill, technical ability in fine art.
- Ceramics degree, I was interested in art.

- I don't know. Employment I suppose. It becomes a hobby, perpetuates itself. BA philosophy.
- Interested in the subject for its own sake

Needed/wanted the qualification for work or other/undisclosed reasons

- The course was needed for the job I was doing and it would lead to a better job later on. It was interesting and you cannot have too many qualifications in computing.
- Interest and to have a degree. I was to work abroad. You need a degree now to work abroad.
- The get a qualification to lead to a job.
- Follow-on course for more qualifications.
- I wanted the qualification.
- Personal qualification, personal interest/development
- To prove I could get more qualifications.
- Medical degree
- To qualify to do teaching
- Because I wanted to teach.
- Continuation of education before pursuing career in chosen subject
- Wanted to retrain to move into another field
- Needed for job in future
- Higher education, self-development for a better job later.
- Because I thought it would lead to an interesting career.

Influenced by employer/work enabled it

- Invited to go on it by employer.
- I was given a scholarship to do the course from the Home Office.
- The army were keen I should do it.

Some responses e.g. "Needed for job in the future", "Because I wanted to teach" could have fitted into the existing categories to do with work but for some reason were not chosen by the cohort members or allocated as such by the coders. The main interest for me here though was the personal reasons, and where responses were mixed or harder to categorise since I wanted to gain an understanding of how decisions to study for a degree as a mature student could be multi-faceted. For example, the following cohort member studied for a degree as a young-mature student to keep up with their sibling:

> "For personal achievement. My sister has a degree and I wanted to achieve or equal her achievements."

On the other hand, this cohort member, was not very clear about their reason:

"I don't know. Enjoyment I suppose. It becomes a hobby, perpetuates itself. BA Philosophy".

This question was not repeated in further sweeps of the NCDS and therefore is only relevant to cohort members in the young-mature category. So again, although I wanted to explore the potential of the information, in the end I used it for context and to enhance my understanding of the range of factors that influence decisions to gain a degree.

Appendix 6: Social Participation and Identity Sub-study package contents

Social Participation and Identity Sub-study. Contents available via the UK Data Service (Elliott et al., 2022) [SN 6691]	
Data item	**Detail**
220 interviews available in txt format	Qualitative interviews conducted face-to-face, mainly at cohort members' home between Nov 2008 and August 2009 in England and Scotland and the end of 2009 to the first half of 2010 in Wales. For full topic guide and details see Elliott et al. (2010)
Contextual information about the interview (Excel spreadsheet)	Info on: cohort member ID (P number), length of the interview, interview date, interview number, language interview conducted in, sex, marital status, region where CM lived, if anyone else in the room at time of interview. ID of accompany materials e.g. essays, life trajectory diagrams chosen (see below).
Contextual information about Cohort Member (SPSS file)	Derived and merged from NCDS age 50 sweep and some variables from previous sweeps. Includes job title at age 50; marital status; country residing in.
Life trajectory diagram (PDF)	Elicited and selected through the interview. *'If you had to depict your life up to now by means of a diagram, which of these diagrams would you choose, or if none of these apply, can you draw a more representative pattern in the blank box?'* Responses/explanations whilst doing this task transcribed within the 220 interview documents.
Interviewer observations (txt)	Interviewers' brief (½ page – 1 page) summary of the interview, highlighting any aspects that would impact on later interpretation and analyses.
Childhood essays at age 11	
179 childhood essays belonging to the 220 interviewed transcribed from the original handwritten documents (see Elliott, 2013a)	Essays written by cohort members at age 11 when in final year of primary school. *'Imagine you are now 25 years old. Write about the life you are leading, your interests, your home life and your work at the age of 25. (You have 30 minutes to do this).'*
NCDS age 11 SPSS file A quantitative data file with contextual information	Created using derived variables from the existing sweeps including CM occupation at age 25, general ability at age 11, region etc.

Appendix 7: Section 4 of SPIS interview schedule

See Elliott et al., 2010 for details.

SECTION 4: LIFE STORIES & TRAJECTORIES (up to 30 minutes)

The NCDS has collected a lot of information about your life over the years. But we'd now like to give you more of a chance to say what has been important in your life from your own perspective.

Q17. So could you talk me through your **life story** as you see it?

Note: Reassure the interviewee that they can take as much time as they wish or need.

It is particularly important not to prompt or to offer any structure at this point but to let people construct their own response and to give them some time to work out how they want to do it. If they ask for clarification, indicate that there is no 'right' way to do this and encourage them to start where or with what they want to.

Only if, after 10 minutes or so, people are really struggling to give a response, or if their response is very short and they have actually finished their account after a few minutes, should they be given some assistance/asked to expand using the following prompt structure:

- **Starting with your childhood could you say a bit about**
  - **what kind of child you were**
  - **how you got on at school**
  - **who had the most influence on your life**
- **Thinking about when you left school and decided what to do next …**
- **Going back to your early years of work and your twenties…**
- **Focusing on your thirties…**
- **Finally thinking back over the past five or ten years…**

Q18. Have you covered all of the major points you want to cover? What would you say have been the **key influences and turning points**?

Probe for:

- Why were they important - how and why they changed the course of a life or lives?
- Influential people as well as events/situations

Appendix 8: Extracts from the SPIS interview observations

Below I provide extracts from the interviewer notes from two cohort members' interviews whose life stories I have analysed in this thesis. The first example is of when the interviewer reported good rapport:

> The interview process felt very easy and the interviewee was happy to participate, was very welcoming, chatty, friendly, and happy to reflect on his life and provide detailed and thoughtful answers to questions. This friendliness and jokiness - easy rapport - is reflected in the interviewee's description of his social life and friendship networks. The interview setting of the kitchen also felt relaxed and was evidently where the interviewee spent a lot of time. The interviewee was very happy to participate with this interview and was pleased to be part of the NCDS. He has a twin brother who also participates in the study and felt that doing the social participation interview (which his brother was not) meant he was "one up" on his brother. He also added the interesting observation that those left in the study by now would be more likely to participate and that "all the boring ones" would have left. I was served refreshments and enjoyed the interview process as did the interviewee. (Interviewer notes for P760)

The next is an example when the rapport between interviewee and interviewer was not so good. The interviewer writes:

> This interview was quite a short one, although all questions were asked and answered. I feel this was largely due to the manner of the interviewee. He was perfectly willing to co-operate but his manner in the interview was succinct, slightly taciturn, and to the point. He certainly didn't seem to be someone given to elaboration or waffle. I did not feel, in my judgement as the interviewer in the room, that it was appropriate to probe him more than I did. My view was that he was giving interesting answers and insights but that he was more comfortable to keep them brief. (Interviewer notes for P052)

Appendix 9: UK Data Service End User Licence Agreement

26/10/2023

Dear Annika Coughlin

This email has been sent to you because you have registered to access data through the UK Data Service (ukdataservice.ac.uk)

This is an automated reminder of the terms and conditions of the UK Data Service End User Licence (EUL) Agreement that you signed when you registered. A copy of the EUL, including all clauses in full, is available at https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/app/uploads/cd137-enduserlicence.pdf.

The EUL applies to all uses of Safeguarded and Controlled data made available via the UK Data Service. By accepting the EUL you agreed that you understood and will abide by any and all terms and conditions of the licence. A summary of the terms and conditions is presented below:

1. To use the data in accordance with the EUL and to notify the UK Data Service of any non-compliance you are aware of.
2. Not to use the data for commercial purposes without obtaining permission and, where relevant, an appropriate licence if commercial use of the data is required.
3. That the EUL does not transfer any interest in intellectual property to you.
4. That the EUL and Data Collection(s) are provided without warranty or liability of any kind.
5. To abide by any further conditions or agreements notified to you.
6. To give access to the Data Collections only to Registered Users with a registered use (who have accepted the terms and conditions, including any relevant further conditions). There are some exceptions regarding the use of Data Collection(s) for teaching and the use of Data Collection(s) for Commercial purposes set out in an additional Commercial Licence.
7. To ensure that the means of access to the data (such as passwords) are kept secure and not disclosed to anyone else.
8. To comply with all obligations to preserve the confidentiality of, and not attempt to identify, individuals, households or organisations in the data.
9. To use the correct methods of citation and acknowledgement in publications.
10. To send the UK Data Service bibliographic details of any published work based on our Data Collections.
11. That Personal Data about you may be held for validation and statistical purposes and to manage the service, and that these will only be passed on to the following, in specific circumstances: the Data Collection Depositor or their nominee, your own institute or your research funder.
12. To notify the UK Data Service of any errors discovered in the Data Collections.
13. That Personal Data submitted by you are accurate to the best of your knowledge and kept up to date by you.
14. To meet any charges that may apply such as the administrative fees for Commercial projects when applicable.
15. To offer for deposit any new Data Collection(s) which have been derived from the materials supplied, where permission to do so has been granted.
16. To, destroy all copies of the data to the standards specified in the Research Data Handling and Security: Guide for Users.
17. That any non-compliance with the EUL will lead to immediate termination of your access to the services and could result in legal action against you.

If your registration period is ending and you are still using data, you should renew your registration. Please note that you must delete any copies of data at the end of the research project. Please ensure that the information in your registered projects is kept up to date, including the number of students for teaching projects if applicable.

We advise registered users to carefully consult the Research Data Handling and Security: Guide for Users and the UK Data Service Licence Compliance Policy.If you are unsure about any of the above please get in touch with the UK Data Service Helpdesk at https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/help