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**Critical exploration of the  
language around “the student  
experience” of higher education  
in the UK**

By

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**Thesis submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the language of Higher Education (HE) in the UK, with a particular focus on “the student experience”. Whilst research on the language of HE is plentiful, most of these studies have a discourse-oriented approach, which lacks an engagement with socio-historical and material contexts. The aim of this research is to investigate what the language surrounding “the student experience” reveals and conceals about HE and society. To this end, my thesis unravels the different dimensions of this concept to understand how it is conceptualised across three domains: a diverse group of students from a university in the south of England; the policies and observed practices of this institution; and relevant policies on HE promulgated by the UK government. With these objectives in mind, the research draws on three theoretical constructs – language, (higher) education, and critical exploration – bolstered by the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin, Ambedkar and Gramsci, and Marx and Engels.

A key finding of this research is that the notion of “the student experience” encapsulates differing views on the role and purpose of HE. These differing views relate to the social positions of the text creators and reveal the social and economic relations between the addressers and their intended audience.

I claim that a normative view of “the student experience” at the institutional and the state spheres is tied to a reluctance to concede that there may be flaws in the established norms and practices of HE. This refusal perpetuates a misconception that there is a singular, homogeneous student experience and fails to acknowledge a diversity of experiences. I contend that these acts of omission and commission suggest dysconscious elitism / racism (King 1991), with the apparently well-meaning and paternalistic interventions targeted at some groups of students stemming from misinformed assumptions about the academic ability of these students.

More significantly, I argue that a focus on “the student experience” of diverse groups of students gives an illusion of inclusion, but seems designed instead to trap students into a long-term relationship of debt.

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# 1. Introduction

***Let no one come in our way,  
With this war cry, awaken!  
Strive for education  
Overthrowing the slavery of tradition  
Arise to get education!***  
- **Savitribhai Phule (1831-1897)**

## 1.1. Research topic and focus

This research sets out to excavate the different meanings embodied in the concept – “the student experience” (TSE). In other words, it attempts to bring to the fore the varied and perhaps contrary conceptualisations of this term that exist among different people and strata associated with higher education (HE). The aim is to understand and to unmask the intent of these different conceptualisations, and accordingly to gain insight into the dynamic interplay of social and economic forces operating within and on the HE sector and through the language (for an explanation of my use of this term see section 1.7.1) of the sector.

Some understanding of the term might be gained by examining the policies and practices of the HE sector and the literature of the area. However, a crucial element of perspective would be missing if the views of those around whom the concept revolves, and from whom it derives its existence, the students, are not taken into consideration. Hence the main domains that come under the radar of this project are: the students of a post-1992 higher education institution, the policies and observed practices of this institution, and national policies on HE.

An awareness that the research canvas could become vast and unwieldy, led me to define the boundaries of this investigation. More accurately, the focus is on the various dimensions of “TSE” as expressed in: the views voiced by a diverse group of 15 undergraduate students from a university in the South of England; the discussions and the documents pertaining to three committees of this institution tasked with different responsibilities relating to “TSE” and; key policies, which make reference to “TSE”, promulgated by the UK government and government bodies from 2010 to 2014.

In deciding to focus on this concept, I admit to the influence of Raymond Williams, who in his *Keywords* focused on words in which there were “deep conflicts of value and belief” (1983, p.23). It is fair to say, to borrow the words of Williams, that this phrase “virtually forced itself on my attention because the problems of its meanings seemed to me inextricably bound up with the problems it was being used to discuss” (*ibid*, p.15).

However, I decided not to place the focal lens exclusively on the concept, but on the surrounding terrain too. This decision was prompted by the ambiguity surrounding the concept. The way it was used in official domains indicated a normativity that was universally applicable to all students; however, the concept, with its amorphous meaning, seemed like a hydra. Since the concept contained multiple dimensions, my endeavour was to untangle this concatenation of meanings. Secondly, since I conceptualise language as socio-ideological, that is, as situated in context and with dialogic and evaluative dimensions, I could not extract the term from the social and material reality within which it existed. Thirdly, I reasoned that if the focus was solely on “TSE”, I would have to restrict the students to reacting to the concept and not to talking about their experiences as students, an aspect that is often thought to be at the heart of the HE system.

## **1.2. Context to the study**

HE in the UK has experienced several changes in policies and practices over the last few years. Some of these changes are not drastically different from previous practices, in fact, they appear to be a continuation of existing trends, but with additional ideological accessories. As this research progresses, the evidence for this claim will become apparent. Nevertheless, the reach and impact of these changes seem to have altered the structure and organisation of the sector as a whole. Consequently, the purpose of higher education, the responsibilities of people within higher education institutions, the nature of academic disciplines, the composition of the student body, and the way the sector is financed all seem to have changed, but some changes are more prominent than others. Commensurate with these transformations new terms and concepts are becoming current; a constellation of terms such as ‘human capital’, ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘employability’ tends to surround HE. Another band of satellite terms circulating within the sector includes widening participation, access, retention and attainment. By paying close attention to the topics and issues of the HE sector, I came upon the term from which these clusters of concepts and issues radiate - “TSE”. The omnipresence of this concept in institutional statements and in government policy documents testifies to the importance accorded to it; hence its central role in steering the path of this research into text and sub-text of HE.

Prior to probing into the students’ words and views, I sought to sift through the multiple layers of meanings that this concept and adjacent ones were accumulating. Through this quest I became aware that “TSE” as a concept is often taken to be a measure of students’ expectations of and satisfaction with their course of study and with HE itself (see any university website, student experience survey, etc). It also seems to function both as an indicator of an institution’s commitment to its students and as a tool to determine its ranking based on the quality of “TSE” it is seen to provide. These functions may be said to account

for the obsession with the term in policies and practices of the HE sector, especially in a competitive, market-driven environment. However, while the term itself may feature in a normative way in government documents, institutional statements and the media, the concept, along with adjacent concepts and the meanings which these host, have also been subject to examination and critique.

Indeed, HE as a whole is a much-researched sector, with a variety of research approaches focusing on different aspects. Some studies deal with policy changes and their impact on the sector (Ball 2012; Barr 2004; Brown 2013; Brown and Carasso 2013; Collini 2011; Cribb and Gewirtz 2013; McGettigan 2011, 2012, and 2015; and others) some other studies focus on the institutional domain (Ahmed 2007 and 2012; Ahmed and Swan 2006; Naidoo and Williams 2015; Stich and Reeves 2016), still others look into issues pertaining to students, mainly as a result of the changes taking place in the sector (Bowl 2001; Connor et al 2004; Crosling et al 2008; Reay et al 2009; Thomas 2008). More specifically, there are studies into “TSE”; these approach the topic through how it relates to different groups of students, and through what institutions should do to offer a better student experience (for a slew of writings about “TSE” and on how to improve it, see Morgan 2012). Besides these normative accounts, evaluative pieces critiquing the language of HE and the changes within the sector are also common (Bowl and Hughes 2013; Fairclough 1993 and 2007; Holborow 2012b and 2015; McCaig 2014, Mautner 2005 and 2010; and Mulderrig 2011a, 2011b).

A crucial difference between the focus of some of these studies on the language of HE and that of my research is that I set out to examine the language of HE with a marked focus on the language around “TSE”. Through a comparative analysis across three domains, I seek to understand the thought and language of those participating in HE as students, as institutions and as framers of policies. Moreover, although the area of investigation of some of the studies on the language of HE is similar to my research, my approach to investigating and analysing the language of HE differs from these studies in another significant way – I focus on language not as disembodied linguistic characteristics, but as a social phenomenon, that is, as an element of human society. Accordingly, I analyse the language around “TSE” of HE bearing in mind the social relations between the addressers and addressees; in doing so I go beyond surface appearances (Woods and Sewell, n.d.).

### **1.3. Rationale for the research**

When I first embarked on this research project I was interested in understanding the interactions between students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to see if there was a language barrier between those who had access to privileged forms of the



English language and those who did not. Hence I was thinking of investigating the role of 'linguistic capital' in HE. My thoughts were shaped by what I was reading about the issues facing students who were considered to be non-traditional, or from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds; and in particular issues to do with the retention and attainment of these students.

After preliminary observations of university classrooms and interactions with some students and staff in my chosen research setting, that is, at the university in the south-east of England, I realised that issues to do with language or academic literacies did not seem to be the main problems affecting many of the students labelled as "non-traditional". Although some students were from non-English-speaking backgrounds, they were competent speakers of the language and were able to understand and engage with academic language fairly well. As I tried to wrestle with the question of what were the real issues, it seems that a research agenda, still in a nebulous form, presented itself to me. I say I had to wrestle with the issues because it was hard to detect what was really going on, although the turmoil and churning within the HE sector was palpable. A general feeling of angst was provoked by the din that surrounded the issues jostling for attention within the sector. From the surfeit of issues and concepts, I singled out the most prominent – "TSE".

"TSE", I noted, was a term that occurred frequently across the HE sector. I encountered this concept in the literature on HE, in government policy documents and in institutional documents. As used in institutional and government documents, it seemed to imply that students are at the heart of the HE system. To test this claim, I thought I should delve into the HE experiences of 15 undergraduate students. Therefore, this research seeks to draw out the students' views of their HE experience and their understanding of the concept. I also sought to find out whether they shared the assumptions that are made about "TSE" in the official domains – the institution and government bodies. Through looking into the language of HE around the concept of "TSE", my research aims to explore the reasoning behind the rise of the concept, the agenda that is being driven by it and the contiguous issues such as widening participation, retention and success, attainment rates, achievement gap, etc.

An exploration of the concept is warranted given its increasing prominence, which can be gauged by the fact that more than 300 million results showed up for "TSE" on a google search. Basic investigations indicate that the term appeared on the HE scene in 1997, at the time when the Blair government introduced tuition fees and in the process changed the funding pattern of HE. Further evidence of the link between the prominence of the term and the fee-paying system in HE is that there was no mention of the concept in the

*Robbins Report* (1963), but in the *Dearing Report* (Dearing, 1997) it was mentioned eight times, in the *Browne Review* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2010) twelve times, and in the *White Paper - Students at the heart of the system* - 19 times (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). I realised that the gradual progression in the frequent usage of the concept also came in a package with ancillary concepts and issues. Along with the increasing emphasis on “TSE” and on providing a good experience, another issue, in many ways connected to the previous one, seemed to be on the minds of many academics, administrators and policy makers: the retention and success of some students. This concern resulted in the commissioning of several committees to look into this matter, both at national and institutional levels. And this soul-searching by higher education institutions (HEI) and by organisations representing the sector has produced numerous documents and reports with ideas for what works to ensure retention and success (Thomas 2008; Thomas 2011b; Thomas and May 2010; and others). The institution where my research is situated is typical, with committees specifically charged with investigating and redressing the situation to do with helping students who are considered “non-traditional” and with meeting the university’s targets for improving the achievement and retention of these students.

As I was assailed by what was going on in HE, I realised that if I wanted to gain a better understanding of the situation, my area of focus had to change to include the contiguous issues as well, and I decided to redefine the contours of this study to focus on the language around “TSE”. This decision to focus on the surrounding terrain has both empirical and epistemological implications. Firstly, guided by concepts of scale and representation (Collins 2011; Collins and Slembrouck 2007; Collins et al 2009) I thought of focusing on the interplay of on-the-ground experiences, institutional culture and practices and national level policies. Moreover, I see language as dialogic, so I am interested in the utterances across the different domains of the HE sector, to understand whether these are echoes of, or directed towards or responding to, other utterances. By examining the propositions and the counter-propositions of the representatives of the three spheres – students, institutions, and government – I try to understand whether these utterances could be said to represent their social positions and relations. This redrawing entailed making decisions about who, what, where, how and why to research.

The key idea of this research is to understand the different perspectives of “TSE”. It therefore seemed natural to explore the views of students about their experiences first and then to investigate their awareness of the concept as it exists in policies and practices of HE. Since students’ experiences may be seen as arising from what is said and done, and from what exists and happens within the institutional domain and the policy arena, I had

to look into these areas to determine whether the texts of the latter two domains were congruent with the students' spoken texts. My interest lay not in describing the features of the spoken and written texts I encountered but in relating the content of the utterances to the social and economic situation. I was motivated to conduct this study and to adopt this approach as I wanted to go beyond surface appearances to grasp the reality of the situation.

#### **1.4. Significance of the study**

This research is situated within the context of HE in England, and is interested in understanding the language around "TSE" of HE through analysing UK government policies, the observed practices of the selected institution, and the experiences of students as they navigate their way through university. The reason for focusing on the HE sector was to make sense of the churning taking place there, to uncover the underlying ideologies (see section 1.7.2 for an explanation of my understanding of ideology) driving these changes forward, and the impact of these on all those within the sector. Although the sector has been much researched and there have been studies analysing the policies and practices pertaining to the sector, I am not aware of studies linking policies, practices and students' experiences. Also, I seek to investigate what the language surrounding this concept reveals and conceals about HE and society, to this end I steer away from analysing the forms and features of the language, instead I take into consideration the social and material contexts of the spoken and written texts I analyse. More to the point, I focus on the utterances as products of interactions and the positions of the real and intended interactants.

I begin this investigation by first trying to ascertain the different perspectives on "TSE" from the three domains that are the focal points of this research. For this I look closely at what those affiliated to HE believe constitutes "TSE" and the steps they recommend to ensure and attain it. Initial engagement with the data revealed some of the allied elements of "TSE". It became apparent that the academic dimension of "TSE" encapsulated the role and purpose of education. And at the social level "TSE" related to the dimensions of diversity, especially following moves to expand and widen participation in HE, making it more diverse. The linking of "TSE" to diversity is apparent through statements from the institution claiming that the intention is "to provide our diverse student body with a high quality holistic student experience" (*CCCU Strategic Framework 2015*) and through the emphasis on peer mentoring and orientation programmes for international students, because the institution seems to believe that they are "susceptible to culture shock" (*Orientation Programmes for international students at CCCU - October 2013 – internal document*). Through the analysis of the language with which the issues surrounding "TSE"

are discussed, I hoped to understand how the conceptualisations of the students, of the institution and of the national policies relate to each other.

### **1.5. Research aims and objectives**

The primary aim of this critical exploration of the language of HE is to understand what the language around “TSE” reveals and conceals about HE and the society of which it is a part. In pursuit of this aim, the research hoped to shed light on why and how the term “TSE” was moved to the centre-stage of the HE system in England. Although several research studies (Sabri 2011, Temple et al 2014) have linked the marketisation process within HE to “TSE”, these have not addressed the social and economic forces and relations operating in society as responsible for the trends and language of the sector. Given this situation, I am interested in relating the language of the sector to the social and economic currents which I believe make themselves apparent in HE and the language therein. This task can be accomplished by understanding the socio-economic and political processes through which the phrase became activated. In trying to understand why and how the catchphrase has seeped into the consciousness of the HE sector, and has become an integral part of its vocabulary, the research seeks to gain clarity on the perspectives contained within this language. These perspectives, I realised, harbour certain attitudes and beliefs about HE, its role in society and in the lives of students, and about those participating in HE as students, staff and institutions.

Also on the research radar is the intention to understand the social positions and relations expressed through the different conceptualisations of “TSE” across three domains – students, institution and government policies. It is hoped that by bringing to light the multiple dimensions of the concept, the research activates critical awareness of the concepts and issues clustering “TSE”, draws attention to the thought and language of these clusters and the way some issues are given prominence and others side-lined; triggers debate on the views that this language around “TSE” seeks to promote; raises awareness of the direction of HE; and helps to identify the reasons for the assumptions and perceptions entangled with the different conceptualisations of the term “TSE”.

### **1.6. Research questions**

A research project requires a defined boundary which establishes the geographical, methodological, conceptual and analytical terrains. These contours are usually set by the research questions, which help to give focus and direction to the research and point to the data needed. As Punch (1998) states, research questions are questions which guide the project, and which the research is designed to answer. In view of that, I went through a process of formulating preliminary research questions, mulling over these while conceptualising my study, and reformulating my research questions to generate answers

to my inquiry into the language of HE. The final research questions emerged from my developing biography and social context (Flick 2009, p.98), that is, as my thinking about the topic became refined and I was able to clarify what I wanted to find out. These questions are as follows:

1 - What does the language around “the student experience” of higher education in England reveal and conceal about higher education and its context?

2 - How do students at a university in the South-east of England conceptualise “the student experience”?

3 - How is “the student experience” conceptualised in the institutional culture at this university?

4 - How do the government policies on HE conceptualise “the student experience”?

5 - How do these conceptualisations relate to each other?

### **1.7. Key terms explained**

The research process entailed getting to grips with issues and ideas and with tackling a range of concepts. Some of the concepts which weave their way through my research are established and widely-accepted. However, some of these are still contested and are embroiled in disputes about their meaning or their interpretation. In this section I hope to clear the fog that may obscure the view of two of the concepts as they appear in my study.

#### *1.7.1 Language*

When I say that I seek to investigate the language of HE with a particular focus on “TSE”, I should explain what I mean by language and why I have decided to adopt this term over other terms such as discourse.

The term language in this study means the spoken and written utterances of the different participants across the three domains that are the focal points of my research – the students, the institution and the policies on HE. This understanding of language has been distilled through engaging with relevant literature. Besides, the works of Volosinov and Bakhtin, which have been discussed in detail in Chapter Two, I seek here to engage with other experts who use the term language, not to mean a particular language such as Mandarin or Urdu, but as the spoken and written utterances of people in society. Some examples to indicate that the use of the term language precedes my adoption of this term include: Rampton (1999, p.421), who points out that sociolinguistics studies the way people use language in discursive practice; Luke’s (1995, p.11) recommendation that language use should be studied in social context; Brown and Yule (1983, p.1), who note that the analysis of discourse is the analysis of language in use; and Halliday and Webster

(2014), who define a text as language at work in the creation of meaning. All of these definitions refer to the way people use language in society, which is the focus of my research.

At this point it is necessary to clarify another point, my decision to use the term language rather than the term discourse. These two terms are used sometimes interchangeably and sometimes discourse is used to emphasise the social nature of language, for instance, in Luke (1995); Brown and Yule (1983); and Fairclough (1992, p.62), who claim that discourse is language as a form of social practice. The provenance of the term may however be said to rest with Bakhtin (1981, p. 259), who, in an essay *Discourse in the Novel*, utilises the term verbal discourse, which is a social phenomenon, to make a distinction between objects of literary analysis or stylistics. He laments that stylistics “ignores the social life of discourse outside the artist’s studio” and proposes that analysis should engage with discourse in the open spaces of life. The form of analysis of stylistics “is concerned not with living discourse but with a histological specimen made from it” (*ibid*, p.269), he adds. Given the semantic proximity or overlap between the terms language and discourse, I feel the need to explain my decision to maintain a distance from terms such as discourse, discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis.

First and foremost, I should mention Foucault (1972, p.49), who stated that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. This statement lies at the foundation of the work of some discourse analysts. For instance, Fairclough (2012, p.9) views social reality as conceptually mediated, in other words, that people’s representation and conceptualisation of social reality is a part of that reality. Views such as these fail “to distinguish between epistemological objectivity and ontological objectivity” (Archer et al 2004, p.2). There are fundamental differences between statements and views such as Fairclough’s (*ibid*) and their implications for research, and my understanding of language as dynamically linked to social and material contexts, which requires a grasp of contextual resources of a text under investigation.

In choosing the term language over discourse, I am indebted to the ground-breaking work of Bryan Palmer (1990). Whilst acknowledging that discourse theory and discourse analysis does indeed offer useful descriptions of social phenomena, Palmer disdainfully points out the limits and the limitations of discourse-focused forms of analysis, which fail to take into consideration historical social forces such as class (*ibid*, p.xiii). In a book-length explication of his position he dismisses this form of analysis as descent into discourse, which tends to reify language and to ignore social, economic and political relations that are intertwined with a person’s language. He also bemoans that discourse is used to signify intellectual sophistication and fashion (*ibid*, p.4). Hence, I choose to avoid the term

discourse to emphasise that my approach to analysis goes beyond the different forms of discourse analysis. Equally important is that in my view language or discourse is not a social agent, but it is the socially located language user as speaker or writer who is the agent. In essence, I am interested in the socially situated person/s who author/s spoken and written texts for specific purposes.

### *1.7.2 Ideology*

The next concept that I would like to engage with is the notion of ideology, as the science of ideas or analysis of ideas as coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy (Freeden 2003). In trying to prise apart the coagulated meanings that the term has come to acquire in lay parlance, I hope to discuss some of the ways in which the term is used and also how it relates to this study.

The concept of ideology can be understood in multiple ways, but I find Freedon's (2003) outline of three ways in which ideology has been conceptualised useful. According to him, ideology can be considered as a set of ideas or beliefs that fall under the rubric of an ism; as a map to make sense of the political and social worlds we inhabit; or, as Marx and Engels used the term in *The German Ideology*, to explain the dissemination of the ideas of the ruling class.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, that is, the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production (1965a, pp.64-65).

Another line of thought about ideology that I find relevant is the one put forward by Žižek (1994), who claims that ideology is not necessarily the distortion of reality, but a way to legitimise a certain set of ideas, or social order. He goes on to add that both the exploited and the ruling classes fall under the sway of the illusory representations of social and economic order that serve the interests of the ruling class.

Since this research is interested in understanding the ideology that underpins the reigning discourses in HE, I thought I should clarify my understanding of this concept. In this context, I view ideology as a way of conceptualising the world and not only as the circulation of the ideas that serve the interests of the dominant group in society. As Heywood (2012, p.15) notes, ideologies help individuals and groups to make sense of the world and so "structure how we think and act". In accepting the link between thought and action, I realise the need to focus not only ideas or worldviews but on the practices from which the ideas emanate, which is what Marx did in *Capital* (1867 in McLellan 1995). He presented an in-depth exploration of capitalist practices to demonstrate how these prepared the soil for ideology to take root and to be accepted as common sense by the

ruling and the exploited classes. Hence even with an understanding of ideology as worldview, one would still have to trace the origins or formation of this ideology. A useful way to do this is to see ideology as social consciousness (Jones 2004; Volosinov 1973 and 1976; Marx and Engels 1965a). However, with this understanding one runs the risk of falling into the trap of social determinism. To avoid this, I draw on the words of Engels (1890) that all social formations should be seen as processes evolving and in a state of flux and change.

This explanation helps to understand that while society or social circumstances provide the potential for ideas to develop and take hold, people have and retain agency. As Marx firmly stated in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.

(1972 [1852], p.6)

From this message the point may be made that in analysing language we have to take into account “the dynamic of social relations of which the makers of language are part” (Holborow 1999, p.57). More significantly, language may be a medium through which ideology can be transmitted, but attention has to be given to wider social forces and not just to the language and ideas through which these are expressed. It is also crucial to note that language and ideology are distinct, and thus language or discourse cannot be conflated with ideology. An ideology or social consciousness is socially formed, that is, it has specific socio-historical roots, and these have to be explored.

Furthermore, Gramsci identified a crucial difference between organic and arbitrary ideologies (1971, p.706). The former helps to form our consciousness of ourselves and our position in society. The latter are arbitrary ideas of individuals, and are involved in struggles to be diffused in society. However, the mechanisms through which ideologies are transmitted do not always involve aggression or force, but are disseminated through the family, religion, education as part of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1971), through hegemonising discourses which make the ideas of the dominant class seem inevitable (Gramsci 1971), or by building consensus through shock and awe tactics (Klein 2009). However, Holborow (2012a) firmly believes that ideologies can be resisted and



challenged, a view developed in Holborow (2007) where she discusses how the language of the market is increasingly being pushed into the HE sector and other areas of life, but this she explains, through her analysis of the asylum seeking process in Ireland, is “official speak” (2007, p.70) and not the language of people.

And so the clarion call by the educator at the beginning of this chapter, to overcome the ideological and real barriers that may come in the way of acquiring education, is a fitting start to the study on the thoughts and ideas circulating within HE. The quote encapsulates the idea that forms the bedrock of this investigation into the language of HE: the idea that education as it functions at present seems to be riddled with false assumptions that obstruct or prevent HE from being a truly revolutionary experience for all students. The text can also be interpreted as a message to overcome the obstacles that come in the way of understanding what is going on in HE.

### **1.8. Outline of chapters**

The thesis is laid out in seven chapters. This first chapter sets the scene for the rest of the thesis. It explains what this thesis is about, that is, an analysis of the different interpretations of “TSE” to find out what is revealed and concealed by these utterances. Herein I justify the focus on “TSE” and the issues clustering this concept. In addition to presenting the issues that need untangling and the concepts that need clarifying, the chapter offers an explanation for the relevance and the significance of the research, followed by a discussion of the research aims and objectives. Next the chapter lays out the research questions and explains key terms that are woven into the fabric of this thesis. The chapter concludes with a description of how the thesis develops.

The next chapter constructs the conceptual framework of the thesis. It has a detailed discussion of each of the three constructs - language, education and critical exploration - that form the conceptual ballast to this research into the language around “TSE” of HE. This illustration of the theoretical contours within which this research is situated is critical to comprehending the issues that surface in the utterances about “TSE” across the different voices. The chapter unpacks the different dimensions of each of the constructs and leads to an understanding of the sub-topics and themes of the research. Also included is an exposition of the approach to analysis that is informed by: the socio-ideological nature of language; the recognition of universal educational ability, criticality and the social purpose of education; and the critical exploration of social phenomena that goes beyond appearance to grasp the essence.

In Chapter Three I present the methodology and the research approach and design that was put together to nest within the theoretical framework. I specify the difference between

critical and other forms of research, highlight the distinction between the various forms of discourse analytic research, and between these approaches and my approach to analysis, which explores the social and material conditions of the language around “TSE” of HE. The chapter also contains a description and an explanation of issues surrounding the research process, and offers a glimpse into the research setting and the participants.

Chapter Four is the first of the two chapters analysing the data. Its focus is on the academic domain of “TSE”. This chapter shows that “TSE” epitomises the role and purpose of HE as expressed across the three focal areas – students, institution and government policies. Through engaging with the data generated for this study I present evidence of how “TSE” of HE is conceptualised through:

- The outcomes of HE
- The role of the academic staff in “TSE”
- Issues relating to fees and funding
- Academic standards and retention of students

The second data section, Chapter Five, dwells on the social sphere of “TSE”. In setting out to explore the different dimensions of “TSE” in a sector dealing with widening participation and internationalisation, this chapter uncovers the dynamics of diversity in HE. As diversity of the student body seems to increase and is in fact actively encouraged in the sector and in some, if not all, HEIs (see section 2.3.3), the chapter draws out the implications of this development for “TSE”. It also investigates the issues resulting from diversity such as:

- Interactions in the classroom
- A sense of belonging
- The culture of the campus
- The understanding of “TSE” in a diverse HE

The analysis of the different conceptualisations of “TSE” reveals whether issues of diversity are accorded importance across the three domains investigated and whether and why some within HE emphasise the connection between “TSE” and diversity.

In Chapter Six, I go beyond the first order of data analysis of the preceding two chapters, which comprised identifying and discussing the form, content and purpose of the texts. Here I engage in a second level of analysis, which entails synthesising and explaining the findings obtained through the three conceptual lenses. This chapter presents a tapestry of the elements of the data woven into the key constructs of the theoretical framework, followed by a discussion summing up the main points.

In Chapter Seven, I take stock of the research, and attempt to look ahead to possible pitfalls and shortcomings. This chapter revisits the purpose of this study, highlights and

explains the significance of the key findings, identifies the limitations of this study, looks at the possible implications and offers suggestions for further exploration.

### **1.9. Concluding comments**

The thesis does not have a separate literature review chapter. This may seem unusual but it is not unprecedented. Wolcott (2002) proposes a “Linking Up” of literature, theory and method as an alternative to the traditional literature review. In agreeing partially with Wolcott, I have decided to embed relevant literature in different sections of the thesis. There is substantive engagement with the literature that is appropriate to the themes and issues that surfaced in this study in the introduction, in the chapters on the theoretical framework and the methodological approach, and in the analysis and discussion of the data. The next step then after having laid out the contours of this study, is to go ahead with fleshing out its conceptual foundation.

## **2. Constructing the theoretical and conceptual contours**

### **2.1. Introductory remarks**

This thesis examines the language around “TSE” of HE through three theoretical constructs – language, education / higher education, and critical exploration – to achieve its objective of investigating what the language of HE reveals and conceals about HE and society. To this end, approaches that analyse language in a decontextualised way would be inadequate. Hence the constructs of critical exploration and education are required to supplement the construct of language. These three constructs, composed through my engagement with the writings of Marx and Engels (1965a, 1965b 1867, 1851), Gramsci (1971, 2000) and Ambedkar (1924, 2013), Volosinov (1973,1976) and Bakhtin (1981,1984, 1986), among others, guide my approach to the analysis of text and sub-text of “TSE” of HE.

The construct of language is mainly influenced by Volosinov and Bakhtin’s elucidation of language as spoken or written situated utterances which are socio-ideological. The construct of education comprises three interlinked ideas, obtained from my reading of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar, that everyone is capable of learning, not just intellectual elites; that HE has a role in developing students’ critical faculties; and that the primary purpose of education is not to train students to acquire skills for the workplace but to help them understand their social responsibilities. The epistemological significance of the third construct - critical exploration – is in its contribution to understanding social phenomena (such as language and HE) by going beyond a focus on mere appearances. It draws from the writings of Marx and Engels (1965a) which explicate that analysis of social phenomena requires an understanding of how society is organised in terms of the social and economic relations between groups or people in society.

The decision to seek theoretical guidance may be a necessary and established procedure in research, but my decision was prompted by Parker’s analogy of reading a book (1999). He explained that we rely on our assumptions to interpret what we read. In the same way, a researcher needs a theoretical frame to guide the research process and the findings. I received additional encouragement from Ahmad’s neatly-phrased argument that a theory is an essential relationship between facts and their explanations (2008, p.34). In an essay critiquing post-colonial writing, he reasons that “it is not possible to pose questions about colony and empire, and about their representations in cultural products, without possessing a theory of such facts” (*ibid*, p.35). Although the subject of my research is different from Ahmad’s, I wholeheartedly accept the need for an explanatory frame to make sense of the issues I encountered in my investigation into the language around “TSE” of

HE. In other words, to make sense of the spoken and written utterances of people participating in HE as students, institution's management and government policymakers, the language in context is analysed with the help of the theoretical insights gained from the aforementioned key thinkers.

With the parameters of this research set by the scaffold of constructs, I go on to explain each construct in detail. Further, bearing in mind that theory should serve to conceptualise the research, frame the approach to analysis of the data and to understand the significance of the findings (Ashwin 2012, p.133), I go on to illustrate how these theoretical constructs contribute to the analysis and the findings of the language around "TSE" of HE.

## **2.2. Language is socio-ideological**

Given the aims of this investigation, to understand what the language of HE reveals and conceals about HE and society, the starting point of this section is to lay out the conception of language that informs this study. But in addition to fleshing out the construct of language, this section has another task: to explain its contribution and relevance to understanding how each of the domains conceptualises "TSE". Drawing primarily on the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Volosinov (1973, 1976) to tackle these two tasks, I conceptualise language as socio-ideological, that is, as social with dialogic, intentional and evaluative elements. Merely saying that the composite construct of language is formed by these interrelated elements is not enough; the meanings embedded in the socio-ideological nature of language have to be uncovered, which I attempt to do in the following parts of this chapter.

### *2.2.1 The social basis of human existence*

One interpretation of language as social is that language constitutes society and is constituted by society. Leading proponents of this view are Fairclough (1992), Wodak (2001b), van Dijk (2003a and 2003b) and others from the field of critical discourse analysis or CDA. This understanding of language, and its approach to analysis, seems to invest language with the power and the ability to shape society. Contra this view, Parrington (1997, p.73) argues that the relationship between language and society goes beyond changes in words. For instance, the use of politically correct language, or the insistence on its use, is an indicator of actual change in society; and while it may drive some of the change, it is not the initiator of the change. As an extension of this argument, Parrington insists that real reform cannot be substituted by language reform. My agreement with Parrington is the reason for maintaining a distance from those who over-estimate the role of language in society, a topic I explain in detail in the methodology chapter.

When I say that I conceptualise language as social, in precise terms, this means that I consider language to be a product of human beings' existence in community with others. This social basis of human existence furnishes the grounds for the social character of language. So, to understand the social essence of language requires a thorough understanding of the social essence of human life, for which the works of Marx and Engels are certainly informative.

The social foundation of human existence is a fundamental theme of their work, recurring at different times: in their critiques of the philosophical outpourings of others, in their detailed tracing of the historical development of society, or in their conception of society. An example of the first is Marx's riposte to the Young Hegelians, who in their criticism of religion naively claim that – man makes religion, religion does not make man. Marx challenges this claim by pointing out that “man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society” (Marx 1844 in McLellan 1977, p.63). Marx seems to be incisively rebuking these critics of religion for wrongly focusing on the phenomenon of religion, rather than on the conditions which enable religion to take hold in the life of an individual. The connection of the individual to the world is axiomatic for Marx, whose analytical insights inform us that a person does not float free of the world, but is a being situated within society. In other words, the individual who creates religion, philosophy, etc, is a creature of the world, whose experience and thoughts are composed only through existence in the world. This message has implications for the focus of my inquiry into the language of HE, that is, I endeavour to explore the terrain surrounding HE. In particular, in examining the language of HE, I try to grasp the socio-economic and political forces that operate within and on the sector; I do not take HE or its language as isolated phenomena.

In addition to placing the individual firmly within the world or in society, Marx, in a section of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, establishes that the substratum of human beings' relationship to nature is the social bond with other human beings.

The human essence of nature exists only for social man; for only here does nature exist for him as a bond with other men, as his existence for others and their existence for him, as the vital element of human reality; only here does it exist as the basis of his human existence (Marx 1844 in *ibid*, p.90).

Marx's explanation of how solidarity with others is fundamental to human nature emerges from a detailed description of the various forms of alienation that people face in capitalist society. His account of how capitalism destroys the social basis of human existence culminates in a pithy comment: “as society produces man as man, so it is produced by man” (Marx 1843 in *ibid*, p.53). However, Justin Holt (2014) clarifies that this does not

mean that individuals enter into a social contract to form society but that Marx's analysis reveals that "humans are social animals and naturally exist within social groups" (Holt 2014, p.50). The interpretation that can be drawn then is that society is not an artificial construction but a natural state of being, since for Marx "society is therefore the perfected unity in essence of man with nature" (Marx in McLellan 1977, p. 56). Through his dialectical reasoning, that is, by exploring the contending forces and factors, Marx arrives at this conclusion, which is in contradistinction to the common assumptions that alienation and hierarchical division of people, are natural orders of life.

It follows from the discussion thus far that an individual's human nature comes into being in community with others, through a collective of individuals living and working together. In the section *Notes on Mill* (Marx 1844 in *ibid*, p.115), Marx both defends and strengthens the idea of the social nature of human existence. His line of reasoning is that to be a human being is to be a social being. Here then is the dialectical relationship between self and society: the individual flourishes where there are strong social bonds with other human beings and society develops through a collective formation of social beings with shared interests.

In considering the reciprocal link between the individual and society, Marx elaborates on how individual interests are best served when considered as social interests. He arrives at this simple yet accurate understanding while developing his idea of communism; he proposes that human emancipation is possible only when "the individual realises his species-being, recognises his own forces as social forces" (Marx 1843 in *ibid*, p.57). The idea of species-being is one that Marx borrowed from Feuerbach who distinguished man from other animals because "man is conscious of himself as a member of a species" (Marx [1845] 1970, p.151). This profound insight is imperative to Marx's emphatic assertion that "the individual is the social being" (Marx 1844 in McLellan 1977, p.91). Indeed, Marx credits Feuerbach with establishing true materialism by making the social relationship of man to man the basic principle of his philosophy. In this regard, Marx challenges the liberal conception of an autonomous, individual self. For Marx, individual rights are confined to the individual being, which inhibit the realisation of the individual's species-being; further, he points out that the rights of man do not conceive of man as a species-being, in fact, species life appears as a constraint on the quintessentially liberal, self-sufficient individual. In other words, a sense of entitlement, developing from individual rights in a liberal configuration of society, leads the individual to consider other people as a limitation of one's own freedom and not to the realisation of one's self (Marx 1843 in *ibid*, pp.53, 54). In opposition to this view, Marx reconfirms that an individual does not exist apart from

society and that society is not opposed to the individual but is a necessary condition for the individual (*ibid*, p.54).

### 2.2.2 *The social origins of language*

The essence of human existence is social. This premise is key to understanding that language develops from the social nature of human existence, which is the next layer of meaning that strengthens my conception of language as social. The idea of the social origins of language was advanced by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*.

Consciousness is not pure consciousness...language like consciousness only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with others. (my relation to my surroundings is my consciousness.) Consciousness is a social product. It is consciousness of the immediate sensuous environment and consciousness of the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is growing self-conscious (Marx and Engels 1846 in McLellan 1977, p.167).

In this critique of the German Idealists for considering ideas abstract and primary, Marx and Engels establish that the social character of human existence is the basis for thought and language.

In another text, *The Grundrisse*, written to clarify his own thoughts, Marx pointedly observes, "it is absurd to think language can develop without individuals living together and communicating" (Marx 1857 in *ibid*, p.346). This observation reiterates the social underpinnings of human life and reinforces the idea that language develops through our existence in society. In attributing the source of language and consciousness to social existence, Marx and Engels successfully confirm the social nature of both.

However, another dimension to social existence becomes evident; in pointing out that language emerges in human society, Marx and Engels address the roots as well as the composition of language. In a suggestion to the philosophers of their time, they specify that our existence in human society provides the content for thought and language.

The philosophers would only have to dissolve their language into ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realise that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only manifestations of actual life (Marx 1846 in *ibid*, p.167).

In critiquing the limitations of the way of thinking of the philosophers, Marx and Engels emphasize the social origins of language. What they seem to be saying is that the life activity of human beings in the world forms the content of human thought and language. Thus, in addition to providing infrastructural support, social existence also contributes materially to the social nature of language.



Any discussion of the societal roots and composition of language would be incomplete without acknowledging the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin. The two books of the former, *Freudianism: a Marxist critique* (1976) and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973), present concrete illustrations of Marx and Engels' views on the social nature of language; Volosinov consolidates their thoughts and ideas into a comprehensive social theory of language. In his philosophy, verbal interaction is what constitutes language.

The actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monologic utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances (Volosinov 1973, p.94).

This concise statement pinpoints the crucial features of language, all of which jointly strengthen its essential characteristic - its social composition. By explicitly stating what does not comprise the main substance of language, Volosinov successfully delineates the different threads which converge to form the social nature of language. But the key to understanding his doctrine lies in the last line of the paragraph, where he posits that the main substance of language is the utterance that is generated in a social situation. This suggests that the concrete utterance, which Volosinov takes to be the core element of language, should not be seen as an isolated, monologic utterance but as a living utterance formed in a particular interactive situation. As he clearly indicates, it is neither decontextualised words, nor the structural features of a spoken or written text that are significant, but the verbal interaction expressed through utterances. In attaching the utterance to a social context, Volosinov offers practical advice for language research – that the focus should be on the social event within which spoken and written utterance or utterances are expressed.

An additional aspect of the concrete utterance expressed in an interactive event is that it is not a detached entity, but is situated within a social canvas, that is, what is said in a specific event draws sustenance from a wider context. The two layers of an utterance are

[t]he immediate social situation and its immediate social participants (which) determine the “occasional” form and style of an utterance. The deeper layers of its structure are determined by more sustained and more basic social connections with which the speaker is in contact. (Volosinov 1976, pp.86-87).

The utterance, which is at the centre of Volosinov's exposition of the social nature of language, is tethered to a specific interactive situation, but one should also bear in mind that the utterance is shaped by the social conditions and the social positions of the parties engaging in verbal interaction. This understanding of an utterance as a product of socially

situated beings, who articulate their social positions, points the way towards comprehending language as dialogic and evaluative.

### *2.2.3 The dialogic dimension of language*

The emphasis on the verbal interactive event and wider context brings to the fore the reciprocal relationship between socially situated beings - speaker and listener. As Volosinov succinctly explains “I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view” (1973, p.95). Two subsidiary elements of language manifest themselves in this statement; the dialogic and evaluative dimensions. Addressing the first of these, Volosinov draws attention to the dialogic aspect as external to the utterance. An utterance, he informs us, is not expressed randomly, but is always directed to an addressee. Moreover, he clarifies that this is no abstract addressee, for an utterance always has an intended audience. To paraphrase his words, (*ibid*, p.96) – the dimensions and forms of the utterance are determined by the particular situation and its audience. Research on language that is attuned to the insights offered by Volosinov would not focus on language abstracted from the situation to which it pertains, but would seek to examine the dialogic exchange – real or anticipated – that takes place in a spoken or written text. Accordingly, in my research, I do not focus on one aspect, or one domain, but on the dialogic exchange that appears to be taking place among the different constituent elements of HE – the students, the institution’s management and the government policies.

The dialogic nature of language is a fundamental tenet of the work of Bakhtin, who points out that an utterance is born in dialogue, that is, in the process of interacting and engaging with another’s thought (1986, p.92). In other words, the uttered words take into account “the apperceptive background of the addressee’s perception of the speech or text.” As Volosinov (1973, p.102) put this, understanding is dialogic because to understand another’s utterance is to orient oneself to it. Further, the dialogic nature is not just a feature of spoken language, but a book or a text is a verbal performance in print which is oriented to previous performances, that is, it engages in ideological colloquy (*ibid*, p.95). Kellogg (2009, p.87) distils from his readings of Bakhtin and Volosinov that words in utterances are pliable and mutable according to the circumstances of the situation. These explanations of dialogism help us to understand that the utterance, in expressing the thoughts of an individual’s social consciousness, is both responding to previous utterances and anticipating subsequent responsive utterances. For instance, an utterance in the form of a policy document is responding to a prevailing situation and its perception of it, is addressing articulated attitudes and opinions as well as impending ones, and also triggering further responses.

From what has been discussed thus far it is apparent that the social nature of language naturally implies that language is dialogic. However, that language is also internally dialogic becomes evident from the writings of Bakhtin and Volosinov. Explaining that dialogue is internal to the utterance, that it takes shape and bears traces of past utterances, Bakhtin states that (1981, p.279) “an utterance is furrowed with echoes of another’s utterances.” This statement clearly shows that an utterance is not an orphan, or a blank slate, but has genetic material drawn from previous utterances and is susceptible to modification based on anticipated rejoinders. And as Volosinov notifies us, the semantic properties of language change as they come in conflict with previous semantic elements (1973, p.106). An exemplar of the evolutionary nature of semantic transformation on account of the dialogic nature of language is the way the term “Black” has been appropriated and continues to be used with pride. This use of the term in a positive way serves to overturn the negative associations of Black with bad. It is important to stress that this semantic transformation has come about because of real, active struggles of Black people and not through language reform, which follows organised movement.

In a critical examination of the work of writers who claim that language is responsible for gender discrimination, Holborow highlights the dynamic and generative nature of language (2006, p.25), and she aptly notes that sexism in society has social and material roots. She agrees that focusing on language can draw attention to the distorted views that exists in society, but she echoes Volosinov in pointing out that change is not the result of the creative expression of individual speakers, but is sensitive to changes in society. This point that language reform is an outcome of real reform of society is salient to understanding language change, or the intrusion of language from one domain of society to another, a topic that comes up for discussion in the chapter analysing the language around “TSE” of HE.

#### *2.3.4 Language as evaluative and ideological*

The other characteristic of language that derives from its social nature is its evaluative or ideological dimension. One of the sources for understanding language as social with dialogic and evaluative elements is again Volosinov (1973, p.98), who reminds us that the utterance is a product of social interaction. And because language is generated in a social situation, he proposes that in analysing language the focus should not be on speakers as individuals but on socially situated people, their thoughts and actions. Similarly, Bakhtin (1981, p.292) cautions us against detaching a word from the impulse which gives life to it, for this would leave us with the naked corpse of the word. He suggests, starkly, that to study the word ignoring the impulse that reaches beyond it, is as senseless as analysing psychological experience outside the context of the real-life situation. Bakhtin’s suggestion

exposes the limitations of analysis which focuses on linguistic form and structure, without taking into consideration the social situation of the speech event.

Acknowledging that an utterance is socially formed in a given situation necessarily reveals the evaluative character of language. According to Bakhtin (*ibid*, p.272) “the authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it takes shape is dialogised heteroglossia...filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.” This means that “the words of others are represented and a stance towards them adopted” (Bazerman 2013, p.152). Bazerman embraces Bakhtin’s explanation that the social context imbues the utterance with evaluative content, and further adds that personal, institutional histories are carried forward in a sequence of utterances.

Recognising that utterances convey ideological content is important for language research that goes beyond linguistic form and structure, for Bakhtin reminds us that “we understand language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as worldview, even as a concrete opinion (Bakhtin 1981, p.271). However, in saying that language is ideological one has to be mindful of McLellan’s (1995) curt yet correct remark that not all thought and language can be considered as ideological, only that which indicates conflicting interests and worldviews. Volosinov (1973) too reminds us that not all utterances are ideological, reflecting and refracting reality, only those which represent as well as encode reality with ideological content or views. In plain terms, ideological utterances are those that express a particular point of view with a particular purpose in mind.

It is equally important to note that the ideological character of language is evident not only in ordinary, everyday language, but also, according to Volosinov, in “ideological products such as works of art, literature (which) represent and depict something, they adopt a stance, take a position on what is happening in society” (1973, p.9). In recognising that language and literature have the potential to be ideological it would be apposite to invoke Gramsci’s (1971) understanding of ideology as worldview or conception of the world. This interpretation is pertinent to my research and analysis of the language around “TSE” of HE, as my focus is on the viewpoints contained in the language of HE. Clearly stated, this means that a statement such as “we have to address the achievement gap” from a document of the institution refers to the attainment of students but also puts forward the writers’ / policymakers’ opinion of the students. This can be further explained by reference to Volosinov’s (1973) insight that language in the form of an utterance usually has both referential as well as evaluative elements. He cautions that these elements cannot be reduced to a simple division in terms of denotation and connotation because the referential aspect is carried within the evaluative aspect of the utterance, that is, evaluation

determines whether a particular referential topic enters the purview of the speech event. In other words, what we think about a topic determines whether or not we choose to utter words about it.

Relating Volosinov's interpretation to my research I can say that that the issue of attainment features in the discourse of HE is significant even before attempting to analyse the linguistic form of such an utterance. In fact, it is meaningless to identify the linguistic forms of language without acknowledging the specific context in which an utterance is formed and the speaker's intent, which gives form and content to an utterance. Thus, stripped off the layers of confusion, language stands revealed as socio-ideological.

To summarise, the insights offered by Volosinov and Bakhtin have relevance to my research on the language of HE; they direct the analytic gaze onto what is said in a specific situation and steer the focus away from practices in language research which concentrate only on the linguistic forms of a given text without any attention to the context. Such approaches do little more than generate lists of linguistic features, notes McLellan (1986, pp.70-71) in a disparaging comment about discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. In the methodology chapter I describe how I utilise the insights into the socio-ideological nature of language to comprehend the language of HE, but first I need to explain the construct of 'education', which is one of the pillars of the theoretical architecture of this study.

### **2.3. Understanding 'education' in higher education**

The construct of 'education', an integral part of this thesis, is formed of three interlinked ideas. The first idea stems from a fundamental belief that everyone is capable of gaining education because intellectual ability is universal, that is, all individuals are equally endowed with intelligence and the ability to pursue education. The second idea relates to the content of education in HE or at any level; in other words, education in my view is not mere instructions imparted through the banking method of education, which Freire critiqued in his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970, p.72). Instead, education is an arena where teachers and students can develop their thoughts and ideas through critically evaluating themselves and their experiences; this criticality entails trying to understand the self in relation to others. The third idea concerns the purpose of education, or the role education is thought to play in the life of an individual in society. These three ideas are crucial to comprehending the language surrounding "TSE" of HE for they form a prism which aids in viewing and understanding the juxtaposed conceptualizations of "TSE" of HE.

### 2.3.1 Universality of ability

The idea that educational ability is universal has not attained universal recognition; on the contrary, it continues to be vehemently denied by some, vigorously defended by others, or deceitfully accepted by others still. However, before addressing these differing views I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the key thinkers who have illuminated my vision of education as being not just the preserve of intellectual elites. The first of these is Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who may be known as a national leader who stood head and shoulders above Gandhi, Nehru and the others in India (Anderson 2012), but was also a keen observer of education and society. His voluminous writings on a range of social, economic and political issues include sections devoted to education, in particular to the education of those at the margins of society.

A central notion of Ambedkar's philosophy is that all human intellect is like an uncultivated land, which, if it is cultivated judiciously, can flourish (Ambedkar 1924 in Naik 2003, pp.262, 263). This view should be seen in the context of what was (and is) a highly-stratified Hindu society, where the denial of economic and social resources to the Dalits, the lower castes in India had religious sanction. As a Dalit, who had to endure humiliation and discrimination in school and other public places (see Vyam et al's *Ambedkar: the fight for justice*, 2013), Ambedkar, writing in the 1920s, bemoaned the fact that only some people or groups had cornered the resources to develop their intellect, and insisted that everyone should have access to education. To this end, he was active in raising resources to set up educational institutions, many with residential facilities, so that these students could pay low or no fees. In addition to establishing educational facilities, Ambedkar tirelessly campaigned for promoting access to education for the Dalits; he realised that it was important for the Dalits to organise a mass movement on this issue. Eleanor Zelliot, in *Ambedkar's World* (2013, p. 197) noted a shift in Ambedkar's thinking as he became more involved in seeking legal redress in pursuit of civil rights for the lower castes.

Ambedkar's outlook on intelligence and education chimes in some ways with the views of the other influential philosopher, Gramsci, who in the 1930s noted down, on approximately three thousand pages, his thoughts and analyses on a range of topics, while imprisoned by the Italian fascist regime. His penned jottings on education emphasize that while all human beings have the potential to be intellectuals, not everyone performs the role of an intellectual in society. Disapproving of the distinctions between the professions, with some being considered as more prestigious, and of the social relations that enable some to have a superior advantage over others, he points out that *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens* (Gramsci 2000, p.321); for Gramsci then, people as doers or workers are also thinkers. Gramsci's awareness of the unequal distribution of, and access to, social

goods such as education in class and caste divided societies is akin to that of Ambedkar's. Both were resolutely convinced that intellectual ability is equally distributed among social groups, and they challenged the view, that some people hold, that only some groups have a monopoly over intelligence because they have a monopoly over educational resources. This view fails to acknowledge the social and economic factors in intellectual development. However, the fact that the social and material conditions might facilitate or hamper cognitive growth has been appreciated by many, including Marx and Engels. Although education was not a central topic for Marx and Engels, they did express their views on the education of working men, women and children in their analyses of capitalist society and in their vision of communism. Marx noted that to educate children it is necessary to feed them, and to free them from the necessity of earning a livelihood (1844 in McLellan 1977). This is indeed a pertinent point in the present context of funding cuts to education and the introduction of tuition fees in the UK. Recent research by Thomas (2002, p.423) confirms Marx's views and provides evidence that financial pressures and the burden of having to work while studying could impact on student retention at university.

A few other points of the work of Marx and Engels are germane to the discussion on universal education ability. In a tribute to the Paris Commune, Marx (1870 in McLellan 1977, p.542) hails the actions of opening educational institutions to all people, of jettisoning the interference of the church and the state, of making education accessible to all, and of discarding the fetters of class prejudice. The message that filters through this tribute pertains to the accessibility, the content and the control of education. Their remarks on education seem to advocate systemic changes and not merely a tinkering with the educational system and curriculum that stems from paternalistic notions of inclusion. A letter circulated by Marx and Engels emphatically states that the working class should not have to depend on the benevolence of the bourgeoisie to gain education (1869 in McLellan 1977, p.573). The letter is a stern indictment of a stratified system of education and is picked up by Gramsci (1971 and 2000) in his critique of the popular university at Turin (see section 2.3.8), which sought to provide sub-standard education to working class students.

Marx and Engels' appreciation, that material conditions enable the cultivation of the human mind, combines their critique of capitalist society with their recognition of the limitations of social reforms. They argued that with the development of society, people would have time to pursue their intellectual development (1857 in McLellan 1977, p.380), and cultivate the mind more, become healthier if their material situation becomes better (1869 in McLellan 1977, p. 538). To make things clear, according to Marx and Engels, while the introduction of technology may have made the production process less labour intensive, a change in the organisation of society would be needed to transform education and educational

opportunities. The points they make are about education in general and not specifically about HE, nevertheless these are relevant points for they resonate with what Ambedkar and Gramsci had in mind about education - that everyone should have the opportunity to pursue their intellectual development because all individuals have the ability.

### *2.3.2 Ability conflated with accessibility*

Responses to Gramsci and Ambedkar's seminal views, that educational ability is universal, have been mixed. While there has been some acceptance of these ideas and some attempts have been made to align educational practice with these views, there has also been fierce opposition. However, it is also true that the notion of universal ability is sometimes conflated with improving access to HE. One outcome of this conflation is the attempt to ensure greater participation of different sections of society in HE. However, these well-intentioned steps to improve accessibility do not always stem from a recognition that all students have the ability, as will become clear through trying to understand some of these widening participation measures in different countries.

The ancestry of programmes to increase the representation in HE of less advantaged groups in society can be traced to countries such as India and the US (Moses 2010, Weisskopf 2001, de Zwart 2000), but now many countries have some form of widening participation activity. Examples of these include the reservation of places in educational institutions in India, the affirmative action programme in the USA, and widening participation policies in the UK. Programmes in different countries are known by different names; the paths leading up to their introduction are varied, and so are the stated reasons for widening participation. It is befitting that a discussion takes place of some of these practices and the motives underlying their implementation.

The variations in the nature and nomenclature of such programmes are due, in part, to the different principles guiding such policies, which Moses (2010) explains in her comparative analysis of affirmative action policies in five countries. For some countries, for example India and South Africa, it is because some groups in these societies have been discriminated against and efforts are needed to aid these disadvantaged communities and to compensate for the wrongs they endured in the past. It is true that the trendsetter, as far as widening participation in HE is concerned, is India's reservation policy, which attempts to encourage certain groups in society to participate in HE through preferential admission for a fixed number of students from identified groups. These are students from the lower castes in what was, and perhaps still is, a hierarchically organised caste society.

These measures, which seem to be about redressing past wrongs, often meet with opposition (see section 2.3.4); but sometimes these are supported because it is believed



that to improve the economic prosperity of these countries it is necessary to widen the pool of trained and skilled workers (See Chitty 2014 for a detailed discussion of the debates in favour of and against educational expansion, Johnston 2005, p.139). Commenting in particular on the UK, Johnston (2005, p.137) explains the obsession with social exclusion in HE as being due to a concern for the negative impact on economic growth if sections of society were not investing in their education. Weisskopf (2003, p.2818) makes a similar point in a discussion of the US Supreme Court judgement in favour of affirmative action. According to him, powerful elites seem to realise that if the US is to maintain its economic dominance, it has to be seen as offering opportunities to all. Another aspect to the apparently well-intentioned measures such as widening participation, as the study conducted by Moses (2010) indicates, is that some countries, such as the United States, are motivated to increase the diversity of the different groups accessing HE because it helps to foster social and cultural understanding. Even the World Bank (2000, p.57) seems to favour some amount of redistribution because it is thought to be good to form 'human capital' and because inequalities in society could lead to social unrest. However, Celikates (2011, p.106) critically comments that inequalities in society are linked to structural problems in capitalist societies, and redistributive measures via education are unlikely to address these.

The varied reasons why diversity is high on the agenda of education policy, as well as the shortcomings of diversity programmes, are discussed by Moses and Chang (2006). Their detailed exploration of the pro- and anti-diversity camps leads them to point out the limitations of views extolling the virtues of diversity for the economy and for democracy as they divert attention away from discrimination, inequality and injustice (2006, p.10). Critiquing the rationales for widening participation and increasing diversity which appear to be motivated by an instrumental agenda, Moses and Chang (*ibid*) put forward another important rationale, a social justice one, on which Brazil's programme is based. Going further, the comment by Moses and Marin (2006, p.3) is particularly apt, for they state that instead of reactive responses to issues in education, researchers should investigate policies and practices to properly understand, race, diversity and educational opportunities. Understanding these different rationales is salient to understanding the purpose of the widening participation policy in HE in the UK.

### *2.3.3 Accessibility to HE in the UK*

Efforts directed towards improving accessibility to HE are not always reconciled with the idea of universal ability. This claim can be made about many of the widening participation programmes across the world, including UK initiatives, where widening participation has been an item on the agenda of HE in England since 1963, when the *Robbins Report* was

released. The stated reason for widening participation first advanced by the *Robbins Report* was to increase representation of students from communities that had few encounters with HE (p.81). Later, the *Dearing Report* of 1997 specifically mentioned the need to tackle the under-representation of “certain ethnic groups and of those with disabilities” (Dearing 1997, p.10). The focus of these two reports seems to have been on the promotion of greater diversity in the student community, and to draw in students from under-represented groups.

It was generally believed that students from some communities were under-represented in HE. In the UK, more than 75% of students from professional backgrounds study for a degree, compared to just 14% from unskilled backgrounds (Feinstein and Vignoles 2008). Given this scenario, a widening participation policy was needed (Bekhradnia 2003, Hart 2010). However, although the number of students enrolling in HE has been increasing, probably due to these social inclusion policies, the inclusion of non-traditional students into HE in the UK happens mainly through new universities or non-elite institutions (Leathwood 2004; Modood 2004; Simpson and Cooke 2009), thus maintaining educational inequality through a hierarchy of institutions. Similarly, Bamber (2008); Boliver (2013); Reay et al (2001); Thompson (2012, p.55) and Whaley (2000, p.137) call into question the stratified system of education which allows elite institutions to maintain the homogeneity of their student body. Students from “lower social class backgrounds, state schools, and certain ethnic minority groups are starkly under-represented” in prestigious universities, states Boliver (2013, p. 346). Other researchers have discussed the multiple interpretations of diversity promotion in HE. For instance, Archer (2007) draws attention to the dual nature of diversity in HE in the UK – institutional diversity and student diversity. The promotion of institutional diversity, according to her critical reflection, is a misuse of equality, as widening participation mainly takes place in new, non-elite HE institutions.

Examining the claims of institutions which declare that they are widening participation and promoting diversity, Sara Ahmed and Elaine Swan in *Doing Diversity* (2006) bring a different perspective to the debate on diversity. They explore institutional practices that create and obstruct diversity in HEIs. They reason that, in aiming to transform non-diverse spaces, we need to gather knowledge about institutional practices. Through interviews with diversity practitioners, Ahmed and Swan (2006) identified two pathways that institutions could take to promote diversity. They found that some HEIs try to change the way the institution is perceived by putting images of diverse students on websites and brochures, instead of trying to change the institutional structure which gives rise to these perceptions as elitist or non-diverse. They conclude their inquiry with the message that the appearance of diversity and inclusion may actually disguise and extend exclusion.

Another take on this issue comes from studies by Reay et al (2009) and the earlier mentioned work by Archer (2007, p.647). These studies do not dispute the view of skewed diversity, but they observe that students from non-traditional backgrounds, that is, students from lower socio-economic classes and minority groups, choose not to go to elite institutions because they feel they will not fit in. However, research by Shiner and Modood (2002) and Modood (2006) reveals that students from some ethnic minority groups find it difficult to gain entry to elite universities, and their research findings boldly hint at racial bias in the selection process. It is beyond the purview of this study, which is interested in the experiences of students against the backdrop of government policies and institutional practices, to explore biases of class and race in admission to HEIs. I mention it here to draw attention that race could be a factor in the representation of minority ethnic students in elite HEIs. Through the work of these writers one realises that while the idea of increasing the representation of different groups in HE may have gained traction, it would not be far off the mark to say that its implementation appears to be circumscribed by elitism in HE.

The discussion up to this point was about the different interpretations of diversity, and the different reasons widening participation and greater student diversity is accepted by some in the HE sector. The discussion now moves on to the various reasons offered for restricting accessibility, and the negative implications of promoting diversity cited by some.

#### *2.3.4 Opposition to accessibility and ability*

The message that Gramsci and Ambedkar sought to convey was that education should be accessible to all, because everyone is capable of learning. However, this message continues to encounter fierce opposition. Indeed, despite the backing of governments in those countries where widening participation measures are in place, it is not unusual for these attempts to make education accessible to all to be resisted on various grounds. For instance, although India's reservation policy is an established tenet in the constitution of the country, it faces widespread opposition. These opponents belabour the point that admission should be on merit, which they interpret as the ability to attain high scores on pre-entry exams. What these opponents choose to overlook is that merit does not exist in an ahistorical social vacuum (Roy 2003). Indeed, there could be some truth to the old adage of a healthy mind needing a healthy body. More to the point, the role of socio-economic resources is not considered by those who chant the word merit in opposing widening access to less privileged sections of society.

The opponents of widening participation seem determined to maintain an elite monopoly over educational resources, by seeking to restrict entry to HE to those who have the social and material resources to attain higher grades. Moreover, their understanding of merit is

the converse of Michael Young's satirical and reproachful use of the concept. The prevailing idea of merit as intelligence plus effort is grounded in a narrow, individualistic, singular and hierarchical conception of intellectual ability (Littler 2013, Young 1994). This conception seems to normalise elite educational entitlement, and does not allow for other forms of intelligence to be recognised.

Affirmative action, the US equivalent of widening participation, has also encountered and overcome hurdles and legal challenges in the many decades of its existence. Referring to one of the many legal challenges to affirmative action in the US, Niemann and Maruyama (2005) remark on the significance of the US Supreme Court ruling which allows institutions to take into consideration the race of students seeking admission. Their paper identifies the virtues of diversity such as encouraging social cohesion, instilling values of citizenship, and promoting economic and scientific growth. However, they insist that diversity in HE is possible through alternatives to affirmative action policies and practices. To this end, they provide an overview of affirmative action in HE, and of other innovative programmes in schools, to reduce prejudices and to raise the aspirations of students. Their suggestions are problematic; they seem to be based on assumptions that some students lack ambition and determination to succeed. Also, they consider affirmative action, which is one of the ways to achieve diversity, to be polarising, as it could lead to feelings of resentment towards students admitted through preferential treatment.

The point raised by these opponents of widening participation is that equality of opportunity for non-beneficiaries is diminished. Anderson (2002) robustly counters such arguments by pointing out that if some people feel aggrieved or resentful of the preferential treatment granted to students in admission to university, they should remember that sharing the costs of widespread injustice is not unjust, but a reparation for past wrongs. More importantly, she maintains that the barriers to advancement should be brought down, which would in fact be a forward-looking step. Indeed this is one of the main reasons why some of the countries put in place affirmative action policies in the first place, to redress the injustice and discrimination that some groups had to endure, and break down obstructions to their progress.

A comprehensive inquiry into the legalities of the reservation policy in India by Marc Galanter (1984) led him to conclude that the policy was devised to create social equality. Similarly, in the United States, affirmative action policies came on the scene to redress discrimination against the African American community, and to provide equal opportunities to these students (Connor et al 2004). Some other countries which have in place policies and practices to enable greater participation of less advantaged groups are Brazil, France and South Africa (Moses 2010). However, as evidenced by the views opposing increasing

participation in HE, discrimination, far from being tackled, persists; which is also true in the UK, as the next section reveals.

### 2.3.5 Quantity and quality – not mutually exclusive

In the UK, some of the more strident views against widening participation claim that more means worse (see Shattock 2010), in other words, that standards will fall if the doors of HE are opened to include students who are underprepared or ill-suited for HE. The reason cited for this resistance to student diversity is that students who are the first generation in their families to access HE are less prepared for academia, and hence unable to cope with the expected academic rigour. It is heartening to note that the *Robbins Report* did not get swayed by such views, but instead relied on hard data to support its recommendation to widen participation. The report, which is widely considered as being responsible for a dramatic expansion of HE in England, did not see any incompatibility between widening participation and the quality or standards of education. It stated that it is a mistake to regard the claims of quantity and quality as being in conflict (1963, p.266). In fact, the report drew attention to the fact that the proportion of the relevant age-group in full-time education had increased from 3 per cent in 1938 to 7 per cent in 1962, and that this expansion was not accompanied by a lowering of standards (p.12, pt43).

The *Dearing Report* echoed the *Robbins Report* in rejecting the view it encountered in the course of its investigation into the HE situation in the country, that more students would result in a lowering of academic standards:

[s]ome of those who responded to our consultation exercise and many academic staff in our survey express concern about the quality of higher education entrants. Nearly half of staff think that the quality of undergraduate entrants to their department has declined over the last five years (Dearing 1997, p.24)

The committee countered this view by stating that “it is very often true that people respond to opportunities that are available and ... widening opportunities can certainly be consistent with maintaining standards” (p.101). Like the *Robbins Report*, it examined and rejected the notion of a limited pool of ability, that is, the widely-held belief that only a small number of students had the intellectual ability to pursue HE. However, it went further, in recommending that the government, when allocating funds, favourably acknowledges those institutions that demonstrate a commitment to widening participation (p.370). Nevertheless, several years after the *Robbins* and *Dearing* reports dismissed these apprehensions that first time students would be of low quality, they continue to surface.

A head-on collision of accessibility and ability manifests itself in claims that widening participation leads to a dilution of standards in HE. This claim gained prominence in the

2010 *Browne Review*, which alleged that it put additional burden on the teaching resources of HEIs because students admitted through widening participation initiatives lack familiarity with academic conventions and so require extra coaching. Also subscribing to the view that widening participation results in a lowering of academic standards is Paul Ramsden (2003, p.3), who holds that students who are not familiar with an academic environment, as no one from their family has been to university, may be unable to deal with the demands of the academic workload and may need extra support. He seems convinced that a greater variety of students - who he believes are less prepared academically, less able, or less independent as learners - unavoidably pose additional challenges for universities and their staff. These derogatory opinions about students admitted through widening participation efforts invariably seem to be based on a belief that students from elite backgrounds and those with family experience of HE have higher intellectual ability than students from other socio-economic groups.

#### *2.3.6 Targeted interventions – a mismatched approach*

As stated in section 2.3.1, the response to the viewpoint that educational ability is universal has been mixed. A less antagonistic view is one that is not opposed to increasing accessibility, yet not fully accepting that all students have the potential to perform well at university. The adherents of this view appear to be obsessed with the attainment gap. These analysts acknowledge the need for diversity, and so recommend that institutions should address the achievement gap and reduce the attrition rate of non-traditional students. Among those subscribing to this view are Liz Thomas (2011) and others who point out that institutions should ensure that students are enabled to succeed, that is, supported through special assistance. One of the measures proposed by this group to address attainment and retention is peer mentoring services for non-traditional students, others advocate research into what works to ensure improved achievement and engagement of students.

In a hard-hitting critique of the mentoring system, Helen Colley (2007) points out that mentoring attempts to change the disposition of students on both sides of the relationship to conform to the ways of the dominant group. She finds that mentoring is a process whereby some students are expected to mediate the transformation of other students, who are thought to lack the requisite skills and the mindset to succeed. Colley's research into mentors' experiences reveals the emotional distress it causes them as they try to get their mentees to adhere to the path set for them by the institution. She recalls that it is important to ask the question - who benefits and who is harmed by a particular practice. Although her research is not on peer mentoring in HE, her findings are relevant for they suggest that we have to rethink whether it is the students who need help to adapt to the HE setting,

or whether it is the culture and practices of the institution, which fail to engage them, that need to change.

Remedial support and academic literacy are other methods that are crafted with the intention to transform the students to adapt to the conventions of the institution. While I acknowledge that there are various nuances to these practices, I refrain from going into a discussion of the merits and de-merits of these different but related practices as the topic has only a tangential connection to my understanding of ability as universal. I mention these briefly to make the point that there is little recognition in these views and measures that a change in the culture and practices of the institution may be required to improve the attainment and the retention of some groups of students. These seemingly well-meaning measures hold the view that some groups of students lack the ability to thrive in the environs of HE and so should be supported. Although these researchers (Lea 2004, Lea and Street 1998) believe that academia should be accepting of all sections of society, and that special provisions should be made for students who are new to HE, they still tend to retain a deficit view of the students they believe need help.

These commentators, while not stating outright that non-traditional students have lower academic ability, nevertheless express concern about the lower attainment of these students admitted to HE through widening participation policies. Here it is relevant to mention the work of Simpson and Cooke (2009), who express sympathy for students who do not have British English as a first language, and suggest that these non-traditional students need help with language and academic literacies. However, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) correctly noted, academic language (and in particular academic writing) is not any student's first language. These are acquired competences and are not innate capabilities.

A critical point that is missing from comments about academic ability is the role of the environment on the experiences of students. Another group of researchers offer suggestions as to how academic institutions could try to address the concerns about the academic performance and experiences of non-traditional and ethnic minority students. These call for a re-examination of the pedagogical processes of HE institutions (Murphy 2009, Burke and Hayton 2011) and for creating a supportive academic environment to ensure student integration (Buckmiller 2010). What distinguishes Kanno and Varghese (2010) from the earlier mentioned studies is their insistence that limited proficiency in English is not the only obstacle, or even the most crucial one. They propose structural and institutional changes which could create an amiable atmosphere for such students. Clearly then, it would be necessary for institutions and their faculty to understand and recognise the needs, knowledge and culture of their varied mix of students.

However, some studies have revealed the heterogeneity of non-traditional students. In a study of non-traditional students – working class, mature and ethnic minority – Baker and Brown (2007, p.389) report that they were not intimidated by studying in a traditional university because they were academically able, while Reay et al (2009, p.1115) find that “they had a greater sense of fitting in as learners in elite HE than they had at school surrounded by ‘people like them’.” These findings indicate that widening participation may have worked for some students, but Liz Thomas (2001) argues that widening participation should improve the chances of all students, not just of the gifted and talented ones.

It is heartening that several researchers have successfully refuted this deficit view, laying the blame for poor performance at the door of the attitude of the teaching staff, the academic and social environment, the content of education and its purpose as the following section reveals.

### *2.3.7 Counter views*

A number of points can be made with the support of research findings about the obsession with the attainment gap in HE. Studies by Hoare and Johnston (2011), rebuff the elitism of the claims about the lower academic achievement of some students. They find, on the contrary, that students from state schools perform better at university than students from elite schools. However, even if one accepts that students from non-traditional backgrounds have lower attainment, one still has to reckon with the critique of Gillborn and Mirza (2000, p.7), who pointedly remark that differences in average achievement between social groups raise cause for concern but do not, in themselves, prove anything about the potential of those groups. In emphasizing the distinction between achievement and potential, Gillborn and Mirza (*ibid*) argue that what is measured is not the unrealised potential of the students but their attainment under difficult circumstances and in a possibly discriminatory environment. The significance of this insight is that it shifts the focus on to the failure of institutions to help students realise their potential, or in fact the obstacles that come in the way of students achieving their potential and which institutions fail to remove.

Indeed research presented at the SRHE (Society for Research into HE) by John Richardson (2015) found that ethnic minority students performed less well than their White peers although both groups had entered university with similar A level grades. This suggests that the educational experience of different groups of students at university varies; this variation in turn may be responsible for differences in academic performance. Although Richardson does not categorically address the reasons for the inability of some groups of students to perform as per their potential, his findings suggest that the focus should be on investigating the reasons for these different experiences which cause some students to perform below their potential. A similar line of inquiry is offered by Theiele et



al (2016), who prioritise contextual data, that is, while considering academic attainment one should bear in mind the circumstances surrounding the students' experiences at and prior to university. This amounts to saying that the achievement of non-traditional students should be understood along with an understanding of the circumstances, the teaching and learning environment. The point about contextual data has been made with reference to admission – that is, to consider the entry scores of students bearing in mind the scores of the rest of the school and the circumstances in which those scores were attained.

Another challenge to views that the better-off sections of society are more intelligent than others, because they might perform better at university, comes from Weisskopf (2004). Alluding to the possible reasons for the difference in attainment among students, he suggests that it could be the poorer access to good educational resources earlier in life and the many hurdles some students encounter during their journey through HE that hampers their performance. These hurdles are mainly non-academic, one of which is the lack of encouragement and even disdain of the teachers who may be from different social, ethnic groups than the students. Weisskopf informs us that despite these harsh conditions, there is evidence that with improvements in the learning environment students admitted to elite institutions through preferential admission policies have been performing better academically. As such, he counters the opposition to what he calls positive discrimination, based on his review of empirical studies evaluating the effects of affirmative action policies in admission to HE institutions in the US. He concludes that affirmative action had succeeded in highly selective institutions that focus on qualitative measures rather than on meeting targets (Weisskopf 2001). This is salient to exploring the policies and practices of HE in the UK, which aim to address low attainment and retention.

Several researchers have investigated the experiences of those non-traditional students who make it to elite and other HE institutions, and have highlighted the difficulties these students encounter. Yun and Moreno (2006) note that schooling disadvantage, in terms of poor preparation for university, could affect access and participation in college. Similarly, Kanno and Varghese (2010) state that students who lack linguistic and cultural capital crucial to educational success hesitate to speak up because they internalise their inferiority. Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2007, p.41) perceptively observe that “confidence associated with language fluency potentially has a major impact on the establishment of relationships with peers” and they add that 70 per cent of international students in their study had no British friends. Hoare and Johnston's (2011) research focuses on the educational performance of diverse groups. They find that students from non-white and working-class backgrounds studying in an elite university are not able to realise their potential. These findings are supported by studies conducted in the US (Castenell 1998

and Valverde 1998), which reveal that African-American students studying in historically Black universities perform better than those studying in predominantly White universities.

Another dimension to the issue of attainment and ability of minority ethnic HE students is the issue of retention. Some studies attribute the non-completion of these students to their inability to cope with the academic standards, others (Connors, Tyers and Modood 2004) demand further investigations into the reasons why these students are likely to discontinue, they hint at the difficulties these students encounter and how the poor racial awareness of staff affects “TSE” and retention of these students. Thus although the HE participation rate of ethnic minority students is higher than for white students, problems with persistence persist and these students tend to be over-represented amongst the students withdrawing from education. Research studies by Thomas (2002); Taylor (2000); Stuart (2000); and others have called for further exploration of factors in retention, which could be social as well as academic. The former could be an emphasis on the social nature of education and the latter could relate to the importance of a critical perspective in education. The next section expands upon the significance of the latter in forming the conceptual construct of education.

### *2.3.8 Content of education – critical and relevant*

An important element of my construct of education is its critical component. The central tenet of this conception is that education has the potential to develop students’ thoughts and ideas, to get them to interrogate normative trends and values, and to re-examine their own perceptions and beliefs. I argue that an education that does not allow students to grapple with their own thoughts and with prevailing ideas in society is deficient, a view informed by Gramsci’s caustic comments about a watered-down education that was offered to non-traditional students at the Popular Universities in Italy (2000). Critiquing these institutions for assuming that their students would be unable to cope, he notes that a schematic exposition of knowledge has little value, while methodical inquiry helps the mind to develop elasticity. He cites his own educational experience to demonstrate that knowledge attained through efforts and struggle to acquire knowledge on the part of the students leads to enriched learning.

Gramsci’s emphasis on the importance of critical education to unleashing the intellectual activity that exists in everyone (1971, p.141), resonates with Ambedkar. In *Thoughts and Philosophy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*, C. D. Naik (2003, p.57) reproduces one of Ambedkar’s speeches where he spelt out the purpose of university education, which was to develop students’ capacities to critically examine established views, and in another speech he forcefully pointed out the failure of the existing Indian education system to engage the critical faculties of the students. In a similar vein, Gramsci wrote that education should be

related to the life of the student (1971 p.181) as that would ensure active participation in school. These are indeed perspicacious ideas, which offer a suggestion for matters of concern to universities in the UK, the attainment and the retention of students who do not feel engaged within the educational environment, perhaps because the purpose of education does not allow for a critical component. This reading of Gramsci and Ambedkar shows up the needless fixation with attainment, ability and retention, which are not the insurmountable and vexatious issues that they are thought to be, but are in fact non-issues in a critically-oriented education system.

The relation between the content of education and the performance of school students from disadvantaged backgrounds has received considerable attention. This substantial body of research and writing (see Cummins 2009; Gee 2004; Lambirth 2006), which successfully tackles the misconceptions about the poor abilities and low attainment of these students, is relevant because of the lessons that can be gleaned for HE. These researchers attribute poor performance of some groups of students to a lack of harmony between the lives of the students and that of the school. Commenting on pedagogic, institutional and curriculum issues, Lambirth (2006) bluntly states that if education is distant from the life of the students, then they find it difficult to relate to it. These researchers firmly point out that educational institutions often fail to acknowledge the potential of all students, and only validate the knowledge of some students, those whose background is aligned with that of the institute.

The findings of research done in schools by Lambirth and others bears out Gramsci's (2000, p.313) advice that a teacher must be aware of the culture that he or she represents as well as that of the students. Gramsci emphasises that the knowledge and culture which all students bring to the classroom should be appreciated, as education is not a top-down didactic relationship but a two-way edifying process; he insightfully notes that (*ibid*, p.666) – the relationship between teachers and pupils is active and reciprocal, so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher. Gramsci's awareness of the reciprocity of teacher-student relationships, and the attitude of teachers towards students as important to the learning experience of the student, is endorsed by research conducted by Cummins (2009); Labov (1972); Gee (2004); Grainger (2013); Grainger and Jones (2013); Jones (2013); Snell (2013); Spencer et al (2013). They confidently assert that there is no deficiency in the linguistic, social and cognitive abilities of children of different social groups, only a lack of recognition by the school or the educational institution of the knowledge and abilities of children from some social groups.

An analogous situation can be said to exist in HE. Evidence unearthed by research studies in the US (Engle and Tinto 2008) exposes the reluctance of HEIs to transform their culture

and environment. This reluctance could be because the content and knowledge that have traction in HE are allied to the purpose of education in general and HE in particular. Researchers on education in capitalist societies (Allman et al 2005; Canaan 2013; McLaren and Farahmandpur 2000; Rikowski and McLaren 2009) therefore stress the importance of education in enabling students to strive for social change through understanding how education is implicated in perpetuating social divisions in society. Education as a critical force for change may be what these analysts had in mind, but it is time to see how the higher education policies conceive of education.

### *2.3.9 Policy focus on the content of education*

Whilst the issue of the content of education was a matter of concern for the *Browne Review*, it was also perturbed that the skills imparted through HE did not match the needs of industry (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010, p.23). The report claimed that it had obtained evidence from business leaders who thought that many of the graduates emerging with HE qualifications lacked the skills required to function in the corporate world. It therefore suggested that “there needs to be a closer fit between what is taught in universities and the skills needed in the economy” (*ibid*). This is tantamount to the report openly advocating that HE should prepare graduates to serve the needs of the economy. Closely related to the concern about the skills component of HE was another matter of concern for the *Browne Review committee*, which, in the same vein as earlier reports, feared that the country was lagging behind other countries in terms of the participation of its population in HE and in terms of investment in the sector (*ibid*, p.4).

While the first of the committee’s concerns about the poor representation of certain groups in elite HEIs appears to bear the characteristics of a social justice issue, the latter two signal the committee’s interest in strengthening the links between HE and the business world. A reference to the role of HE in instilling values of civil society (*ibid*, p.14), can be detected amidst the overriding emphasis on aligning HE to the needs of industry. The committee seemed convinced that a synergy between HE and industry together with greater investment in HE will enable the country to have a competitive advantage over other economies in a globalised world (p.2). An institution’s success in employability could be “a key selling point” in attracting more students than other institutions (p.31), it noted, thus advising institutions about marketing strategies that they should implement.

The undiluted concern for the content of HE is also unmistakably clear in the 1997 *Dearing Report*. Notwithstanding the precarious funding situation of HE, the report strongly advised the government to continue funding to support human capital projects which enable HE to be responsive to the needs of industry and commerce (Chapter12). In other words, funding to the sector would be cut except in areas which could develop the potential of the students

to serve the needs of industry. The intention for HE to thrive in a global economy probably led the committee to suggest ways to strengthen the links between HE and industry. It advised HEIs to tailor their academic programmes to help students become familiar with the world of work (Chapter 9). While the main thrust of the report was on the link between HE and the world of work, it did devote some space to urging that HE in the UK “should sustain a culture which demands disciplined thinking, encourages curiosity, challenges existing ideas and generates new ones; be part of the conscience of a democratic society, founded on respect for the rights of the individual and the responsibilities of the individual to society as a whole” (p.8). Here again one can detect an unmistakably individualistic tone permeating the text.

In the course of its deliberations the *Robbins Review* committee posed a question about the social purposes that could be served by HE. In answering this question, the report unabashedly declared that there was nothing dishonourable in stating that education has a role to play in imparting skills to maintain the division of labour and to ensure the country’s economic progress and competitiveness on the world stage (pp.5-6). This understanding of the role of HE guided the committee in its review of, and recommendations for, the HE sector. It went on to state that even without the drive to compete with other countries, it would still be necessary to ensure that the citizens acquire higher standards of education to improve the country’s economic and cultural wealth. It likened HE to the training of manpower that would be productive, and seemed convinced that its expansionary plans would transform the stock of working men and women (p.70). However, the committee’s firm assurance that HE confers necessary work skills (p.73) was tempered by the report’s contention that it did not endorse courses that failed to engage the critical and creative potential of the human brain, such as those which only imparted factual knowledge and skills (p.95). In a continuation of this line of thinking, the report pointed out that universities are not only for imparting skills and instruction but that they are communities, and suggested that academic as well as informal interaction between members should be encouraged (p.194). The significance of this suggestion lies in the present moves to widen participation and the challenge for institutions to promote intercultural interaction among the different groups represented within HE, an issue that will be tackled in more detail in the analysis of data.

It may thus be said that the overriding practical, economic focus notwithstanding, the report, also appeared to have a broader conception of education. Another instance of this outlook is that the report seemed to be convinced of education’s role in promoting values of democracy and citizenship (pp.6-7), which it believed were necessary for a healthy society. Its idea of a good society was one that provided equality of opportunity for its

citizens to become not merely good producers but also good men and women (point 33). The report seemed to be sending out a message that HE had responsibilities that went beyond serving the economy. It is easy to be deceived by the reference to democratic values and citizenship if one does not critically assess these concepts and what they represent. Citizenship education, according to Gillborn (2006, pp.9-10), can be a meaningless exercise that does not engage social and economic conditions, or as Levidow (2005, p.160) argues, it can be a way “to discipline labour for capital”. From the preceding discussion I conclude that the critical component of education is closely related to the purpose of education, that is, it enables us to think about the role of education / higher education in society.

### *2.3.10 Purpose of education*

The role of education, or the purpose it is thought to serve, varies according to time, place and political orientation. If the purpose of education is seen to be to train students for work, to equip them with the skills for the economy, then the content will have little to do with nourishing their critical sensibilities. However, my understanding of the purpose of education is tied to my firm conviction that as social beings we all have social responsibilities. And the task of helping people realise their responsibilities falls equally on the broad shoulders of education as it does on other social institutions. In fulfilling this obligation, education in any discipline would have to design its content to raise students' awareness of the world and of their place in it. Gramsci (2000, p.321) was at pains to note that education should not stifle a person's creativity and awareness of the world, but should help students to develop a conception of the world and encourage the development to new ways of thinking about the world. A not dissimilar view was put forth by Ambedkar who stated that “education should be society-oriented (and) scientific”. In his view, the aim of education is to develop students' capacities “to critically examine the words of established powers”. He adds that the purpose of education is to enable students to investigate concepts and issues and to develop a thirst for understanding the world (Ambedkar 1924, in Naik 2003, p.54).

It is disheartening to find that understandings of the purpose of education, that drive policies and practices in UK HE, have a weak connection to instilling a sense of social responsibility. The warrant for the claim that there have been half-hearted attempts to have a social agenda in education comes from the various policies promulgated since the *Robbins Report*. Through detailed scrutiny of the *Robbins Report* (1963), the *Education Act* (1983), the *Dearing Report* (1997), the *White Paper* (Department for Education and Skills 2003), and the *Browne Review* (2010), I find that, across the years, education was

seen as important for its contribution to the economy and it was deemed necessary that education should serve the needs of industry.

*Pace* the policies on HE and their fixation with work skills, some commentators on HE such as Frank Furedi, David Palfreyman among others are concerned with the critical role of HE. The latter, in Palfreyman (2006), while commenting on the issues raised at a conference on HE, vehemently disapproved of the absence of reference to HE's role in spreading knowledge. He was troubled that the discussion did not mention that one of the main roles of HE is to equip students with the ability to speak the truth to power. Furedi (2011) too noticed that the HE sector as a whole does not seem concerned with developing the critical potential of students. He strongly critiqued the tendency to treat students as consumers that accompanies the marketisation of HE. In line with Gramsci's suggested outline of the fundamentals of education, Furedi forcefully argues that students should be challenged to experience the intensity of problem solving and should not be given readymade nuggets of information. He suggests that the intellectual development of students might be compromised if they are encouraged to consider themselves as customers.

HE's seeming submission to the marketisation process has been condemned widely, with many seeing an alignment of marketisation with the purpose of education and its academic content. The purpose of education seems to be encapsulated in the phrase "TSE": Collini (2011) argues that "TSE" is a marketing strategy that promotes an individualistic orientation to HE. And Sabri (2011), in a study examining the conceptualisation of "TSE" in policy documents, points out the limitations of the concept and the reasons for its ascendance. In her view, it homogenises the student body and denies students agency. She also identifies its associations with approaches to learning suggested by experts such as Paul Ramsden (2008). Such approaches can be critiqued for the political and social vacuum with which they seem to view HE, and students' experience in HE. Further, Sabri's (2011) paper rightly identifies the totemic nature of the concept as part of a set piece of the commodification of HE, and its consumer-oriented understanding of students. It however neglects to extend this critique to the capitalist society within which HE operates. Since "TSE" is often associated with student satisfaction, Ainley (2008) critically surveys the different ways in which "TSE" has been studied, and proposes that the focus should be on what students learn, rather than on the teaching they receive and their satisfaction with it, which studies such as Bekhradnia, Whitnall and Sastry (2006) have conducted. He further questions whether there can be a unified student experience for a diverse student body.

A study by Temple, Callender, Grove, and Kersh (Temple et al 2014) explores how “TSE” is managed and how this is changing as a result of competition among HEIs for students. Their contention is that the increasing focus by institutions on “TSE” may be explained by the competitive pressures of raising their own resources. They also argue that institutional culture and organisational priorities are changing, with more emphasis on marketing and customer care, than to teaching and learning. However, a point to note is that this is not a new process, but a continuation, and intensification, of a project that was deemed important as far back as the *Robbins Report*, which emphasized the need to compete with other countries for the international student market (1963, pp.70–74). Furthermore, marketisation is not just a factor of HE but of society and the economy too, so it is important to address the social forces underlying the changes to HE and its language. This task requires me to move on to explain the construct of critical exploration.

#### **2.4. Critical exploration**

Given the polysemy of the term ‘critical’, its various interpretations by theorists, and the rival claims by researchers to the label ‘critical’, I am compelled to expand on the import of the construct of critical exploration to my thesis. The term ‘critical exploration’ is not a mere appellation describing the nature of my research, instead it forms the sinews of this research into the language around “TSE” of HE. The construct has epistemological and methodological significance as it channels the focus, the approach and the direction of my research. However, in this section I confine the discussion mainly to the epistemological substance; that is to explain the role of this construct in illuminating the path for the researcher to understand the subject matter. I deal with the methodological aspect in the next chapter, where I describe how I utilise a critical approach.

My understanding of critical exploration or critique entails getting to grips with the underlying and the interconnected factors impinging on the topic of inquiry. Seen in this way, critical exploration is an attempt to examine the context within which the phenomenon of language and education are located. As such it leans on the writings of Marx and Engels, whose colossal body of work has painstakingly grappled with many topics, including recurrent references to making sense of society, to understanding the way it is organised, and to uncovering the ideas and interests represented. As Marx states in *Capital* (1995 [1867], p.11), critical inquiry has to appropriate the material in detail, analyse the different forms of development and trace out their inner connection. The work of Marx and Engels has consistently subjected the “categories of political economy to criticism not by formally comparing them with some object lying outside them but by drawing out the contradictions in these concepts” (Pilling 1980). Their process of inquiry involved intensive investigation of the inner workings of society. This form of critique tries to understand society and its



organisation prior to understanding any social phenomenon, in this case the language around “TSE” of HE.

A core message that contributes both methodologically and epistemologically to my construct of critical exploration is found in their collaborative work, *The German Ideology*.

We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-processes we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premisses (1965a and 1970, p.47).

Through their appraisal of the ideas put forward by the German ideologists, Marx and Engels offer “a critique of a method or practice of reasoning and inquiry” (Smith 2004, p.452). This critique suggests a starting point for the focus of investigation and provides the key to knowledge and understanding of HE and the language of the sector. The ideas expressed in their text posit that inquiry into human society should begin with concrete reality. In other words, a foundational premise of their work, which has relevance to my study, is that “an understanding of the world has to start not from the ideas which exist in people's heads in any particular historical period, but from the real, material conditions in which these ideas arise” (Clapp, n.d). Thus drawing on the writings of Marx and Engels helps in developing an understanding of HE, and the language around “TSE”, as processes of human society rather than as abstract, static or isolated phenomena.

A rationale for Marx and Engels' method of analysis is given in *A contribution to a critique of political economy*, where Marx reiterates the guiding principle that they adopted in their studies into human society:

[m]y inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life. (Marx 1857 in McLellan 1977, p.389).

This principle goes along with Marx's belief that “what human beings are depends on the material conditions of their production” (Marx 2008 [1847], pp.36-37). The notable point is that because human thoughts, words and deeds have their origins in the social and material spheres of life, the way to understand ideas, concepts and the social relations of society is through exploring the organic movement that give rise to these.

Marx and Engels' systematic study of society had a focus on the existing situation, but it was not dismissive of history. Marx, in his vehement critique of Proudhon, asserted that “ideas, categories, are as little eternal as the relations they express. They are historical

and transitory products” (2008[1847], p.122). And in agreement with Marx’s assertion, Engels, in *Socialism: scientific and utopian*, pointed out:

the whole world, natural, historical, intellectual, is represented as a process – i.e., as in constant motion, change, transformation, development; and the attempt is made to trace out the internal connection that makes a continuous whole of all this movement and development (1908, p. 84)

Their method of examining “things not as static entities but in their development, movement and life” enabled a description of the character of capitalist society, which was “situated in a general schema of history” (Bidet 2008, p.17). In fact, what they did, according to Perry Anderson, was to provide “a set of analytical instruments to be able to integrate successive epochs of historical evolution and their characteristic socio-economic structures into an intelligible narrative” (1983, p.86).

Marx and Engels’ method of analysing society, as well as their insights into society, drew many followers, and many critics too. Among the former was Gramsci, who had pages devoted to Marx and Engels in his notebooks, wherein he lavishes the following praise:

With Marx, history continues to be the domain of ideas, of spirit, of the conscious activity of single or associated individuals. But ideas, spirit, take on substance, lose their arbitrariness, they are no longer fictitious religious or sociological abstractions. Their substance is in the economy, in practical activity, in the systems and relations of production and exchange (1971, p.38).

In these notes Gramsci makes clear that his praise is for their method of examining society, and the ideas therein, especially in reference to their social and material conditions. He demonstrates his allegiance to their materialist theory of social change, which accords “explanatory primacy to the structural contradictions which develop between the forces and relations of production” (Callinicos 1990, p.36). Herein lies the fundamental difference between the method of historical analysis derived from the writings of Marx and Engels and other methods of analyses: the focus on capitalist social relations which is missing in some research and analysis that adopt the critical label. It is this absence that led Palmer to deride these methods for their reliance on “the new-found explanatory power of language, discourse, subjectivity, and identity, little of which is acknowledged to be embedded in material relations” (1993, p.85). Also salient to my form of analysis is Woods’ (2013) interpretation of the ideas of Marx and Engels; he highlights a major weakness of post-modern interpretations of history, which offer “disconnected narratives with no organic connection” in comparison with Marxism which “analyses the hidden mainsprings that lie behind the development of human society”. Woods probably draws his analysis from the neat explanation in the Preface to *Capital*, which states that the ultimate aim is to

lay bare the laws of motion of society (Marx 1867 in McLellan 1995, p.5). The point is that, to understand how society functions one has to get to grips with how the economy operates.

The ideas and the analyses put forward by Marx and Engels tend to be critiqued as deterministic (Ferguson 2001). It is beyond the purview of this discussion of the construct of critical exploration to placate those who misconstrue the ideas propounded by Marx and Engels, however, a crucial point that needs to be made is that their observations do not purport to predict the future of society, a point which Engels (1883 and 1908, p.91) clarifies:

Its task was no longer to manufacture a system of society as perfect as possible, but to examine the historico-economic succession of events

This statement offers clarity about both their analytical focus and the tenacity required of an analyst. It has been noted that their efforts were to seek to know the world and to critique it (McGuire 2008). Equally significant is that there are no *a priori* assumptions, or pre-determined goals to this inquiry. Marx and Engels present a non-teleological reasoning as illustrated by Marx's gleeful comment on Darwin's discoveries:

[d]espite all deficiencies, not only is the death-blow dealt here for the first time to 'teleology' in the natural sciences but its rational meaning is empirically explained. (Marx 1965b, p.123)

Similar to Darwin's approach to explaining evolutionary processes in the natural world, their attempt was to understand the historical development of human society. The lesson to take from this is that research may be undertaken to investigate how things are and how they have evolved but this process does not have to lead to fixed outcomes. It is this error in the interpretation of Marx and Engels' work that Sayers (2015) tries to set right. Through a detailed analysis of Marx and Engels' writings he concludes that their description of communist society "should not be interpreted as expressing a teleological thought" (p.16) since what they present is just "the beginning of a new era which will be made possible" (*ibid*).

In the early phase of his research and writing career Marx, in a letter to Arnold Ruge in 1843, succinctly declares the importance of proceeding with an analysis of circumstances even though the findings unearthed may seem unpalatable or may cause discomfort to our beliefs:

[i]f we have no business with the construction of the future or with organising it for all time, there can still be no doubt about the task confronting us at present: the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be (Marx 1978, pp. 12 - 15).

He later adds that their credo is

the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age (*ibid*)

Marx's letter makes the objective of their endeavour explicit: to generate knowledge and understanding primarily for themselves, in advance of engaging others in discussing their discoveries, which relate to an understanding of the working of society, and of the inherent tensions in processes and undercurrents.

Clearly then, the method of inquiry that Marx and Engels developed to understand society was permeated by major strands: tracing historical developments in a non-teleological way; locating ideas and phenomena to the material conditions and the social relations that existed; and raising consciousness of the way things were through a rigorous critique. It is fair to say that "Marx and Engels produced sustained analyses of capitalism's historical development as well as materialist explorations of major political events and polemics on tactics and strategic direction" (Palmer 1993, p.77). Interpreting their philosophical output as a suggestion to probe beneath the reigning ideas and concepts of the age or the linguistic expressions, which are but surface manifestations of society, I delved into the analysis of text while being cognisant of the social and material conditions that made the spoken and written texts possible. Although my critical exploration does not claim to have a panoramic view of things, I seem to have acquired a lens to view society. I am also aware that critique has to go beyond accusing the HE system of being unequal and unfair to considering strategies to challenge and transform education and society (Fischman 2009, p.7). Having attempted to lay out the terms through which I sought to understand one of its constituent elements - HE and the language of HE - the next chapter addresses how I utilised these constructs as a method of inquiry before demonstrating their effectiveness in the analysis of the data – the language around "TSE" of HE.

## **2.5. Concluding comments**

In this chapter I have explained the composite structure which forms the theoretical framework of this study. I have also indicated how I intend to draw upon three constructs to understand what the language around "TSE" of HE reveals and conceals about HE and society. These constructs collectively contribute to the research and analysis of the language of HE. However, each construct also has its own individual role.

The construct of language informs the methodological frame of this study. Hence I have tried to spell out the significance of the central unit of language - the utterance – which articulates a speaker's social position and worldview. In drawing out the socio-ideological nature of language, I first establish its social origins through engaging with the work of Marx and Engels. I then explain how Bakhtin and Volosinov unravel the dialogic and ideological aspects of the utterance by building on from this social starting point. Throughout this discussion I refer to how the construct of language with its social, dialogic

and evaluative elements leads the analysis of the language of HE towards the context of the relevant spoken and written texts of the sector.

The construct of education is designed around three fundamental ideas about the ability of all students to pursue HE, its critical content and its purpose. It creates a lens to examine the many issues and concepts jostling for attention in the HE sector. I indicate how the construct draws on the writings of Ambedkar and Gramsci to understand the issues within HE. I have devoted space to the examination of both ability and accessibility as these two concepts are often conflated. And I also discuss how it helps to compare and contrast how these issues are expressed across the three domains of this investigation.

The third construct – critical exploration – complements the other two in guiding the approach to analysis and in defining the scope of the analytic focus. In tandem with the construct of language it guides the researcher to acknowledge social reality and the social relations therein before attempting to make sense of the language of HE. I explain how the method of critique is guided by the writings of Marx and Engels, and in the next chapter I flesh out the methodological interpretation of the construct of critical exploration.

### **3. Engaging with methodological and procedural issues**

#### **3.1. Introductory remarks**

My investigation into the conceptualisation of “TSE” across three areas of HE aims to understand what the language of HE reveals and conceals about the sector, and about the social and economic situation within which it functions. In pursuit of these goals, I needed a carefully crafted research methodology and design that would help in exploring the multiple dimensions of “TSE” as understood by different participants in a complex and changing sector such as HE. The participants I refer to are those involved in HE as students at a university in the South-east of England, this institution of HE, and the policy makers.

My foray into researching the language of HE developed from the theoretical architecture of this study, crucial elements of which are the constructs of education, language and critical exploration. In this chapter I focus on the methodological aspect of the latter two constructs since the construct of education has mainly content value. In simple terms, this “specification of methodology means to go beyond describing what and how data were collected and analysed” (Casanave and Li 2015, p.113) to explaining the principles underlying the inquiry process (Wolcott 2002, p.93). I decided to locate this investigation within a critical qualitative research paradigm, as this approach would help me to understand HE and its language in context. Moreover, this approach can be reconciled with my reasoning that HE should not be considered as an atomistic unit, but as embedded in society. A natural corollary to this reasoning is that I see the language of HE as a product of evolving socio-economic and political processes. These ontological and epistemological principles guided the methodological approach to this critical exploration which in turn determines the deployment of selected research methods. The core elements of critical qualitative research and the way I incorporated a critical approach to my research and analysis will be made clear in the following pages, wherein I also spell out the details of the research strategies adopted, the techniques used and the challenges encountered.

#### **3.2. The critical approach / critical exploration as methodological orientation**

Critical research can be understood as research which explores historical and structural forces while trying to critique social processes. This understanding encapsulates the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of critical approaches to research. These dimensions relate to what constitutes the research arena, how this topic can be explored, and the role of the researcher in the research process.

The ontological underpinning of this research is that there is a reality out there but our interpretation of it depends on our social position. This perspective requires the researcher to be reflexive and critically reflective throughout the process of inquiry. Whilst this

approach to inquiry may be common amongst researchers engaged in critical qualitative studies, the epistemological foundation of my research differs in some way from these studies and from critical discourse analysis. The pivotal point of my study is that to understand people, their thoughts and ideas, we have understand material conditions through history. As Block (2018, p.3) categorically comments, if one chooses to understand social phenomena then one has to pay attention to the underlying issues. Extending his point that inequality is not caused by discourse (*ibid*), and similar points made years earlier by Holborow (1999) and Jones (2004), we can say that commodification of HE or the intrusion of marketisation is not a result of discourse, but of economic forces and the social relations that arise. As I continued to experience much hand-wringing in defining and articulating the position of this research, I looked up Lee Harvey's explanation of what distinguishes critical from interpretive approaches, both of which are concerned with social meanings. In Harvey's view, the latter focuses on local scale interactions whereas the former engages in analysis of social processes to reveal underlying practices and their historical specificity (1990, p.1). Other distinctions that I relied on are those made by Crotty (1998, p.112), who describes interpretivism as an uncritical form of study, and by Travers (2001, p.115), who claims that the interpretive approach is concerned with surface features of society and does not engage with political or moral issues the way critical research does. Although I would insist that my research has a critical orientation, it seems to conform to Reid's (2014) depiction of interpretive methodologies which "position the meaning-making practices of human actors at the centre." However, a fundamental distinction is that I view the meaning-making practices as bearing the inflections of our social worldviews, which are formed in given social and material conditions.

This critical research relates what is happening on the ground - the constructions of "TSE" by the students, the institution and the government - to wider social structures (Duff 2008, p.124 and Carspecken 2013, p.35), as this will enhance understanding of the situation being studied (Casanave 2010, p.67). In aligning this research with these insights, I would say that the aim is to portray social reality and critically examine it within social and political contexts (Goodman 1998, p.55, Cohen et al 2003, p.28). Here I am inclined to agree with the guidelines of TESOL (Starfield 2016, p.51) and Hammersley's claim that critical research locates the phenomena studied in their wider socio-historical context (Hammersley 1995, p.39). However, my understanding of critical runs counter to Hammersley's later understanding of critical research as evaluating "current social arrangements according to certain value principles such as equality or social justice" (2000, p.134). His focus on values seems to echo the words of Thomas (1993, p.47), who

elucidates the difference between critical and conventional qualitative research by stating that the former “directs our attention to things that are not right in our culture”, while the latter describes it. Here I should state that critical research is an orientation rather than a tight methodological school (Carspecken 2013, p.3). Thus although I align myself with the critical tradition, I make a distinction between the methodological aspect of my chosen research approach and the explanations offered by Hammersely (1995), and Thomas (1993). To be more precise, I think it is meaningless to critique any social phenomenon, be it religion or education, against certain established norms without an understanding of the socio-economic and political conditions which create the grounds for the manifestation of an issue. This train of thought derived inspiration from Marx’s (1844 in McLellan 1977) critique of the Young Hegelians for criticising religion without reference to the social conditions within which religion developed.

Through my research I am interested in gaining insights into forces that appear to be playing out within the arena of HE in England, so the focus is not on an idealised image, but on what emerges through a probing inquiry. In this way I hope to bring to the fore the social and economic relations in society and in HE, as I believe that only through understanding these can the changes in HE and in the language of the field become clear. As Becker (1981) explains, qualitative researchers try to describe a system of relationships to show the interconnections between things. However, I am mindful of the criticism that critical research invites for assuming that the analyst has a superior insight to that of ordinary members of society (Travers 2001, p.114). Hence I intend to heed the advice of Kincheloe and McLaren (2008, p.406) that researchers in the critical tradition “try to become aware of the ideological imperatives that inform their research as well as their own subjective, intersubjective and normative reference claims.” Kanpol (1998 and 1999, p.3), also reminds us that it is inevitable that researchers’ subjectivity may intrude into the analysis and the findings, since researchers are socially situated beings whose biographies and subjectivities surface in each phase of the research process (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton and Richardson 1992, p.5).

A different interpretation of critical research and researcher neutrality is found in the work of Carspecken, who suggests that a researcher’s value orientation should not determine the research findings (1996, p.3). Similarly, Anderson (1998) cautions that researchers should maintain an objective stance while researching an area towards which they have an affinity. However, a significant counterpoint is made by Talmy (2015), who, dealing specifically with critical research in applied linguistics, points out that critical researchers do not believe that research can be value-free. This point is forcefully endorsed by Mautner’s view that (2010, p.162) “the idea of entirely neutral and objective research is



essentially utopian”, and she suggests that a more realistic approach to bias places an additional burden on researchers to expose their methods to scrutiny (p.163). In alignment with Mautner’s exhortation, I present, in this study, the processes and procedures that I followed and the thinking that underpinned these decisions. I also attach a worked-on transcript and field notes in the appendices.

An additional piece of advice for critical researchers is that they should be reflexive or self-critical. This instruction comes from Schwandt (2001) and Roulston (2001), who urge researchers to be aware of the role the researcher plays in the research process – in data generating, analysis and findings. Similarly, Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.97) advise that analysts acknowledge when their own or their respondents’ biases intrude into the analysis. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) give an expanded and reflective account of reflexivity in research and in data analysis. They emphasise the importance of recognising the subjectivities of researchers and participants in a research and the theoretical and epistemological influences, and they recommend that researchers take account of the range of influences shaping their research (p.425). In agreement with these writers I would say that I have to be vigilant and reflexive while interpreting my data and the analysis which comes about through my developing biography and my engagement with critical reading and thinking.

Thus equipped with guidance on methodology, and about the approach and rigour essential to a critical research process, I would like to embark on an explanation of the data generating procedures. But before that I think it is important to spend some time discussing critical research on language and critical research on the language of HE to understand how the theoretical concepts of language and critical exploration steer the research project. This discussion will also clarify the point of departure from prevalent methods of investigating language.

### **3.3. Critical research on language**

The qualifier ‘critical’ has branched out in numerous directions; of these offshoots, the ones most relevant to this research are critical studies involving some form of linguistic or discourse analysis and research. Some of these are critical linguistics (Fowler 1996; Kress 2011; van Leeuwen 1996); critical discourse analysis (Blommaert 2001 and 2005; Fariclough 1989, 1992, 1993, 2007 and 2012; van Dijk 1995a, 1995b, 2001, 2001, 2003 and 2010; Wodak 2001; and Wodak and Weiss 2003); poststructuralist discourse theorists (Angermuller 2018, Foucault 1980; Herzog 2016; Howarth 2010; Laclau and Mouffe 1985); critical political analysis (Chilton and Schäffner 2002 and 2011), critical policy analysis (Taylor 2004) corpus linguistics (Baker et al 2008; McEneaney and Wilson 1996; McEneaney and Hardie 2012), and approaches that combine two or more of these ways of investigating

language (see MacDonald and Hunter 2010, 2013a, Mautner 2010, Mulderrig 2011a, 2011b). These different approaches to analysing linguistic form and content are interesting and offer valuable insights into language and society, but the constraints of space and scope do not allow for detailed discussion of these. Instead, I present a brief overview of these for the specific purpose of explaining my decision to adopt a different approach to researching the language of HE. The difference between my methodology and the discourse approaches lies in our distinctly divergent epistemological foundations. Put simply, the investigative aims of, and the processes followed by, some of these approaches from the family of critical research are incompatible with the theoretical framework of this research, which was laid out in Chapter Two and which I will revisit towards the end of this section. Let us now examine the main issues and claims that the various forms of critical research share.

### 3.3.1 *Critical discourse analysis*

A form of research and analysis that has gained prominence and popularity over the years is critical discourse analysis. It has its origins in critical linguistics (Chilton and Schaffner 2011, p.303), which, according to its founders, is a form of linguistic analysis

which is aware of the assumptions on which it is based and prepared to reflect critically about the underlying causes of the phenomena it studies, and the nature of the society whose language it is (Fowler 1996, p.186).

This quote seems to lay heavy emphasis on exposing how “social structures impregnate language with social meanings” (*ibid*, p.192). To achieve these goals, critical linguists use linguistic analysis to identify how misrepresentation or discrimination operate through language (Chilton and Schaffner 2011, p.309). However, they also believe that this could be both an analytic and a pedagogic tool; according to Fowler, the aim of critical linguistics is to equip readers with the tools to demystify ideology-laden texts (1996). The ultimate aim however is to use linguistic tools and concepts to analyse social phenomena and bring about social transformation. In the words of its practitioners, in making ethical judgements about social processes (Chilton and Schaffner 2011, p.303) the critical approach sees language analysis as an instrument of social change (Fowler, 1996, p.309).

Emboldened by their crusading zeal, some of these analysts, for instance Fowler (1996), criticise sociolinguists for being ideologically conservative in merely describing linguistic variation in society without evaluating the phenomenon being described (*ibid*, p.192). Mere description without a critique of the system in their view, and one which I share, normalises unequal processes (*ibid*, p.194). Conversely, critical linguists analyse linguistic structures to recover the social meanings expressed in discourse (*ibid*, p.196) which they maintain is part of the social process.

From this initial agenda, the field developed in the hands of Fairclough who felt the need for an approach that was grounded in a social theory of language (1992, p.1). This need arose because he recognised that critical linguistics and discourse theory “suffer from an imbalance between social and linguistic elements” (*ibid*, p.2). The project of critical discourse analysis (CDA), according to Fairclough, is to give equal importance to social and linguistic aspects because its objective is to analyse change in language to understand social and cultural change (*ibid*, p.8). CDA involves more than exploring a text or talk, which is considered in a limited way as a product (*ibid*). Instead, CDA is interested in discourse, which is the process of text production and reception, its discursive practices and the social practices which give rise to it. This approach involves looking at a text to see how the message is framed and the perspective that it offers. Working independently of him, although some worked collaboratively, other kindred minds also began to frame their research as CDA.

The leading figures in the field have repeatedly stressed that there is no standard set of methods to critically analyse discourse nor “a unitary theoretical framework” (van Dijk 2001, p.353). In the words of Fairclough (1992, p.225) there is “no blueprint or set procedure for conducting a discourse analysis, the nature of the research project and the analyst’s views of discourse determine the way of doing discourse analysis.” Weiss and Wodak (2003, p.7), also claim that CDA is a theoretical synthesis of conceptual tools, and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), advocate theoretical diversity. However, the different methods all share “an explicitly critical approach to text and talk” (van Dijk 1995a, p.17) and a set of perspectives, which maintain that it is the role of the critical discourse analyst to uncover the play of power in language. Accordingly, it is interested in the political undertones of elite discourse. As van Dijk points out,

CDA is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (2001, p.352).

This statement explicitly rejects the idea that research could be a value-free exercise; CDA focuses on the way discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society (*ibid*, p.353). However, despite these shared aims, there are ontological and epistemological differences within the family of critical discourse analysis.

### 3.3.2 Variations of CDA

A significant form of analysis within the critical family is van Leeuwen's (1996) work on the representation of social actors. His work attempts to overcome what he considers to be a flaw of CDA – that it conflates grammatical agency with sociological agency. A linguistic focus on the grammatical role of agent may overlook other ways through which agency may be expressed. To address this problem he proposes the use of sociosemantic categories rather than linguistic ones, for instance he prefers to identify how suppression and backgrounding of people through semantic concepts serve to exclude them and their role in racist discourse. His work analysing texts on immigration contributes to understanding how “representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended” (1996, p.38). By focusing on the use of representational devices in the texts selected for analysis, he demonstrates that attitudes towards immigration are founded on fear and also have the potential to instil fear of immigration (*ibid*, p.32). Since “representations endow social actors with either active or passive roles” (*ibid*, p.43) he holds that the analyst can investigate the choices and the interests underlying the choices. It is undoubtedly a useful exercise to identify the manipulation and distortion that takes place in language, as doing so could draw attention to the way certain ideas are promoted. However, this method does not address how these racist attitudes or concerns about immigration come into existence, or their source in social and material conditions.

The work and writings of van Dijk constitutes a prominent adaptation of CDA. Although affiliated to the basic principles of the paradigm, he makes a distinct mark on the field with his focus on ideological discourse analysis (1995a, 1995b, 2002a, 2006a 2006b). Crucial to van Dijk's work is the distinction between discourse and ideology, a point covered in Chapter One and Chapter Two section 2.2. Despite his dedication to ideological discourse analysis, van Dijk raises a significant point - that the tools of a discourse analyst are not necessary to understand the ideology of a text (1995b, p.143), since a basic understanding of language and society would enable a person to reliably infer its political tones. Hence he stresses the need for analysts to state precisely which expressions they are focusing on and what inferences they derive from these. More significantly, he insists that “ideological differences should be sought in what people say, rather than in how they say it” (2006a, p.734). He also advises that it is important to analyse what is left unsaid in addition to analysing what is said (2002b, p.71). All in all, van Dijk does not merely offer a schematic presentation of CDA, but actually leads the reader into the empirical realm of his approach.

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that the codes and categories of linguistic and grammatical analysis are not the main tools of van Dijk's method of analysis. Instead he proposes a socio-cognitive approach to discourse, which takes into account the environment of a talk or text and the socially shared ideologies of the participants. Although he has been prolific in analysing lexical and syntactic styles of spoken and written texts (2006b), he argues that these are controlled by the social cognition of the authors or speakers. It is this 'context model' which allows language users to adapt their talk to the social environment, contends van Dijk. Accordingly, he insists that it is important to draw upon the ideological background, and to identify the goal of the participants in a communicative situation. For this he has devised an 'ideological square' to explain how self-serving information is highlighted and dispreferred information is backgrounded (1995a, p.32). He adopts this model in his analysis of Tony Blair's speech in the British House of Commons to show how Blair manipulated public opinion and the Members of Parliament to legitimate participation in the Iraq war (2006b, p.160). Notwithstanding van Dijk's findings of power and manipulation in elite discourse, his persistence in exposing racist discourse, and his shunning of autonomous approaches to text and talk, his work still does not delve into the material realm of discourse. It is because social and economic relations of discourse are not attended to that I remain disenchanted with his method of analysis.

Yet another form of CDA that shares many of its theoretical and methodological orientations, is the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). According to one of the main advocates of this form of analysis, Wodak (2001, pp.70-71), DHA entered the fold of discourse studies specifically to "analyse the linguistic manifestations of prejudice in discourse". She adds that analyses of oral and written texts, such as newspapers, radio and television news, interviews and discussions, pertaining to the 1986 Austrian presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim, were compared with information of historical events. Wodak claims that through drawing on historical knowledge, the research was able to prove the distortion of facts and allowed a critical scrutiny of narratives and myths about Austrian history and the links to National Socialism. This is undoubtedly a significant study, which relied on different media genres to expose prejudice, discrimination and even racism, and which explored "the historical dimension of discursive actions" to "understand the diachronic changes taking place in discourses" (p.65).

Offering an explanation of another study, Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p.88) describe how a DHA integrates three aspects in its critique: discourse-immanent critique to identify inconsistencies in texts; socio-diagnostic critique to demystify the manipulation of discourse; and prospective critique to raise awareness of sexist or racist language and to

improve communication. They aver that the weaving of historical and contemporary data sources into their research agenda, to identify which topics dominate and which are pushed into the background in the texts of a Czech politician, reveals the neo-liberal inclinations masked by scientific jargon. Further, Wodak and Reisigl (2001, p.388) list the different linguistic strategies or rhetorical means to qualify or modify a proposition. They seek to convince the reader about the constituting, perpetuating, transforming and destructing functions of discourse. However, their claim that discourse serves to construct race (p.385) may be only partially true, for it is the relations of production and of reproduction of discourse and the people involved in these relations who develop and promote ideas and issues.

Moreover, notwithstanding their claims and the apparent successes of the DHA, questions still remain about the validity of DHA in tackling racism or other forms of prejudice. In fact, its utility in addressing “How do these different forms of racism manifest themselves in discourse?” becomes apparent in their conclusion: that they are left without any comprehensive answers to this and other related questions (Wodak and Reisigl 2001, p.389). Whilst identifying positive self-representation and Othering in the text of Jorg Haider, an Austrian politician, as their study does, is certainly useful, it does not offer a convincing explanation for why racism and racist ideas take root and spread. At this point we can look favourably on Zizek’s (1998 /2004) blunt statement that, instead of trying to counter an ideology we should understand the basis for the ideological claim. Applying and adapting this comment to this context, we can say that instead of merely identifying the linguistic features of racist texts, we should show how ideologies / prejudices have their roots in particular economic and social circumstances, since ideologies are ways to “stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system” (*ibid*, p.723). Linking ideology or social consciousness to the conditions and relations of production and the power differentials therein, as Zizek recommends, brings into focus the areas which could fall under the gaze of critical discourse analysis.

In summing up this discussion of the varieties of critical discourse analysis, one can say that there is a fine line that distinguishes the ontological and epistemological orientations of these approaches - whilst Fairclough’s approach describes, evaluates and explains social reality by revealing the effects of structures (2013, p.178), the discourse-historical and socio-cognitive approaches of Wodak and van Dijk claim that there is no direct link between social and discourse structures (van Dijk 2005), but these are mediated by “the cognitive representations and strategies involved during the production or comprehension of discourse” (van Dijk 1990, p.164). A fitting point here would be Herzog’s (2017) suggestion that a discourse analyst in analysing language and social practices should

remember that these practices are human made, to which I would add that it is socially situated humans and not unaffiliated beings who engage in language practices. Accordingly, this additional element should be taken into consideration in analysing language.

The above discussion is not intended to be an exhaustive listing of the various forms of critical discourse analysis, but an indicative depiction of some of the significant work in the area. The purpose of this discussion is to highlight the point at which my research diverges from this area of discourse studies.

### *3.3.3 Other approaches to language research*

An emerging area of research is one that blends corpus linguistics (CL) and CDA (MacDonald and Hunter 2010, MacDonald et al 2013b; Mautner 2010; Baker *et al* 2008). Analysts working in this area examine huge data sets to understand the lexical choices and patterns in texts, and they also analyse the contextual factors that influence these patterns (Biber et al 1998, p.3). The tools of corpus linguistics help to demonstrate the semantic prosody of keywords in the selected texts, “the consistent aura of meaning with which a word form is imbued by its collocates” (Louw 1993, p.157), and the discourse prosody of these salient word forms, which express the attitude of the text producer and the overall tone of the text. The addition of methods of CDA to CL enables the analyst to identify what is present and what is absent in the data under examination and to have an awareness of the wider context. In combination, these methods help to trace how language or discourse travels from one context to another to suit the purpose of the creator of the text.

In an article setting out a framework of analysis incorporating CL and CDA, Baker et al (2008) describe how a combination of these methods addresses the respective limitations of each, thus reinforcing the research structure through a merging of the strengths of the two methods. Their investigation into how refugees and asylum seekers are represented in political and public spheres relied on corpus linguistics to provide a map of the data, in terms of word frequencies, lexical patterns, key words / clusters and collocations (p.295). Moreover, the analysis depended on the macro-categories of CDA, such as inclusion and exclusion strategies (p.280) to enrich the findings. Although one does not have to be a discourse analyst to identify and analyse specific lexical items found in some texts as racist or sexist discourse (van Dijk 1995b, p.143), the work of corpus linguists helps to present statistically significant evidence of trends in language. Nevertheless, it is often said that CL has little regard for the context of the text or speech (Widdowson 2000), however, some researchers, such as Baker and team and the ones discussed next, have attempted to plug the gap in this method of analysis.

A significant body of research that combines the tools of CL and CDA is a series of studies conducted by MacDonald and others (see 2010, 2013, 2013b, and 2015). These analysts present detailed information about data selection procedures: the reasons for selected data sets as well as research goals and findings. A fundamental property of this body of work is the selection of texts from two or more domains, such as from political and public spheres of life since “one set of texts give only partial accounts of how a phenomenon is constituted” (MacDonald et al 2015, p.189). The analysts search for keywords relating to a chosen theme and following on from this preliminary investigation, they do a comparative analysis of the texts from the different domains. Through this comparison of keywords, collocates, repetitions and other linguistic features they seek to understand how concepts are framed differently in different texts (*ibid*).

Furthermore, researchers in this area establish a timeframe for the data and pay close attention to the language spanning a number of years; these procedures help to identify the focusing event that triggers a change in the discourse (MacDonald and Hunter 2010). Equipped with this contextual information, the analysts are able to explain the linguistic strategies used and the purpose these serve. For instance, in MacDonald and Hunter (2010 and 2013a), the analysts bring to light how the creators of a text seek to establish a pretext for a particular practice, such as a massive security operation. They are able to make this claim through engaging with the circumstances surrounding the production of the text they are analysing. This background information strengthens the analysis of the lexical and linguistic tools used by the text creators to influence the text’s reception. MacDonald and Hunter (2010) draw attention to tactics including the reification of concepts through repetition, and the collocation of positive words with negatively loaded ones to give a positive spin to, or to neutralise, what would otherwise be a negative connotation. Thus these researchers point out how information is presented to garner support for a specific purpose or to promote certain issues, notably a concern for national security.

Also, in MacDonald *et al*’s (2015) study, the decision to give greater emphasis to one method of analysis at different phases of the research process strengthens the comparing and contrasting of data and the findings. For instance, corpus analysis of the data (United Nations Security Council resolutions and newspaper articles) helps to identify keywords and phrases, which are then related to wider contexts through discourse analysis. This form of analysis enables researchers to understand how ideas travel from political to public spheres. Following rigorous analysis of the selected data, MacDonald *et al* declare that “words bring particular meaning into being” (2015, p.174). This observation is contrary to Parrington’s (1997 p.165) view that discursive construction does not change existential composition as there is merely a semantic transformation of existence. Thus it may be said



that although such forms of inquiry present robust evidence about the intent of a text, yet what is missing in these informative accounts is an acknowledgement that the texts and the text creators are socially and economically situated.

The range of research projects and approaches from the critical discourse paradigm certainly offer insightful perspectives on various social and political issues. Furthermore, some of the attributes of these approaches, particularly a concern for the way things are in society and an intention to uncover how people use language to serve certain interests, are similar to my research project. However, despite some shared sentiments, I had to decide against adopting a discourse-based approach because of a fundamental difference between my outlook on language as socially situated and that of critical discourse analysts. That said, in rejecting critical discourse analysis I do not wish to be drawn into a detailed discussion of the limitations of this paradigm, but to briefly point out why it does not fit within the theoretical approach I follow.

### 3.3.4 Criticisms and challenges

The criticisms against CDA have been many, with some writers making pointed references to particular aspects of the discipline, some comprehensively identifying a range of shortcomings, and some calling into question the very existence of the paradigm. Moreover, some adherents of these discourse-based approaches acknowledge that their approach has some limitations, and attempt to address these. Researchers such as Blommaert (2001 and 2005) and van Dijk (2012), who engage in CDA themselves, note that it often fails to theorise context. A context is not a static background to a text, according to Blommaert (2001, pp.15-17), but intrinsically linked to the social situatedness of a text and its author. He directs our attention to the *a priori* contextualisation that goes on in critical discourse analysis, which he finds objectionable because it does not take into consideration text trajectories, data histories and unequal resources. Verschueren's (2001) criticisms deals with the failure of some forms of critical discourse analysis to provide empirical dimensions of the data. Kress (2011), another researcher from within the field, laments that it is backward looking with its focus on past texts. Another criticism raised by Stubbs (1997) is that it does not engage with large a volume of data, a point accepted by some (Baker et al 2008, MacDonald et al 2015 and others), as discussed in the previous section – 3.3.3, who have tried to address it by a synergy of CDA and corpus linguistics.

Other researchers who focus on the flaws in the approach include Talmy (2010), who points out that CDA is known for its theoretical and methodological ambiguity. Substantiating this point is Widdowson's stinging rebuke that the practices of CDA are unprincipled and unsystematic (2007, p.110). In a book-length discussion as well as in

journal articles, he complains that the data is cherry-picked to support the interpretation. With examples drawn from published works of CDA practitioners, he pinpoints how these researchers try to find evidence in a text to back up their claims. He concludes that the work of critical discourse analysts amounts to interpretation not analysis (Widdowson 1998 and 2005). A response to some of these criticisms as well as more comprehensive criticisms can be found in Breeze (2011), Haig (n.d), and Matheson (2008).

Since others have covered the topic in sufficient detail, I am not going to get drawn into corroborating or refuting the criticisms. However, I think it is important to emphasize Mautner's response (2010, pp. 150-151) to the accusation that fragments of texts are analysed. In stoutly defending the research practice of selecting relevant sections of data for analysis, she counters that researchers invariably make selections from the body of data they generate. It is true that any researcher working with qualitative interview data for instance, transcribes, codes, and selects for analysis parts of the data relating to the sub-themes and overall theme of the research. Mautner accepts the situation, and she describes how she tried to get around this problem by factoring in background information to contextualise the data. The terms background or context seem to be a mass of tangles, with different strands projecting from different theoretical sources. For interpretations of context see van Dijk (2006b and 2012) and Mautner (2010). However, Mautner's efforts to bring background information, if not within the purview of the analysis, at least as a backdrop to it, do not escape the main criticism that CDA seems to invite. This criticism relates to the neglect of the social relations and forces that are articulated in language. It is this neglect that makes CDA incompatible with the theoretical framework of my research, leading me towards other forms of analysis, which I discuss in section 3.3.6.

### *3.3.5 Poststructuralist and materialist approaches to discourse analysis*

The discussion of the variety in discourse analysis shows that critical research relating to language or discourse constitutes a range of approaches with affiliated strategies albeit with some methodological and epistemological differences. An example of a difference is that between discourse analysis drawing on poststructuralist approaches, which eschews claims "to objectivity and truth" (Graham 2005, p.3) and the family of approaches engaged in critical discourse analysis. Whilst Foucault, whose writings form the basis for poststructuralist discourse theory (Howarth 2010), insists that the scholarly task is to see "historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false" (Foucault 1980, p.118), the form of inquiry of critical discourse analysts, as many of its experts will testify, has an overtly political stance and aims to challenge power and discrimination manifested in language (Fairclough 1989 and 2003, Kress 2011, van Dijk 2003, Wodak 2016).

From the foregoing discussion it seems that there are ontological and epistemological differences between these approaches to discourse analysis. In other words, critical discourse analysts tend to accept that there is an objective social structure which they are determined to reveal through their analyses, and poststructuralist discourse theorists maintain that it is the discursive production of meaning that constructs social structures or elements (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, pp.33-35), and analysis should focus on the different regimes of knowledge which seek to infuse reality with meaning in their own way. Thus it can be said that discourse theorists seek to investigate how particular “social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p.4). Citing the example of discourses in favour of or opposed to a road in a green belt, they explain how the discourse of economic modernisers would frame the event in a different way from the discourse of environmentalists. This explanation has its antecedents in Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985, p.108) elucidation of their point that whilst all objects are constituted as objects of discourse, there is a reality external to thought. Put simply, they point out that an earthquake can be constructed in scientific terms or as God’s wrath depending on the way the discursive field is structured, thus allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives, all of which have equal claim to truth.

CDA, on the other hand, focuses on “prevailing social problems, and thereby choose(s) the perspective of those who suffer most” (van Dijk 1986, p.4). In fact, they do not hesitate to call a discourse unjust if it contributes to social inequality (van Dijk 2009, p.62). These different orientations to discourse analysis seem to also have differences in terms of method of analysis. As Fairclough et al (2001) argue, poststructuralists ignore the interconnection of semiotic and non-semiotic aspects of events and “emphasise the endless possibilities for meaning to emerge” (p.18). A similar claim is made by Fairclough (2013) that CDA gives primacy to language analysis but also gives due consideration to the extra-discursive along with the discursive factors.

Responding to the criticisms as well as evolving the field of discourse analysis, Herzog (2016) emphasises the point that discourse should be linked to material reality. He further points out that discourses cannot be considered as context-independent points of reference (p.281). He therefore pleads for a sociological discourse analysis which would draw the attention of the analyst to the social condition of discourse production and the structural obstacles to discourse dissemination. In addition to bringing a critical perspective to discourse analysis, this approach, according to Herzog (2017), would also provide methodological tools for analysis of discourse. Accordingly, discourse studies can point to the role of language in constituting the social through representation, but also have a comprehensive focus on material realities.

Elaborating on the methodological, ontological and epistemological angles of a materialist discourse analysis, Beetz and Schwab (2017, p.ix) clearly explicate that language practices are the result of material conditions and relations of production, which in turn are shaped by language use. Their point that it is necessary for a materialist discourse analyst to focus on relations of power and inequality in language use (2017, p.41) bears similarity to Herzog's (2018, p.409) argument that "ideas and discourse are not autonomous formations, i.e., they do not exist independent of the social relations".

Given these views, it seems that a materialist approach to discourse holds out a promise of fidelity to Marx's (1972 [1852]) understanding in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that it is really existing people and the conditions of their existence that create the grounds for ideas to emerge, and which consequently spells out the position of the focal lens of analysis. In alignment with Marx, Herzog (2018, p.407) warns against treating discourse or text as an independent unit of analysis, which is akin to a reification of discourse (Palmer 1990). Similarly, Angermuller (2018, p.5), advocating materialist discourse studies, insists that since not all truths can have equal value, the researcher is expected to explore the processes through which some ideas gain traction. In emphasising a materialist approach to discourse, these researchers seem to be developing a point in Beetz (2016, p.22) that the material world which shapes people and ideas is composed of relations, practices and processes, which the analyst has to explore. It is not clear whether this entails following the advice of Jessop and Sum (2018, p. 327), who point out that the specific social relations of economic exploitation and political domination, in short the class character of language, has to be explored.

Hence, although both schools of thought – critical discourse analysis and poststructuralist discourse analysis - share an interest in investigating the "relationship of language to other social processes, and of how language works within power relations" (Taylor 2004, p.436), in emphasising the fluidity of discourses (in the case of poststructuralist discourse analysis) and in downplaying the dynamic of class relations (in the case of Critical discourse analysis), both approaches seem to fail to fully address the socially situated nature of language, or its class character.

### *3.3.6 Alternative approaches to analysing language*

The primacy of the background to a text over its linguistic aspects has been repeatedly emphasized by writers vehemently opposed to CDA such as Collins (1999, 2000); Holborow (1999, 2006, 2015); Jones (2004, 2007); Jones and Collins (2006) among others. These writers convincingly argue that in analysing linguistic and lexical features, CDA results in superficial analysis. Instead they insist that analysis should go beyond surface appearance to get to the essence of a situation or a phenomenon. The research

ethos here seeks to avoid the fetishism of language (Lecercle 2008). At the heart of the approach to analysis that these advocate is the view that language is part of the social process and is not an independent entity. This principle swayed my decision to align my analysis of the language around “TSE” of HE with the work of these writers rather than with the critical discourse paradigm, while acknowledging the descriptive usefulness of CDA.

As the principle underlying these related approaches is attuned to my theoretical framework, which comprises an understanding of language as social, dialogic and evaluative, it is only right that I explain these. The work of these different writers takes shelter under the same theoretical umbrella, but the research aims, the analytic gaze, and the methodological contours vary from one to another. Nevertheless, the shared theoretical assumptions encourages these writers to maintain a safe distance from discourse analysis. The prime reason for this distance is the importance that CDA gives to the role of discourse in social change. In a strongly worded attack on CDA, Jones (2004) accurately recognises that change in language use is part of wider social change, hence it is necessary to analyse the actual processes of change rather than aiming for a partial view of social change which CDA offers. Discourse analysis merely provides evidence of change, he maintains. In a later piece of work, Jones (2007) calls into question the very existence of CDA as an analytic discipline, endorsing van Dijk’s (1995b, p.143) view that the tools of discourse analysis are not needed to understand the ideological slant of a text. He (Jones 2007) convincingly argues that political or ideological critique does not require the aid of critical discourse analysis. He painstakingly elucidates how this method of inquiry fails to take into account the speaking and listening persons in the communicative process. And he firmly recommends that a concrete analysis of the historical and political context within which the linguistic expressions are uttered is necessary. This is explained with an analogy – there is no point in analysing a gun without trying to understand the situation in which the gun was used (2007, p.343). Taking on board Jones’ advice I would say that what is needed is concrete analysis of the coordinates of the situation, that is, the researcher has to understand the form of the social, economic and political activity that is ongoing. In his words, the researcher has to understand the real relations between the communicators in the interaction, not the relationship between abstract verbal features. As Jones (2007, p.360) further expounds, in supplying a checklist of features for critical analysis this form of research “involves a fantastic reification of discourse and, with it, a serious mystification of society’s workings”. Another challenge to discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis comes from Collins and Jones (2006, p.116) who point out that the link between constitution in meaning and constitution in reality is blurred. They

emphasise the importance of political and historical analysis and of the class nature of language in lieu of mere linguistic analysis.

However, Jones (2006) does admit that CDA provides useful information about socio-political and economic phenomena. A view shared by Collins and Jones (2006), who clarify that since discourse evolves from human activities, it can provide clues to study social change, but for this the researcher would have to grasp the historical developments which generate particular uses of language (p.53). Collins (1999 and 2000) provides a concrete illustration of this point in studies of popular movements in conflict with official texts. He seems to follow Geras (1995) who firmly points out that there is a reality out there regardless of our representation of it. Collins describes how “language-use should not be analysed in isolation from a detailed examination of socio-historical context” (2000, p.86). Using what he calls the analytical framework of the Bakhtin Circle, Collins demonstrates how the conflicts between social groups are registered in the tensions in a communicative situation (*ibid*, p.85). Through analysing the utterances of people involved in social movements and the opposing views of those in power and authority, Collins (1999 and 2000) considers the social relations that exist among the interactants in a specific situation. He finds that the utterances are socially and ideologically connected. Although the work of Jones and Collins is not on the language of HE, it does offer some insights to my research. A similar approach is that of Holborow (2015), whose work on the language of HE had direct relevance to my own – and which I discuss below.

### **3.4. Approaches to researching the language of HE**

Analyses of trends and developments in the language of HE are plentiful. This section engages with different approaches to researching the language of HE. The most common are studies that adopt some form of discourse analysis or CDA of texts of the sector, either government or institutions. For instance, Fairclough (1993), who in his analysis of HE, may have set the trend of exploring the language of the sector. He examined job advertisements for academic posts as well as institutional brochures, and found that these texts conformed to the marketisation and commodification processes in capitalist societies (p.143). By comparing texts from different time periods, he demonstrated the shifts in the language of the sector, which seemed to have developed in later years a promotional style reminiscent of advertising jargon. He noticed this from the foregrounding of the qualities of the institution in the later texts (p.157) as compared with texts from an earlier time. His detailed scrutiny of texts from different genres and time periods offers insights into the interdiscursive potential of language, which constrains and transforms the discursive practices of universities (p.137) to conform to the prevailing social and economic environment. These insights are useful, nevertheless they seem to be tied to an inflated

idea of the power of language to bring about social change. It is a socially situated language user who wields language to drive change in society, not language itself that can drive social change forward.

Following the lead set by Fairclough, many other researchers working within the broad field of critical discourse analysis have examined: university mission statements (Ayers 2005, Bonner 2014, Morrish and Saunston 2013, and Saunston and Morrish 2010); UK government education policies over a period of 33 years covering five different governments (Mulderrig 2011a, 2011b); university websites (Mautner 2010, Sanigar 2013, and Zhang and O'Halloran 2013). These studies, drawing on the tools of critical discourse analysis or a combination of corpus linguistics and CDA (in the studies by Mautner 2010 and Mulderrig 2011a, 2011b), focus on the lexical choices and the grammatical features of their chosen texts to portray the values, agenda and governance tactics encoded in the statements analysed. The findings of these studies, along with the reflective paper examining the trends and features of the language (Katz 2014), do little more than confirm the existence of neoliberal business practices in the HE sector. Some of these researchers claim that the importance of this form of CDA is to identify the language of business, which can then be resisted. However, I fail to see how resisting or changing the language of the sector is likely to halt the intrusion of marketing practices into the sector. Moreover, in lamenting the demise of intellectual values in HE (Morrish and Saunston 2013), which they insist is surrendering to economic ones, these researchers tend to romanticise universities as being bastions of universal and moral values or of equality and social justice. This ideal is far from true as universities have always been elitist with strong ties to the economy, and with little focus on equality. The Robbins expansion was very much focused on the benefits of HE to the economy of the country (*Robbins Report* 1963, pp.70-74). If anything has changed, it is the intensity with which these ideas are pushed that make the link to the business world more overt.

An area of research that does offer more than an identification of neoliberal language in texts of the HE sector is the work of Holborow (2015). She seems to be under no illusion that a critique of neoliberal trends in the language of HE is sufficient to reverse the trend. Through focusing on keywords such as 'entrepreneur', Holborow locates her critical examination in the social context to which language is connected. Her focus on keywords weaves concepts of political and social agency into the analysis to uncover the ideological significance of selected keywords such as enterprise, which are rife in the HE sector. She argues that CDA confirms the marketisation process in HE but does not allow the dynamic of social relations to come into view. Therefore she proposes that a sustained critique should make a "direct reference to actually existing social and economic relations" (p.89).

She draws on Volosinov to explain that words such as enterprise and entrepreneur “carry the imprint of the social class that promotes” this language because it has “the power and the means to dominate official discourse” (*ibid*, p.91). It is this focus, on the specific class character of the utterances of the HE sector, and an awareness that the language of a text is dynamically linked to the social position of the author/s of the texts, that most of the other studies fail to acknowledge.

It is not my intention to be dismissive of studies which analyse the language or discourse of particular social institutions, but to point out that whilst such research is useful in providing informative and descriptive accounts, some researchers (for instance Fairclough 1993, Mautner 2010), doing discourse analysis and CDA, tend not to recognise the human actions responsible for the marketisation and commodification processes in HE. In these forms of analyses there tends to be a reluctance to acknowledge the social and economic relations that operate between the utterers and the intended audience. For instance Fairclough (1993, p. 158) claims to connect linguistic analysis to wider social and cultural contexts, but is silent on the class nature of HE.

My decision to abstain from conducting a CDA stems from a fundamental difference in our respective outlooks on language, which makes the approach incompatible with my conceptualisation of language. A pivotal element of this difference is that I consider language as dialogic and evaluative utterances, with roots in social and material reality. Accordingly, I seek to understand the material practices from which an utterance derives its essence. With a multiplicity of approaches and an eclectic mix of descriptive and diagnostic tools, the discourse analytic studies fail sometimes to engage with the social and material context to a text. According to Blommaert (2001, pp.23-24), access to linguistic and other resources in an unequal society can influence whose texts gain traction across domains and in society. The resulting text trajectory involves texts moving from one sphere of activity to another, getting recontextualised and acquiring changes in meaning (Blommaert 2005, p.46) to fit the purpose of the situation. It is with this awareness of text trajectories that I seek to explore texts across three domains – students, HEI, and policymakers.

We are now at the point where we can synthesize the content of the theoretical framework in respect of the social nature of language and the epistemological positions outlined by Holborow (2012a, 2012b, 2015), Jones (2004) and others. This also allows me to justify the selection of methods and methodology which fit my conceptualisation of language. Further sections will deal with the different research methods I have deployed which are compatible with methodological approach of this study. In plain terms, while I set out to



critique the language around “TSE” of HE, I also engage in a critique of (higher) education as conceptualised in present capitalist society.

### **3.5. The research arena**

The ontological and epistemological assumptions which underpin my approach to research and analysis required a critical qualitative investigation. In alignment with these positions, I maintain that there is a reality that is independent of a researcher’s analytical perspective (Block 2012, p.85). In practical terms, I believe that there is a particular form of HE in existence which seems to require certain rallying slogans to support and strengthen its way of functioning, and the student experience is one of the main mobilising constructs in HE. My epistemological stance in understanding the interpretations and tensions of this construct led me to investigate the viewpoints of those studied (Becker 1981). This quest favours a dialectical understanding of forces and relations in society (Cole 2003, p.491), whereby the existing conditions are the basis for a critical perspective (Sayers 2014). Having stated the principles underlying my chosen topic and my approach to the research, which accords explanatory primacy to the contradictions that emerge (Callinicos 1989), I can now move on to explain the decisions pertaining to the selection of data and their analysis, before discussing the methods of investigation.

#### *3.5.1. Decisions about participants, institutional committees and policies*

Once my research ideas started to develop a focus, the next stage of the research journey was to decide the corpus of data that would allow an exploration of the conflicting conceptualisations of “TSE”. Put simply, I had to think about the quantity and quality of data that would be needed, and I sought guidance from the literature on research.

An adequate sample size is one that permits deep, case-oriented analysis and a richly textured understanding (Sandelowski 1995, p.183) or when additional interviews do not result in identification of new concepts or themes (Sargeant 2012). This data saturation is achieved when the number of participants or size of the data sample is adequate to enrich understanding of important elements of the phenomenon under investigation. However, Malterud et al (2016, p.1753) eschew the concept of data saturation, which in their view does not specify how saturation is assessed, instead they propose the concept of information power. According to them, the latter is a product of the quality of communication, the study aims, theoretical background and strategy for analysis. When these are in alignment and when a depth of information is co-constructed by complex interaction of the researcher and the participants, then information power can be obtained with a small number of participants, they explain. Taking into consideration these perspectives, helped me to decide on the size of the sample for this study. Also, by analysing incoming data in parallel with collecting data I was able to gauge the quality, the

appropriateness and the adequacy of the data, and to finally decide when an optimum was in sight. For instance, after conducting approximately 13 interviews, I realised that there was an imbalance in the ethnic composition of my participants, that is, I did not have the same number of Black British students as White British and International / European students. Following a chance encounter with two Black British students in the university library late one evening, I requested them to participate in my study, which they did and so brought the total to 15 participants. This composition is not a representative percentage of the actual numbers of these groups of students, but I thought that I had to get the views of more than the initial three Black students who participated in my study.

#### 3.5.1.1. Seeking student participants

The choice of who I should research evolved from my original ideas. Earlier I had planned to focus mainly on students from minority ethnic groups, but then I came to realise that a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of HE would not be possible unless I heard from students representing all groups, since all were in the frontline of the policies being thrust upon the HE sector. The decision was forged in the light of Sargeant's (2012) advice that selection in qualitative research is purposeful, that is, the research seeks participants who are deemed relevant to the research questions and the topic of inquiry. The next question that surfaced in my mind was how to approach students to participate in my study. The composition of the student participants was made possible through elements of strategic thinking, planning and requesting. I realised that my initial strategy of talking to faculty members who I met at various fora, and requesting them to put me in touch with students would not work. I was not getting a sufficient number of students. I then trawled through the university website for the programme leads of different departments or subject heads. Following this search, I drafted a letter explaining my research idea and asking permission to give a short talk about my research in their lectures or seminars. I then emailed this letter to the programme leads of all the departments. Many responded to my request and agreed to give me a few minutes to talk to their students in a lecture or a seminar. After a two-minute presentation in each of the classes I was invited to, I asked whether any of the students would be interested in participating in my study. I then requested those who were interested to give me their email addresses and I later emailed these students. As expected, not all the students who initially volunteered responded to my email, but with the ones that did, I arranged a date and time for an interview, and finally interviewed the students who turned up on the appointed date.

To investigate the views and voices of the students, I decided not to include first year students as I thought they would have had only a few months of university experience. Consequently I interviewed fifteen second and third year students from different courses -

in Arts and Humanities; Education; and Social and Applied Sciences - of the undergraduate programme: four EU students; one international student; five Black British students; and five White British students. The decision to adopt these categories to identify the participating students came about through careful consideration of existing labels such as “BME” or “BAME” (Black and Minority Ethnic or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). My rejection of these labels followed a realisation that this labelling of one group of students or people and the absence of labels such as WME to denote the White Majority Ethnic group of students promotes the assumption that the former group is not the norm and so has to be categorised into a box.

I decided to adopt the term Black to represent students from Black and Minority Ethnic communities only after asking my participants how they identified themselves. Most proudly answered Black, but one student answered my question by asking me how I identified myself, to which I replied that I associated myself with the group Black. She then suggested that I put her down as Black as well. I am fully aware that I could invite criticism for influencing her answer, or that I could be accused of erasing the differences between groups by throwing the different groups of students into a few broad categories. My response to these criticisms is that I did negotiate with my participants the categories they would like to adopt for themselves. Secondly, the reason for unifying the groups is that these groups are already lumped together through labels such as “BME”, a categorisation which, in my view, is used to pigeon-hole some groups into subordinate positions. It is indeed ironic that this form of categorisation, which is a product of the hierarchical nature of society, is rarely challenged, but the use of a unifying label may be considered as hegemonic.

#### 3.5.1.2. The institution

Logistical and practical considerations helped to find an answer to the question of where to situate my study geographically. Although I did consider other research sites, I finally chose this particular institution because I had become somewhat familiar with the research setting and knew that this would allow me easy access to research participants. Also, I realised that I could get an in-depth understanding by focusing on one institution. This decision was informed by the literature on case study research. According to Creswell et al (2007, p.245) and Merriam (1998, p.27), case study research can be considered as a methodological approach, an object of study and a product of inquiry. For my research I drew on the heuristic feature of a case study (Merriam 1998, pp. 30-31) wherein the intent of analysis (Creswell et al 2007, p.246), is to select a bounded case to provide insights into the issue (Stake 1995) that is being explored. This instrumental case study differs from an intrinsic case study which tries to evaluate the functioning of a system or case.

The HEI wherein I conducted my research has approximately 17,000 students, but it started out as a teacher training college in 1962. More than ten years later, it launched into non-teacher training degrees. In 2005, it was awarded full university status, and in 2009 it was granted the power to award research degrees. As a fairly new institution, it is considered by the staff as a widening participation institution. I gathered this bit of information from the meetings of the different committees I attended as an observer. The university is organised into academic schools and professional service departments. Within this structure there are several committees tasked with specific responsibilities such as outreach, widening participation, student success and retention, equality and diversity and others. I decided to approach the heads of relevant committees to request permission to attend meetings and to analyse documents drafted by these committees on issues relevant to my research. Following written requests and responses to clarification from some of the committees, I finally obtained permission to attend as an observer three committees. In addition to attending three meetings of each of the committees held at various times of the academic year 2014 – 15, I also had access to documents circulated at these nine meetings as well as information on their webpages.

It may well be argued that a focus on one institution cannot be taken as representative of all HEIs. However, a close look at the language of the selected institution as a case study “to understand complex social phenomena” (Yin 1994, p.3), along with a reading of relevant literature, shows that the waves of changes sweeping over HE seem to wash over all HEIs and most appear to be moving in a similar direction. A look at previous research and analysis commenting on the trends and practices of HEIs (see for instance, Fairclough 1993 and 2007; Holborrow 2015 and 2012b; Mautner 2005 and 2010) leads me to conclude that the language is more or less uniform across the sector and perhaps even across countries. Hence it would not be wrong to say that with institutions aligning themselves to the dominant trends in society and the economy, the texts of a particular institution may be seen as indicative of the language of the sector.

#### 3.5.1.3. The policies

The selection of policy documents for this study was based on their authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Scott 1990, p.6). The first two criteria are self-evident, the latter two criteria were fulfilled by a purposive selection of policies that had an association with my research questions and the topic (Flick 2009, p.260). In my search for HE policies to analyse I decided to select documents from public and political spheres as I wanted to trace the trajectory of issues and ideas in HE. I trawled through the websites of the UK government, the HEFCE (HE Funding Council for

England), the HEA (Higher Education Authority) and Universities UK. From the several documents that showed up, I decided to select the most relevant and recent ones. I first looked at the 64-page *Browne Report: higher education funding and student finance* (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010) and the 83-page government's response to it, issued in the form of a White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011) I then discovered *The Coalition - our programme for government* (2010), and zeroed in on the section pertaining to universities. Next my eyes fell upon two policy statements, of five and three pages each: *Making the higher education system more efficient and diverse* (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2012b), and *Widening participation in higher education*" (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2012a). I also decided to include the 115-page document, *National Strategy for Access and Student Success* (2014), as it was mentioned at some of the committee meetings I attended. Besides, I realised that the content of this document had direct validity and relevance to my study and to the issues that I was exploring, namely "TSE", retention, and allied themes. My reading of these documents was aided by the background reading of the 383-page *Robbins Report* (1963) and the 517-page *Dearing Report* (1997).

I am aware that policies do not emerge spontaneously. Most policies, however inappropriate, inadequate or ill-conceived they may appear, do not exist in a vacuum; there is always a context underlying their formulation, and there are implications following their implementation. Policies are usually informed by reigning interests and trends in society, which the policies seek to promote. The questions that follow this awareness therefore are: what are these reigning ideas and interests, and what are the ideological bases for these worldviews. My attempt to address these questions appears in the section, where I discuss my approach to investigating the different domains that comprised my research arena and I explain the analysis of the spoken and written texts.

### 3.5.2 Research methods

This critical exploration of the language around "TSE" weaves together multiple research methods to create a comprehensive picture of HE, the language of the sector, and the society and the economy within which these operate. The variety in the investigation process was part of the strategy to examine the subject of the research from different angles as I was determined to add depth and richness to the findings I hoped to unearth. Also, the juxtaposition of voices from different domains of the sector, while consistent with my view of language as dialogic, enables me to grasp the perspective of addressors and addressees in a text and to consider their social positions and the relations between them.

I opted to understand the students' experiences through open-ended interviews, to observe the functioning of institutional committees, and to engage in an analysis of policy documents from the official domains that I had decided to include in this project.

It might seem unusual to some that I decided to analyse interview data within this critical exploration of the language of HE because this approach may appear to them as diverging from established practice amongst both critical and interpretive approaches. However, there are qualitative research studies which have adopted discourse analytic methods to make sense of interview data whereby "data are treated as texts, generated in the process of social interaction and located in a particular social context" (Chandler 2008, p.48). Another relevant example is Talja (1999, p.6), who defends her method of doing discourse analysis of interview talk, which in her view offers participants' interpretation and evaluation on a topic. Equally relevant is the advice of Mann (2011), who resolutely believes that since interview data is generated through spoken interaction it should be subjected to discourse analytic methods.

Since my work seeks to go beyond discourse analysis to a critical exploration of language, I seek support from the work of Collins (1999 and 2000) and Collins and Jones (2006, p.64) which evaluates spoken texts "concretely, in all its vital and internal connections with concrete social and historical processes". A more pertinent point is that my decision to include interview data is not inconsistent with my theoretical framework, wherein the inquiry and the analysis conform to Volosinov's (1973) explanation of the influence of localised and extra-local factors on an utterance. Hence the epistemological principles underlying this approach to inquiry allowed me to analyse the spoken and written texts as socially situated utterances, which I hoped would give insights into the social positions and relations between the authors of the texts and their real or assumed interlocutors.

The different domains that were under the investigatory lens of this research required different modes of inquiry. The exploratory procedures that I followed included semi-structured interviews with students, examination of relevant policies and practices (as observed by me) of the institution, scrutiny of selected government policy documents, and field notes wherein I noted down what I saw, heard and understood (Becker 1981). The data generated through interviews, observations and close reading of policy documents were analysed for the thoughts and language that were expressed but with a sense of the social positions that were being articulated. In the following sections of this chapter I elaborate upon the contribution of each of the data generating methods to my research on the language around "TSE" of HE.

### 3.5.2.1. Questioning the students

To investigate the student participants I interviewed fifteen second and third year students from different courses of the undergraduate programme at the HEI in South-east England, that is, four EU students; one international student; five Black British students; and five White British students.

Each interview comprised an introductory phase, a substantial middle, and a closing. During the initial phase I introduced myself and the research, thanked the students for volunteering to participate, requested their permission to record the interview, gave them an information sheet and a consent form to sign, and asked whether they had any questions for me. These procedures conform to the explicit suggestions of Codo (pp.165-169) to explain the format of the interview and engage in light conversation before the actual interview as it helps to build rapport. The middle section was the actual interview with a range of open-ended questions and without a pre-determined sequence. At the end I thanked the students once again, asked whether they wanted to say or ask anything, and informed them that I would contact them for a follow-up interview after transcribing the interview and doing some initial analysis.

Interviews are an established tradition in qualitative research. I launched into the data collection phase of interviewing after four preliminary interviews, which helped me to get to grips with interview techniques and topics for discussion. Cohen et al (2003, p.279) suggest that “an interview is a social, interactional encounter so it is important to establish an appropriate atmosphere that allows the participants to talk freely.” Hence I chose a semi-structured format for the interviews, which were exploratory in nature, as I wanted to elicit not just information but also thoughts, perceptions and emotions. In particular, the purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews with the student participants was to understand their experiences of HE and the issues they considered significant. According to Flick (2009, p.150), participants are more likely to express their viewpoints in an openly designed interview than in a structured situation. My chosen method is also in tune with what Holstein and Gubrium (1997, p.113) and Kvale (1996) recommend - that interviewers generate empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives and experiences. Although I had a few basic questions for each of the interviews, these were only prompts as I was mindful of Thomas’s (1993, p.40) advice that “a list of questions written in stone becomes a crutch that hobbles the researcher in pursuing data.” I thus had the flexibility to pose questions based on replies given by the informants to earlier questions. Moreover, not having a fixed set of questions but a set of prompts helped to me capture what the students had to say rather than what I wanted them to state. These

prompts required me to view the interview as a communicative, knowledge-generating process which required some amount of prior thinking and planning.

Focusing on the interview as a process shifts the spotlight onto the role of the researcher in the interview and in generating data. This role has been emphasised by many who see the research interview as a conversation with a purpose (Richards 2011), or as sites of social interaction (Mann 2011, p.8) which create situated narratives (Silverman 1993). This requires not just a thematic approach to analysing interview data but a reflexive analysis of the data as jointly produced (Roulston 2001, p.298) or co-constructed (Briggs 1986; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Mann 2011, p.9). Duly informed by these insights, I followed a procedure of re-viewing the data (Roulston 2001), which ensures that the data a researcher gathers focuses not only on “topics under discussion but on the research encounter itself” (Briggs 1986, p.124). This reflexive exercise made me aware of the relationship between me and the interviewees, and the instances where I as the interviewer may have inadvertently set the tone and the direction of the interactive event. Since I could not undo what had already been done, I decided that I had to admit that some of my questions may have influenced the participants, and I conducted retrospective interviews which allowed me and the participants a space and an opportunity for reflection (Budach 2012, p.320). The retrospective interview is similar to member checking (Creswell and Miller 2000, p.127) and helps to establish the credibility of the study (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p.314) by asking participants to confirm the information and the interpretation of the previous interview.

The role and position of the researcher may impact the research in other ways. Berger (2015, p.220) discusses how access to the research field may open up because some participants might want to share their experiences with a researcher who in their eyes is supportive of their cause. I admit that some participants may have opened up to me because they saw me as a fellow Black person in a predominantly White institution. In fact, one did say that she told me things that she had not told her mainly White lecturers (see section 5.2.1).

Another aspect to reflexivity is the role of the researcher during the analysis of interview data. This aspect acknowledges that the data is approached by a researcher with her socially situated identity, which has shaped her worldview. This epistemological reflexivity (Willig 2001, p.32) means that a neutral or detached approach to analysis is a myth, with researchers becoming “more visible in their writing” (Mann 2011, p.11). In this study and in the write-up of it, the researcher is evident in the choice of topic, in the approach to the research (see Chapter Two) and in the analysis and discussion of data (Chapters Four, Five and Six).



The next step after the interviews entailed transcribing and preparing the data for initial analysis. After the first round of analysis, the next steps were: drafting questions for follow-up interviews and conducting further analysis of the students' conceptualisations of their experiences. In all, I conducted 34 interviews with students, four of which were initial exploratory interviews and did not form part of the data for my study.

#### 3.5.2.2. Examining the institutional domain

To explore the institutional arena I observed several meetings of different committees such as those of the Equality and Diversity committee, the Retention and Success Delivery Group, and the Widening Access, Participation and Retention Sub-committee, of the case study institution, to understand the practices and concerns relating to "TSE" and affiliated issues such as widening participation, equality and diversity, and retention and success. The data from this site comprises field notes of the observations and analyses of documents circulated at these meetings.

I opted for observation in this study to get a first-hand account of the case under investigation. During observation researchers perceive what is happening and represent it with their interpretation. "Good ethnographers make carefully planned observations in natural settings" (Stake 1997, p.404), bearing this in mind, I jotted down key points during the observations and wrote up field notes immediately after the observations. This data unearthed during the observation phase of the research contributed to the analysis. These observations enabled me to learn about the activities of the institution and provided me with guidance for interviewing some of the people heading these committees. These participants were interviewed not in their capacities as experts (Flick 2009), because these ethnographic interviews were like friendly conversations (Spradley 1979, pp.58-59) albeit focused to elicit explanation or clarification of an issue.

#### 3.5.2.3. Understanding government policies on HE

The policies that I selected were not viewed as standardised artefacts as Woolf (2004, p.284) seems to consider documents in research, but as "integrated into fields of action" (Prior 2003, p.2). This required me to look beyond the selected texts and to be aware of the data history of the texts (Blommaert 2001), that is, the appearance of certain texts coincide with certain social, economic and political circumstances. On a first reading of the selected policies I realised that there were two main discourses permeating these documents: an economic discourse, with an instrumental view of HE, and a discourse of social justice, with a concern for widening participation and retention. Further readings were required to explore these discourses and to understand: how they manifested themselves, their intentions and their effects on the intended readers of the texts. I was

also interested in determining whether the language of HE bears the imprint of wider social and economic processes and the implications for institutions and the different players within the sector. Hence I was interested in exploring more than the linguistic forms and features of these texts.

To make sense of the socio-political tones that resonate through HE, I examined relevant national policies on HE. This process entailed identifying and analysing the issues they deal with, unravelling the linguistic features deployed in the discussion of these issues and the underlying sub-text. And throughout this process of analysis I have made reference to socio-economic and political realities.

A need for further conceptual clarity arises here as I describe my analytical approach as critical exploration of the language around “TSE” of HE rather than CDA because of the apparent limitations of CDA. My analytical approach attempts to address these criticisms, but it also fits within the theoretical framework I adopt: I make use of the insights of Marx and Engels, who spell out the necessity of historicising and materialising our analysis (Palmer 1993), to understand global capitalist society and the laws of motion governing its development (Sayers 1989). I intended to take an historical approach – to see how the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men (*sic*), the language of real life (Marx and Engels 1965a).

As I said in the introduction, this research is determined to understand what is going on in HE in England. It attempts to gain this understanding by conducting a qualitative research study to examine: the institutional policies and practices of the research site, a post-1992 university; the experiences of students within the institution; and the overarching influence of government policies on both of these.

After deciding the focus of my research, I had to decide how to go about researching this area. Since the research is interested in understanding HE policies and the discourses that circulate there, I thought it appropriate to conduct an analysis of the policies on HE to understand the meaning embedded in the policies and to trace the influences shaping them.

#### 3.5.2.4. Transcribing and preparing the data for analysis

After each interview I reviewed the notes I made during the interviewing and added comments based observations and associations to these notes. I then settled down to transcribe the interviews and jotted down significant points that I encountered while listening to the recording of the interviews. These jottings were a form of pre-coding (Layder 1998), which were focusing devices that drew my attention to interesting points in

the data, which I then highlighted when reading through the transcripts. The identified topics or codes that stood out, and which I thought needed further exploration made me engage in a conversation with myself about the data (Clarke 2005, p.202). This analytic memo writing (Saldana 2013, p.41), which entails thinking critically about the topic, the data and our assumptions (Mason 2002, p.5) ensures researcher reflexivity on the data. Another stage in the process of coding the data was to categorise or group themes. Similar to a code, a theme is a product of interpretation (Packer, 2011, p.70) that is discerned by the analytic lens of the researcher (Saldana 2013, p.7) This processing and organising of the data (Moyer 2008, p.29) before getting down to analysing it was crucial to forming a coherent presentation of the conceptual constructs, the research questions, the method and the analysis.

To illustrate, a statement in the data such as, "I was quite lonely", triggered off questions about feelings of isolation, lack of friends, and the reasons for this. In this instance, such querying did not lead me towards a psychological exploration of the student's personality and self-confidence, since the student had alluded to these traits by telling me that she was outgoing, and articulate in class. Also, because of the theoretical orientation of this study and my epistemological position, I sought to put the spotlight on the social circumstances or the culture and practices of the institution. In this way the highlighted code of "loneliness", which recurred in the data obtained from some of the participants, led me to develop the theme of "the classroom as a community". These themes represent the ideas and experiences of the participants with the researcher's explanation, interpretation and elaboration (Butler-Kisber 2010 and Rubin and Rubin 2012, p.118). Thus, as Packer (2011, p.70) argues, themes did not just emerge from the data, but were products of my interpretation.

During the transcribing I also noted down pauses, hesitations, expressions and other paralinguistic features. These features of the utterances gave me an insight into the significance that some topics had for the participants. As Turell and Moyer (2008) note, these additional elements contribute to the meaning of the responses (p.194). I also decided to use punctuation marks sparingly but as necessary to make the spoken texts hold meaning.

I decided to put extracts of the interviews in the chapters analysing the data rather than summaries of the participants' utterances as I did not want to lose the detail of the speakers' content. Moreover, a summary may attribute beliefs and values to speakers and risk changing the object of analysis (Antaki et al 2003), which I was keen to avoid.

### 3.5.2.5 Ethical issues

Having obtained ethical clearance from the university, I tried to follow ethical interviewing procedures, such as allowing the participants to choose the date and time of the interview (Codo 2008, p.169), and ensuring that I anonymised the people participating in my study. As stated earlier, I presented each participant with an information sheet which had details of my research project. I explained my research project in brief, requested them to sign the consent forms, and asked their permission to record the interview. At the start of each interview I engaged in casual conversation with them about them, their course of study, and neutral topics to help them relax.

While seeking permission to attend the meetings of relevant committees as an observer, I gave an assurance that I would not disclose the identities of the members of the committees, hence I cannot provide the permission letters or details of the minutes of these meetings.

### 3.5.3 *Analytic approach*

The analysis of the data moved beyond focusing on what was said, that is, on the particular issues that were voiced, and on how these were expressed. This move is in line with my conceptual and methodological framing, which holds that mere analysis of linguistic and grammatical features of texts would only amount to recognising the forms used. As Volosinov correctly argues, it is of little use to recognise the identity of a text, the forms and features that comprise it, but what is necessary, according to him, is to explain and understand the actual context within which an utterance is formed (1973, p.68). Suitably informed by the work of Volosinov that the significance of a text lies in its use in a particular context, I seek to relate the content of the spoken and written texts to the contexts that made these texts possible. In other words, I set about investigating the situations within which particular topics are raised and hoped to understand the intent underlying these topics.

A critical exploration of the language around “TSE” of HE is not possible without the aid of the three constructs that form the foundation of my thesis. In the analysis of the data I demonstrate how these constructs contribute to the findings which I present and discuss in Chapters Four, Five and Six. The constructs of language, education and critical exploration together formed a lens to understand the different conceptualisations of “TSE”. With the aid of the construct of language, I analysed the spoken and written texts not as autonomous, abstract, disembodied texts, but as utterances expressing the social positions of and the social relations between the participants in the communicative situation, that is between the addressors and their intended addressees. Moreover, I

subscribe to the view that the ideas that are carried through in language should be the focus of analysis along with an exploration of the trajectories and data histories of the ideas (Blommaert 2001). In essence, I hold that the socio-ideological nature of the language of the texts has to be explored. Secondly, I relate the ideas expressed in the texts to the construct of education that I have developed. To this end I evaluate the conception of education that informs the different texts examined against the understanding of education that I have developed. Here I subject the texts to rigorous critique based on the components that I have come to believe are necessary for a fair and just HE sector. Finally, I try to connect the texts and the ideas they espouse to the social and material conditions which are inscribed in these ideas. These processes were part of my endeavour to answer the specific research questions of this study. The main one was to explore what the language around “TSE” of HE in England revealed and concealed about HE and its context. This question was explored through investigating how the different sections of the HE apparatus – students from diverse backgrounds, an HEI, and relevant government policies conceptualised “TSE”.

### **3.6. Concluding comments**

This chapter laid out the methodological approach of this study. A discussion of the various types of research from the field of critical discourse analysis in this section of the thesis was necessary to mark the distinctions within the field and to emphasise how my study has a different epistemological steer. The chapter also presented the procedures and criteria for putting together a purposive sample of participants, institutional committees and policy documents. An explanation of the research methods and the approach to analysis brought the unit to a close. In sum, the key elements of this chapter link the conceptual framework to the analysis of the data, which forms the following chapters.

## **4. The role and purpose of higher education**

### **4.1. Introductory remarks**

Examining the different perspectives on “TSE” revealed a close connection between “TSE”, especially around the academic domain, and the purpose of HE, with the concept of “TSE” appearing to encapsulate the latter. This chapter sets out to unravel the component parts of “TSE” that came to light in the process of analysing texts and sub-texts from the HE sector. As the analysis progresses I tackle the key issues entangled in the connective tissue of this association between “TSE” and the role of HE. The main strands flowing from this connection are views on how “TSE” relates to the gains or outcomes of a HE degree; opinions about the expectations students are assumed to have and about whose responsibility it is to meet these so that there is a better student experience; justifications of, and reflections on, the increased fees students are expected to pay, and the possible impact of this on their experience and their expectations; thoughts on academic standards and abilities, and speculations about how these might be a factor affecting “TSE” and some students’ retention.

The analysis proceeds by examining each of these elements across the three domains that form the investigatory focus of this research. In other words, the analytical lens is trained on the data drawn from students, the institution, and government policies, with the meaning distilled from the voices of the students compared and contrasted with the language and the views expressed in the other two domains of HE. This juxtaposition of the different views helps to investigate what these views reveal or conceal about HE. As explained in the introduction to the thesis, this section of the thesis aims to explore the tension between the different constructions of “TSE” and to make sense of the different tropes implicated in this concept.

### **4.2. The outcomes of higher education**

The benefits, or gains, of HE as a factor of “TSE” is a major talking point across the three domains analysed. Encountering this perspective evoked the idea that the learning process should be a conscious one. The task that arises then is to examine the various views and to gain some understanding of how this aspect of “TSE” is conceptualised. I set out on this investigation beginning with a peek into how a committee of the institution understands and constructs the role of HE and the benefits of education.

*The committee members are engaged in an animated discussion on the role and the responsibility of the institution in developing the employability skills of its students. A committee member points out that the students should realise that they cannot leave university with just their degree, they need something more. Another member adds that the university should make use of its expertise to help the students add value to their academic*

*degree, so the career development team is involving alumni to offer placements, internships and guidance to the students. Another member suggested that the institution should cast its gaze on how other institutions were dealing with this matter. (Committee 1, Jan 2014)*

The observation notes you have just read are of a university committee entrusted with the responsibility for “TSE” and widening participation. Employability and career development for students was one of the main topics on the agenda at this meeting, with the members emphasizing the close bonds between university education and jobs, claiming that an important role for universities is to prepare students for work. Two strands of thought can be detected in this discussion: the need to equip students with employability skills; and the need to do this because other institutions might be doing the same. Hence also up for discussion was the need to be aware of what these other institutions were doing to make their students employable. A significant point to note is that knowledge of a particular discipline or a degree certifying knowledge of a discipline was not considered to be of much value whereas the acquisition of work skills was stressed. In plain terms, the talk at this meeting had nothing about the role of education and of the HEI as contributing to the learning process of students. The institution seems to understand that a good experience would mean gaining skills for work.

The topic under discussion, and the suggested solutions to boost the institutions’ saleable qualities, depict the institution and the committee as concerned about the students and their future after university. However, the concern for students is tied to a concern for how the institution compares with other institutions. This comparison among HEIs is because competition for students has become endemic across the HE sector, a trend that has grown as institutions have seen their grants reduced (Collini 2011, McGettigan 2015). In fact, the policymakers seem to actively encourage competition, as evidenced by this statement from the *Browne Review* – “competition improves the quality of education” (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010, p 32). The competitive nature of HE seems to be a realisation of the laws of capital, according to Marx’s explanation in the *Grundrisse* (1858, p.752). Taking Marx’s insight forward, Rikowski (2012, p. 25) points out that inviting competition into any area of public service is to open the door to capital. Hence it may not be unusual that competition has become a common practice across the education sector, with HEIs competing for funding and for students (Arestis and Sawyer 2005, p.177), if one tries to understand the provenance of competition, or the economic idea and system from which the competitive trend has developed.

A further significant point is that the apparently well-intentioned suggestions that were offered at this meeting of one of the committees I was observing seem limited when

juxtaposed against the views put forward by the students as they narrated their experiences at this university, which is the focus of the next section.

#### 4.2.1 *"It's definitely been a big learning curve"*

One of the first issues that came up during the interview with Debbie, a White British student, was that her positive experience spanned across both the academic and the social domains. She talked about what she had gained, how she had developed, and the role of education in these developments.

I – So to ask you once again, what can you tell me about your experience at university?

D - It's definitely been a positive experience, as I said last time it's definitely been a big learning curve, definitely I feel more responsible

I - So has it been all positive?

D - It is well, it has been stressful in terms of the workload and eh that is something that I have had to learn to cope with quite quickly but I think all in all it has taught me how I actually cope with stress so on the one hand yes ok it has been stressful but I would see that as a positive, another way is learning more about myself and how to manage time

I – So positive from an academic point of view or a social point of view?

D - Both, definitely both eh I I thought I would like to think that I've always been quite sociable however being involved in other activities (.) football and having a wider circle of friends it's definitely developed my people skills in terms of friendships as well, but academically it has definitely definitely broadened my knowledge I didn't actually study law before I came to uni so that has been a definite ehm change of skills in learning different things (Debbie2, p.1)

In response to my general question asking her to tell me about her experience, Debbie answered confidently that her experience was "positive". She chose the word positive of her own accord to describe her experiences at university. In fact, she reiterated what she had said in the previous interview, that her experience was all good.

On hearing her affirmative response, a note of scepticism crept into my voice as I interrogated her whether everything about her experience was positive, to which she conceded that she did experience some amount of stress, but she offered several reasons for her positive appraisal. In sum, Debbie's positive experience at university was because she gained a good deal from her education academically and socially. Of greater significance and relevance in the light of the previous discussion of the committee meeting is that she did not mention anything about picking up job skills at university. The significance is that her perception of the outcomes or gains of education is different from the views of the institutional committee I observed and in sync with a key idea of the construct of education that was discussed in the conceptual framework (section 2.3).

Debbie's language shows her as being modest at times in admitting that she was expressing her opinions and not facts when she prefaced her statements about what she



had learned with – “I think”. But for the most part there was no hint of tentativeness in her narration, this is evident through her repeated accentuation of her positive experience with a modifier – “definitely”. She used this repetition to emphasise all that she gained from her experience at university - new learning, interpersonal skills as well as a sense of responsibility.

Another aspect to Debbie’s talk is that she represented herself as a beneficiary of her education process when she talked about what she had gained, but at the same time as an active initiator who learned to take control of her life at university, and to make decisions so that the pressures of the workload did not get the better of her. In this way she projected herself as being actively involved in shaping the direction of her experience, but acknowledged that the academic environment allowed her to grow and develop herself and her abilities. Her account reveals her attitude towards the university, which she evaluated positively.

The preceding two paragraphs analyse Debbie’s text through a focus on the features of her talk. This form of analysis offers insight into how she stated what she described about her experience, but it does not focus on the content of Debbie’s spoken text and the socially situated nature of the text. However, analysing the content of Debbie’s response within the conceptual contours of this project, in particular through the socio-ideological lens of language draws attention to the specific topic of Debbie’s message. If the analysis has to proceed beyond identifying the features of Debbie’s talk to understanding its meaning in this interaction, a further aspect will have to be considered - the context that made her talk possible. The contextual dimensions of language have been prominent in the work of Bakhtin (1984, pp.181-182) and Volosinov (1973, p.159), who convincingly make the case for the sociological nature of language. In their view, an utterance emerges and acquires meaning in the context in which it is being formed. This context is not a static entity, but dynamically comprises the person, the social situation and the wider socio-economic environment.

As a third year student at university, Debbie had the time to settle in and to develop her network of friends: in short to navigate her way around university academically and socially. Also in this interview Debbie was commenting on her experiences while engaged in conversation with the interviewer (me), hence she chose to expand and illustrate the points she was making probably in response to the scepticism with which I questioned her about her experience, that is, whether her academic and social experiences were all positive.

A further aspect to consider is that her positive narration could be because as a White British middle class student whose parents had studied law at university (Debbie, interview 1, p.7), Debbie was able to navigate her way through university without having to face insurmountable hurdles. As will be seen later, not all the students had a similarly all-round positive experience. Several points to ponder over are whether Debbie's family experience of university was an asset, or whether there are other factors which prevent some students from feeling socially and culturally comfortable at university. Equally important is to consider whether this should be a significant factor at all, especially since HEIs claim to promote access to all, and to offer all students a good "student experience" (CCCU *Strategic Framework 2015-2020*, p.2). Of further significance is whether there can be a singular understanding of "TSE" that can be universally applicable to all students.

A final point to be noted is that Debbie's comments pertain to the role of HE in the development of mainly self-oriented knowledge and skills. Other students might have a different area of focus, and/or have an entirely different experience or understanding of the role and purpose of HE and of the outcomes of their education. All of these will be uncovered as the analyses of the students' voices progresses.

#### 4.2.2 *"I really liked the learning"*

Other students also spoke in upbeat tones about the academic side of their university experience. For instance, Tamara, a Black British student, corroborated what Debbie said, that her university education gave her more than the knowledge of the course she was studying, that it gave her an education for life. Her positive experience, however, was only one side of the story as will be seen later.

I – I have to ask you this, anything positive about your time at uni?

Tamara answered:

T - Ehm I'm I really liked the learning so, I'm happy that I could learn, if I could take anything away over the three years especially the learning, learning about different topics and stuff, I found that really good, I think that also being put inside this kind of social environment you kind of learn what type of person you are, so I know that maybe on my part what I can do to improve my social skills, I think that's positive, that's a positive thing, and like and doing presentations, being just completely doing everything by myself and with a group and how you work with a group (Tamara2, p.6)

Tamara, in the encounter reported here, situates her positive experience in the academic domain, through which she improved her knowledge and understanding of different topics as well as developed her confidence and ability to work independently and in groups with other students. She lets us know that her education did not merely equip her with skills, but that through group work she realised more about herself in relation to other people. The opportunities for improving students' interpersonal understanding that Tamara

appreciated have been documented by researchers on HE (Crosling et al 2008, p.3; Richardson 2015) who find that students are better able to reflect on themselves and their abilities through interacting with other students. Tamara's description of her positive academic experience, of the sense of independence that she gained, and of confidence in herself and her abilities, is almost an echo of what Debbie said earlier, but there is a crucial difference between these two sets of experiences, which will be explored in detail later, in section 5.5.3 and 5.5.4.

If attention is given to the dialogic exchange of the interview, following the lead given by Volosinov's (1973) and Bakhtin's (1984) interpretation of the dialogic nature of language, it will be noticed that I specifically asked Tamara whether there was anything at all positive about her time at university. This question was prompted by what she had told me in her first interview, that she was dissatisfied with her experience at university and that she had nearly dropped out for reasons which pertained to the non-academic dimension of university, a major topic which will be addressed in the next chapter of this thesis. If she had not described her negative experiences, I would not have had the occasion to ask whether there was any positive element to her experience. Tamara paused a bit before answering that she considered the learning that she gained at university as something that she could cherish. A pause that could indicate that she was searching her storehouse of experiences for something positive. However, after her initial hesitation, she went on without further prompting to explain why she felt this way, an indication of her willingness to talk about an aspect of her experience that she enjoyed.

Another element of Tamara's language is her use of modifying words such as "really", "completely", and "definitely", which intensify the force of her assertions, and emphasise that her experience in this area was quite different to her negative experience in the social sphere. However, since the phrase "I think" appeared in the vicinity of these statements, Tamara, like Debbie, seemed to be also making the point that she was voicing her views and not universal truths. The views which her words expressed were formed of course through her experiences at university. The significance of Tamara's text, that is, its content, can be appreciated only in the context of her overall experience and with awareness of her social position. Analysing her talk and her experiences without taking into consideration her identity as a Black British student, who with her siblings constitute the first generation in the family to go to university, will not get us to see that her experience is shaped by the position she is assigned and is allowed to assume in a predominantly White British HEI. The full import of her words and her experience will come to be realised when the discussion reaches the topic of diversity in HE, in Chapter Five.

For the moment, it is sufficient to note that Tamara's focus on the academic situation as being conducive to allowing her to understand herself, to identify her abilities, and areas for self-improvement, serves to represent both herself and the academic environment in a positive manner, a representation she shared with Debbie. Hence, although it might seem that she was portraying herself as creative and independent, through phrases such as: "what I can do...", and "doing everything by myself...", she recognised the importance of HE in preparing the ground for her to work and interact in groups with other students. Relating her text to the construct of education, in particular, to the social purpose of education, it can be said that Tamara saw the gains of education in terms of learning and self-improvement, and not in terms of job skills. Another similarity that Tamara's account shares with Debbie's is that she too conceptualised her experience in terms of the self-related skills that she developed at university. But the next student in this analysis brought up another dimension of "TSE" as seen in the following sub-section.

#### 4.2.3 *"My studies have really enabled me to think critically"*

Wilma, another Black British student, formulated her academic experience in a tone of enthusiasm while appreciating the role of HE in shaping her thinking:

I - Your academic experience - how was that?

W - I think till my the end of my first year it wasn't very enjoya- I wasn't very interested, however when I got into my second year, especially my third year, the course content, particularly one of my, the one I enjoyed doing, because it was really really challenging, i really was able to go deeper into the subject areas, and that is really down to the course content and also a lot of the teaching materials that were available online and even some of the things that really had nothing to do with the course they'd say this is helpful if you read this, it'd make you well actually change your way of thinking, my studies were have really enabled me to think critically

I – who's they? Who made, told you to read?

W- Oh they, the lecturers (Wilma, p.5)

Wilma's related narration included details of what made for a pleasant experience. Her fascination with her chosen subject of study and the encouragement of the faculty, which motivated her to go beyond the contents of the course, were crucial components of her positive experience. Wilma cited these as reasons for a spurt in her level of interest in her studies, and it gives us a glimpse into the varying nature of her experience at different phases of her time at university. But what comes through strongly is the connection between her academic engagement and a positive student experience, a correlation that has been noted by research on HE (Ashwin and McVitty 2015, p.356; Quaye and Harper 2014, pp. 5-7; Healey et al 2014, p.55; Kahu 2013, pp.767; Kuh 2003, p.25). These investigations find that if students are socially engaged it leads to engagement with their

studies and better academic performance. In Wilma's case, as she experienced a turnaround of what she categorised as a miserable social experience (more about this in the next chapter), she was able to participate and thrive in the academically challenging environment. Consequently, she became motivated to get a deeper understanding of the course material and developed her critical thinking and analytical skills. So her newly developed positive social experience led to academic engagement and to enhanced critical consciousness. Plenty of research evidence exists in support of Wilma's account of the connection between social engagement and a good experience of university. Some like Astin (1984) propose that engagement is the amount of time and energy students invest in different aspects of their education at university. While this view puts the onus mainly on the students to engage, others such as Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Kuh (2009) accurately conceive of student engagement as a responsibility that HEIs, staff and students should share.

In the interview Wilma seemed to be drawing on her newly-acquired critical consciousness to compare her state of mind at different times and to talk about the specific ways through which her experience had been transformed. Like the other students discussed here, Wilma too emphasized that the benefits of her education went beyond the knowledge of the discipline she was studying. Her positive stance towards the institution notwithstanding, Wilma's depiction of herself as having been granted the resources to develop her thinking - "have enabled me to think critically" – might be considered as her way of telling us that although she may have been encouraged by the faculty, yet she exercised her own mind. In other words, she represented both herself and the institution in a positive way.

Wilma repeatedly relied on intensifiers such as "really" to strengthen her claim that the academic content presented a good challenge, on account of which she was enticed into learning and exploring the subject in depth. The non-hedged adverbs also present her statements as facts, for example, she stated that the course and the readings would "well actually change your way of thinking". It seemed that she was making a seamless transition from cautious statements beginning with "I think" to bare assertions to demonstrate the specific gains in terms of her cognitive development in this HE environment. This indicates that she was becoming more assured of the outcomes of her education. These outcomes align with the construct of education, notably the critical component of education outlined by Gramsci (1971) and Ambedkar (in Naik 2003). Moreover, in a quite significant departure from the views expressed by Tamara and Debbie, Wilma stressed that she gained not just interpersonal skills and academic knowledge, but also in terms of improved thoughts and ideas.

Although Wilma talked about the wider influence of her education, I seem to have adopted a line of questioning informed by a utilitarian perspective, as shown by the next question I put to her:

I - How has your education helped you gain?

W - Uni has exposed me to so much that I've had to let go and just if I knew something to be true before, I now either I've analysed it, criticised it and realised it's not true, I've unlearned it and let go of it as something I no longer hold to be true and now learning it, almost asking the question, almost like I'm 18 again and everything I'm learning I'm picking up and deciding for myself what is true and what isn't and I don't think I would have been able to be like that had I not gone to uni (Wilma, p.6)

I appear to be trying to pin Wilma's experience to the use or benefits of education by asking how her education had helped her. In response she went beyond the contours set by my question as she highlighted the quantity – “uni has exposed me to so much” – and the quality of what she gained through her education at this institution. Her narration conveys her attitude to education and portrays her as a reflective and analytic person, who examines her former self with her new knowledge and understanding. Through this comparing and contrasting Wilma pits her earlier self, when she was not much aware of issues, against her present self, where she has greater understanding thanks to university.

As stated earlier, Wilma's narration can be said to conform to the construct of education, which comprises the idea that education helps develop our critical abilities. Also significant to note is that her fascination with her learning could be due to her decision to transfer from another programme because she was not interested in business and finance. The engagement with thoughts and ideas that her new course provided made her enthusiastic about her education. Her enthusiasm towards her academic experience could also be attributed to her unhappy social experience, which was alluded to earlier in this section and which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Conducting an analysis of Wilma's account with the aid of the social nature of language is insightful. One can understand that what Wilma said is relevant because of what it reveals about HE, in particular for a Black British student. It shows that some within the sector do have a comprehensive understanding of education as opposed to a narrow skills-based form of education. Encouraged by lecturers who sought to extend the critical frontiers of learning (hooks, p.203), Wilma flourished and she proves that she is academically able and engaged, despite what some writers on HE such as Bamber (2008) seem to think, that non-traditional students have an instrumental view of education.

Having listened to the students recounting their experiences of HE in terms of the role of HE in their lives and what they gained from it, it seems appropriate to find out the interpretation of the outcomes of HE in the institution's and the state's policies on HE.

#### 4.2.4 "We will prepare students for employment, lifelong learning and citizenship"

In focusing on the intermediate layer between the government and the students, that is, the institution of HE, I look to see whether there is harmony between the voices of the students and that of the institution, and also whether institutional policy bears the imprint of official discourse or is sensitive to the students' voices. The section begins with a close look at a key document of the University, which outlines both its understanding of the role of education and the institution's commitment to fulfilling it.

We will also develop a distinctive curriculum, building on our Church of England foundation and Christian ethos, which puts into sharp focus: student employability (according to the 2009-10 DLHE figures for UK domiciled full-time first degree leavers, 94.3% of our graduates are in employment and/or further study six months after leaving\*); a critical understanding of sustainability issues and preparing students for employment, lifelong learning and citizenship in a rapidly changing world. (*Strategic Plan* 2011, p.8)

Although the text pledges the institution's commitment to offering its students a programme of study founded on Christian principles, the overriding emphasis on education for employment is hard to miss in the *Strategic Plan*. The dual focus could be due to the fact that the document is laying out the vision and mission of the university, hence it tries to put forward a comprehensive project that is targeted towards possible diverse sentiments and expectations of the potential student community. Along with an assurance of the institution's intention to have in place a curriculum focused on the employability of its graduates, the text proudly displays the institution's success in preparing its students for the world of work by stating the percentage of its graduates who have been placed in jobs. It is possible that the idea that education is a stepping stone to a career is one that many people have. Hence, this text may be seen as trying to allay any concerns prospective students and their families might have about getting a job after graduating from university.

In an apparent attempt to lure students to this institution, the text adopts language that would not be out of place in the field of marketing or advertising. In fact, efforts by HE institutions to lure students to their institution is an increasingly common trend across the education sector, a point noted by Blum and Ullman (2012, p.368) and Chapleo (2011, p.101). These analysts of HE critically comment that with institutions relying on branding to set them apart from one another, HE is being rebranded into a marketable product. The text under analysis uses the adjective "distinctive", to emphasise the distinguishing quality of the institution's curriculum and its Church of England foundation. This sits alongside

other information about the institution's success in producing job-ready graduates. The motive underlying the language of this text could be to advertise the institution. In other words, by highlighting the features that distinguish it from other HEIs, the university looks to be trying to sell its education. The institution may be said to be deploying this marketing strategy because it is competing with other HEIs, a competition that is endorsed and encouraged by HE policies (see the *Browne Review: Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010*, p 32). In fact, a long-standing mantra of neoliberalism is that marketing and competition improve efficiency (Friedman 1991, 2009; von Hayek 1944, 1992), a mantra that those in charge of HE seem to have swallowed, going by the message of this institutional text.

The language of the text represents the students as people to be shaped and moulded by the actions of the institution. And through statements such as "we will" the institution is projected as a determined actor doing its best to provide students an array of necessary skills for the modern world. The authors of this text seem to be addressing students from a position of authority, making promises and also pushing the idea of employability as central to "TSE". It is relevant to draw on the socio-ideological construct of language, which reminds us that an utterance expresses the social position of its author, whose words and thoughts are socially formed. In this case, it is necessary to point out that the institution is a new one, which sees itself as a recruiting rather than a selecting university, information that I gleaned from some of the meetings of the committees I attended as an observer. This status seems to have an influence on how it goes about trying to attract students.

The institution's practices and marketing strategies may succeed in drawing students to the institution, and some, as we have seen, may be pleased with the academic environment and with what they gained from it. However, there does seem to be a mismatch between what the students say they gained from their academic experience and what the institution is determined to provide or what it believes should be the purpose of HE. It is now time to see how the perspectives of the institution and those of the students compare with the understanding of "TSE" of HE in the government's policy documents.

#### *4.2.5 "Our universities are essential for building a strong and innovative economy"*

A faith in the close links between education and the economy and the understanding that education is mainly about equipping students with the skills needed for work is the key message of *The Coalition – our agenda for government*, a text issued by the coalition government in 2010, spelling out its programme of action. In the section on Universities and Further Education, David Cameron and Nick Clegg proclaim that:



The Government believes that our universities are essential for building a strong and innovative economy. We will take action to create more college and university places, as well as help to foster stronger links between universities, colleges and industries.

We will seek ways to support the creation of apprenticeships, internships, work pairings, and college and workplace training places as part of our wider programme to get Britain working. (Cabinet Office, 2010a)

The message the text seeks to convey is that the purpose of education is to serve the needs of the economy. One of the ways it does this is through a linguistic device of the factive verb “believes” in the first paragraph cited here. This amounts to a presupposition that universities are essential for building a strong economy. In addition, the choice of the present tense of the verb – “our universities are essential” – appears to be used to convince the reader to take what is said as the truth. And because the authors of this text believe that they are stating facts, they put forward without any hedging, their intention to strengthen the links between education and industry.

The repeated use of “we will” – “we will take action to create...”, “we will seek ways to support...” - positions the government as an active agent able to do things. It seems intended to assure the readers of the policy that the government has a comprehensive project designed to create jobs. This is evident in the phrase “as part of our programme to get Britain working”. The absence of any hedging and the chosen verb “to get” indicate that the authors of this text or the ghost-writers of the text possibly subscribe to the view that Britain is not working and show that they (the coalition partners) are determined to change this situation. The reference could be to what is disparagingly labelled as NEET, that is, young people not in education, employment or training.

The use of an authoritative voice to state what the authors of this text (the government) believe, and intend to do, indicates the position and the resources to which these authors have access. In other words, their power and status as the ruling parties can be said to have placed them in a position to use language to persuade and influence the minds of others, to get things done and to direct the actions of others. But that is probably the way governments put forward their policies and spell out their programmes of action. Thus an analysis focusing on the features of the text as in a discourse or a critical discourse analysis limits the analysis to the text. Such an approach to analysis attempts to explain and analyse the structure of a text, the phrasal and syntactical organisation, and to uncover the socio-political undercurrents to it, all of which are useful descriptive tools.

Examining a text in context requires an understanding of the social, political and economic climate, and how these influence what is said and done. A look at some of the circumstances that made the text possible in 2010 offers interesting insights into the

thoughts and ideas of the authors or of those authoring the text on behalf of the named authors, and their social position and the interests which they represent. This utterance or text, which is the object of analysis, seems to share the sentiments expressed in a Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report. In 2008, the CBI, released a report calling for stronger links between government and the business world and expressing its concern about the negative impact on society and the economy due to a large proportion of young people labelled as NEET in the UK compared to countries in the western world (CBI 2008 pp.7-8). On its website, the CBI boldly claims that it has sufficient clout to influence government policy and to ensure that the government of the day keeps business interests at the centre of its policy focus.<sup>1</sup>

The government's text, that is the focus of this section, seems to fall in line with this directive from the CBI. It clearly states its intention to maintain a close relationship with business and to draw universities into this alliance. I am not claiming here that the text under scrutiny definitely originates from the CBI report. There may have been previous statements from other organisations expressing similar views, but it is not the intention of this research to investigate the starting point of this trend of thought. The reason I mention it is to draw attention to the atmosphere in which such texts and the ideas they promote exist. More precisely, I argue that these objective material conditions enable the text or rather the text with its ideological orientation to emerge.

For the first time in 65 years the UK had a coalition government. This government was formed following the first elections held after the 2008 financial crisis. The government claimed that its priority was to tackle the deficit, that it did not want the people of the country to be burdened with unsustainable debts, and that it had to implement spending cuts. But as some experts have pointed out, the country's debt burden in 2010 was lower than the one which the Labour government inherited in 1997 (Gamble 2015, p.46). Moreover, the claim that the government is concerned that the citizens should not be burdened with debt seems to be hollow considering the government's decision to raise tuition fees for university students. As a result of this decision, students are drawn deeper into a state of indebtedness. However, the prospect of debt that awaits students on graduating from university, can be downplayed by the underlying message of responsibility that the text seeks to convey.

At a press conference announcing the Coalition's programme for government (Cabinet Office, 2010b), three key words were mentioned, one of which was "responsibility", which the deputy prime minister explained as, when people take responsibility for their own

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<sup>1</sup> See CBI website at: <http://www.cbi.org.uk/about/about-us/>

choices a strong and united society is possible. The term responsibility seems to be used to leverage support for its austerity measures, claiming that the government was taking responsibility to manage public finances.

Heeding the advice of Blommaert (2001, p.24) to connect text to context, I draw on another aspect of context, text trajectories, to interpret texts not as a single communicative act. With this in mind, I can say that an analysis of a part of a text is incomplete if we fail to take note that the object of analysis intertextually draws on other texts. These extracts appear to be intertextually chained to the White Paper, “*Students at the Heart of the system*” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011), which holds a similar narrow instrumental view of HE as necessary for the economy:

Higher education has a fundamental value in itself and our universities are, in many ways, world-class: in research; in attracting international students; and in contributing to the economy. (*ibid*, p.4)

And

Higher education is a good thing in itself. Students may study a subject because they love it regardless of what it means for their earnings. But one of the purposes of higher education is to prepare students for a rewarding career. (*ibid*, p.36)

The two extracts of this text reveal their authors’ (or those who created the text on behalf of its authors) awareness of the intrinsic value of education, that is, value devoid of any attachment to external gain. In other words, they acknowledge that the purpose of HE is not defined solely by its ability to provide work-related skills. However, this acknowledgement along with its awareness that students may choose a course of study without any consideration for the earning potential of their degree do not detract from the core arguments of the document. In the first of these quotes, the argument pertains to the importance of HE for the economy, and in the second it clearly mentions that the purpose of education is to train students for work. The language in these two texts shifts significantly from one of doubt about the students’ reasons for pursuing a course of study, as expressed in the phrase “students may study a subject...”, to epistemic certainty about the purpose of HE, which it states “is to prepare students for a rewarding career”. On the whole, these texts do not equivocate in stating what they believe is the role of HE.

An additional feature of salience is that the document seems to share the anxiety expressed in the White Paper of 2003, released by the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke, which noted that Britain’s “competitors are looking to sell higher education overseas, into the markets we have traditionally seen as ours” (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p.13). This apprehension about retaining its stranglehold over the market for international students is hardly surprising given that in a

resource-depleted climate of HE UK universities may be expected to raise a significant amount of their own funds. This leads to competition to attract high fee-paying international students, and to the policymakers fear that other countries would encroach on their turf and win overseas students to their universities.

This text also shares the sentiments expressed in the *Browne Review* (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010), which maintained the view that

Graduates go on to higher paid jobs and add to the nation's strength in the global knowledge based economy..... (and)

A degree is of benefit both to the holder, through higher levels of social contribution and higher lifetime earnings, and to the nation, through higher economic growth rates and the improved health of society (p.2)

The text unambiguously notifies us that an individual's earning capacity increases with education and that this strengthens the nation socially and economically. The text states with certainty what it considers to be the definite outcomes of education. The intertextual chain however can be stretched further back to the *Robbins Report* of 1963, which also emphasized the role of HE in contributing to the economic health of the nation through equipping students for work (Tomlinson 2013, p. 124).

The linguistic features of all of these texts, the statements in the present tense, indicate that the policies take it for granted that HE does indeed have a role in a globalised economy. The thrust of these words appears to be that it is the role of HE institutions to train students to serve the needs of the economy. These policies seem to view education in an instrumental way, thus assigning a narrow restricted role to HE; but at the same time they seem to be aware that education has wider implications that go beyond the economy. The tensions that play out in the policy domain bear out the struggle to diffuse ideas and to transform mindsets that Gramsci described in his *Prison Notebooks* (pp.189, 190).

Since the students connected their experience to broader outcomes of education, I decided to focus on this aspect of education and to see how it was addressed by the other two domains. I found that the institutional and policy texts seem to link "TSE" to economic gains primarily. The research moves on to investigate other ways through which "TSE" is conceptualised and to explore other aspects and issues of HE that derive from the importance accorded to this concept.

#### **4.3. The role of the academic staff in "TSE"**

Another way that "TSE" is conceptualised is in terms of the relationship between the academic staff and the students. One version of this conceptualisation relates to the belief that the role of HE is to give students a good experience. Associated with this notion is

the assumption that students have expectations of HE. An accessory to this line of thinking is the question about who has a responsibility to fulfil these assumed or actual expectations, because providing a good student experience through meeting students' expectations could then be made into a selling point for HEIs. This section delves into these varied conceptualisations of "TSE" and the assumptions that accompany these, beginning with one of the committees of the institution.

A member of one the committees I observed spoke with passion about how students should be provided with the opportunity to talk about their experiences, and he thought that it was the responsibility of the academic staff to do this.

*You know what the students want is they want a secure place to put their experience on the table and hear comments from the tutor and work together in groups and that just that doesn't happen in large seminars, it certainly doesn't happen in lecture theatres, what is needed is the space where you feel at home, not just sitting on the edge of the academic world. The first port of call here is the academic tutor. So we need to integrate personal academic tutoring into the curriculum. (Committee 2, May 2014)*

I noted that a member of the university's administrative staff was speaking about the importance of and the role of the institution's academic staff to the students' experience of university. His words (paraphrased here) indicate that he believes he knows what the students want. He comes across as concerned and caring about the retention and success of students, and as aware of what students expect from university. It may be that this is indeed what students indicated to him or his team as their expectations of their tutors. However, his comments do reveal the social position of the author of this text, who heads a committee tasked with student retention and success. Analysing the message of this text through the conceptual construct of language, one notices that the author, a member of management staff, is instructing academic staff to engage the students, or to connect with them. Moreover, as Volosinov (1973, p.93) notes, an utterance and its reception are shaped by the social situation, so in this case, the other members of the committee did not question him, probably accepting his authority and his suggestions because he was senior management. He seemed to believe that an artificially orchestrated approach was the way to foster staff-student interaction, rather than through an organic approach which could develop through mutual understanding and respect.

Another aspect that we need to focus on is the understanding of education that informs this text, which can be discerned by relating it to the construct of education. The author of this text seems to desire a collaborative approach to learning which would enable students to feel a sense of belonging to the institution. His ideas conform to the principles of sound practice proposed by Chickering and Gamson (1987), in particular that institutions should

encourage reciprocity and cooperation among students, and that there should be more contact between students and faculty. In fact, this management staff seems to be echoing Kuh et al (2006), who suggest that satisfied students are those who feel comfortable and affirmed in the learning environment.

If, as the author of this text seems to think, the academic staff and the tutoring scheme he was proposing are crucial to the students' experience of university and that students have expectations of their tutors or lecturers, let us find out what the students think.

The interview data revealed to me that the students' experiences did not just relate to the course content, but also to the relationships they established with the academic staff. Hence in this section I present the students talking about the help and support they received from the teaching staff, which contributed to their experience of university.

#### *4.3.1 "They're quite friendly and open if you go and speak to them, you can just turn up at their office if you have a problem"*

Michelle's positive evaluation of her experience at university seemed to be due to the easy access to academic staff.

I - Could you tell me something about your experience of university?

M - Oh, I'd say it's quite friendly, the lecturers know who you are and I've had quite a positive experience like with regards to whole uni life and my lecturers, although some are better than others, yeah it's quite, it's good overall the experience

I – Ok so what more can you tell me about your interaction with the faculty? How was it?

M - Oh good, if we ever have a problem we can have a tutorial and pretty much whenever I've asked for a tutorial I've always had one, it varies but I've never had to wait long for a tutorial and they're quite friendly and open if you go and speak to them, you can just turn up at their office if you have a problem (Michelle, p.1)

Michelle, a White British student, responded to my generic question about her experience by attributing her positive experience to the friendly and approachable nature of her lecturers. Although she felt that the tutors were helpful on the whole, she did mention that there were variations. Nevertheless, the fact that she started off by connecting her experience at university to the attitude of the teaching faculty rather than to any other aspect, indicates that this probably holds a lot of significance for her. It piqued my interest to ask her to spell out how she interacted with the faculty, and Michelle substantiated her earlier response with details of the ease of access to the teaching staff.

Since Michelle was reporting on her actual experiences interacting with the faculty, her positive experience led her to generalise from her personal situation to make it seem that it was a common experience for all students. She moved from statements such as "I'd say it's quite friendly..." or "I've had quite a positive..." to "if we ever have a problem we can

have a tutorial..." Michelle's use of "we" gives the impression that it was commonly known to all students that the tutors were accessible, but in fact she in particular had approached the lecturers for help and had never been rebuffed.

Through analysing the content of Michelle's utterance, one can say that she comes across as an engaged learner, who approached her teachers for help and advice with her studies. However, Kuh (2009) accurately points out that students can be engaged if enabling conditions exist in universities. This places the responsibility on institutions, staff and students to ensure that students are able to engage. However, in Michelle's case, the enabling conditions took the form of her role as a student representative, and as the first in her family to study at university. These could be factors in her determination to do well, and in the feeling of confidence she had in her academic abilities. However, it is open to question whether Michelle's general perception of university, and her understanding of the situation, is shared by other students, and whether they too experienced the open-door policy of the teaching faculty. I discover that some did, as can be seen in the following exchange with Martha.

#### 4.3.2 *"I mean they are not that helpful the teachers there (her home country)"*

Like Michelle, Martha, a student from the European Union, narrated that her experience was good because of the attitude and behaviour of the teaching and administrative staff she encountered at university.

I – Martha, please tell me about your experience at university here

M - Since I'm from Slovakia and I can say that it's different in a better way because being one reason when you look at the people there they are not willing to help you, they are just doing their own business and they don't care about the students at all and when I compare with that we were happy here.

I - who are these - they?

M - Teachers, I mean they are not that helpful the teachers there (her home country) compared to how it's here and then even the the whole campus and the environment inside here I think it's much better.

I - So are you impressed with the teaching or/ ?

M - /Teaching as well, attitude and behaviour of the teachers, library staff, everything (Martha, p.1)

Martha too plunged right into the academic domain when asked to talk about her experiences in general. Having had some experience of a different system of education, she drew on her knowledge of university teachers in her home country and the academic atmosphere there, which she evaluated negatively, to construct her experience here. Bearing in mind Volosinov's (1973, p.157) explanation that evaluation determines what is uttered, one can say that her glowing report of her interaction with the staff of the institution

indicates that this was a crucial component of “TSE” for her. In short, the words we utter are coloured by our worldview, which in fact determines what is uttered and not just how it is uttered.

Since Martha was quick in connecting a pleasant experience to the teachers here, I tried to find out whether she was appreciative of the teaching, to which she replied in the affirmative and added that that was one of the reasons for being favourably disposed towards the staff. She extended her appreciation to much more than the teaching abilities of the staff, in fact, she acknowledged the attitude and behaviour of all the university staff she interacted with.

Looking at the features of her talk one notices that her comments veered towards over generalisation – “I mean they are not that helpful” – or a labelling of the entire community of university teachers in her native land. Moreover, this labelling of the teaching staff was not insulated with any cautiousness, but came across as a straightforward accusation. It could be a matter of on-the-spot processing of language, which often does not involve much thought and planning. An alternative view could be that she was pleasantly surprised by the helpful nature of the staff here. Some contextual information might help to make sense of Martha’s utterance. It was at her sister’s insistence that Martha came to the UK to study. She claimed that the former had done her undergraduate studies in her home country and was deeply disappointed with the teaching and learning environment there, and so persuaded Martha not to seek admission in a local university. Her vicarious experience of the education system in her home country and the positive experience here combined to shape her expression.

Analysing her response with reference to the social basis of language indicates that Martha’s spotlight on the academic environment and her interactions with the staff is significant for what it indicates about other aspects of her experience at this institution. Focusing exclusively on the language would push social relations to the sidelines (Palmer 1990, p.5). Through this one realises that the speaking person is not an isolated individual but a socially situated being. Although Martha had no defined expectations, unlike the student we encounter next, her positive depiction of the staff may have something to do with the unfriendliness she encountered while trying to interact with her peers (more about this in the next chapter of this thesis), as did some of the other students who I will discuss later.

#### 4.3.3 *“Some of the tutors can be a little bit lax”*

By opting to talk about his academic experience, although I deliberately did not specify which aspect of his time at university he should talk about, Ben, a White British mature



student, signalled that “TSE” for him was primarily about his studies, but he did have some concerns about the attitude of some of the academic staff.

I - Could you please describe your experience at uni?

B - Ok, ehm I think everything's been quite eh, I quite enjoyed the course I would say in terms of the actual subject matter, and I've really quite taken to the all of the (subject) stuff particularly, some of the (subject) stuff as well like to see how it fits together, and I appreciate eh the material, obviously there's the element you can't help but question, considering how much you are paying for it all, so you wonder the way things happen and some of the tutors I appreciate that they have hundreds and hundreds of students but some of them can be a little bit lax, stand-offish, maybe that's wrong terminology, you know what I mean, but then I think overall eh the course has been good, I enjoyed it (Ben, p.1)

Ben's answer puts the spotlight on what seems to be an important element of “TSE” for him - the interesting and engaging course content - which motivated him to develop his understanding of various dimensions of what he was learning on the course. Ben's conceptualisation of “TSE” in terms of the learning gains that were possible can be analysed through the lens of education, that is the faculty that he developed enabled him to train a critical lens on education itself.

Ben's answer had an additional element to it, the attitude of some of his teachers; this slightly marred his otherwise positive experience. His disapproval of the laidback attitude of some of the teaching staff stems from the high fees students pay for their education, which he seems to think entitles them to better service. The idea of customer-friendly service or service with a smile is a fairly common observation and expectation across HE and allied areas (see Woodall et al 2014, and Mark 2013). Some of these commentators seem to have no problem with what they see as a natural trend, while others (such as Tight 2013, Naidoo et al 2011, and Naidoo and Jamieson 2005 ) bemoan the consumer culture that has permeated the sector and are hugely critical of what it portends for HE, and for society as a whole. It should not be surprising that some students such as Ben did pick up the connection between fees and students' expectations from the debates raging on various platforms such as the HE sector and the media. However, although Ben's comments seem to exemplify this trend of students as consumers, this is not the whole story. He quickly sought to make amends for his critical comments, by claiming that the huge pressures of work might be responsible for the behaviour and attitude of some of his teachers.

Although Ben did not specifically label his experience as negative I sought to determine whether this was indeed the case. He concurred but immediately attempted to set right the impression that he may have given about his teachers and about his academic experience,

expressing his appreciation for the course as a whole. When probed further, it seems that what Ben expected was a change in attitude of some, not all, of his tutors.

I - So was that a negative experience - the attitude of some of your tutors?

B - Eh, yeah, but certainly the majority of tutors are very pleasant and very very accommodating, eh there have been the fact that there have been a few though that I felt were a little bit sort of unnecessarily disrespectful but you know like I suppose other human beings might have other opinions and stuff but I couldn't, you can't help but feel that way because of the student debts, the fees, but then I think that's just individuals it's no reflection on the uni as a whole, or the institution (Ben, p.1)

Ben's utterance bears the marks of the tension he faced in describing his experiences and his views. I admit that I am guilty of suggesting words for him to describe his experience, however, Ben did not get swayed by my loaded word. The language he deployed to talk about his experience has the effect of representing him not as arrogant or condescending, but as a respectful student careful not to label or tarnish the institution. Exemplars of his respect are his expression of regret that he was harshly voicing his opinion against some of the faculty, and his self-questioning whether his criticism was worded appropriately or was a bit excessive.

The analysis of Ben's utterance with the help of the construct of language brings to the fore elements that would otherwise not be noticed, his social position as a mature student. Moreover, if we are attentive to Gramsci's well-reasoned arguments, we realise that Ben's utterance, in fact, his consciousness is not individual, but is socially formed (1971, p.179). Or that the content of a speech is a creation of our consciousness, that is, thoughts, ideas and language are formed by our social existence (Marx 1970, Volosinov 1973 and 1976). One can then say that as a mature student, Ben's expectations and awareness of what constituted education were different from younger students, and this constituted his framing of his student experience in terms of the fee and funding situation. His comments make reference to developments in the HE sector and in society, that is, the government's decision to significantly raise university tuition fees. Given this situation he seemed to be more sensitive to the attitudes of his tutors, and was more concerned about what the high fees meant for students in terms of the debts they were incurring.

The fact that Ben decided to bring fees into the discussion early on despite being quite appreciative of his academic experience, indicates that fees might be a significant issue for some students and could raise their expectations, a theme that will be explored in the next section of this chapter. But before that, I examine other perspectives on "TSE".

#### 4.3.4 *“The lecturers accept us more because they know we are international students”*

Janet, an international student, endorsed the opinions expressed by Michelle and Martha about the helpful nature of the staff, whose contributory role helped improve her experience at university. However, Janet offered a different take on the role of the teaching staff and their contribution to her experience; she felt that the staff countered the negative experiences at the hands of the other students.

I - How did you finally adjust, or feel comfortable?

J - Yeah the good thing is ehm any time I'm in uni and we have a lecture, the lecturers are more are more ah they accept us more and because they know we are international students definitely they know we are under sort of pressure especially in terms of (.) they make sure they encourage us, if we have any problems, any questions anything we need and from there gradually I started settling down and knowing yeah a lot of things, they are very willing to help, with emails, we can come in any time and discuss anything, if we are under pressure, it doesn't matter if it is accommodation or academics (Janet, p.3)

My question, asking Janet how she adapted to the situation at this university, came up following her narration of her far-from-pleasant experience with her course mates (a topic that will be examined in the next chapter). Her plaintive description of how she was able to deal with her negative experience contains information about the plight of some international students and about the pastoral support the staff extend towards students like her. Janet's description, based on her personal encounters with staff in their role of “care and concern”, does draw attention to the fact that the academic staff are stepping in to play a crucial role in the international students' experience.

Janet's comment that the teaching staff understand the difficulties of international students could imply that these students are highly valued or that HE staff are aware that these students could face adjustment issues, for which they are willing to help. The practice of helping international students adjust to universities in the UK is a trend that has been critiqued in the literature on HE (for example, Simpson and Cooke 2009). Indeed it is widely reported that universities in England make concerted efforts to attract international students and the high fees that they pay (Leyland 2011, p.199; Robertson, p.22; UUK 2017); it is often alleged that they put in place measures to help these students and to cater to their needs because they are a lucrative source of revenue. In fact the efforts to recruit and retain international students are often endorsed by policymakers, for instance the 2003 White Paper by Charles Clarke (Department for Education and Skills 2003), exhorted universities to strive to maintain their competitive advantage over other countries in attracting overseas students.

Given that UK universities are strenuously trying to recruit international students, a question arises about what measures they have in place to help students like Janet, who face an unfamiliar and unfriendly environment. The evidence from my research suggests that the measures taken by universities may be seen as directives issued to their staff to be supportive, with little effort exerted to changing the atmosphere of the institution. The latter requires a change in attitude and behaviour of not only staff but also of home students, as Heng (2018), and Young et al (2013) correctly observe, which could possibly be achieved through understanding rather than through instruction. Furthermore, the support measures, or the targeted interventions of HEIs are not always appropriate, for sometimes these may be based on false assumptions of the abilities and potential of these students.

A close look at the language of Janet's utterance brings into focus the distress she experienced: the repetition of the phrase "under pressure" conveys the difficult time she had. However, the assertions "they make sure they encourage us" and "they are very willing to help" give an idea that the support of the lecturers enabled her to turn the situation around. With recourse to phrases such as "any time, any questions, anything..." Janet conveyed a sense of the all-out support she received, and she spelt out without any vagueness the many ways through which students could access the help of the lecturers. More significantly, Janet's utterance reveals the difficult time she had trying to interact with her predominantly White peers. This situation contributed to her positive description of the staff, whose help and encouragement directly or indirectly compensated for her negative social experience. In a somewhat similar tone, Shireen, a Black British student, also commented upon the willingness to help of the tutors.

#### *4.3.5 "I can go drop into an office and say hi, because being a student rep helped me a lot"*

The recognition and status that came from being in a position of responsibility provided the frame for Shireen's experience and allowed her to see the academic staff as friendly and approachable.

I – What about your interactions with the teaching staff, your lecturers?

S - Here (.) I'm quite friendly with them

I - So do you feel comfortable to approach a staff?

S- Yeah yeah, I can go drop into an office and say hi, because being a student rep helped me a lot, because you feel like they are not monsters they are there to help you, you need help they are there, like (name of tutor) helped me with (.) I had a project, and like I had a what do you call it like a problem, and he said oh don't worry about it and (name of tutor) said that it would be fine, they understand us (Shireen, p.5)

Shireen declared that she had friendly relations with the academic staff and was able to casually enter her lecturers' workspace for help. Having experienced their helpfulness, Shireen gave examples of incidents where the help and understanding of her lecturers came to her aid. Also, similar to some of the other students discussed earlier, she stated the reality of her experiences, hence she utilised the present tense with phrases "they are there to help you", "they understand us" to assert her views as facts about the teaching staff of the university.

Shireen's positive evaluation communicates her perception of the staff she encountered, but this perception seems to be rooted in her interactions with her classmates, which, as will be discussed later, were not so positive. As required by the principles outlined in the conceptual framework, the analysis of Shireen's utterance has to be situated in the context of a preceding discussion, where Shireen in a pained voice confided that she did not feel she belonged (a detailed exploration of this theme takes place in the next chapter), which nudged me to ask her about her experience in terms of her contact with the staff at this institution.

In terms of representation, it is possible to say that although Shireen seemed to be saying that the help was omnipresent, she was also projecting her unique position - as a student rep - that enabled her to have privileged access to the teaching staff for advice. Shireen's narrative describing her experiences, and her depiction of the academic staff as people who are not to be feared, may be taken as signs of her confidence or assertion of her identity. In response to a question whether identity is a set of stable traits expressing an almost permanent state of being, Wetherell (2001, pp. 186-7) declares that "minds and selves are constructed from cultural, social and communal resources". Utilising Wetherell's insights allows us to make sense of Shireen's utterance as having its origins in her experience at university as a Black British student (more about this in the next chapter). This experience may have required her to develop her sense of self and to negotiate her sense of identity and her relationship with academic staff. This relationship as part of "TSE" did feature in the voice of the next student too.

#### *4.3.6 "They even help me with planning my essay and how to construct so I feel comfortable going up to them"*

For Miriam, a student from Europe, it was the willingness of the teaching staff to help students that made for a pleasant experience.

I - What has been your experience interacting with academic staff?

M - I'd say it was positive, usually all of my lecturers are really nice and helpful and like they are they even help me with planning my essay and how to construct so I feel comfortable

going up to them and they usually answer and sometimes they drift away from the question  
I think (laughs)

I – Do you do any, do you try to bring them back to the topic?

M – No, nothing nothing, it's just funny, it's fine (laughs again)

I – Do most students on your course feel the same way as you?

M - Ehm well I think since my course is quite small and well I'm a student rep and maybe when there's an issue we'll just go as a group to some lecturer and there it would be solved straight away because there's not many layers of administration so yes yes I think so  
(Miriam, p.2)

In Miriam's view, the encouraging and helpful nature of the teaching staff were significant aspects of her experience. More specifically, she appreciated the help and guidance with her studies that she received from her teachers. Miriam's reliance on the discourse structure of result expressed through the clause "so I feel comfortable..." tells us that it was this helpful nature that created a level of comfort whereby she was able to approach the staff to get the help she needed for her studies. And to express her admiration for the staff Miriam uses inscribed and evoked evaluation. The "so" clause, which explains that she felt comfortable to approach the staff, contains an evoked evaluation that also strengthens the inscribed evaluation through which she explicitly described the staff as helpful.

However, the significance of Miriam's utterance lies in her confident description of her experience as positive and not in her choice of linguistic forms. This description is formed in her social situation. More precisely, her experience was positive and she seems to think it was true for the other students too because the distance between the staff and the students was narrow. The course she was pursuing was small and cohesive, without too much of a hierarchical organisational structure and the bureaucratic hurdles that a large course could entail. Her overall response in the form of a narrative was a mix of positive evaluation and a touch of humour. The reason for this could be similar to what Shireen had alluded to – that being a student rep gave her the confidence to interact comfortably with the staff. Here Miriam is probably representing herself as someone who took the lead in ensuring that the staff and students on the course functioned as a close-knit unit. This could be interpreted as Miriam constructing her version of the social world, not intentionally, but while trying to make sense of her experience (Potter and Wetherell 2001).

It is not only the students with difficulties or those with a special status who say that their experience was framed by the help they sought and have received from their lecturers, as Nuria, a Black British student, reported in the following extract.

#### 4.3.7 *“I go to them before I write my essay to see what they think”*

The hands-on academic support provided by the staff was a notable factor in Nuria’s experience.

I - I’m coming to your interactions with the faculty - how has that been?

N - Ehm I think it’s been all fine because I’m a quiet person so ehm I don’t really speak out a lot but with my tutor I feel comfortable enough to go to her if I need help or if I’m ehm I’m stressed about something I feel comfortable enough to go to her but ehm I’m more like now getting the gist of like emailing lecturers if I have a question or ehm my essay plan (.) making sure that I go to them before I write my essay to see what they think yeah I think that they are good at doing that interactions with their students and making sure that they reply to questions (Nuria, p.4)

Nuria’s positive evaluation of her lecturers was based on her experience interacting with them. Her general assessment of the faculty did not single out one or some for either positive or negative comments, hence she used “they” – as a catchall phrase to refer to all the faculty without exceptions. Nuria’s initial comments were supplemented with evidence of her interactions. Although she started off by saying that these were her thoughts about the nature of the interactions, she then quickly moved on to saying it was the way things were in general.

Focusing on the linguistic elements of Nuria’s answer, it seems that when she reported that she approached her lecturers for help with her assignments, and to discuss drafts of her written work, she was transmitting information mainly about herself and about the changes she had undergone. This is noticeable in the “I” constructions which place her at the core of her decisions and her actions. The reason probably lies in the framing of my question: I did not ask her to comment on or to share her thoughts on the faculty, but to tell me particularly about her interaction with them. My question emanated from her earlier narration that she did not feel comfortable interacting with some of the students on her course. Consequently, she shared information about her personal nature and about her thoughts and her feelings in the context of describing the relationship of trust that she had established with her lecturers.

When Nuria said that she had developed the habit of consulting her lecturers for advice on her drafts at a later stage of her time at university, it could be seen as her portrayal of herself as a person who gradually gained in confidence and as someone with a disciplined and planned approach to her studies, but this is also an allusion to the role of HE and the staff. However, the full import of Nuria’s utterance will be realised when one takes into account her limited social interactions in class, which were restricted to White European students and to other Black British students, but not to White British students. Going

beyond the superficial aspects of Nuria's account leads us to understanding the situation at HE, in particular for Black British students. Whilst Nuria's experience in terms of interactions with the faculty were good and she did not have high expectations, or rather any unmet expectations, the next student had a different experience.

#### 4.3.8 *"Some of the lecturers just don't expect that much from me as a black person"*

Penny, a Black British student, poignantly narrated her experience, her expectations and her perception of the teaching staff that she encountered in her journey through university.

I – Do you have any expectations of university?

P - I just think that we need to have a lot more understanding lecturers, who are realistic, you are dealing with young people, they need to understand that

I - When you say "understanding lecturers", would you, could you please explain that?

P - **Most definitely** (emphatically), from my experience I've noticed that lecturers have told one of my friends that she's not capable of getting a good mark, you know it's quite sad, you know I told her to report it but you know some lecturers don't have (----) and I think it's hard as well being young and being black, you know there are stereotypes, when you work so hard in life to get to uni and not fulfil those stereotypes and you get stereotyped it's very upsetting, some of the lecturers just don't expect that much from me as a black person, we know that we don't get taken seriously and it's kind of it is demotivating when you do work hard and then it's kind of not enough and they don't realise that you are at least trying and it's kind like they just expect you to do crap anywhere.

I – you said your friend had this experience, but but have you experienced anything similar?

P – I I well not directly, but you can feel it (Penny, pp.4-5)

Penny's comments came in response to my query about her expectations of university, which itself was subsequent to her telling me that she was disappointed with her experience. When I tried to pin Penny down to her words, she showed no signs of demurring; with a confident "most definitely" she quickly began railing against the education system in general and some of her lecturers. More importantly, Penny attributed the struggles and difficulties some Black students face to the lack of understanding of White-dominated academia towards ethnic minority students. Based on the disparaging remarks she overheard, Penny seemed convinced that some in British society and in the academic world have condescending attitudes towards Black British students. Her anguish at the derogatory perceptions that she felt prevail in people's minds despite the hard work and effort she and other Black students put in was palpable through her repetition of "when you work so hard". Penny's depiction what she perceives to be discriminatory attitudes of White staff in HE is backed up by some literature on HE. For instance, Kuh et al (2006, p.40) reporting on a study by Bridges et al (2005) argues that minority faculty members use more effective educational practices to encourage and engage students. Moreover, Connor et al (2004, p.137), in a study to find out why the experience of students from



ethnic minority groups differs from the experience of students from the majority community, find that poor racial awareness among staff could affect the experience of minority ethnic students. Similarly, Pilkington (2011, p.17) and Tomlinson and Basit (2012, p.1) believe that research is needed to understand what happens to students from minority groups at university.

An analysis of the language of Penny's narration allows her representation of herself to emerge. Through her use of "we" and "they" in "we know that we don't get taken seriously" and "they just expect you to do crap anyway", Penny portrayed herself as affiliated to the community of Black students who seemed to be at the receiving end of the labelling and profiling by the academic community. If, on the advice of Volosinov (1973, p.86), one takes language to be communication between socially organised people, then Penny's words can be said to be emanating from her presumed or actual membership of a community, that is, a community of Black British students. To be more precise, although a person may be speaking, that individual is not independent of society or a social group. To illustrate, although Penny did not point out a particular incident that she experienced, she appears to be drawing on her general perception and the experiences of her friends to put before us a scenario of life as a young Black student at university. Her utterance can be further interpreted through the words of Bakhtin that words and sentences are not impersonal but a sign of our semantic position (1984, p.184). In conversation with me, Penny may be seen as communicating her views on another social grouping that she thinks views her and her community with disdain.

In the preceding discussion, there were eight students speaking favourably of their positive interactions with their tutors, who were encouraging and supportive, and who helped them to cope with their academic coursework as well as other issues at university. While the first two students launched into a detailed description of their positive experience, which was centred on the academic domain and the staff; the fourth and fifth students came to talk of the encouraging teaching staff after having narrated their not-so-positive experiences in terms of their relationships with their peers (a theme that will be explored in the next chapter); and the sixth and seventh students commented that the open line of communication that existed between staff and students helped their learning. Most of these students seem to have experienced the open door policy of their tutors, which made it possible for the students to consult them whenever they needed. Based on a review of several research studies, Kuh et al (2006, p.42) clearly state that one of the main conditions for student success is the interactions between staff and students. As seen at the beginning of this section, a member of this university's management team put forward a recommendation for staff to be more accessible to the students, as he believed that that

was what the students expected. While these six students in no way indicated that this was one of their expectations, some other students, like Penny and Ben, did talk about their expectations and their experiences. It is time to see what the institution believes are students' expectations and how these relate to "TSE".

#### 4.3.9 "We will ensure we listen and act on the students' expectations and needs"

That the institution construes students' expectations to be the mainstay of their experience of university seems obvious from this extract from the university's *Strategic Plan 2011 - 2015*:

Where students expect more from their university education and experience, we will ensure we listen and act on their expectations and needs. We will invest in flexible degree programmes, which enable students to make an informed choice about where, when and how they learn. This will include a planned £18m injection into technology enhanced learning and teaching over the lifetime of this Plan (p.8)

The text appears to anticipate that the students would expect more from their education and the institution, and it assures the reader that the institution will provide flexible courses and technology driven ones. These assurances appear to belie the determination to listen to students, as none of the students I interviewed defined their expectations according to the terms of this text. It may well be the case that students questioned about their preferences by the institution did express their interest in these things, but it seems unlikely that these were the only things mentioned. Although Ben, the student quoted earlier, did raise the point that some students had greater expectations from their education, his expectations were in no way connected with flexibility, choice or technology, which are mentioned in the *Strategic Plan* as ways to fulfil the assumed expectations of the students.

Moreover, the *wh*-cleft clause at the beginning of this statement, outlining the university's goals, presents as an accepted fact that students would expect more from their education. It can probably be said that the university is naturalising the view that the receiving party in a transaction, which in this case is the students, expects the delivering party, which is the university, to anticipate and fulfil the expectations of the former. The context to this presupposition could be the fee-paying environment that exists in HE today. It is no surprise then that the university assumes that students, as fee-paying users of educational services, expect more from the educational service provider. And it would be fair to say that this assumption begets another one – that education and educational institutions should be focused on providing students with choice and information, rather than on what in my theoretically informed view are other aspects of education such as engaging and challenging students' thoughts and ideas.

The statement also serves to project the university as an educational provider which is tuned in to what in its view are the needs and requirements of its students. The text tells us the amount of money that will be spent on providing a technology-enhanced learning environment but the reader has no way of knowing what percentage of the university's budget this figure constitutes. Some experts have observed that is a common practice in the world of advertising to manipulate rather than to inform (Dyer 1982), that is, to exclude relevant information and to highlight other information according to what is deemed necessary to boost the image of the product or service. This text, in stating its intention to provide the students with choice and flexibility in learning, seems to draw from the domain of advertising and marketing. This may not seem unexpected as the HE sector is shaped by the society in which it operates (Ashwin 2012, p.7). Thus the marketing pitch with its promise to spend £18 million on technology-mediated learning opportunities seems intended to ensure that the institution is able to compete with other universities to attract students. This offer of better services may be a calculated move to promote the institution over other institutions, and seems to be following what was decreed in the *Browne Review* – that competition improves the quality of education (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010, p 32). The text can thus be said to be giving a stamp of approval to the *Browne Report's* conception of education.

The text is authored by the Senior Management Team (SMT) of the institution, which has financial and administrative authority to state that money and efforts will not be spared in ensuring a better student experience. The authoritative voice used to declare the institution's commitment to fulfil the needs and expectations of students, as expressed through the use of "we will invest in...." positions the university as acting in the best interests of its students, so that they benefit from the actions of the institution.

Further evidence of the advertising jargon intruding into HE comes from another statement of the *Strategic Plan*:

The distinctive nature of our work, together with the energy and expertise of our staff, is critical to our ongoing success as we develop an academic portfolio and student experience which respond innovatively and dynamically to change. (*Strategic Plan 2011*, p.8)

This section of the text presents as an established fact that the institution is successful. It expresses this "fact" with the help of the phrase "our ongoing success", which it says is due to the remarkable work of the university and of its staff. By highlighting the excellent features that are crucial to the institution's success in developing a meaningful student experience, it appears to be informing readers that it is an outstanding institution with hardworking and experienced staff. This glowing image of the institution that is sought to be created fits within the marketing-oriented discourse and ideology that has found its way

into HE, as several experts on HE have already noted (Blum and Ullman 2012, p.368; Chapleo 2011, p.101; and Morrish and Suanstion 2013).

A look at the lexicogrammar of the text, tells us that the phrases “our work”, “our staff”, “our ongoing success”, and “we develop” have a specific discourse function, which is to represent the institution as playing the lead role in the academic programme for the students. The staff on the other hand seem to be portrayed as having a secondary position, which is to execute the university’s master plan. However, the interviews with the students showed that most of the students held the staff in high regard and thought that it was they who had played an important role in their positive experience, and even the two students who claimed that they would have liked the staff to have been more understanding did not have a purely consumer-like attitude.

If the analyst intends to engage in more than a perfunctory analysis of the text under investigation, then it is necessary to explore the specific nature of the sphere of communication, which determines the whole utterance as well as its lexical and grammatical features (Bakhtin 1986, p. 61). As per this explanation, the text here may be said to have developed in an atmosphere of competition. Moreover, as a fairly new university which is probably trying to climb up the league tables, it seems to be trying to convince students that it is an institution that they should attend. To this end, it utilises strategies and jargon to promote the institution. Thus the form and structure of the utterance under analysis seems to be related to the purpose and also to the larger environment within which the institution operates.

The preoccupation with students’ expectations and with offering choice and innovation is not unique to this institution, but can be traced to government pronouncements. And so the analysis moves on to examine government policy documents.

#### *4.3.10 “HEFCE will take on a major role as a consumer champion”*

An understanding that innovative learning opportunities are necessary to improve “TSE” seems to be the focus of government policies on HE. For example, the policy on *Making the HE system more efficient and diverse* states:

We also want to ensure HE institutions provide innovative, high quality learning. We believe the way to do this is by making institutions compete to attract students and the funding they bring with them. (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills , December 2012b, p.2)

This policy seeks to convey several messages. First, it proclaims the government’s determination to guarantee state-of-the-art and quality education for students by compelling universities to offer their students innovative learning opportunities. Further, the text notifies the reader that in addition to enforcing innovation upon HEIs, the

government is exhorting universities to compete for students. Another message sought to be transmitted is that students should fund their own education. This message, communicated without any hedging in the text, leaves no illusion that the authors are convinced that institutions should raise their own resources by levying fees, which the students have to pay.

The text can be interpreted as stating clearly the government's belief that universities should engage in free-market competitive business practices to lure students; and unsurprisingly that is what this institution intends to do, as the statement from the *Strategic Plan* discussed earlier indicates. More significantly, the text seems to be informing us that the way to quality in education is through competition. It seems fairly clear that the framers of the policy are adhering to the advice of one of the founding fathers of the neoliberal project, Hayek, who, in *Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, firmly declared that "through further competition, not through agreement, we increase our efficiency" (1988/ 1992, p.6).

If we analyse the actions that the government, as lead actor in the text, states it is engaging in, we understand that it can make HEIs do what it tells them to, in order to achieve the outcomes it desires. The transitive processes, expressed through constructions such as "we want to ensure..." and "...by making institutions compete", tells us that the text represents the government as having power and authority over HEIs. An understanding of the contextual factors that seem to influence the authors of this text to draft this utterance comes about through an analysis involving the socio-ideological nature of language. In precise terms, this involves an understanding of the authorial position.

The authors of this text, which is probably drafted on behalf of the government in power, put forward this policy, which seems to be aligned with the principles of financial sustainability, wider participation, and higher quality outlined by the *Browne Review* (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010). The latter document strongly advocated for students to have choice, and for HEIs to charge high fees if they met the criteria that it thought students were looking for. Since the Review claimed to be recommending programmes for the government and HEIs to implement, based on its consultations with academics, institutions, students and other experts, the government of the day in the text under analysis seems to be adhering to its recommendations. However, it is equally important to note that the *Browne Review* was commissioned in 2009, when the after effects of the 2008 financial crisis were still unravelling, in this situation the pressure on public spending, and the clamour to scale it down, rose. The policy decision thus seems to be a continuation of the trend to transform HE and to cut government funding to the sector.

The 2010 policy statement was followed by a White Paper, *Students at the heart of the system* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011) which set out the government's commitment to transforming the relationship between universities and their students, to resemble the relationship between service providers and consumers.

So we will empower prospective students by ensuring much better information on different courses. We will deliver a new focus on student charters, student feedback and graduate outcomes. We will oversee a new regulatory framework with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) taking on a major role as a consumer champion (*ibid*, p.2)

The text seems to be full of the government's promises to students - to empower them, to monitor universities and to see that universities provide students with accurate information about courses. Here again the government appears to be prescribing the tasks HEIs should undertake to best serve student-consumers. Further, these pronouncements seem likely to increase accountability and to reduce the autonomy of HEIs and of their staff. Also, the text can be taken as an explicit admission of the government's attitude towards education, that is, a corporate-style marketing orientation to HE.

This text too, like the one analysed earlier, bears traces of the government's determined and authoritative tone. The assumption implicit in the text is that students as consumers would have grievances against the providers of the service and would need the intervention of a body to safeguard their interests and to ensure that they have a good experience. The connotation is that a good student experience depends on how well HEIs fulfil the needs of student consumers. These texts can be analysed as having a narrow conception of what constitutes education. Bearing in mind the construct of education, which clearly outlined the critical and social roles that education has, it may be said that the policy texts have an understanding of HE and of HEIs as having to provide students with choice and to satisfy their needs as consumers.

Since for some students the issue of fees had an impact on their experiences and their expectations it might be necessary to explore in detail the main concerns of the students and the institution, and to relate these views to those expressed by government policies on fees and funding for universities.

#### **4.4. Issues and experiences relating to fees and funding**

The issue of university tuition fees relates in different ways to "TSE". These interpretations of the linkage between fees and "TSE" cross over into the territory of the role of education. The following section analyses various utterances to understand the messages they contain about the purpose of education.

At a committee meeting the members seem to be gripped with anxiety about the unfolding funding situation.

*Several members of this committee seemed to be agitated about the precarious nature of government funding for universities, in particular for disadvantaged and disabled students. One member remarked that with the government announcing cuts to funding for students, there seemed to be a discrepancy between the rhetoric of widening participation and the reality. Another pointed out that there would be a change in the Disabled Students' Allowance, that the government would provide funding only to those students with complex needs and that the university would have to find resources to support its students with learning disabilities. (Committee 3, April 2014)*

Since debates on the topic of university fees and finances have been ongoing, it is no surprise then that impending cuts to universities' grants was one of the major talking points of many of the committee meetings I attended. In fact, the implications of the cuts, and the actions the institution would have to take to offset the impact on students, dominated the committee meeting reported here. The members of the committee were unanimous in expressing their disapproval of the changes to the fees and funding structure. As university staff entrusted with different responsibilities related to supporting students at university, the members of this committee seem to be acutely aware of the difficulties some students face. In this scenario HEIs are required to put forward access agreements spelling out how they intend to widen participation. The institutional staff seem to realise that their work of supporting students, who are being encouraged to study at university through the government's widening participation efforts, is going to be more difficult. However, expressing their dismay at the proposed policies and their likely impact on students may be ineffective to address the situation (McCaig and Adnett 2009, p. 34). These researchers argue that in a climate of higher fees HEIs tend to use their offer of support in the form of bursaries as a marketing device to recruit students to their institution. They argue that the focus is not on widening participation to the sector as a whole but to their respective HEI.

Following this brief glimpse into the response of some of the institution's staff to the rise in fees and the cut in grants to universities, the analysis turns to finding out what the students had to say about the changing fee structure and what this means for their experience.

#### *4.4.1 "Charging us 9000, sorry I think it's a great mistake actually yeah mildly offensive"*

I put a question about tuition fees to Ben because, while talking about his experience and the expectations he had of his tutors, he mentioned the fees students pay.

I – Would you like to say any anything more about university fees?

B – Yeah in terms of the fees I obviously you can't help but notice the discourse surrounding tuition fees, everybody has a position or voice to speak on that, they got their education for free and then now implying that we should pay high fees (Ben, p.5)

I – But the policies say that those who benefit should contribute?

B - Uhm I don't know I I'm trying to interpret that in a way that kind of makes sense to me, I mean you know it's it's as a phrase it sounds very nice, you should contribute I guess but if that's like charging us 9000, sorry I think it's a great mistake actually yeah mildly offensive (laughs) I don't know yeah I agree with the sentiment of the phrase but I don't know how it justifies charging the populace more for an education I don't understand that considering that like the an education should be I think a brilliant part of our society or whatever like free education for how many years, so I don't understand that (laughs) I'm quite amused by that phrase. It's the idea that you talk about a hospital and then talk about profit, so those two things don't go together, and these are really really things to be proud of I mean Britain, the national health services, they say, yeah it's it's not something to be just disregarded, and especially when you are obviously when you notice these expenses scandal or whatever kind of thing well we know like wealthy people are corrupt have a tendency to be corrupt in powerful positions, so yeah gosh, yeah, but then they so then for them to say that people who benefit the most should contribute, well I would say it's obvious that a kind of moral sense seems lacking (Ben, p.6)

A general overview of Ben's outburst is that he seemed to have much to say about the raising of university tuition fees and the people responsible for it. He offered his opinions, shared his beliefs and plainly voiced his condemnation of what he deemed to be unfair and perhaps morally repugnant. After what seemed to be a thorough analysis and assessment of the situation, Ben concluded with his verdict on the unfolding events and, by proxy, on the people responsible for the situation. His detailed outpouring offered insights into the array of thoughts and emotions that were stirring in his mind: Ben expressed his confusion, his amusement, his indignation and even his incomprehension of the decisions taken to impose fees of approximately 9000 pounds on students.

Although I invited him to talk about fees, a point to note is that I only mentioned the word fees, but Ben attached the word "high" to emphasize that in his opinion the fees were indeed much more than what students should be asked to pay. Further, he did not hesitate to point out the irony of the situation, that is, he questioned how those who received free education could speak about imposing high fees on the students of today. In effect, Ben seemed to be setting up an oppositional interaction between the policy makers and the students (himself included), with the latter as victims of the hiked fee regime imposed by the former.

Although Ben did not directly name any particular persons or organisations for the decision to hike university fees, it is not hard to infer that it was the people wielding political power



whose words, thoughts and actions Ben vehemently denounced. Since I did not ask him to clarify who are the “they” he was referring to, it is quite likely that I was conveying my understanding of what he was saying and the opponents he was attacking. I then tried to get him to respond to the statements issued by the policymakers justifying the imposition and the raising of fees. Probably encouraged by the understanding I showed, Ben hesitated a bit before launching into a scathing tirade against the fee structure.

Focusing on the language that Ben uses brings to light his attitudes towards the situation and his representation of the people involved. He voices this accusation without any hesitation but with the language of conviction. Through his arguments Ben discloses his belief in a welfare state, which in his view should be committed to providing people with certain necessary services free. Also, this indication of where he stands in relation to ethical and moral questions fits within de Fina’s (2006, p.263) description of identity as a means of communicating to another the kind of person we are. This indicates that Ben, in talking about these issues, sought to portray an image of himself as a politically aware person. In terms of self-representation, with his reference to the debates playing out in the media, in policy circles and other fora, he indicates that he has his ears tuned in to the ongoing discussions, and shows himself as aware of economic and political issues in the country, and of corruption of those in public office.

In expressing his views on the topic of fees, and his views on what those who have imposed fees are saying, Ben is both retorting and commenting on the utterances of the policymakers. The reported speech (the policymaker’s words) and the authorial speech (Ben’s remarks) reflect a dynamic social inter-orientation in ideological communication between people (Volosinov 1973, p.119). Through analyses of Ben’s voice we get insight not only into the individual utterances but into the social life of the utterance (*ibid*, p.117). In other words, the reporting context has traces of the economic and political climate and the socio-ideological orientation of the people involved. This can be explained further by considering that Ben’s utterance comes into existence because of the utterances that were made by the policymakers, and he brings not his individual perception and evaluation, but his socially formed orientation to reply and comment on the policy statements. Put simply, as a mature student Ben seems to be keenly aware of the debts students are likely to incur because of tuition fees, and he takes the discussion beyond the realm of his immediate experience. Ben’s concern is not unfounded, as research by Dearden et al (2011, p.24) found that there was a 3.9 per cent decline in university participation as a result of an increase in fees. A related point is made by Pennell and West (2005, p.136), who express concern that the objectives of widening participation to lower socio-economic groups may not be fulfilled as students from these groups are likely to be debt-averse. This could be

the reason for Ben's anger about the government's decision to raise tuition fees, an anger that is shared by some of the other students too, who articulated their views on a matter that directly affects them and could have implications for the rest of their lives.

#### 4.4.2 *"The minute they become policy makers they forget that they once were people who got free education"*

Wilma's response to the issue of fees had many resonances with those of Ben.

I – About education and fees – well, what are your views?

W - I mean I've always I have always said that water, gas, electricity, should not be things we pay for, these are basic human needs, they are not wants I mean education to some extent I can understand why the government may want to cost it out, because it does cost a lot to run institutions and I think I would be ok if I knew what I was paying for (.) and when they say things like choice, you are using a very business-like tactic to sell me a product that isn't a product (Wilma, p.8)

A question that sought to elicit her general opinion on university fees allowed Wilma to set the tone of her response and to determine its direction. Like Ben, she accepts that students should pay some fees, but she makes a clear distinction between education as a consumer product and as a necessity for life. In questioning the business intrusion into HE, Wilma articulated her thoughts with fervour and appeared to be actually engaging the decision-makers in an argument. Her choice of the second person pronoun in this phrase - "you are using a very business-like...." seems to be a direct address to the people in charge of education and responsible for the raising of fees, in fact, as admonishing them for their attitude towards education and the way they are promoting it, like a business.

The significance of Wilma's assertion lies in her identifying and denouncing terms such as "choice" in the language of HE, and its practices, which appear to be akin to a "business". To get at the meaning of her utterance, which can be said to have developed through the material of her social environment (Volosinov 1973, p.102), one has to trace the objective roots of the utterance, as Volosinov recommends (1976, p.86). This involves understanding the social environment, which comprises socio-economic factors and forces and the relations between the speaker and others in this environment. As a student who enjoyed her academic experience and who told me that she was academically engaged, Wilma certainly seems to have a grasp of socio-economic developments and their connection to her education. Given the direction that HE is moving along as a result of the policies of the sector, Wilma can be seen as having developed her social consciousness through her interaction with this situation. In other words, she seems to have encountered the utterances of the policymakers as reported in the media or elsewhere, to which she is giving her response in this interview. Whilst it is true that many students may have encountered the policies being prescribed for HE, not all would

respond in the ways that Wilma, Ben and some of the other students in my study did. The different interpretations could be explained by the interplay of the social milieu and the position the speaker has in this environment.

When I prompted Wilma into responding to the policymakers' rationalisation of the fee issue, she unleashed her well-thought out arguments rebutting the views of the policymakers.

I - So what would you say when the policies say that those who benefit should contribute?  
W – Well we've had no problem with contribution, the problem we have is how much you want us to contribute because it's it should never be this high, we are going to have a generation of students who will graduate in three, four years' time and they will be in debt for years, they are saying their argument here is that students are benefitting from education, are they benefitting? for one we know that jobs are on an all-time low, you know employment rates have gone right down, how much are these people benefitting, have they gone into the real world to be able to make these assumptions or are these assumptions that they have made from statistics, because statistics are not always correct and they don't always reflect the real situation and I think these are things that policy makers need to be more aware of and they are not, they are always quite out of touch I find, the minute they become policy makers they forget that they once were people who were in education, they were once people who got free education (Wilma, p.9)

Once again Wilma's arguments resemble those advanced by Ben, both in terms of the perception of the fee situation and in her evaluation of the people who implemented the policy on university tuition fees. Similar to Ben, Wilma represents herself, and other students, as aligned as one against those who engineered the hike in fees. This can be inferred from her use of "we" and "they". Also, she can be seen as speaking on behalf of all students as the aggrieved party affected by the decision to charge students high fees for their education. Although the "they" as the opponents are not named, their identity can be deduced from the context and the co-text, as Wilma makes a reference to the policymakers a few lines later. An additional feature of Wilma's language is the rhetorical questions, which are intended to persuade the interlocutor to accept her points of view. These are: firstly, that students cannot be seen as benefitting from education because of the precarious employment situation in the country; and secondly, that the assumption that students will benefit from education is underpinned by inaccurate statistics.

Going by the suggestions offered by Volosinov (1973, p.123) that the conditions of verbal communication, its forms, and its methods of differentiation are dictated by the social and economic prerequisites of a given period, one can see Wilma's utterance as emerging from the terrain of these changing sociolinguistic conditions. Wilma vigorously debunks the assumptions that students benefit from education and so should have to pay for it. And

the arguments she lines up – unemployment, students' debts – testify to her keen awareness of the issues of the day for students. Furthermore, precisely because the policies assert that students benefit, Wilma can be seen as retorting with her own assertions.

While Wilma appears to be adopting the role of a spokesperson speaking for all students, Michelle, who will be discussed in the following section, offered her personal experience linked to university tuition fees.

#### *4.4.3 "If I'm not working and I'm not in lectures I have to be doing like my uni work, if I ever took like a day off it's like I'm behind"*

Michelle shared Wilma's and Ben's anguish over the high fees, but her concern had more to do with the financial burden she had to bear and how this affected her experience.

I - Could you please tell me what you think about the fees students have to pay - university fees?

M – What would you like to know?

I – Do you have any views on that? The fees?

M - Definitely, if you don't have a job then you probably don't have the money to socialise, even with a job I still struggle to find the money to socialise because it's very expensive to participate in like lots of different events because a lot of them revolve around money so the fees, and the cost of rent is ridiculous, and if you don't have family supporting you then like for me if you need the extra so you work but it takes your spare time away, because I find if I'm not working and I'm not in lectures I have to be doing like my uni work, if I ever took like a day off it's like I'm behind, yeah because you don't have spare time if you work as well then like even that extra money you get in you just like oh it goes to pay the bills, yeah it's tough (Michelle, p.7)

Michelle gives us an insight into the plight of students who have to work their way through university, in doing so she indirectly draws attention to the widening participation agenda of bringing in students from all backgrounds into HE and its effectiveness (or lack if it) as a social justice measure. The point to ponder over is whether merely opening the doors of HE to students from a wider socio-economic base is adequate in itself, especially in the context of higher tuition fees. In fact, the measures to widen participation seem to be at odds with the decision to raise the cost of education, which adds to the other expenses students incur while studying at university.

The significance of Michelle's utterance can be grasped through understanding her as a hardworking, working class, first generation student, who was always anxious that she would fall behind in her studies. Probably as a result of this anxiety and the responsibility that her position and her identity entrusted onto her, Michelle made judicious use of her time. The ironic situation of her life as a student was that, if she did not work, she would

not have money for extras such as engaging in social activities, but if she worked, then she would have no time for socialising. Another aspect to her utterance is that it not only describes her situation but also comments on HE and policy contexts. It reveals the difficulties students endure with the pressure to work and earn while studying, especially for those who do not have the security blanket of their family to finance their education. Commenting on the impact of university fees on participation in HE, Pennell and West (2005, p.127) argue that students from minority ethnic groups and lower socio-economic groups are more likely to work during term time, and this could affect their academic performance. The issues that Michelle raised pertain to her experience, that is, to how the high fees affected her experience at university, but it does expose the incongruity between the claims to widen participation and the changed funding structure of HE. The next student discussed her views on university fees and did not dwell on her experience, but she alluded to the flaws in the widening participation agenda.

#### *4.4.4 "I feel that the ethos behind the fees is we want to limit the number of people who go to uni"*

Another student, Debbie, when asked to comment on the topic of fees, made an oblique reference to widening participation by wondering what could be the reason for raising fees.

I - University fees – what can you tell me about that?

D - Well I'm paying 3000 for each year, but to put that to 9000 I was well let's put it this way I was how incredibly crazy that number is, so I would like to know why they feel, why the government feels that that was necessary

I – those who benefit should contribute – that's what they say

D – eh without without students going to uni and learning to learn the trades that are needed for the economy, without students doing that then you are going to have a workforce which quite possibly lacks the academic training, if you don't go to for example law, I could only go to uni really strictly speaking it's the quickest easiest way to obtain the pathway to law is to obtain a law degree, so why then do does the government feel that (laughs) to have the people paying right 9000 a year it's just not fair it's it's not fair it doesn't make economic sense I don't understand why (.) I have a strong opi opinion on that, I'm not sure whether I should voice that but I definitely feel that uh paying 9000 pounds is ludicrous, I feel that the fees I feel that the ethos behind it is we want to uh limit the number of people who go to uni it's absolutely ridiculous in my opinion (Debbie, p.5)

It is not a matter of great surprise that Debbie immediately connected the question about fees to the hike in fees. The ongoing and wide-ranging debates in the media seem to have reached her ears, as it has for almost all students I interviewed.

Another feature that stands out is that Debbie examined the propositions advanced in support of raising fees, and offered counter propositions. She thus tried to get the listener

or reader to see both points of view. At times she did hesitate or appear to be cautious but for the most part she was forthright in rejecting the views of the government and in exposing the inconsistencies in their reasoning. She did this through rhetorical questions – “why then does the government feel that people should be paying 9000 a year” - which serve to strengthen her arguments that the government’s position was untenable. Debbie’s explanation for the importance of education can be interpreted as endorsing the government’s narrow view of education for employment. But as discussed in section 4.2.1, she had a much broader perspective on the role of education, she highlighted the significant gains she received from education in terms of knowledge and skill for different areas of life rather than merely work-oriented skills.

Debbie seemed to be in agreement with the views about tuition fees voiced by the other student participants discussed earlier. In the interaction reported here she was narrating her reaction to the hike at the time it was announced, that is, it came into effect for students who were in the first year of university, while she was in her final year. Although the hike in fees did not affect Debbie, she declared that she was strongly against the tripling of fees and in fact suspected the motive for the decision. Moreover, as a White British middle class student, Debbie did not face any particular issue with fees, but she voiced her views against it. This can be interpreted as Debbie aligning herself with the community of students, as did Ben and Wilma.

The conscious awareness of fees and their impact on students is socially formed, however, one is not saying that everyone in those circumstances would respond in the same way. It may well be that different students in similar circumstances and faced with the same issues would respond in different ways. In emphasising the social basis of consciousness, it can only be said that the context does provide the raw material for our thoughts which any individual can then process to develop his or her own understanding of a situation. A point that Marx clearly stated in the third *Thesis on Feuerbach*: “The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself” (Marx 1845 in McLellan 1977 p.156). In other words, there is a dynamic interplay of factors and forces with circumstances providing the potential for the human agent to develop his or her ideas. Returning to Debbie’s utterance, her allegiance is to her community of students, and this community cuts across class lines. In expressing her critique of the government’s policy on education, Debbie, a White middle class student, shares the view of the next student in this analysis.

*4.4.5 “You are not benefitting because you have to pay back the student loan, with interest on top of it .....that doesn’t make sense.... It’s so unfair”*

Penny, a Black British student, expressed her exasperation with the education system and with those in charge in response to the topic of fees, which came up without a direct question on my part, when I touched upon a topic that can be said to be contiguous to that of fees - working while studying.

I - Were you working?

P- Yeah, part-time but it was stressful

I – Then why did you work?

P - I had to I had to work, even though what I would get it would be gone by the end the month (.) I had to work, I don’t know how I’m going to survive on student loan, because I’m planning not to work in my final year, I’m just going to have to survive, you know I’m planning to work this summer, I’m planning to find a job in London this summer and do full-time full-time and then I don’t have to work when the new term starts

I – You said it was stressful why (.) could you say why?

P - Most definitely, it’s the stress of fees, do you know like how much money it costs, like money itself is hard, and I’m like who is running this country, what the hell is going on, now I’ve just tried to get into politics a little bit, the whole system is so messed up, and education is the cherry on top with the fees, the higher fees students have to pay

I - But the policies say those who benefit should contribute. What do you think?

P - So what does that mean? so the people that (.) because you get a degree you should pay more, I understand that, but what’s the point of benefitting from something when really truly you are not benefitting, because you have to pay back the student loan, with interest on top of it, you have to survive, you have to pay to live, what is the benefit, how are you benefitting, I’m so confused, that doesn’t make sense, so what are they talking, when they did that I just couldn’t believe it, I was like it’s so unfair, I’m already I’m going to owe like 30, 40 grand, it’s so unfair (Penny2, p.9)

Penny’s story is that she felt compelled to work, yet the money that she earned was barely enough to survive. When asked to explain the reasons for the stress she said she experienced, Penny brought the discussion onto the terrain of fees. Although the policymakers seem to believe that students should pay because they say that students are the ones benefitting from education, Penny and the other students discussed here do not share that perception.

Unlike Wilma, Debbie and Ben, who came across as speaking on behalf of the student body at large, but akin to Michelle, Penny’s attention and anger was focused on her existing situation and the indebted future that awaited her after graduation. The rhetorical questions that she deployed, such as “what’s the point of benefitting” and “what the hell is going on” lent an energetic force to her arguments as she expressed her distaste for the

education system and the way it was functioning at present. Her detailed description of her summer work plan, and her declaration that she is developing an interest in the political scene, send out a strong message that Penny was not indifferent to or disengaged from her studies or from society. She represented herself as a person who made strategic decisions in the interest of her studies at university.

The significance of Penny's utterance lies in its content, in what it tells us about HE and about UK society and economy. In her well-considered view, things seem to be in a real mess. Like Ben, Penny seems to be alluding to the scams and scandals, such as the expenses claims by some Members of Parliament, which are surfacing on the political scene. Of greater significance is that her statement here has to be understood with reference to her other statements in response to other topics, in particular to her experience interacting with the academic staff. There Penny highlighted the assumptions that are often made by some within the HE sector (see Ramsden 2008) about students from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, assumptions that I also encountered during the course of this study. In saying that she planned not to take up a job during her final year at university so that she could concentrate on her studies, Penny seems to be challenging the assumption that students like her do not engage academically and so underperform.

The construct of language brings another dimension to the analysis of Penny's utterance: the evaluative tone with which she severely castigates the political establishment and the policies being inflicted on students. In plain terms, as she vents her dismay at the HE fee system, and the general disarray in the political and economic scene, she connects it to her personal situation. It is this personal experience or the anticipated situation of indebtedness that frames Penny's utterance. As the works of both Bakhtin (1981, 1984, and 1986) and Volosinov (1973 and 1976) explain, ideological orientation determines what topics enter the purview of an utterance. The fear of indebtedness that tends to plague students from lower socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds drives them to work during their university studies (Pennell and West 2005). These two factors – fear of debts and the need to work - could affect their academic achievement and their experience, and also shape Penny's utterance.

The different students had much to say about the fees students are expected to pay, and what it meant for them in terms of studying, working and the obligation to pay back the loan after graduating. The spotlight now turns to the institutional policies and practices, to see whether these share the concerns of the students or have conflicting interests.



#### 4.4.6 “We will seek to maintain our generally strong performance in access and student success in what is a more challenging financial environment for students”

The institution, as was evident through the discussions at the committee meeting, has many concerns about how the revised fees and funding systems are likely to affect students. This analysis takes a look at some of the key statements from the *Access Agreement* that the university submits to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).

The Agreement seeks to ensure that in a context of increased tuition fees, CCCU sustains and, where possible improves, its performance in assisting and supporting suitably qualified, under-represented students to access and succeed in Higher Education (HE), where success is recognised to include retention, attainment and employment. (*Access Agreement* 2015 – 16, p.1)

These lines from the introduction to the *Access Agreement* of the University lay out the general direction of the institution’s plans to support its students. In fact, the statement seems to be implying that the institution will have to do more than what it is already doing to help certain groups of students, on account of the higher fees students have to pay.

The institution’s concern for its under-represented students is apparent through its stated goals; however, its acceptance of the higher fees, or rather its inability to challenge this despite being well aware that it poses difficulty for some of its students, is also clear. The conclusion that can be drawn from what is said, and from what is not said too, is that although institutions may notice that some of their students find it hard to pay the higher fees and that this difficulty could affect their retention and attainment at university, they have little choice but to play along and instead to offer some students soothing support to relieve some of the adverse effects of the increased fees.

An additional point to note is that the commitment to help under-represented students, while no doubt well-meaning, can be construed as hinting that these students are not successful in terms of good degree attainment and that they could face problems with regard to retention and completing their course of study. A focus on the keywords such as “under-represented students”, “retention” and “attainment”, leads me to surmise that for the institution, success in education means attaining a good score and progressing to a good job, and under-represented students in particular need help in these areas. This raises a disquieting point about the way in which the institution measures success, in other words, learning in terms of developing thoughts and ideas about the world, as was pointed out by the students in sections 4.2.1; 4.2.2; and 4.2.3, is not counted as a measure of success. Instead, the text promises that the institution will see students through till they complete their education and even beyond into the world of work.

Closely related to the preceding point is another phrase in the text that demands attention - “suitably qualified” - which can be interpreted as stating that HE is available only for those deemed to have the appropriate qualifications and abilities. A noteworthy point is that, since only suitably qualified under-represented students are admitted to HE, these students are more or less on par in terms of academic abilities with students from well-represented groups. The subsequent point to be made then is that it is a mystery why these suitably qualified students face difficulties at university, have lower attainment scores, and have difficulties in completing their course of study. It is indeed inexplicable that they are perceived as being somehow inferior or inadequate with regard to the abilities required to be successful at university. One wonders then whether it is the institution’s perception of these suitably qualified students or the students’ lack of preparation for university that leads to retention and attainment issues. Moreover, as Jones and Thomas (2005, p. 616) note, framing widening participation or fair access in terms of creaming off better able students from under-represented groups maintains a deficit view of these students as being uninformed or under-prepared for university study. Calling for progressive approaches to widening participation (*ibid*, p.627), these experts insist that there should be a focus on changing the culture and practices of the institution.

The statement in question is a part of the *Access Agreement* drawn up by the institution, which every institution has to mandatorily submit to the HEFCE / OFFA. This Agreement lays out the institution’s intention and commitment to improving access and success, and must be approved by the Director of Fair Access as a condition for charging fees higher than the basic fee. Access Agreements became a requirement following the policy decision to allow institutions to charge higher fees, and may be seen as an attempt to counter the charge that high fees would deter students from attending university.

The document then goes on to present data obtained through the monitoring and evaluation of its existing access plans, and gives details of its estimated allocation for access and success measures for the future.

Our estimated spend on access and success measures remains at 22.9% (£5,407,235). Given our relatively strong record this may be higher than expected by OFFA but reflects our institutional values and commitment to supporting our increasing student population from under-represented and disadvantaged communities as integral to our Mission as a University with a Church Foundation. This level of spend also reflects what we consider to be necessary for maintaining and improving our current record for access and student success and addressing the priorities identified as a result of our detailed assessment. Spend on financial support remains high based on high percentage of qualifying students and in light of the government withdrawal of National Scholarship Programme funding (*Access Agreement* 2015 – 16, p.14).

The text conveys the institution's intention to continue spending 22 per cent of its fee income on supporting students from less privileged groups. It informs us that the institution is known for reaching out to the less fortunate as this lies at the core of its Christian mission. This indicates that the institution compassionately feels the need to step in, because government funding to support these students is not going to be available.

Some information about the institution's role and position, and its attitude towards its students, can be gleaned by focusing on the linguistic features of this extract. The aspects of lexicogrammar as expressed through "given our strong record", "reflects our institutional values" and "our detailed assessment" allows us to see the institution as acting in the best interests of its students and with a long-standing commitment to these values. Although the statement notifies us that the number of students from under-represented groups is high, it does not attempt to explain it in terms of political or economic factors, but presents it just as a matter to be stated. A contextual understanding of the institution as a fairly new one, whose intake of students is not drawn from the ranks of the elite, might be necessary to make sense of this text. Moreover, the allusion to the whittling away of government funds exposes the state of helplessness that universities find themselves in, or which they unquestioningly accept. It seems that they are left with no option other than to step in to shoulder responsibilities that were once taken care of by the government. The reference to the withdrawal of government grants notwithstanding, the text is non-committal as far as expressing its disapproval of this cut in funding, this is in contrast to the comments raised at the meeting I observed where the increase in fees and the withdrawal of grants by the government were much denounced (see beginning of section 4.4).

The tensions that are noticeable in the institutional statements may be explained by the different social positions of the authors of the different utterances. As staff working on the ground supporting students, the committee member encountered at the beginning of this section expressed her anguish at the withdrawal of funds for students, probably because she had first-hand experience of dealing with students in financial straits. The authors of this text are most likely to be from senior management, whose priority would be to ensure that the institution adhered to the guidelines of government policies, for this would guarantee that its *Access Agreement* would be approved and it would be allowed to charge higher fees. Through the dialogic nature of language, the text can be interpreted as echoing some of the government policy texts and to which it is responding.

Despite failing to express disapproval for the withdrawal of government grants, later on in the document the institution presents evidence to show that financial support for its students helps in retaining them at university.

Of the 22.9% (£5,407,235) of additional fee income which is to be spent on access measures, 77.8% (£4,205,422) will be spent on financial support through scholarships and bursaries. Following the University's successful allocation of all of its NSP awards, the subsequent removal of the scholarship for undergraduate students from 2015/16 and in consultation with student focus groups and the Students' Union, the institution intends to continue to provide financial support to its students from low income households. Our own internal survey carried out with students in receipt of financial support found that 84% of students felt that the award contributed to their CCCU retention in 2011/12 academic year. (Access Agreement 2015 – 16, p.15)

This text spells out the ways through which the institution intends to go about disbursing financial grants to students in need of such assistance, and the reasons it feels the need to do so. The document presents clinching evidence of the success of this funding measure. However, an OFFA 2014 report doubts the claims advanced by students and the institution that bursaries are helpful to retain students. The OFFA report – *Do bursaries have an effect on retention rates?* - refuses to acknowledge the institution's acceptance of the students' views and insists that it is requesting institutions to provide more evidence to support the claims for providing students' bursaries.

The dialogic nature of language helps to make sense of the institutional text and the atmosphere in which it is generated. An utterance is formed in response to other utterances, so the text under investigation seems to be alert to the new fee regime in HE and the reduction of government funds to the sector. However, the institution's commitment to helping some of its students financially, and the evidence it provides for doing so, seem to be dismissed by the national level decision makers. This dismissal raises awareness of the unequal power relations within the HE sector.

It is hardly necessary to get entangled in technical points of terminology such as grant, support, scholarships, bursaries but it is important to make the point that this *Access Agreement* provides specific information about actual spend and percentage spend. Since this document is submitted to OFFA, which requires institutions to provide specific information, there is detailed information and not vague statements as in the *Strategic Plan*, which we analysed in section 4.2.4.

Having examined the institution's statement which claims that it has to provide a support mechanism to assist some students and to prevent them from dropping out of education especially because the government is not offering any assistance, the analysis turns to consider the government's views on fees and funding.

#### 4.4.7 *“The people who benefit most from higher education should pay more towards their education”*

This statement (*Making the HE system more efficient and diverse*) bluntly conveys the thinking of the government on HE and the way it should be funded.

The government wants to ensure the system for funding universities is financially sustainable. We think this can be achieved by asking graduates - the people who benefit most from higher education - to pay more towards their education than they have in the past.

We are:

creating a new funding system for higher education, where graduates contribute more to their education; and creating a more diverse, competitive higher education sector by reviewing the way alternative providers can access funding (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills , December 2012b, p.2)

In this policy statement the government puts forward the reason for asking students to pay higher fees, which is that it wants to create a stable financial environment. The language of this text puts across as a statement of fact the government’s analysis of the condition of HE as being unsustainable. It also states in blunt terms that since students are the main beneficiaries of their education, they should pay more than what students in previous years have paid. The reason for the revised fees and funding system appears to be tied to two outcomes – to ensure financial sustainability and to enable private HE providers to have access to fee income from students. The policy however does not explain how the financial situation will become stable if students pay higher fees and if private providers enter the field of HE.

The text does not say why the funds are being cut, or allude to the government’s austerity measures. It also chooses not to mention who will benefit from the cuts, or where the money saved from education is being allocated. The absence of these important pieces of information may be said to be deliberate decisions to obscure the budgeting moves of the government. It is possible to say that without this information one can only offer guesses as to the motives of the hike in university tuition fees and one would be unable to subject the decision to robust questioning.

Furthermore, the text’s failure to connect the government’s plans to the wider socio-economic context can be interpreted as its way of concealing the hidden agenda that is driving its decisions. This approach to analysing the text draws on what Blommaert (2005, p.67) and van Dijk (2002b, p.71) point out, that analysis should include what is said and also what is unsaid. In this case what seems to be unsaid is that alternative or private providers should have equal opportunities to enter the HE sector, opportunities which they lacked because they were at a disadvantage vis a vis grant-receiving institutions. This

concern for financial sustainability of the HE sector and was first mooted by the *Browne Review* of 2010, which the government accepted. However, the “decisive shift towards a privately funded HE” (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2011) is remarkably clear in this text, with the intention to increase competition and diversity of providers.

The statement about the decision to hike fees was followed by what can be considered as a way of softening the blow.

We’re providing financial support to help young people from low income families go to university so that: students from families earning £25,000 or less get a full grant to help with living costs under our new National Scholarship Programme, universities will offer extra financial help to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. (*Making the HE system more efficient and diverse* – Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2012b)

The text seeks to assure the readers of the government’s actions in supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds at university. This section of the text seems to contradict the move to cut funding to universities, a move that the university staff at one of the meetings I attended were bemoaning. However, whilst one section of the text contains a promise to offer grants to students in need of financial assistance, a subsequent section shows that it is reneging on it. In fact, this statement too clearly indicates that the government expects universities to come to the aid of students. It may be said that the text demonstrates a feeble commitment to widening participation, more so because the National Scholarship Programme was discontinued for students starting HE in 2015 -16 and beyond. Moreover, despite widening participation policies, there is still a hierarchy of institutions, with widening participation mainly taking place in new universities (Boliver 2013, Shattock 2010).

In analysing this text it might be necessary to look at the language, not as the main driver of the change, but to get at the real driving forces of society (Jones 2004). In this case it could be the drive to push more students into university, in particular to get students from low income families to enter HE. This drive itself has to be explored and the possible reasons for it examined. One of which could be that Britain has one of the lowest participation rates in HE among developed countries (*Browne Review*: Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010, point 123). The Review claims that the country’s economic growth depends on the education of its people, and this could be a factor in the decision to widen participation. As the authors of the text under analysis have accepted most of the recommendation of the *Browne Review*, they are unlikely to go against its recommendation to widen participation.

Another less innocent reason for the insistence on widening participation could be that with more students at university, and with these students taking loans to finance their

education, the credit system would expand massively (Kliman 2008). According to Kliman, policymakers would like to encourage the expansion of debt to tackle economic stagnation as it is a way to artificially boost economic growth (2009, p.1). Extending this point, Paul Smyth notes that consumer credit helps to create profit through fees and interest payments. He adds that “capitalism is all about growth, so the commodification of areas that were previously untouched is the defining feature of neoliberal capitalism” (n.d., p.10).

Since the idea that students are going to benefit from education is used to justify charging them high fees, it is time to find out how this gain is constructed – whether the academic experience of students makes them want to engage and to continue their education, or whether their experience was different.

#### **4.5. Student retention and the academic experience**

Student retention is a widespread issue across the HE sector. This concern is often expressed in the vicinity of “TSE” because it is commonly thought that a successful student experience is possible if students do not drop out of education. This correlation connects easily with what is considered to be one of the purposes of education, which is to ensure that students complete their course (Crosling et al 2008, Engle and Tinto 2008, and Liz Thomas 2002). This section concentrates on the issue of retention, which did come up for some of the students participating in this study. The task now is to examine these different voices to get at what lies beneath the surface of these views.

A committee of this institution is reading and debating a report and an action plan, purporting to assist students who are “at risk” of withdrawing from education. The plan is drawn up in accordance with the report which has identified the vulnerable students and the likely reasons for their retention issues.

*A lively discussion is taking place on the data that the committee has of students withdrawing and the steps that the university should take to address this issue. The main talking point is the retention strategy action plan that has been drawn up, which firmly insists that student retention should to be on the agenda at the faculty level. Key components of the strategy are a revised policy on monitoring attendance and on identifying students at risk of withdrawing. The committee talks about the importance of an integrated approach so that a cause for care and concern for students at risk can be flagged up and addressed in a timely manner. According to the committee, among the several risk factors that need attention are underperformance, lack of familiarity with the academic environment, inability to cope with the demands of academic coursework, etc. (Committee 2, Jan 2014)*

The members of a committee responsible for student retention and success are expressing their understanding of the risk factors that lead to failure to attend and ultimately withdrawal from education. From this discussion it seems that the members of

this committee are convinced of the importance of tackling the retention issues of students it believes to be “at risk” of withdrawing from HE. Based on their awareness, they propose a technical solution, to monitor students’ attendance. The absence of any other reasons besides the ones mentioned indicates that these members are either unaware or unwilling to consider that there may be other reasons for retention issues. It might be true that some first generation students do meet the conditions identified by this committee, that is, they are unfamiliar with the academic environment, but it does not mean that their low grades correspond to low academic ability or lack of potential. The tendency to conflate these issues strongly suggests that these institutional staff and their thinking bears no relation to the construct of education, in particular the idea that educational ability is universal.

Interpreting the thoughts and views raised at this meeting through the social nature of language reveals the socially formed mindset of these members. This form of analysis also reveals the absence of a dialectical understanding that issues and events are not casually connected but outcomes of dialectical interaction. Put simply, it needs to be understood that language and behaviour evolve through interconnected processes of people interacting with their environment. The committee members assume that because some students do not have family experience of university they are likely to struggle with academic work, to attain lower grades and to be “at risk” of dropping out. However, a study by Kell and Gregson (2011) convincingly demonstrates that it is erroneous to view students of different ethnic and education backgrounds as lacking in academic literacy. Hence the institutional assumption is not only false but could also be linked to the class and race of the members of this institutional committee.

Upon observing this meeting, and mulling over the points raised, a question to ask is whether the strategies to monitor and to prevent the withdrawal of students seem appropriate to the situation as experienced by the students. Another question is whether the students’ reasons for thinking about leaving the institution are similar or different to the ones identified by the institution. A still further question is which groups of students are deemed to be “at risk”. The following interaction with Joel, a white British student, might throw some light on these questions plaguing my mind.

#### *4.5.1 “It almost seemed easier than A levels which really it shouldn't have”*

Here Joel, a White British student, explains what he expected from his academic experience and why he thought of leaving this university.

I - Could you please elaborate what you mean - you were slightly disappointed with your academic experience?

J - Yeah especially the first year the way I was it was it could have it felt like they were eh oversimplifying it or the structure seems a bit off they could have made it they could have



kind of given you more of an impetus to want to learn, my lecturers are incredibly enthusiastic which obviously you have to be, but it felt like it almost seemed easier than A levels which really it shouldn't have. (Joel, p.1)

Joel had earlier narrated that he had felt let down by his academic experience. His narration presented me with a question which I put to him. In response, he explained that he did think of leaving this university because he felt that he was not being challenged academically. However, embedded within his negative evaluation of his experience is a positive evaluation of the teaching staff. Like some of the other students discussed in section 4.2, Joel emphasised the good qualities of the teaching staff as he talked about the effort they put in to teach. Yet Joel, with his use of the term “obviously”, makes the point that he has an understanding of the level of knowledge and academic passion university academic staff should have. More crucially, a meaningful academic experience for Joel would be one with a high standard of teaching and a learning curriculum that stretches students' minds.

I tried to ask whether he did anything about his disappointment with the standard of education, to which he replied that he did think of leaving the university and of going to another.

I - Did you do anything about it, did you try to raise this issue?

J - I almost eh almost tried to switch to Kent, because Kent is a more established uni they are more likely to get people of my level of confidence and my capability to come over, it's just their knowledge base is more (----) and I was restrained here. I didn't feel like I had to push myself and learn that much, I did learn that's not saying I didn't learn anything because it would be very arrogant to say that (Joel, p.2)

Two preliminary points need to be made here: one, Joel thought the academic standard at this university was not on par with a more established university, and two, he thought the way out was to move to another university. A subsequent point is that Joel, while voicing his thoughts, was careful not to appear arrogant and condescending towards the institution and its academic staff. This circumspection succeeds in portraying Joel not as an all-knowing student but as a respectful one. Also, the use of phrases such as “it felt like...” indicated that he was expressing his thoughts or feelings, and was not presenting his perceptions as a universal view of the situation.

When I tried to find out whether he attempted to raise the issue of low standards with institutional authorities, Joel answered that he thought of moving to another university. His answer is significant for what it leaves out, which is his reasons for not raising this issue with the institution. However, his mention of a more established university could explain that Joel seems to think that this institution, being less established, would be unwilling to

pose a tough academic challenge to its students drawn mainly from under-represented groups. Here Joel's answer can be seen as aligning with the view of the university staff at the committee meeting - that non-traditional students lack the ability to meet the academic standards. It is quite likely that dominant ideas get diffused and accepted by wider society, as Gramsci (1971) accurately explained. It could also be that Joel's comments are based on his observations and are formed dialogically with these. Although himself a non-traditional student, Joel expected a tougher academic challenge, which he did not get.

A more pertinent point is that Joel's reasons for considering withdrawing from this institution, while not in any way a retention issue, as he was determined to continue his studies, does belie the claims of the institutional committee that students who are first generation in HE are likely to struggle at university. Furthermore, the mismatch between Joel's expectations and his academic experience exposes the flaws in the thinking of some who claim to have specialist insight into HE and into non-traditional students in HE, notably Bamber (2008), Biggs and Tang (2007), and Ramsden (2003). These, as pointed out earlier claim that non-traditional students are difficult to teach.

On the whole, Joel's answer brings to mind one of the five factors that Kuh et al (2006) claim as crucial to student success at university. Their study into HE in the US recognised that the level of academic challenge is important to student success. They pointed out that if the academic course poses adequate challenge, it gets the students engaged and feeling a part of the system; and it was this lack of academic challenge that made Joel think of leaving. This thought may not be considered a cause for care and concern in the eyes of the institution, but Joel's views chime in with those of another student, Ben, who felt that his academic experience was good but was not challenging enough.

#### 4.5.2 *"It does feel that the university is mollycoddling school children"*

In trying to understand what other students had to say about their academic experience and the standard of education they encountered at this institution, the analysis focuses on Ben, who seems to believe that the university is more interested in appeasing younger students.

I – So were you able to deal with the the academic pressures?

B – Yeah I think so, like I said at the start it's quite reasonable the academic workload but it does feel that the uni does cater to the 19 year old rather than being about sort of academia as a whole like do you know what I mean, sort of kind of mollycoddling school children rather than (laughs) you know get on with life

I - What do you mean by mollycoddling?

B - Raise the standards maybe, yeah maybe it was a bit strong (laughs), I don't know, I yeah maybe again it's probably just my cynicism but I do kind of feel really can we just get

on? I wouldn't like to say it's it's you know dumbed down because I feel that's kind of harsh, maybe I don't want to say it because maybe the third year will be harder than I expected, but I do yeah I actually feel that we take a lot of time to make sure that that sort of everyone is ok (Ben1, p.3)

The question put to Ben sought to elicit information about his encounter with the academic environment, but he used his experience as a point of reference to comment on the general academic atmosphere, or rather to reveal his perception of it. This question came up in the context of Ben narrating that he knew of students whose work had piled up, and who had difficulty managing the course load. He responded with a note of hesitancy in his voice; although his remarks were uncomplimentary, Ben was careful not to make an outright denunciation of the education at this university. The rhetorical question – “can we just get on” – to display the strength of his argument, was offset by a tentative condemnation. Furthermore, although Ben's words and language conjure up an image of an academically aware and astute student, the laughs interspersing his comments indicate his hesitation to be seen as ruthlessly critical.

This linguistic analysis may be inadequate to fully understand the significance of Ben's utterance. An attempt at a proper understanding can be made through looking at the speaking person of the utterance. As a mature student, Ben probably felt he needed a more substantial academic engagement than a basic or simplistic academic content. When asked to explain his reason for thinking that the university was cosseting immature students, Ben readily complied. He revealed that his idea of university, as a place for learning about life, was not upheld by the institution because it was focused on pandering to the needs of young and immature students, whereas he would have preferred a quickened pace of learning. His reference to academia indicates that he expected HE to be about higher order thinking and learning, and similar to Joel, he was disappointed that it was not the way he had expected it to be.

However, in taking an approach to analysis aligned with the social nature of language, it is necessary to bear in mind the dynamic interaction between language and experience, and the social circumstances. This means that as social beings we are not rigidly placed in a specific location, but are dynamically interacting with several social situations concurrently. These contribute to the composition of our consciousness and our language. In short, our worldview does not develop from a static or one dimensional environment, this would explain the differences in the views of different students from a similar socio-economic background. It could also explain the institutional tendency to generalise from the experiences of some to all who fall within the group.

Ben's account raises a number of points for consideration, notably the idea that all students have intellectual ability, which universities as educational institutions have to nurture. This idea was put forward by Ambedkar (Naik 2003, p.263), who accurately noted that "all intellect is like an uncultivated land, which needs to be cultivated". Addressing specifically HE he further noted:

Education should enable students to analyse a problem, explore the merits and demerits towards its resolution. Through education students should possess the insight to verify the truth or the falsehood of suggested ideas, should consider rationally what conclusions an analysis warrants before accepting or rejecting them, should evaluate the existing evidence correctly, logically and critically comment on the views expressed by those in authority. A university education that is unable to broaden the capabilities and skills of the student is an utter failure. (Ambedkar 1924, in *ibid*, p.54)

Taking Ambedkar's insights as a yardstick to assess the institution's practices would expose the shortcomings of the institution as perceived by some of the students I interviewed. Ben and Joel explained how their experience was affected because the academic standards were lower than what they had expected, but Michelle, the student who will be discussed next, went further in suggesting what students could do to make sure that they received a higher academic content, more precisely, what they could do to make sure that they had a higher standard of academic input.

#### 4.5.3 *"You've got to go and research it yourself to get a decent amount of knowledge, because you don't get that in the lectures"*

Although in section 4.2.1 Michelle saw her positive experience through the lens of her relationship with the academic staff, here she offered her advice to students to obtain a higher standard of education than the input provided by the institution.

I - In terms of academic content – what do you think of that /?

M - /Eh, yeah it's ok I'd say so, the first year was a bit more basic and I knew a lot of it, I kind of knew most of the background, most of it is quite good, but I think the core module could be improved, some of the content comes across as I think very boring or dull, it does come across, we've already learned pretty much everything, you've got to go and research it yourself to get a decent amount of knowledge, because you don't get that in the lectures, so we are given the most basic knowledge in the lectures, and it will serve you well if you go and do your own extra reading

I - As a student rep have you tried to raise this issue - has this issue come up?

M - Yeah, it has come up and they pretty much always said like you need to go do your own independent reading that, there's a huge emphasis on it's your degree, you go and do your reading (Michelle, p. 4)

It is important to focus on what Michelle said, as well as to understand the circumstances that made her to say the things she stated in this interview. My questioning of her academic

environment came about because some of the students I had interviewed earlier narrated their disappointment with the academic component of their university experience. Michelle corroborated what Ben and Joel said, but with prefaces such as “I think” before her negative description of the course content, she distinctly conveyed that she was expressing her opinion of the situation, that is, the way the course appeared to her.

Michelle’s initial tentative assessment of the academic content, with phrases such as “could be improved” soon gave way to more forthright comments such as “we are given the most basic knowledge”. Her suggestion to students to enhance their knowledge through their own efforts and initiative is a relaying of what she was told.

In reporting the words of her lecturers, Michelle can be seen as also expressing her evaluation of knowledge acquisition (see Volosinov 1973, p.156). Her utterance is encoded with a previous utterance to which Michelle is responding. This appears to be her understanding of what is required for a good education, and what the institution’s staff seem to have advised her. The advice originated from academic staff, who seem to have imbibed the thinking that pervades the sector. The individualism of this advice and its source are important factors to be considered. As a new university, this institution may be seen as determined to make its education appeal to a wide spectrum of students, who it thinks are not academically able, hence it may be reluctant to make the content tough. The advice also ties in with the individualistic culture and the increasing individualisation process in society, which Beck (1991, p.135) describes as each individual having to construct their own biography with a disregard for social context. Moreover, the advice appears to be incompatible with the understanding of education as having a social purpose as discussed in Chapter Two section 2.3.9.

I was interested to find out whether Michelle was sharing her perceptions, or whether this had been stated explicitly, so I asked her:

I - Where did this come up?

M - I think in one of our student-staff liaison meetings - in our department - basically it was raised last year, at the end of last year we found the first year very basic and they (the staff) said well you need to go do your own reading, they said you’ve also got some students that will say oh this is too challenging ehm they will start complaining saying that it is too hard, so I think you need to address the basics, so there's that too (Michelle, p.4)

Michelle reiterated that she found the academic content quite elementary, and so she raised the issue with the staff of the department. She reconstructed the interaction and what was said to the students. She seemed to accept the explanation given, that the university had to meet the needs of all students, not just the ones like her who preferred a higher academic standard. The institution’s refusal to offer a more critically challenging

education could also be conforming to the responsibility of new universities to prepare students from under-represented groups for non-professional jobs (Holmwood 2011). It seems that what is needed is revolutionary critical education, so students understand the material basis of social life, rather than a revised curriculum that does not make students aware of capitalist social relations (Allman et al 2005, p.11 and Canaan 2013, p.33). The main point is that contrary to what some professionals (such as Bamber 2008; Biggs and Tang 2007; and Ramsden 2008) from the field of HE say, students from under-represented groups do not conform to the stereotypes that exist about these students being unable to cope with academic rigour.

#### 4.5.4 *"I thought it would be more challenging, but it doesn't really stretch you"*

In section 4.1.2 Tamara spoke about how she enjoyed learning at university, but here she expresses her disappointment that although her learning experience was positive, it was mainly self-initiated learning.

I - In what way did you expect it to be challenging?

T - Ah, ah I I thought it would be more difficult I thought the work would be more difficult but I think um yeah I thought it would be more challenging, didn't think that it would also (-----) it doesn't really stretch you I don't know my whole perception of the course is not what I thought it would be it's completely different which I thought was quite disappointing. Yeah I thought I don't know I thought it would be it would engage me more but coming on the course I found that it's completely different, I don't think that I have learned as much as I need to learn. I think I'm walking away with, i expected to walk away with the idea that you have learned something, but with this course I don't think that I've actually learned on this course I don't think I've walked away with anything. If at all I've learned it's because I I have I had to learn, broaden my knowledge through my own efforts, through extra reading (Tamara, pp.3-4)

Tamara, like the other students in this section, constructs her academic experience according to what she expected, which is, a high standard of learning. My question followed her comment that she expected university to be more challenging. In response Tamara expressed her perception of the academic environment and the level of education at this institution. Her account about the academic situation indicates that the institution is interested in appealing to a wide section of society, and probably erroneously believes that these students would be unable to work, because they have not been exposed to a learning environment, being the first generation in the families to pursue HE.

Tamara evinces an understanding of university education, and the learning and knowledge that she thinks should be developed at university. She seems to be endorsing what Michelle said: that students had to do their own independent work to gain more out of their

education at this university. The sense of disappointment that Tamara experienced and her utterances acquire significance when one considers that she and her siblings were the first to study at university. Realising that she was not getting the academic stimulation that she expected, she, like Michelle, had to fend for herself, enhancing her knowledge through her own efforts.

None of the four students discussed in this section can be accused of being reckless in denouncing the academic standards; they are cautious in their criticisms. However, their thoughts seem to be aligned with the views of Frank Furedi, who dismisses the infantilisation of education and the patronisation of students, which he thinks has become institutionalised (2002, p.41). In agreement with Furedi, they are critical of an education that they think is not sufficiently academically challenging. Their experiences are contrary to Paul Ramsden's (2003, p.3) belief that students who are not familiar with an academic environment, as no one from their family has been to university, may be unable to deal with the demands of an academic workload and may need extra support. He seems convinced that a greater variety of students - who are less well prepared academically, less able, or less independent as learners - unavoidably pose additional challenges for universities and their staff. His opinions align with those of the institution and of the policy makers, that the academic environment may be too demanding for some students, who then tend to drop out. However, the students discussed here did not conform to the views expressed by Ramsden (2003) about students who are unfamiliar with an academic environment. In response to my question to Joel:

I - I'd like to come back to what you said, your academic abilities, so do you have family experience of higher education?

J - No, none of my family has even A level qualifications (Joel, p.7)

and when I put a similar question to Ben:

B - No, I know few friends who have gone to university (Ben, p.8)

and to Michelle:

M - No, only what I've heard from my mum's friends (Michelle, p.8)

and also to Tamara:

T - yeah, I have siblings who have gone through uni so they have told me about it (Tamara, p.5)

It needs to be pointed out that although these four students had little prior experience of HE, being among the first in their families to go to university, they were not unable to deal with the academic workload; in fact, they thought that the standard of education could have been higher. As stated earlier, it might be that some students from under-represented

groups do struggle academically, but the same may be said for students from any other social group, including students from mainstream groups. However, the several suggestions put forward by the HE sector to tackle retention issues (see Biggs and Tang 2007, Ramsden 2003 ) seem to spring from a mindset that non-traditional students are in need of support to make the transition to an academic environment. The task now is to investigate the views of the official domains on student retention and the factors affecting it.

#### 4.5.5 “There are ways of identifying students without them recognising they have a problem and self-referring”

This internal document, *Identification of students at risk of withdrawal*, displays its understanding of the experience of some students, an understanding that seems to be based on its assumption that their experience is likely to be fraught with difficulties because they belong to certain social groups.

Although it is useful to put in place strategies that can help retention, these may rely on students recognising that they have a problem in the first place. There are ways of identifying students without them recognising they have a problem and self-referring. In this case it is important for the student to be identified and offered assistance in a timely manner. Research and our own data can be used to identify cohorts of students who are considered more at-risk of leaving early e.g. young care leavers, students in receipt of financial support via the bursary, late starters, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students etc. Providing early information which provides a ‘flying start’ for these cohorts of students is part of the University’s Retention Strategy (March 2014)

The document spells out the university’s plan to identify students “at risk” and to target interventions to these groups. The comprehensive system that it wants to be in place is based on the data it has of groups of students likely to discontinue their education. The text adopts a paternalistic tone towards these students, who are perceived as having problems because they fall under certain categories. It represents the institution as benevolent, caring and concerned about these students who are portrayed as vulnerable, helpless and in need of assistance to cope with their difficulties. In other words, although some students are naturally inclined to have a difficult time at university, according to this text, the institution will not allow this tendency to escalate into a problem. Instead of a technical solution to improving educational outcomes, as this text suggests, Case (2013, pp.29-30) recommends viewing education as a social process and insists the HEIs should be aware of the social environment which would allow all students to flourish academically.

Examining the semantic prosody of the text or “the persistent aura of meaning with which a text is imbued” (Louw 1993, p.157), gives an insight into the text writers’ attitude and



stance towards what they are writing about. In this case the writers seem to have categorised the students, and have judged students from some categories as deficient. This is evident in the use of terms such as “at risk”, “problems”, etc, which permeate the text, and which give the impression that these students are afflicted with a malady. The purpose of the proposed early identification strategies appears to be to identify, and help, these problem students to succeed and progress. The novel approach that HE institution would like to roll out is to catch students before they even realise that they have a problem. This is akin to profiling of students based on their race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age group and to presume that these students are likely to have difficulties. This discriminatory profiling is, however, cloaked in terms of the institution's intentions to help these students by giving them a flying start, whatever that means.

Probably drawn up, if not by senior management, at least under its instruction, the text does not hide its condescending attitude towards students from under-represented groups. If some students from these groups do conform to the stereotypes that abound about them, this may not be unlikely, for it could be that some of these students have internalised the characterisation of them as problem students. The positioning that they are subjected to, and the relations that they have with people in authority, may have made them feel inadequate. The text betrays a lack of understanding of the dynamic nature of social relations and social processes, with its tendency to view students as inhabiting fixed categories and the characteristics that go with these categories.

The technocratic approach to student retention may contravene Tinto's (2006, p.5) argument that retention should not be a separate activity of an HEI but should be built into the ethos of the institution. However, the institution is obliged to submit an *Access Agreement*, which outlines the steps it takes to help students from certain groups, if it wants approval for charging higher fees. Given this requirement, it is proposing technical solutions which would satisfy the approving authority, OFFA. Such solutions do not actually address the root of the problem, but appear to be motivated out of concern for students and hence receive endorsement from the OFFA. Another factor to be considered is that the requirement that may be directly responsible for the text is itself a product of the government's decision to get more students from non-traditional backgrounds into university. As explored in section 4.4, there seems to be a hidden agenda in this decision, and to make a success of it, retention measures seem to be needed.

The specific plan is to address the presumed issues of these identified groups, so that they can get ahead and succeed on par with other students. The text makes the claim for early assessment so that the underperforming students get to know early on that they are struggling.

Early assessment not only provides students with information about their progress it also offers academic staff and personal academic tutors the ability to identify potential problems at an early stage. If the first achievement indicators do not emerge until after a whole term has passed it is often too late for students and tutors to take effective action to redeem the situation. An early assessment, which may finally only contribute part of the marks for a module, would allow academic programmes to identify students who are underperforming at an early stage and implement appropriate and timely support (March 2014).

The institution seems to be making the case for early assessment over end-of-term assessment, on the grounds that it will benefit students who, it believes, do not perform as well as their peers. These apparently well-intentioned plans emerge from the assumptions that certain groups of students fail to continue with education because they do not, or are unable to, attain good academic grades. This poor performance is deemed to be problematic and in need of appropriate interventions.

One may not be able to dispute the data that certain groups are overrepresented among those failing to retain and to perform well, but that data does not reveal the reasons for failure to retain or to perform well. During a presentation at the SRHE (March 2015), on *Under-attainment of BAME students in UK higher education: what we know/don't know*, Professor John Richardson of the Open University stated that even Black and minority ethnic students who entered university with similar grades as their White peers, attained lower grades at university. Hence there could be something that is not quite right and which does not allow the students labelled as under-performing from attaining higher grades. Furthermore, Gilborn and Mirza (2000) make an astute observation that the studies of the achievement gap do not measure the potential of the students.

The institutional statement does not mention any plans to investigate the reasons for students underperforming, but only the intention to assist them. This could be because it does not believe that these students have innate potential, and that there could be forces that do not allow them to realise their potential. However, it has to be said that such a measure as early assessment might indeed reveal the real issues, which may have nothing to do with students' lack of ability, and which the institution could then address. This possibility seems unlikely considering that the intervention mentioned is to offer remedial support to these underperforming students. The point of this text is that some students are likely to perform badly, and to pre-empt their withdrawal on account of poor performance, the institution believes that they should be assessed early so that they can be helped. A similar thought seems to pervade the government policies too, as the next section demonstrates.

#### 4.5.6 “It costs more to recruit and teach students from disadvantaged backgrounds”

Whilst institutional texts proclaim the intention to help students who are considered to be struggling academically, government documents seem convinced that certain groups of students are difficult to teach, as the Browne Review states:

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds cost on average more to recruit and teach than others. The costs of widening participation in higher education. The HE Council will target funding to ensure that institutions provide them with additional tuition and support to help them to complete their degrees (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010, p.56).

This statement boldly asserts that students from “disadvantaged backgrounds” need additional support to survive in an academic environment, and so funding will be targeted to help them develop the requisite knowledge which their more advantaged peers possess. This appears to be a profiling of whole groups of students as deficient in academic ability, hence more difficult to teach and more expensive to educate than other students. What is more, it expresses its negative evaluation of these students and the higher cost of educating them as indisputable facts. If these policymakers think these students are not able, then why do they insist that they are determined to provide them support and to ensure that they are retained? The text indicates that the policymakers might want to draw students from non-traditional backgrounds into HE, although they do not believe that these students are naturally qualified to thrive in HE. This deficit view of disadvantaged students circulates and reappears in other documents released by the government.

The proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas who enter higher education has increased by around 30 per cent (6,600 more students) over the past five years, and by around 50 per cent over the past fifteen years (9,000 more students).

This is a positive trend and has been supported by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) Widening Participation Allocation which recognises the extra costs that institutions face to recruit and retain larger numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011, pp.54-55)

This chapter sets out how we will promote fairer access without undermining academic excellence or institutional autonomy. We expect higher education institutions to be active partners, challenged and supported by a strengthened Office for Fair Access (OFFA). (*ibid*, p.54)

The text identifies the positive developments within the HE sector as a result of widening participation, but it perceives that this may pose some difficulties or could hinder the progress of these students without safety measures in place to prevent them from falling through the system.

By citing the increase in the number of students from disadvantaged areas in HE, the White Paper appears to be appreciative of their entry to HE, and it declares its intention to encourage and assist these students, as it considers them to be weaker and inferior to other students. At the same time as it displays its negativity towards the students it deems to be not-so-bright, it portrays itself as understanding and accommodating towards these students, and to HEIs which have to bear the additional costs of educating them.

Some insights into the nature of education, and the thought processes of those in charge of administering the institution, can be gleaned from this text. This text is authored by the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the then Minister for Universities and Science, or by a team working on behalf of these ministers in government. No surprise then that they are upbeat about the increase in the number of disadvantaged students accessing HE, since that is what the government wants, because it proves to be good for artificially boosting economic growth, and so they want to widen participation in HE.

In the foregoing discussion we had the institution and government documents commenting on the abilities of students and presenting their opinions as facts, but the students, while expressing their views on the academic environment they encountered, were careful not to judge or to appear arrogant. Furthermore, the students deemed to be underperforming and under-prepared for university were the ones under-represented, but the under-represented students interviewed for this study stated they were more than able to cope with the academic workload which they felt was not academically challenging.

The air of superiority that people in authority at the institutional and government levels have towards students from under-represented groups seems to be an affront to the knowledge, intelligence and the culture of these groups. Moreover, as Tinto (2006, p.9) despairingly notes, although retention is touted as an important issue, efforts to solve it fail to tackle social, structural and institutional issues. It is time to move on to explore the social side of university life and the experiences of students in the social sphere.

#### **4.6. Concluding comments**

This chapter drew out some of the key issues radiating from the concept of “TSE”. The analyses of the content and language of these concerns bring to light several inconsistencies, which were discussed in detail, such as differing perceptions of the role and outcomes of education; of students’ expectations and the responsibilities of staff; of university fees and funding system; and of the factors in students’ retention. The reasons for these differing perceptions and what they reveal about HE were also discussed, but

will be explored further in Chapter Seven. Before that, the discussion tackles other dimensions of “TSE”, especially with regards to the social environment at university.

## 5. Dynamics of diversity

### 5.1. Introductory remarks

This chapter looks at the students' views and their experiences within a diversified HEI, with particular focus on the social environment and the culture of the campus. The understanding of 'culture' that informs this work is based on my reading of Raymond Williams' *The Analysis of Culture* (2006, p. 48). Through this work I use the term culture to represent the practices of people, groups, and institutions which structure and organise their ways of functioning or behaving. As in the previous chapter, I juxtapose the students' thoughts, perceptions and suggestions against those espoused by the institution and the national level policies on HE. Investigating the various views on the dimensions of diversity, and the language through which these are expressed across the different domains of the HE sector, merits importance for what this analysis can reveal about diversity in HE and society. Also, having already established that "TSE" should be connected to the actual experiences of students in a diverse HE sector, the significance of diversity as a focus of analysis cannot be overstated. With the increasing representation in HE of students from diverse backgrounds, and with some of this diversity being represented in my student participants, I realised that there was a diversity in the experiences of the different groups of students, which I set out to explore.

The first section examines students' experiences in terms of their interactions with each other and the opportunities for peer learning that they think could open up through such interactions. It tries to see whether the increasing diversity on university campuses creates a tapestry of different groups woven together, or a motley canvas of separate, unconnected strands. I explore the issues that surfaced while talking to the students, such as the difficulties they encountered in interacting with their peers. These issues and experiences present the frame with which to scrutinise the institution's policies and practices that claim to be about fostering an interactive climate on campus.

The second part discusses students' views on the importance of a sense of belonging. Here I try to understand how students' feelings of social engagement relate to their retention and academic attainment. I also look to see how these issues are constructed in the other two domains. Accordingly, I examine the institution's views on belonging and its targeted interventions to address issues of retention and attainment, which seem to be part of its drive to offer a good "student experience".

The next segment follows on from the second and explores some of the factors that students say could play a role in fostering a sense of belonging, that is, the culture and practices of university life. The students' encounters, and their suggestions, are discussed alongside the measures proposed by the institution. The silence of state policies on

education to consider these issues – interactions, sense of belonging and the culture of the campus – as crucial to “TSE” is also explored.

Since all of the previous elements can be said to constitute the students’ experience of university, the fourth and final unit of this chapter looks at the concept of “TSE” and its framing across the three focal areas of this thesis. Here I try to understand the students’ response to this catchphrase, to determine whether their response matches the interpretations of this concept that exists at the other two levels of the HE sector.

Finally, I should say that throughout the analysis I draw the different strands together and present a synthesized discussion that connects the conceptual lenses and the research questions to the findings.

## **5.2. The classroom as a community**

*The university is expecting 70 new international students and 200 EU students, and so a peer mentoring project for international students has been set up. Several training sessions have been held for around 20 mentors; and 21 international students have signed up for a peer mentor. Also, an intercultural event is being planned which will include music and food from various countries. A member intervened to say that besides such events there should be efforts to get students to interact with one another. To which another replied that there is no problem with students interacting as they chat with one another on Facebook. Still another member stated: ‘The increasing diversity of the student body is evident, but we need to think about engagement, about engaging the diverse groups of students who come here to study, not only about recruiting them. It is also important to focus on diversity while recruiting staff’ – [paraphrase of a committee member’s viewpoint]. (Committee 1, July 2014)*

The notes I have made here are of a committee discussing the organisation of a peer-mentoring programme and an introductory intercultural event. A few thoughts crept into my head on hearing the topic of peer mentoring being discussed at this meeting. I tried to determine whether the peer mentoring project was being rolled out to improve interactions among the different groups of students, or to enable international and EU students to adapt to the institution. The ostensive purpose of the programme, I gathered, was the latter, for when a member tried to make the point about interactions among different groups of students, the person organising the intercultural event dismissed it by saying that students are always interacting across groups as they chat with one another on Facebook. The reply of the second member shows a refusal to acknowledge that there is a problem and that it needs to be addressed in more meaningful ways than events such as food festivals, or superficial chats and contrived interactions facilitated by institutional set-up.

Analysing the remarks about students' interaction through the construct of education, both the remark in favour of promoting students' interactions, and the one refuting it, relate to the dimension of academic ability. In refuting the insights presented by a member as well as the evidence gathered by a substantial body of research which points to the connection between academic and social engagement (Ashwin 2014; Trowler 2014; Liz Thomas 2012; and Kuh 2009), the member of the committee seems to be evading issues that were pointed out by her colleague and seems intent on forging ahead with her plans. That the lack of social engagement could affect academic engagement and attainment has been established by research (Thomas 2002, p.431; Tinto 2006, p.5; and others) and this raises the salience of interactions at university. However, despite this body of research evidence, the reason for some students' low attainment is sometimes wrongly attributed to students' ability. This line of thinking finds fault with students and refuses to admit to flaws in institutional policies, practices and the culture on campus. Given this situation, it is necessary to understand the real reasons for students' lack of engagement instead of pinpointing imaginary flaws.

A few minutes into the meeting, a member intervened to say that there was a crucial need to think about the diversity of the institution's staff as this could help to get students to engage. This intervention shows that this member of the committee thought that the institution had to do more to achieve real diversity. The dichotomy of views expressed at this meeting reveals the clash of ideas within the same institution, and hints at the social basis to language or worldviews and their utterances. As part of a committee on equality and diversity it is not surprising that this member placed emphasis on engaging the diverse groups of students and not merely on recruiting them. Given her role and responsibility she probably had evidence to support her belief that some students were not engaging, and she attributed the lack of engagement to a lack of staff diversity. Her suggestion that the committee should consider this aspect of "TSE" hinted that there was a tension between the general tone of the meeting, and the remarks of this member. Implicit in her suggestion was a simple yet profound point: that the interactive programmes the institution was devising, to address the engagement of diverse groups of students, could be straying away from the actual issues affecting student engagement. This is an important point and one that has been addressed by research on African-American students in the US (Powell, 1998; Howard-Hamilton et al 2011; Cuyjet 2011; Valverde 1998; and others). These studies observed that Black students in HEIs with substantial numbers of Black academics attained higher scores than those in predominantly White institutions (Castenell 1998, p.15).



It is difficult to say whether the advice of the committee member would be heeded in this institution, or in the HE sector as a whole, but there is no doubt that the increasing diversity of students on university campuses is a highly-discussed topic and is often touted as evidence of the success of widening participation measures (see for example the 2011 White Paper *Students at the heart of the system*, the 2010 *Browne Review*, etc). However, the increasing diversity of students and widening participation are also blamed for some of the issues emerging in the sector (see Biggs and Tang 2007). Indeed, it is true that many groups that were traditionally under-represented are now accessing HE, but the resultant diversity of the student body is considered by some commentators and academics (Ramsden 2003) to be a factor in the retention issues that HEIs have to deal with. The point I want to make is that diversity is required, and even encouraged, but students admitted through a drive to increase diversity are considered to be inadequate to the academic setting, and some unfortunately are unable to continue with their studies. However, there seems to be a reluctance, or an obdurate inability, to consider other factors affecting students' retention and or attainment.

The issue of student retention is one that I will return to, but for now I want to dwell briefly on another point, that this student diversity is not seen across all institutions. Diversity is mainly realised in the new universities (Department for Education and Skills 2003; Pilkington 2013; Reay et al 2001); and elite HEIs seem to have retained their homogeneity as far as the economic and social composition of their students is concerned, with even the *Browne Review* lamenting that the more selective institutions were less successful in widening access (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills 2010, p.22).

The failure to widen access is but one aspect of the diversity agenda in HE, another aspect to diversity is the kind of interactive atmosphere that this diversity creates, or allows to create. The analysis now moves on to investigate this aspect, that is, to try to understand students' experiences of diverse groups on university campuses. The analysis delves into these issues to uncover the students' experiences, perceptions of, and suggestions for, interactions between the diverse groups of students at university, and their experience of in-class and campus diversity.

### *5.2.1 "I found myself in my first year very miserable very lonely"*

Wilma had animatedly explained in section 4.1 how her education had enabled her to reassess her thoughts and perceptions as she encountered new ideas at university, and that she enjoyed this part of her experience. However, she had a different story to tell when asked to talk about her interactions with her peers.

I – So your friends, who are, who were your friends?

W- I feel a bit strange actually because it's going to sound weird and I don't mean it for it to sound weird but I found in my experience here at Christ Church that a lot of the racial groups were very segregated I don't know if it's the case for any other uni (Wilma, p6)

I – What about on your course?

W - Yes, in my course certainly we tend, we tended to stick within our own groups, I don't know why it is like that, I think that one of the things that tends to happen at uni it it's almost that there is a racial division, and it's very strange, very very strange but it does happen, you wouldn't think in this day and age, but it does happen (..) I'm generally the kind of person who doesn't care I have friends and family from all corners of the world and it doesn't matter but I found that in at uni here in Canterbury I tended to stick around a lot of people from the same background as me.

I – What groups, were there different groups, nationalities in class?

W – More than 80 per cent were white British, I think, and the rest some Europeans, and and I was the only Black student (Wilma, p.7)

Wilma seemed a bit hesitant to admit that she had little interaction with students who did not share her ethnic background. She did not directly answer the question about her friends but wandered off to describe the situation, and state her perception of the social side of university. One of the reasons for her prevarication could be that Wilma was aware that by admitting who her friends were, it would make her seem insular, hence she talked about having a cosmopolitan circle of friends and family. Her reluctance to talk openly about the topic, and the situation in which she found herself, could also be because these were emotive topics, and so she could not speak in a confident and direct way. However, her circuitous answer does give an insight into the environment she encountered, her experience and her relationship or the lack of it with her peers.

Wilma's depiction of university, as comprising socially segregated groups, seems alarming because of what it reveals about HE and the students. However she was at pains to emphasise that she was not the kind of person who selected her friends on the basis of their race or skin colour, but that she had no choice at university. Her account was not just a description of the situation but also her evaluation of it, which coheres with Volosinov's (1973, p.103) comment that what we think about a topic determines whether it is expressed as an utterance. Analysing Wilma's answer through the social dimension of the construct of language one can understand that she found this situation to be inexplicable and in fact inexcusable. According to her, in a globalised world, one would expect HE to be a modern, inclusive arena. Instead, she was surprised to find that it was a place riven with segregated groups with little interaction across the racial divide. Wilma's surprise stems from her awareness that diversity and intermingling of groups in contemporary society is widespread. This awareness or consciousness is not individual as Marx and Engels

(1965a), and Gramsci (2000) have rightly pointed out, but is socially formed, by the social environment in which she participates.

The situation that Wilma describes may not be beyond belief, given that there is little attempt or awareness within the HE sector to forge solidarity and understanding within the student body. A modicum of caution is required in making this argument, especially because it could be seen as asking for the already high workload of the teaching staff to be increased. Calling for teachers to facilitate interaction and understanding among the diverse groups of students, does not necessarily imply that teaching staff should be burdened with additional responsibility. Instead, what is required is for additional time and other resources to be made available for staff to fulfil this responsibility. However, in a climate of cuts to the teaching grant, universities are under pressure to cope with teaching more students with limited resources (McNay 2005), and so staff may not be able to encourage students to interact and understand one another. However, the reluctance of a member of a committee (as discussed at the beginning of this section) to admit this, and the absence of any discussion of this issue in government policy statements, highlights the lack of importance accorded to the social dimension of university, or to an enabling environment within HEIs for the diverse groups of students accessing HE.

As mentioned earlier, the importance of friendship and social interactions to “TSE” of HE has been discussed by several experts on HE, notably Crosling et al (2008) and Thomas (2011b). Hence the next question that I put to Wilma about her lack of interactions sought to understand her experience in this situation. This query dredged up feelings and memories that she had suppressed.

I - How did you feel, what did you experience as the only black person in class?

W - To be honest I didn't really experience anything until we had one of my modules, and then we did one lesson on uh uh (.) learners who spoke different languages and it was then that I realised that they hadn't realised that I was not different, because I had never thought about this before, but then they would ask me questions like questions where are you from, and I felt a bit strange while answering the questions because I'm from London, so I just said London, and then they said but where are you really from, and then I realised what they meant, I would just politely just say what you mean to say is what is my heritage, and I can tell you that, but where am I from? - it's London, because I'm not from anywhere, but I understand why you would make that assumption, but that's not the right way of asking that question, if you had to say quite nicely what's your heritage, I would say this and this, I would then really notice that they did find me diff different (Wilma, p.8)

Not having friends on her course was distressing for Wilma, but she was further upset when she realised that she was considered different by the other students on her course.

She recreated the conversation she had with some of the students on her course, who assumed that she was a space invader (Puwar 2004). Here she was both reporting and appraising her colleagues' words and actions, as well as suggesting appropriate ways for them to phrase their questions. With this narration Wilma seems to be exposing the fractures within the HE sector.

The segregation, or lack of understanding, shown by one set of students or people towards other students or groups has been recognised by commentators engaged in studying and exposing the Whiteness of academia (see Ahmed 2007). Furthermore, Puwar (2004, p.8) presents a compelling argument to show that certain people are considered to be the natural inhabitants of an institutional setting, and others are considered to be encroachers. Drawing on the work of these experts, I would say that if the HE sector is serious about offering a good student experience to all students, then much thought and effort will have to be deployed to making all students feel at home, and not like outsiders or space invaders.

However, insisting that a sense of community should be fostered amongst students does not mean that differences should be erased. In fact, it is important to engage "students in exploring the commonalities and differences in group identities and experiences" (Gurin and Nagda 2006, p.20). The failure to foster a spirit of understanding and community in HE may be seen as stemming from the individualistic nature of capitalist society, which does not enable people to see themselves as part of a community and their peers as allies, but instead to see them as rivals competing for resources.

The construct of education which holds that education has a social purpose, which is that students should realise their social responsibility, is useful to make sense of Wilma's answer and what she describes of HE and her experience. Analysing the narrative account that Wilma gave of what caused her to be upset and to feel isolated through the lens of the social purpose of education exposes the hollowness of an education system that fails to engage students and which does not allow them to realise the goals of collaborative learning. The works of Ambedkar and Gramsci (see Chapter Two, section 2.3) emphasise the importance of mutual education; in the words of Ambedkar (1924, p.54) "education should be society-oriented" and Gramsci spells out how combining the expertise of different people in a collective helps to further the intellectual abilities of all (1971, p.168) and could make for a more enriching educational experience.

On hearing Wilma's account I wanted to explore how she conceptualised her social experience, but was unprepared for what she was going to tell me.

I - So how would you describe your social experience?

W - It's sad because just having this conversation with you makes me realise that how true my experience was but if I was sitting here explaining to a lecturer of mine, or someone who lectured me two years ago and I was in this situation I wouldn't have told them because I would have thought they wouldn't believe how come someone like you who are so outgoing have no friends, because when they set the break they (the students) go into their little circles and go and have coffee together, and you have to find something to do, you have to fake that you are busy, so that they don't like see that you are lonely (..) I found myself in my first year very miserable very very lonely (low voice) (Wilma, p.9)

I - Why would your teachers think that you were confident?

W – Well because I would participate in class discussions and such, yeah yeah, I never had an issue as such I was quite lonely but I didn't have an issue because if I knew what I was speaking about, I would discuss it (Wilma, p.10)

Wilma and I reached this point in the discussion after dealing with the academic side of her experience, which she told me made her feel enthused and engaged. I soon realised that my question raked up distressing memories for her. As she reflected on her time at university, Wilma was painfully reminded of how lonely and miserable she was. Her success in masking her loneliness and in giving the impression that she was confident and happy is particularly salient in an environment where Black students are labelled as lazy and lacking in a culture of learning. Witness for instance statements made by a senior academic to a colleague – “Black students are always late, these students do not have a culture of learning” (personal communication). Wilma probably sensed the derogatory and condescending attitudes of White staff towards students like her, and so she was determined to portray a positive image of Black students.

Wilma's reconstruction of her situation draws attention to ways that the Black students are perceived by academic staff. Her revelations call to mind the examination of NSSE data by Bridges et al (2005), wherein they noted that minority students had more enriching educational experiences at institutions with ethnic minority faculty. A similar point was made by Kuh's (2009) summary of research on “TSE”, which stressed that minority faculty were known for their more effective educational practices than faculty members of the majority community. It could also be that Wilma's teachers were unaware of her situation because she projected a confident and articulate persona. From what she stated here, that she actively participated in discussions during lectures and seminars, one can surmise that she was not a shy, unfriendly, loner, who preferred her own company, yet she had no one to talk to at university. It seems that Wilma was confident to engage academically although opportunities to engage socially with the students on her course were denied to her.

It is salient to note that Wilma, despite her confidence in herself and in her educational ability, was made to feel isolated and lonely. Her experience and her account of it expose the fallacy of the commonly held view that students who lack educational ability may feel unable to cope with their studies at university and so may drop out. Wilma certainly had ability for she was not struggling with her studies, yet the social situation in which she found herself made her miserable enough to consider dropping out.

She added that there were days

W - In my first year I could go through the whole day with only talking to my mother on the phone, and not to a single person

I - What were your thoughts or feelings/?

W - /Oh I wanted to leave every single day (Wilma, p.11)

Having already established that Wilma's isolation, or the difficulty she faced, had nothing to do with academic engagement or a lack of academic or social skills, it is relevant to question the social environment within an academic space and the isolation that some students face. The composite construct of language allows us to understand the contemporary relevance of her narration, the context which made it possible for her to express it and the situation that caused her to have this experience. Her willingness to reveal aspects of her experience that she had concealed from her lecturers conveyed much about Wilma, the situation she faced at university, and the communicative situation of this interview. It may have been easy for her to talk to me because she saw me as another Black person, hence as someone with whom she could share her deepest anxieties and misgivings. She probably thought that while her White British lecturers might not have understood how and why she felt alienated from the other students on her course, who were mainly white, I would understand her.

Wilma's account clearly indicates the absence of a sense of community in the institution and the structural issues in the social engagement of some students. In an attempt to uncover whether the reasons for the feelings of isolation and the lack of interaction with students were shared by other students, I engage with what some other students told me about their interactive experience in the next section.

### *5.2.2 "I can interact more with the foreign students on my course than the English students"*

Having already discussed her academic experience and her interactions with the academic staff, I sought to understand Nuria's social experience. She shared her views of interacting with her peers and the trepidation that gripped her.

I – Tell me about your friends, the friends on your course

N - The friends that I have they are not on my course, I think it's more to you will probably find more friends that don't do your course than finding friends within your course like because some people can so intimidate, some people are very reserved within the course so you then you don't feel like you can approach them but then sometimes I feel I would think that it would be better to have friends within your course because let's say when it's to do with assignments if you need help, you can discuss, you can do revision, you can be able to work together but I don't think that's the case really but I would prefer to have friends within my course

I - do you think this should be addressed then?

N – Yeah maybe if we did more activities together all together in class then everyone would be able to like you know help each other I think that barrier should be broken

I – So do you interact with other students on your course

N - yeah, I think what for me on my courses I interact more with foreign students rather than the actual British, yeah they are very friendly and approachable whereas the White English students are a bit distant (.) so it's not like I feel I don't feel that comfortable to go and talk to them, yeah for me I find that I can interact more with my the foreign students in my course than the English students

I - who are these students the foreign students you said, from where/?

N - /The ones that are from abroad the Slovakian students the foreign students yeah (Nuria, p.9)

In this extract, Nuria described her interactions, or rather the limited interactions she had with the other students on her course because she perceived some of the students in her class to be unapproachable, and in fact intimidating. Unlike Wilma, she did not face any isolation, but she too noticed that there was a kind of segregation at university. This took the form of White British students on one side of the divide and the rest of the students on the other. Nuria advocated the importance of having friends on the course, as she thought students could help each other by studying together, a point noted by Thomas (2011b p.27) who highlights the advantages of peer learning.

In addition to describing her interactions, Nuria also offered her opinions of the different sets of students on her course at university – the ones she had been able to interact with and those with whom she did not have any interaction. She used assertive statements to put across her evaluation of these students, that is, she presented these not as her perceptions but as statements of fact, for example, “they are very reserved” and “they are very friendly”. Through these assertive comments Nuria presented herself as willing to get to know the other students, but with the avenues for developing friendships closed down with some students. She also projected herself as a person who had friends, although these may not have been from her course.

The socio-ideological lens of language helps to make sense of Nuria's description of her social experience. Through this we realise that she not only describes, but also evaluates the situation according to her worldview. As a Black British student, it is quite likely that Nuria's experience is down to the position assigned to her, and to students like her, in a far-from-race-free society and HE sector. Hence she invokes the metaphor of barriers to signify that the divide between groups of students, who do not communicate with each other, was an important issue for her, probably because she herself struggled to overcome the barrier. Nuria's suggestion that the barrier needs to be broken down because it prevents students from coming together to help each other is borne out by overwhelming research and evidence (Kuh et al 2006, Engle and Tinto 2008, Thomas 2011a, 2011b), which points to the need for students to establish bonds of solidarity and support. In highlighting the divide and differences that keep students apart, Nuria also seems to be stressing Gramsci's (2000) point about the need for a collegial atmosphere in work, life and education. Gramsci considered this to be a necessary task for education, as he thought education should be formative in the sense of developing the student's character and respect for others.

Given Nuria's language, describing other students based on the traits that she perceived them to have, it may be tempting and easy to lay the blame on individual students. However, one has to go beyond a focus on individuals and the personal traits of some students to acknowledge that it is a particular kind of society and HE system that allows these individualistic and segregationist practices to continue. A focus on the latter would take the analysis beyond the surface manifestations of individualism to understand that the alienation that individuals experience are hallmarks of the individualistic and competitive nature of capitalist society. That competition and lack of community are actively encouraged by capitalism can be easily established by examining the words of Friedman (1991, 2009); Hayek (1944, 1992); Thatcher (1987) and others. These ideas are either deliberately, or inadvertently, promoted by institutional failure to realise that promoting diversity without a change to the system covers up signs of injury inflicted through racist practices (Ahmed and Swan 2006). Following Nuria's narration of the barriers in HE and the lack of institutional efforts to dismantle the barriers, I would like to discuss other students' interpretations of their interactions and their social experience at university.

### *5.2.3 "To be honest I don't think I even like talk with White English people in my class, I don't know they are like harder to reach"*

Martha, a student from the EU, corroborated what Nuria said about the limited interactions that take place in the classroom. In the earlier part of the interview she spoke in glowing



terms of her interactions with the staff of the institution, and the support she received from them. I was now curious to find out about her interactions with her peers.

I - Do you interact with students in class?

M - Yeah, and I notice that maybe (.) ehm people who are foreigners they are much like, more friendly than people from here, like British people, because to be honest I don't think I have ever talked with White English people in my class, I don't know they are like harder to reach, ehm just distant I don't know

I - Have you tried reaching out, talking to the British students?

M - **Oh no** (nervous voice), because I didn't um I don't know because usually they are like in groups, and it's hard to just go 'hi guys can I just sit here' (mock silly voice), I'm not that type of person, when I see that they know each other for longer time and they are already talking in their groups, so other students don't look like a closed group, so I'm ok to approach them

I - So who are the students you have interacted with?

M - mainly Bul Bulgaria, then I think ah some people like they say have grown up here but they originally from Nigeria, India like that, and some Romanian people, mainly like that (Martha, p.2)

While answering that she did interact with other students, Martha revealed what she thought about the White English students on her course at university, especially in comparison with the other students, who she thought were friendly. Martha can be seen as determined to protect her sense of self-respect, and as unwilling to lose face by risking a rebuff from the English students on her course of study at university.

Although there seemed to be a bit of a hesitancy in her voice while she expressed her opinions, she did express some amount of certainty. She can be seen as fluctuating between epistemic certainty and doubt; her description of the White English students as harder to reach, and as already talking in groups, is strewn with phrases such as "to be honest I don't think..." and "I don't know". These features of her talk can be taken as Martha showing some restraint in labelling, or accusing the English students of being distant.

Looking at the context of Martha's talk through the social dimension of language brings the focus onto the contextual cues that she picked up and how these in turn gave form and content to her talk. The unfriendly attitude of the majority students, who she perceived as being distant, led her to look towards other students for interactions. As a student new to Britain, who was possibly unsure of her language skills in English, she sought to establish relationships with students who she saw as also on the margins of the situation, that is, other European students or British students from different ethnic backgrounds. Her perception and her account of it, in other words, her consciousness bears the imprint of

the social situation and the social relations that were formed in this situation. But the words of Volosinov (1973, p.22), Gramsci (2000) remind us that the influence of the wider social milieu cannot be ignored. This calls for a critical exploration of HE and society.

Martha's account resonated with my own experiences in HEIs, not as an undergraduate student but as a researcher or presenter at conferences. I did not feel comfortable approaching and interacting with White British people at conferences or at the meetings I attended as an observer. Like Martha, I also felt like an outsider, with little or no interaction with the other participants, if I was the only Black person in the group. If there was another Black person or someone from a different ethnic background I would gravitate towards him or her and engage them in conversation. However, her experience was different because she was a White European student and it puzzled me. An initial critical conversation that I had with a White British person made me think, temporarily, that it is not part of British culture to go up to a person you do not know and to engage in a conversation with a stranger. The realisation was temporary as another thought subsequently dawned on me: there have been White British people at meetings and conferences who did come up to me to introduce themselves and this made me feel less out of place. Also, although some White British students who participated in my study, such as Ben, claimed that he was unaware that some students – international and others – did not feel a sense of belonging, others like Debbie and Peter (see sub-section 5.2.7) did say that they were interested in interacting with European and international students. With this recollection, the myth of a reserved nature as a trait of Britishness soon fell apart.

Given that the HE sector is actively seeking to increase the diversity of students, and to draw in students from other countries, the idea of intercultural understanding is sometimes proposed as a magic formula (see Crose 2011) for tackling the rifts that exist in HE. But as Gillborn (2006, pp.9-10) convincingly argues about citizenship education in schools, the focus on addressing relations between students, without a wider critical understanding would be meaningless and a mere tinkering with the system. Indeed, providing students with opportunities to value diversity, without addressing race and class assumptions that underpin behaviour, attitudes and societal trends could turn out to be limited and meaningless exercises.

Whilst Martha, like Nuria before, said that she approached only those students she perceived as open to interacting with her, the next student in this discussion talked about his success in reaching out to all students.

#### 5.2.4 *“It’s never been a problem for me like it’s been for other people”*

Abraham, a final year European student, told me about his positive experience interacting with the other students on his course, and that he got along well with his classmates, so I put a question to him with a specific focus.

I - I’m going to ask you a specific question now, if that’s ok - in terms of your interaction with other students in class - how has your experience been?

A - uh, I found it easy to be fair, I’ve travelled a lot since I was little, and this meeting new people, new places, you know I’m (.) adaptive to that sort, it wasn’t very much an issue, I like to meet people and talk, I just go up and introduce myself and most people are open to that, it’s never been a problem for me like it’s been for other people.

Then I asked him pointedly:

I - You said you have had no problem interacting, but do you have friends in your class?

A - Ah that I don’t because ah I most of my close friends are Romanian born but I get along with people from my class, just like if we see each other on the street we say hi how are you, or how was your summer, basic things. (Abraham, p.2)

Abraham went to great lengths to tell me that he was outgoing, confident and able to interact with people from different socio-cultural groups. One also learnt that he took the initiative to go up to students and to strike up a conversation. His experience then can be said to be largely on account of his friendly nature. However, having heard several of the students recounting their not-so-friendly interactions, I asked whether his interactions with students from different nationalities could be considered as friendships. His response indicated that it was not the case. Although Abraham proudly said that he got along well with all kinds of students, his interactions seem to be mostly superficial, except for close friendships with students from his community.

If one pays close attention to the language, one realizes that Abraham foregrounds himself with the help of “I like to meet people”, “I just go up and introduce myself”. This positive portrayal of himself is probably because of the intercultural skills that he developed through having lived and studied in many different countries. However, Abraham’s confidence and his exposure to international situations still did not enable him to make friends with the mainly White British students on his course. His socially formed attitude may have equipped Abraham with interpersonal skills but it did not prepare him for the atmosphere he encountered. In fact, his utterance reveals how he was positioned within British HE; as Marginson (2014, p.8) argues, there is a sense of cultural superiority in HE which expects international students to be trained to adjust to the norms of the host society. Abraham’s utterance sheds light on the sense of superiority within HE and by extension within society. Moreover, by claiming that he never had any difficulty interacting with other students,

Abraham indicates that he was aware that some students did have a difficult time, as the following student tells us.

### 5.2.5 *“The culture of the institution doesn’t create the grounds for people to interact”*

Asking Keith, another student from the European Union, about his relationship with his peers uncovered not just his difficult experiences but also his views about the atmosphere and the people he encountered at university.

I – What can you tell me about your interactions with other students?

K - Oh well sometimes it’s quite hard (low voice)

I – Why?

K – You know the culture of the institution doesn’t create the grounds for people to interact, I meet lots of people in class, but no friends

I – But would you like to work interact with different people?

K – Yes, because you learn so much, I think it is good, we are doing the same thing, so we are same (.) but I would prefer to work with foreigners than BRITISH (his emphasis)

I – Why do you say that

K - You can see what they are (.) what I’ve found yeah well they they might be like well that’s what I believe there is a bit discouragement that foreigners are actually coming and studying and you have to be stuck with them, that’s what I think the majority thinks but they are not actually looking again at what they can actually gain from it, they don't realise that it’s even better to have a foreigner rather than just having same person from your culture

I – By British what do you mean – which students?

K – The the White British students

I – So what do you think about diversity? Should there be more diversity or less?

K – Yes, more, everyone is different, it doesn't matter whether you are British or not, diversity is everywhere, why would you decide to judge foreigners actually, it doesn't matter, we are all people, it would be great if everyone was there, different cultures, imagine the extremes, if we are all the same, all like, it would be boring, so if there is bigger diversity, that’s better, it’s better for you, you are learning from it, when there is bigger diversity it is healthier for everyone

I – Ok, I am going to ask you who are your friends

K - My friends are mostly my nationality, Slovakian (Keith, pp.3 - 4)

In the interviews with Keith and Abraham, the topic of their social experience came up after a discussion of their positive academic experience. Keith echoed Abraham’s comment that only superficial interactions are possible, but he went further in pointing out the failure of the institutional environment to enable the different groups of students to understand one another and to interact. He also corroborated, to some extent, what Nuria and Martha said, that there is little or no interaction between the European students and the White British students. But Keith was emphatic in stating that he did not like interacting

or working on study tasks with White British students. His words can be construed as an indictment of the HEI for failing to foster students' understanding in an increasingly diverse society. His evaluations of the institution and the British students are expressed as statements of fact at some times and as his thoughts and beliefs at other times.

The situation in this HEI, with the absence of interactions among students from different cultural background, allows us to draw from this case that the situation could be a feature in the sector as a whole, in the UK and elsewhere. Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2007) found that in Northumbria University some home students were unwilling to interact with international students. They cite another study (Bochner et al. 1985) which finds that 70 per cent of international students had no British friends. Citing evidence from studies conducted in the US and other countries, Crose (2011, p.388) points out that international students do not feel engaged because the cultural climate is not welcoming. My own critical conversations with international undergraduate students at other universities revealed that students were not interacting across social groups on courses, but that intergroup interactions and even friendships were established at their accommodation or work sites.

To reiterate a point, the lack of intergroup solidarity seems to be part of the fragmented nature of society. Whilst there are voices in government and in HE in favour of diversity for the potential benefits this has for intercultural understanding, these demands are because of a convergence of interests (Bell 2003; Lee 2007, p.935). These experts argue that diversity is valued and promoted because it serves the interests of some sections, and is not an altruistic step that is designed to benefit all.

Returning to the point at hand, Keith's commentary on the social environment in this university, an analysis of the social nature of his utterance brings to prominence two aspects to the context. The first layer of context pertains to the lack of social and cultural understanding or rather the unwillingness or inability of some students to forge social bonds. This situation was significant for Keith and led him to dwell on it in the interview. In other words, his opinion of the social environment in this university is formed by what he encountered. The second aspect of context is the interactive situation of the interview. Here Keith seems to have seized the opportunity to talk about an issue that was troubling him. It is significant that Keith, like the other students I interviewed, volunteered to participate in the interview and was eager to talk about his experiences. Having understood that I was in some ways an independent researcher and not directly connected to his faculty, he, in the same way as the others, probably felt confident to express his opinions. Keith discussed the possible apprehensions that British students might have about other students coming to study in England, and he then went on to state the advantages of interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. In elaborate

detail, he spelt out the missed opportunities to broaden minds and to get to know the wider human family.

Depositions before the US Supreme Court in support of affirmative action (Moses 2009), and research reports, support the view that ethnic diversity on college campuses has positive effects on learning outcomes. Gurin and Nagda (2006, p.20) examine several studies that have shown that interactions with diverse peers in and outside the classroom had educational benefits for students. Based on their analysis of a variety of campus diversity programmes for promoting cross-racial interactions, they propose a model of intergroup dialogue to get students to explore common issues and differences in group identities and experiences. Their model seems to acknowledge the limitations that Gillborn (2006) identified in the citizenship education programme rolled out by the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett (see Blunkett 2001; 2003).

From the discussion thus far it seems that a university cannot be thought of as a place bustling with eager, outgoing, open-minded young people all excited to make friends and to get along with each other. What many of the participants seem to have described are little enclaves of different nationalities within the university, with students not having opportunities to make friends with people from other communities. And when students do not find others of their community on their courses, they end up without friends in class. However, the alarming scenario of a university being home to ghettos of different nationalities may not be entirely true for all students. A few students succeeded in establishing strong bonds of friendships and in having an active social life.

#### *5.2.6 “We actually have learning groups together that we set up”*

A different perspective on the social experience was offered by Miriam, a second year EU student, who told me that she had friends from different nationalities.

I - What has been your experience interacting with other students?

M - In general it has been positive because in my class it's quite a small group and everyone is interested in the same thing that is having a career in the music industry so we all share our deep interests and we actually have learning groups together that we set up without lecturers or anything so we are quite a nice grp and since it's so small it is not like being in a class where there are 100 people (Miriam, p.1)

I - what about group projects - do you have that those in your modules?

M - Yeah, for most modules actually we do have group projects and we tend not to work with the same people all the time because it's more interesting to work with different people

I - is this your decision or has this been decided by the lecturers

M - no it's our choice, we chose, well last year there was this lecturer who said that it was the people at the back don't interact with the people at the front, we saw then that it worked

and we started applying that as well and then for this year for one of our module it is entirely based on group work so we were to work with the same people throughout the whole year, but we changed that, I generally prefer working with different groups, it's just more interesting for me to see how other people work

I – has the faculty accepted it?

M - I think that they actually encourage it because well they want us to get the experience of working with more people and it does create a bond within the class

I – So now could you please tell me this - who are your friends?

M - I mean most of my friends are British people because most people at uni are British but within my group of friends and also within close group of friends there are international students as well so like the last big gathering with my friends it was mostly British people and then there was me, a French girl and a Russian as well. (Miriam, p.3)

The question I put to Miriam followed her narration of her good academic experience. She also conceptualised her social experience in a positive way. There could be a number of reasons for this: the course comprised a small and cohesive cohort of students, or the lecturers played a key role in encouraging interactions among the students. It is true that a perceptive lecturer pointed out to the students that there was a divide in the class, and suggested that there should be more interaction between different groups of students. Given that my approach to analysis conforms to the paradigm that recognises the social nature of thought and language, it might be necessary to mention that whilst most of the lecturers of the other students I interviewed did not intervene to encourage interactions amongst the students, one of Miriam's lecturers did. There can be little dispute about whether this action is salient, what requires further exploration however is the social basis to his thought and language. Although I did not interview university lecturers, it might be an area that needs to be explored, that is, to understand the social positions the teaching staff have and how this impacts on the students' experience at university.

Since I did not ask whether the groups not interacting were from different social and cultural backgrounds, I cannot make any claim about the nature of the divide that existed among the groups of students, except to say that there was a divide which a lecturer noticed. It is also not possible to speculate whether Miriam's teachers tackled the issue of interactions among the students to improve the interpersonal relations in class, or with a view to addressing wider, societal or structural issues. Although the former may be a superficial gesture, it is nevertheless important as a first step and an instrumental tactic to get students to get to know one another.

Another reason for Miriam's positive experience could be her outgoing nature, but as noted in Chapter Two, section 2.2.1, our human nature is not an autonomous entity but is a product of our social relations. In a book length treatment, Volosinov (1976) critiqued Freud

for attributing human behaviour and personality to an individual's psyche and he firmly emphasised the social nature of human psyche. This is congruent with Marx's understanding of the social basis of human nature (1844 in McLellan 1977) and stems from the social relations that operate in society. Going by the writings of Volosinov (1976), one can say that the human psyche is a composite of the social and cultural milieu and the position that one has based on the prevailing social relations in society. This runs parallel to Marx's proclamation (Marx 1851 in McLellan 1977) that people make their own history but they make it according to the conditions given at a particular point in time. Following on from these ideas, one can say that it was the social environment that contributed to Miriam's experience and expressions of it.

Focusing on the actual content of Miriam's response, in particular her description of the sense of community that was built up among the students and their shared interests, strengthens the argument that collaboration rather than competition works. The point that Nuria, the student discussed in section 5.2.2, made about peer learning opportunities that were possible with students interacting and working together, did materialise for Miriam, and it contributed to a better all-round student experience for her. It may be right to say then that students should be encouraged to understand that they have a collective will and purpose, and that interacting with different students broadens the understanding of people and cultures. This getting to know one another helps students to understand, recognise and respect one another, and was a factor in the next student's positive experience.

### *5.2.7 "It's good to get perspectives for issues such as that from different students"*

Another student, Peter, a White British student, excitedly narrated that there was a good mix of students from different backgrounds and cultures on his course, and that this was important for fostering greater understanding.

I - So you feel it's good that you have interacted with some of the students from different backgrounds. Can you tell me why?

P - Yeah yeah, I quite like meeting people from around the world, that's something I'd like to do, I'd like to travel the world and that's my passion, that I would like to study abroad, just like to be around, it's really good for me to have several people from different countries

I - So that's the attitude that you take, but what about those who disagree/

P - /You know there are some people in politics you know they are really racist, they are like you know immigration, we've got to curb migration and that rubbish, they are saying restrict it, I find it quite good to interact with people from around the world, it's a good opportunity

I - Why do you think it's good to study with people from different cultures and backgrounds?

P - I do because especially in politics, it's good to get a perspective on an issue, we are doing globalisation, global issues, it includes the lives of everyday people, it's good to know



that globalisation what it means for the majority, how does it affect people in different ways, there are pros and cons, it's good to get perspectives for issues such as that from different students, to know the impact of globalisation in their countries (Peter, p.3)

Peter was upbeat about his experience at university, which he attributed, at the start of the interview, to the diverse mix of students at university and on his course. He considered this diversity to be an opportunity to interact with, and learn from and about different cultures.

While Peter's narration could make him appear as motivated by his own agenda, it also reveals his socio-ideological orientation. His awareness of the need for people to know and respect others stems from his understanding of the larger issues in society, and why and how racist views are promoted. Peter's attitude runs counter to the description that Keith, the student from section 5.2.5, gave of White British students. The difference in attitude and perception between students from the same ethnic background can be explained by the social nature of language and worldview. From this one can understand that an individual's thoughts and utterances carry the individual's socially formed conception of the world, and convey messages with an intended aim and purpose. Peter's account and his enthusiasm can be explained by his social position. As a White British working class student, whose only experience of university was gleaned from a cousin who was the first in the extended family to go to university, Peter was impressed by this novel experience. Also his worldview, and attitude towards different students, could stem from his social environment, which looked favourably on diversity and encouraged intercultural communication, and his own goals, which were to enhance his understanding through intercultural communication. Whilst many of the European, Black British and international students perceive the White British students as unapproachable and unfriendly, Peter seems to belie this perception, as he declared that he was keen to learn from the diverse groups of students on campus.

Another White British student, Debbie, seems to share Peter's views; in the first interview she said that

Getting different groups to study together is good, it encourages debates, also different perspectives are brought to the fore, if we are able to overcome prejudices (Debbie, p.7)

A connection can be made between the utterances of Keith, Debbie and Peter, in that all three realise the enrichment that comes from engaging with people from different social and cultural backgrounds. Their utterances seem to resonate with the advice proffered by Bell hooks (1994, p.8) that excitement of learning can be generated through recognising everyone's contribution. An analysis of their account with the aid of the construct of education shows that they are talking about the purpose of education. Whilst Keith talks

about the general broadening of the mind, Peter relates his learning to his experiences at university, and Debbie talks about overcoming prejudices. These narratives show that they do not have a compartmentalised approach to learning, or rather their learning is not disconnected from life. It is with this understanding in mind that we turn to discussing how the next student, Penny, conceptualised her social experience.

### 5.2.8 *"We have to understand each other that we are more similar than we are different"*

Penny had told me in plain terms that she did not have a positive academic experience, that she thought the staff were not supportive towards Black students, and that she was disillusioned with university. With this information in mind, I now sought to find out whether her social experience was any different.

I - What about your social experience?

P - It's been ok I think ehm I've met some interesting people you know I think you know students should be encouraged more to socialise in their classes you know I think we should be encouraged more socialisation within our classes

I - So when you say socialise more, do you feel it's not enough within the class?

P - Most definitely, I feel like eh we are just encouraged to tolerate each other in class like ok you've got assignments and you know take a group or sit together you know I think I guess that's not really a lecturer's job or maybe it is, so it's kind of I think we should come together more we should realise that we can actually help each other because it's not like it's a competition because if we all, let say we all get first, and then if you knock some people's grades down it would still be a high 2.1, so it's not a competition, we are not competing against each other, we can help each other, we genuinely can

I - That's an interesting point, but I want to ask about your friends - who are they?

P - My friends, yeah they are Black uhm I think everybody kind of sticks to their own is it demographic? Well I have a few White friends, but to be honest they are not English White, they are European, Turkish and a few other Blacks, Indians and people like that

I - What do you think people stick to their own group?

P - Black and White don't understand each other, they still don't, I don't know if you have watched this film called Freedom Writers, there's a film, I'll find it for you, and in there the teacher made them understand each other before they understood the work, and she was like you guys are going to mix, and they found more things in common, so basically, there are the black people, white people Hispanic people and they didn't understand each other, which is what happens in our classes, we have the European, Black people, White. What she did, she said walk in the middle if you have friends who have been shot down, and at least three people came in and it made them realise how you are more similar than you are different, that's what you need to do, understand each other that we are more similar than we are different, we have to understand our surroundings before we understand our

lessons, so when we understand our lessons it will be easier for us to work together as a group. (Penny, p.9)

Penny bluntly pointed out the need for greater social interaction amongst students. She offered concrete suggestions to bridge the cultural divide that she claimed existed between students. In highlighting the benefits of getting to know and understand the different students on a course of study, Penny seemed to be echoing some of the other students discussed in this study. These students also spoke of forming study groups, as that would enable students to collaborate with each other, and aid the learning process. However, Penny's repeated assertion, that education is not a competition, shows that she was making a more significant point than peer learning. It indicates that she does not buy into the dominant discourse of neoliberal capitalism, which maintains that competition is good for quality and efficiency. The individualism that this view promotes, encouraging competition among students for high grades and hence a better career pathway, did come up in the discussion on academic standards (see section 4.5.). With this information, Penny's utterances can be interpreted as going against the dominant view in HE.

A further commonality that Penny's response shares with those of Nuria's and Martha's, is her comment that her friends were not White English students. It is indeed significant and a cause for concern that this point was made by many of the student participants. Once again Penny accurately identifies that a mechanical way of getting students to interact is limited, instead she seems to be proposing that there should be an attempt to encourage students to develop an understanding of fundamental processes in society. She also seems to wittingly or unwittingly allude to Maya Angelou's (2012) exhortation that "we are more alike my friends than unlike".

Penny was forthright in expressing her views because she felt strongly about her experience and the situation in HE. Her understanding, and awareness, of the importance of community rather than competition, and the idea of students as a community with shared interests and goals, may not see the light of day as this dialogue with Penny and the other students has shown. The next student corroborated in some way the views expressed by the students discussed thus far as she shared her views and her personal experience.

#### *5.2.9 "I felt like you had to have friends or a best friend, at least someone that you connect with"*

Shireen had spoken positively about her relationship with the staff at university; I was interested to know whether she had a similarly positive relationship with her peers. In this conversation she described her thoughts and feelings associated with not having friends in class, and how she came to terms with her situation.

I - So could you relate to and connect with your classmates, with students on your course?

S - Eh umh, I think now in third year I've come to accept who I am, but in first year it was I felt like you had to have friends or a best friend at least someone that you connect with, but you don't, yeah you just have to deal with that

I - That realisation - how did it come about?

S - I think it was a gradual thing because when you are young you just think because there's like media stuff that you have to have friends, there's loads of films, and you haven't, like, like all my sisters have friends and or like I don't know there was a big (----) and I just felt like everyone had friends and they were enjoying things without me and I didn't feel, and no one asked me like how how are you feeling or like ah, just felt like no one cared about me (Shireen, p.3)

Shireen did not answer my question directly, as she probably did not want to state in stark terms that she was lonely. The fact that she did not dwell on the pain and anguish that she experienced indicates that she had succeeded in coming to terms with her situation. Her narration shows that she conceptualised her experience not in terms of her loneliness and isolation, but as a process of overcoming these difficulties. Confronted with mass media portrayal of life at university, Shireen built up her expectations, which she had to discard when it dawned on her that her reality was different from the media images, or the idealised experience transmitted through popular culture. Her stoic acceptance of the situation, one in which she was without friends at university, is an illustration of "keep calm and carry on", a British government slogan dating since 1939, but resurrected some time in 2000.

Examining Shireen's response through the socio-ideological lens of language allows us to see her utterance as responding to the situation she faced: indifference and isolation. The other aspect to her utterance is that of her social background, and this could be another reason for her determination to make the best of her situation and not give up. As the first girl in her extended family to go to university, Shireen could not let her family down. She saw herself as setting an example for her younger sisters and female cousins. Her determination to continue, and just get on with her studies, could also be due to her realisation that the staff and students in this HEI were unaware, or unconcerned, that she was isolated, so she felt that she had to be self-reliant and deal with the situation on her own. Analysing the milieu from which Shireen's utterance comes to life, enables a questioning of the nature of HE, of HEIs, and the claims of concern for students' attainment and retention as well as claims of providing a good "student experience". These claims appear to be features of institutional and government documents, and are also stated in several academic publications, notably in the work of Thomas (2002); Thomas (2011); Thomas et al (2008); Crosling et al (2008). Once again Derrick Bell's (1980) concept of interest convergence comes to mind, in that lip service to seems to be paid to inclusion or

widening participation because of their perceived benefits to the revenue stream of HE, but with little sustained or meaningful action to address exclusionary practices.

The topics or sub-themes raised by Shireen are a sign that these issues are significant to her, and many students. However, government policy documents do not seem to address issues of engagement, and a sense of belonging, which are significant issues for students. Following an exploration of the issues such as having friends, and cultural diversity, that the students narrated of university life, the focus of this analysis shifts to the institution's texts to understand how the institution conceptualises the social dimension of "TSE".

#### *5.2.10 "Peer mentoring had been shown to have a positive impact on student attainment"*

The following extracts from two documents of the institution show a commitment to ensuring that students are enabled to attain, and to have, a good "student experience". The link between these two issues is a thread that runs right through the documents which profess the institution's concern with achieving improvements in both.

Peer mentoring had been shown to have a positive impact on student attainment and the University has developed a student peer mentoring strategy which will be tailored to meet the needs of specific student groups if a need was demonstrated (*Student Retention Strategy*, p.5).

And from another document:

All programmes are required to offer elements of a peer-mentoring programme which best fits their identified needs (*Student Retention Strategy Action Plan*, p.2).

From these documents it seems that in the race to recruit and retain students, the HEI is actively trying to devise strategies to help the diverse student body adapt to the culture and practices of the institution. One of the ways is through peer mentoring, a method that has the appearance of good intentions, but further analysis reveals that it has deceptively malignant characteristics.

The author/s of this text seem to be talking from their position of authority, a position which puts them in charge of delivering a good student experience. Their way of tackling this responsibility is determined by their socially formed conceptions, and from an understanding of this one can grasp their perceptions of students, in particular those students deemed to be low attaining. In focusing on remedies to help these students, these texts conceal pernicious thoughts, which could be responsible for undermining the confidence of students labelled as low achievers. According to Ahmed's (2007) work on diversity in HE institutions, steps such as the ones proposed by the institution, and other diversity promoting initiatives, appear to be signs of institutional repair; however these do not address but in fact conceal the major flaws in the system.

The institution's texts claim that certain measures are necessary to improve the attainment of some groups of students; however, the texts do not provide evidence in support of the claims made. These bare assertions contravene a key tenet of academic writing. Whilst I appreciate that the documents in question are not essays written for award of a degree, they are institutional documents and therefore subject to evaluation and scrutiny. In fact, they should have to conform to these standards because HEIs repeatedly drill these standards into students and enforce them with penalties for failing to conform.

Also, mentoring may seem to be a way to get students engaging and attaining, but it is not without its flaws. Margolis and Romero (2001) have been assiduous in discovering, through their research, that mentors are agents of socialisation to maintain and reproduce "existing hierarchy and the status quo" (p.80). Similarly, Helen Colley (2002), researching in a different context, exposes the problems with mentoring, notably its intention to mould mentees according to the norms of the established system. Hence mentoring as a form of addressing student engagement and improving "TSE" may not be the solution to the lack of interaction among students at university. As Colley's research findings demonstrate, mentoring serves to regulate the behaviour of people according to institutionalised norms and practices, or as Foucault (1979) would say, mentoring is a disciplining mechanism.

If the institution sees mentoring as a way to get students to engage, other experts, such as Thomas (2011) and Taylor (2000) focus precisely on the need for HEIs to undergo structural and cultural change, so that students' diversity and difference are appreciated and understood. This call for structural changes also seems to be limited as it does not extend to questioning or dismantling the elitist system of HE.

Having explored "TSE" at the level of students' interactions with one another, I now move on to understand how a sense of belonging to the institution fosters and encourages students to engage and to be retained.

### **5.3. Sense of belonging and retention**

Going by the extensive coverage in the literature, it is fair to say that a sense of belonging to an institution is considered to be a factor in students' experience of HE (Engle and Tinto 2008; Wilcox et al 2005; Taylor 2000; and others). This factor has been recognised by this institution, given the steps it has outlined to tackle this issue. It remains to be seen whether the institution's way of addressing a sense of belonging matches students' understanding of this aspect of "TSE". But first, this section analyses how a sense of belonging relates to "TSE", beginning with a head of one of the committees I observed for this project.

*If you are not going to simply compound disadvantage with failure how do you make sure that what you do in your university genuinely enables the disadvantaged students to come*

*in and get a sense of belonging how do you make sure that you have learning and teaching strategies which get engagement in the learning process because if they don't engage there's no way they are going to learn, because that's been found to be the number one reason why students aren't retaining, so if you can get one to come in on volunteer offers of the student union, if you can get them to become a volunteer, if the more you can get them into friendship groups regardless of anything else, the more likely they are to feel that they belong here, this is their university and they don't drop out, so we want to do lots of action around sense of belonging (SMT1, July 2014)*

A member of this institution's SMT is sharing here what it means to have a sense of belonging. In this interaction she portrayed the institution as committed to enabling disadvantaged students to engage and to learn, while the students were depicted as failing to engage and to learn. To help students succeed and not fail, the institution claims that it has taken, and is planning to put in place, special measures. While the intention and the measures recommended by this member of the senior management team have superficial merit, they do not seem to be appropriate or sufficient. With these measures, the institution seems to be placing the onus on students to get engaged, while the factors inhibiting engagement are not mentioned or acknowledged.

It is possible to detect the mindset, or in the words of Joyce E King (2006) the miseducation, of this committee member, which prevents her from understanding the reasons why some groups of students do not have a sense of belonging to the institution or are unable to engage. The text emanates from a member of the SMT, whose belief that disadvantaged students are not engaging and thus failing, is part of her mental make-up. In other words, her social standpoint is that of the class or race to which she belongs and which she maintains through her relations and her perceptions of students. As Gramsci (1971) clearly points out, language reveals our conception of the world, and this conception is composed through our social fabric; in other words, language does not float free of the world.

A further point of note is that the construct of education, with its core element that educational ability is universal, makes me question this respondent's text. She made it seem that these students refuse to engage, when in fact, a desire to feel a sense of engagement and belonging seems to be a crucial aspect in the narrated experiences of the key constituents of the campus: the students (see section 5.2). Despite their varying levels of social engagement, many of the student-participants were unanimous in saying that the social atmosphere had an important role in university life. The clear connection between engaging and learning is hard to miss with some students mentioning how they faced barriers in engaging, and how this affected their learning.

### 5.3.1 “I had already established myself pretty well in this uni”

A student who voiced his views on the academic standards at this institution (in subsection 4.5.1) and spoke about thinking of moving to another university, explains the reasons for not doing so.

When I asked Joel:

I - Then why didn't you switch to another university?

He answered:

J - Mainly because of by the end, by the time I finished first year I knew over 100, more than 100 people in this uni which yeah which is obviously you can imagine quite a lot and so I know a lot of people it would have been a lot of not hassle but I had already established myself pretty well in this uni and I'm not saying I I would have felt uncomfortable, it would have been fine with me, but the fact that I would have to start from square one because I was already ahead in this case it didn't make that much logistical sense (Joel, p.2)

Joel presents himself as an outgoing and socially capable person who decided not to withdraw from this university because of the significant number of people he had got to know. He stated with confidence and certainty that he would have had no problems on the social circuit of the new university, if he had moved. But since he had a well-established network of friends here, it would mean that he would have to start all over again in the new environment.

It may be tempting to attribute Joel's confidence and his positive social experience at university to his outgoing personality. However, this individualistic explanation would have to be tempered with the explanation proffered by Volosinov (1973, p.89) that “individualistic confidence in oneself, one's sense of personal value, is drawn not from within, not from the depth of one's personality, but from the outside world.” Volosinov systematically lays out arguments to show that the structure of the conscious, individual person is a social structure, in other words, that “consciousness is incarnated in a specific social organisation”. So in analysing the form and content of what Joel said, and the manner in which he stated his views, one needs to be reminded of Volosinov's (*ibid*, p.82) point that “the speech act, or its product the utterance cannot be considered as an individual phenomenon ... and cannot be explained in terms of the individual psychological conditions of the speaker. The utterance is a social phenomenon.” These insights have validity and relevance to analysing Joel's narration; they tell us that an individual's confidence, or lack of it, is socially constructed; put differently, it means that the social and economic relations, and the social positioning of an individual, frame experience and expression.



The fact that Joel chose not to transfer from this university to another, because he did not want to lose his social base, presents some evidence for connecting a positive social experience to student retention. The lack of social engagement could affect academic engagement, as will be seen in the discussion with Janet, in section 5.3.2.

Joel went on to spell out the importance of a good social experience which he thinks contributes to feeling engaged with university.

I – so did you stay because of the social experience?

J - I do believe that education has to be more all-encompassing but I'm not necessarily sure how they can do that I mean for example yes you've got I mean uni has done quite well for the fact there is very good social aspect which could, which makes your life at uni easier (.) yeah the social aspect I believe could have a positive influence, you enjoy uni more, so the fact that the social aspect is very reasonably well established helps (Joel, pp.5-6)

What Joel is saying is significant for many reasons. First, he believes that social engagement has a crucial role in academic success, that is, students who have good interpersonal relationships on campus are likely to have a better academic experience. He was confident and asserted his views firmly, with less doubt in his voice, and more certainty - "you enjoy uni more". It was this positive social experience that influenced his decision not to quit this university in his search for a more fulfilling academic experience.

Second, Joel's line of reasoning, linking social engagement to academic success and retention, is shared by many academics and researchers such as Crosling, Thomas and Heagney (2008); Tinto (1998, 2000); and the Chair of the *What works* project, who declared:

...it is a sense of belonging that is crucial to both retention and success. It is the human side of higher education that comes first - finding friends, feeling confident, and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution - that is the necessary starting point for academic success.

*What works? Student retention and success summary report* (Thomas 2012, p.1)

With research complementing Joel's views on the social aspect of education, it is time to tune in to other students' experience of the social life on campus and their thoughts and feelings associated with this.

### 5.3.2 "It affected even the way I settled down academically"

Janet had mentioned that she did not have friends; I was curious to know how this friendless situation affected her. She talked about her experience and her feelings, and how this situation had a negative impact on her studies.

I - You said you didn't have friends, what did you feel?

J – oh lonely, you you notice this form of form of loneliness, I felt like an outsider and then how I think they call it culture shock here, so there's a massive form of culture shock and all, back home you can walk up to someone and ask questions of them, definitely you will get help, here you will talk to someone and they will literally look at you and walk out on you, they can't, you know I couldn't relate like that, that was really really difficult, at first it affected even the way we I settled down academically (Janet, p.3)

Janet seems to be reinforcing the point that the pivotal aspect of the social experience is the relationships students establish with one another, and the friendly atmosphere that is needed to succeed academically, but which she did not find. As an international student who had not experienced any problems in communicating and interacting with people in her home country, she felt excluded from the social scene. The absence of friends, or the perceived unfriendliness of other students, made her feel out of place and affected her academic engagement. From what Janet said, it seems that the concern for international students that she mentioned in section 4.3., does not seem to have filtered down to many of the students. This claim stands confirmed by Bodycott's (2012, p. 361) investigation into the integration of international students and institutional policies around this. Although he suggests that HEIs should address the Confucian heritage culture and expectations of students and their parents, he concludes that it is not only the international students who need to develop cultural competencies but that home students and staff of HEIs should develop intercultural understanding.

Moreover, Janet's response can be understood by relating it to the construct of education: in the absence of a social purpose to education, and with an overwhelming sense of individualism pervading the sector, it is hardly surprising that most students fail to see themselves as part of a community with shared goals and interests. In this situation, steps such as peer mentoring seem like quick-fix technical solutions, while more fundamental changes to the structure and culture of the institution may be required to change the attitude and the understanding of students towards one another.

Relatedly, in analysing Janet's response for its implicit comments on the nature of HE, my bold claim here would be that the individualism and indifference that prevail within the sector seem to be part of the capitalist agenda in HE, which would be threatened by collaboration and solidarity among the student body. However, the isolation, and lack of belonging, that some students experience at university may in fact be detrimental to the "business" of HE, with some students toying with the idea of withdrawing from university, as the next student told me.

### 5.3.3 *"I wanted to leave every single day"*

In section 5.2.1, Wilma had described how she was lonely and miserable because of her limited interactions with the mainly White British student population at university. Here she explains how she succeeded in overcoming her feeling of loneliness and in gaining a sense of belonging.

I - How did you get over your loneliness?

W - I started going to the ACS (Afro-Caribbean Society) meetings and I I the kind of person that I am quite outgoing anyway but I'm also quite shy so it takes a while for me to really get going uh so I started to integrate myself and make my presence known I started to throw parties and dinner things, like come round to my house for food, that kind of thing and from that point I became quite comfortable with people, but my first year at uni was my worst year because I lived with four other white British students and they excluded me a lot so I think that influenced a lot of how I then went out to seek friends elsewhere because they really excluded me, there were days when they wouldn't even speak to me I didn't really know how to handle it so yeah that really was my experience, they weren't prepared to make any room for me and that was very hard, it was tough, so yeah I had a real tough two years but it really shaped how I how I think and how I interact so all these things, all my decisions I've made they are all influenced by everything that's happened over the last two years

I - what thoughts came to your mind at that time?

W – I I wanted to leave every single day, I thought thought maybe I don't belong here

I - what made you continue at uni then?

W - uh I'm quite a strong-willed person I don't really give up very easily eh and if I say I'm going, if I set out to do something even if I do it late I tend to still do it so that was that was it's a lot to do with my own nature, I just wanted to finish my studies, just get on with it, and I did it, well I can't say it was easy, it would not be telling the truth (Wilma2, p.9)

Wilma presented herself as a victim of the exclusionary behaviour of some of the students at university. She also emphasised the active role she took to turn her circumstances around. Although the attitude of some of the students made Wilma feel lonely, this did not deter her from completing her studies; she decided to do something about the situation, and sought friends elsewhere. She attributed her actions to her determined nature, but as was discussed in section 5.3.1, our behavioural ideology, that is, "the aggregate of life experiences and the outward expression directly connected with it .... endows our behaviour and action with meaning" (Volosinov 1973, p.91). According to this understanding of socially shaped behavioural ideology, one can say that Wilma's words and expressions carry the DNA of her experience. Of course, not all the students who faced a similar situation to Wilma respond in the same way, this is because behaviour and

action are products of the interplay of both the immediate social situation and the wider social context.

While admiring Wilma's resilience, in taking the initiative to do something about her situation, one should not overlook the fact that she was constantly gripped with thoughts of leaving the institution. Studies have explored the issue of the need for students to feel a sense of affiliation at university, with McNay (1994, p.175) in particular, pointing out that unless students found affinity groups they risked alienation. Wilma's decision, and action, is a clear demonstration of McNay's observation. Her action shows up the absence of an institutional response to enabling students to have a sense of belonging. Some of the literature on improving student retention in HE (Crosling et al 2008; Jones and Thomas 2005) identifies some students as being under-prepared for the academic demands of university. This body of research expresses concern for these students, and recommends helping them through an inclusive curriculum. However, Glazer (1987) labels the practice of curriculum transformation as theoretically shallow for lacking a vision of an emancipated society. Besides, these recommendations have only a passing reference to the role of networks and relationships with fellow students in academic and social engagement (Crosling et al 2008, p.167). Thus some of the literature on HE maintains a deficit view of some students, they seem to suggest that HEIs should address these deficits through remedial measures.

An overwhelming emphasis on the attainment gap of minority ethnic students as a factor in their retention and experience, indicates the official domains' lack of familiarity with the experiences of these students and their failure to understand the intentional or inadvertent discrimination they face. And as Gillborn and Mirza (2000) accurately point out, measuring and comparing attainment of the different groups of students in HE does not say anything about the potential of these students, and I would add, about the hostile environment they face, which could affect their academic performance. This was not the case for Wilma, and her experience was shared by some other students, who similarly had to devise ways of making themselves at home in this institution.

#### *5.3.4 "I'm not going to just sit there and feel as if I don't belong, I'm going to make myself belong"*

Shireen, like Wilma, had to take matters into her own hands, that is, she decided to act to develop a sense of belonging. Although she presented her experience in a positive way, this was a result of her own actions.

I - ok let me be more specific - when I say what is your experience of higher education, what I mean is what has been your experience in terms of your interaction with people - with staff and students?

S - Oh I'm quite sociable, but then yeah yeah it's been quite good, I do socialise with people but because I'm from a different culture, and they usually go well drinking and stuff, which I don't because of my religion, so they have, yeah because, I don't know so you have a whole culture of things like surrounded with uni, and people just want to go clubbing and things, but then I'm obviously not going to do that so I'd be more (----) I found that I volunteer quite a lot in the community where I interact with people that way so I found because I did feel a bit isolated in the first year where I did feel like no one cared, I didn't feel uh like I belonged eh but now because I've been volunteering and I've found, I've actually found out that oh no I'm not going to just sit there and feel as if I don't belong, I'm going to make myself belong, so yeah because I'm into like conservation so yeah it's good ( Shireen, p.1)

Shireen started off on a positive note, situating herself as a sociable person, and her experience as good. However, the repeated stops and re-starts in her narrative tell a different story, for they show that she struggled to talk about this part of her experience. This initial description of herself in a positive way, seems to be a way to delay talking about the negative experience, or to postpone the depiction of herself as a victim of the negative experience. It could be because reconstructing her social experience and her feeling of not belonging to the institution was painful.

Another reason for Shireen's reluctance to talk about her negative social experience could be that she was hesitant to portray the institution in a bad light. It almost seems that Shireen is willing to accept the blame for her poor experience. She mentioned that she was different from other students and unable to conform to the dominant culture and its standard practices. Nevertheless, her description of the culture at university indicates that there is little common ground between the practices sanctioned by her religious culture and what she considers to be a package of practices associated with the social circuit of HE. However, choosing not to participate or being unable to do so because of religious constraints was not without consequence for Shireen, she felt out of place and quite lonely.

Realising that she was unable to feel a sense of belonging because of her culture and her religion, and also realising that she could not change the culture of the institution, Shireen came to a decision to chart her own course out of her miserable situation, which she successfully did through volunteering. Her determination to not feel sorry for herself shows her strength of character, but it also reveals the failure of the education institution to understand the different groups of students and to also understand how institutional structures and environment do not allow all students to feel at home. Studies exploring the factors in student engagement (Thomas 2002) point out that the need for structural change to improve student engagement, a need which Shireen's experience confirms. Nevertheless, Shireen's account does confirm what the management staff said at the start

of this section, that the institution wants to get students involved in volunteering. This theme of volunteering however has been approached from contrasting perspectives.

The fact that Shireen had to develop her own modes of engagement to feel a sense of belonging can be due to the responsibility she had of being the first girl in her immediate and extended family to attend university. Since Shireen could not let down the younger members, who looked up to her as a role model to emulate, she resolved the conflict between the social situation at university and her own social background. The crucial point here is that both Wilma and Shireen contemplated quitting university, not because they lacked academic ability or because of any other inadequacy. It seems that some students did not feel the atmosphere at university was friendly and welcoming. Some felt that the prevailing cultural climate makes some students feel out of place. It is now time to investigate how the institution conceptualises the sense of belonging for students at university.

#### *5.3.5 “A number of factors, other than attendance, may contribute to concerns about a student’s engagement with the programme”*

This section of the thesis shifts its focus to finding out whether the institution and the government policies considered student engagement, and the sense of belonging at university, to be an essential part of “TSE”. It also seeks to determine whether these were considered significant enough to be mentioned at all. The following text on the importance of the attendance policy and the role it plays in student retention gives us some idea of how the institution conceptualises these aspects of “TSE”.

The University requires each academic department to maintain accurate and complete student registers, to both aid the support we can provide in retaining vulnerable students displaying irregular attendance patterns, as well as to ensure compliance with regulatory funding bodies and government departments. (*Attendance policy and guidance procedures*, p.3)

The institution, through this internal document, almost seems to be compelling academic departments to strictly monitor students. The reason offered for this compulsion is that the attendance data would enable it to identify students likely to fall out of the system and to provide them with a safety net. Let us now try to unpack the hidden assumptions of this text: it implies that some students are vulnerable and may drop out of university; the vulnerable students have irregular attendance; the vulnerable students have to be supported by the university and the departments; monitoring of attendance is the way to address retention issues, so that the vulnerable students can be identified and supported, and prevented from dropping out of university. The students are thus constructed as a problem needing help and support, which the university believes it can provide, while the

university is projected as playing a paternalistic role, caring and nurturing its students and understanding their needs and difficulties. In contrast with the students' conceptualisation of their experience, there seems to be no consideration in this text that there could be other reasons for students discontinuing their studies. Following their investigation into the difference between the attainment and the experience of minority ethnic students and the majority White group, Connor et al (2004, p.xvii) recommend that further studies are needed into factors such as staff support, feeling of isolation and cultural diversity. However, the text of this institution takes it as a given that monitoring of attendance is the way to identify students with irregular attendance, as that is a sign of a lack of engagement with the institution.

It was made clear from the interviews with students that for those who did toy with the idea of dropping out, the problems with retention did not lie with them. They did not have a problem with attendance, instead the threat of retention came about because of an absence of a sense of belonging. The literature in this area (Kuh et al 2006, Bridges et al 2005) makes reference to engagement as connected to the social experience at university, but the institution seems to display a reluctance to dislodge its preconceived ideas of "TSE". Perhaps it has a reason for doing so, which we will find out.

The text also makes reference to the fact that universities are obligated to address retention issues to satisfy funding agencies. This statement reveals that the obsession with student retention is directly linked to the issue of fees and funding. As Yorke (2000) and Yorke and Longden (2004) point out, institutions lose money for each student they fail to retain. Relating the text to some of the literature in this area falls in line with the dictum of seeing a text in context, a critical feature of the social nature of language. As long as the utterance in its whole is ignored, it is not possible to have a genuine, concrete understanding rather it would be an understanding of only the syntactic forms (Volosinov 1973, p.4). The meaning of this text becomes clear in conjunction with the trends in the sector, trends which seem to push HEIs towards a concern for student retention because of the implications of this for their loss of funds.

HEIs may be concerned with their funds and with finding ways to hold on to students so that they do not lose resources, but not all of the institution's staff seem to fall in line, as the next text indicates.

A number of factors, other than attendance, may contribute to concerns about a student's engagement with the programme. Students may demonstrate symptoms of anxiety, concerns about a personal situation or medical condition, or may be indicating signs of dyslexia or other disability, which may require further support or intervention from Student Health and Well-being including the submission of multiple requests for Extenuating

Circumstances or a Negotiated Learning Plan. Any or each of these circumstances may warrant referral to the Head of Student Health and Well-being under the Cause for Care and Concern arrangements. (*Supplement to Attendance policy and guidance procedures*, p.4)

In this extract from another internal document, a supplement to the proposed policy of the university, the institution seems to display an awareness that factors other than attendance may present difficulties for students and that it has systems in place to address these. This revised guideline indicates that at least some of the institution's staff are aware that there could be other reasons for students' non-retention besides the ones mentioned by the earlier document of the institution. This shows that there are tensions between the different conceptualisations of "TSE" within the institutional domain too.

However, the absence of any reference to student's sense of belonging at the policy level is a significant lacuna. It indicates that the policies on getting students to HE do not try to understand the real issues in "TSE". If, as I discovered, students are concerned about their social experience and its impact on their attainment and retention, it is fitting that I investigate what other factors could influence their experience.

#### **5.4. The culture of the campus**

The social atmosphere that pervades the institutional set up is an important dimension of "TSE". The students participating in my study made many references to the culture and social practices of the student body on university campuses, which I analyse in this section. The starting point of the section is a vignette of the institutional perspective on this theme, with the views expressed by a member of the university's SMT. I then go on to engage with the students' views to understand how they framed this theme and how it related to their experience of university. I later probe into if and how institutional and official policy frameworks treat this aspect of "TSE".

*It is important that in those first weeks or so students feel that they are part of the social set up of the uni and the uni is the place where everybody can do what they can, I'm saying that it is not inclusive enough, we know that because there's a problem with you know drinking and dancing and having a wild time, all cultures are not the same, but they (students union) are aware of that and they are beginning to try and address that. A lot of students, international students for example want to mix but they can feel excluded by the nature of the activity and often it is alcohol-related, but also they don't want to do clubs, so it isn't just alcohol but the whole culture isn't right. (SMT2, July 2014)*

Here we have a lead member of a committee that I observed for this study talking about the need to transform the culture of the campus so that it is more inclusive. He is aware of the cultural differences that exist among the diverse groups of students on campus and is



concerned that the dominant culture and practices could hinder the participation of some students, especially the international ones, in the activities on campus.

It is relevant here to recall Bakhtin's (1984, p.184) elucidation of the dialogic nature of an utterance, which is shaped by its environment and the social position of its speaker. As management staff, the author of this text is apparently concerned about the experience of international students, probably because the management of HEIs are aware that this group of students constitutes a profit-earning group, given the high fees they pay. Realising that it is necessary to attract and retain this market, institutions may want to ensure that they have a good experience. Or they may be genuinely concerned that these students should feel culturally and socially comfortable at university. Regardless of their motivations for caring about the experience of international students, the support that institutions provide could be crucial to the experience and retention of international students, as we saw in section 4.3.4.

The staff member's concern for creating a more inclusive environment for students at the university echoes the concerns raised by some research into HE. For instance, Pilkington's (2011) study of institutional racism in a university in England found that there is a problem with alcohol, and some students' distaste and unwillingness to engage in drinking and related activities. The point where Pilkington's findings part company with the views of this management staff is about the experience of home and international students. The institution's focus on making the institution more inclusive, in particular for international students, overlooks the fact that there may be home students, both White British and Black British, who also feel excluded by the culture of the campus, as the data derived from the students indicates. It is this aspect which the next part of this thesis explores.

#### *5.4.1 "You can fit in by not fitting in"*

Shireen, in section 5.3.4, explained that she felt that she did not belong to the institution, and revealed that she took matters into her own hands to make herself belong. I revisited this point because I wanted to explore whether it was possible for acceptance and harmony to prevail among the disparate groups with different preferences for a good social atmosphere at university.

I - You said earlier that you were from a different culture, I would like to ask what what you think can be done because well your culture and the culture of the campus were in conflict?  
S - yeah yeah eh eh I think they (the department) could have done more I think when they have department socials, they have like drinking and things, like, they could have done oh other activities, let's go bowling and things, but no, you know not everyone wants to go to the pub like I know some students that don't, but then I don't want to be the one that says let's do something different, yes,

I - why not? Why didn't you say something?

S - I don't know (----) because even the staff yes, yeah we went to Malta and that's what they did, just go drinking in the evenings (p.7)

I - Are these difficulties because there are different cultures and communities in HE?

S - Yeah, but there are advantages too because people need to know, they need to know about that there's a whole world out there and there's different people out there and you know you it's not just oh you have to be a size 8, you have to look like this celebrity, or you have to eh eh listen to this type of music, you know it isn't black and white you know you don't have to be the same, you can fit in by not fitting in

I - you can fit in – could you please expand, tell me what you mean?

S - I don't know when you say like fitting in eh it's only I don't know people have this ideal image you know like the media portrays like, ok this is a bit generalised, it's very generalised but you know you have this image that is spread, that you have to be, look, dress a certain certain way but you don't you don't have to fit in (Shireen, p.8)

My question harked back to what Shireen had said earlier that she was from a different culture. It was intended as an invitation to her to reflect on what could be done to tackle the cultural incompatibility she perceived existed within the university, amongst the student body. The question I put to her was not what you can do or what the institution can do, but a non-specific one – what can be done. In response, Shireen articulated her views on the indifference, or the inability, of the staff to recognise her experience and to do something about it. Her narration brought into sharp relief the diversity of students on campus and the absence of diversity in terms of the practices of the institution. She seems to suggest that the institution did nothing to make the place welcoming for the different kinds of students it admitted. As a member of one of the committees I observed said, merely increasing the representation of different groups of students is not enough, the institution has to ensure that the students feel that they belong to the place (see section 5.1).

Shireen's answer "they could have done more", leaves no doubt that she believed that the institution had to do something to enable the diverse range of its students to engage socially. While in the earlier part of the interview (see 5.3.4), Shireen accepted responsibility for not participating in the drinking activities, attributing her reluctance to her religion and culture, now she had no hesitation in laying the blame at the door of the institution and the staff for the social disengagement that some students experience.

This reformulation of her earlier comments could be a sign of Shireen having gained the confidence to talk about her experiences, both the positive and the negative ones. It could be that as the interview progressed she got to trust me with this information. Shireen's changed response can be explained by the dialogic nature of language (Bakhtin 1984 and Volosinov 1973), that is, her utterances were articulated according to how she perceived

they would be received by the listener, that is, me. At the start of the interview, she had little information about me and how I would respond to what she was saying. As we spent an hour and a half interacting, she probably picked up cues about me and ventured information that she was reluctant to share at the initial phase of the interview.

A few further points can be made here about what Shireen said and how she stated her views. There was little hesitation in her utterances, in fact, she was categorical in stating that the department and the staff could have made some efforts to encourage other activities. Also, her clearly expressed forthright views, in this phase of the interview, about not conforming to an idealised image stands in contrast to her earlier loosely worded expression of her feelings, where she had many false starts and repeated re-phrasing of utterances. It is fair to say that while articulating her views she was confident, but a bit diffident while talking about her feelings of loneliness, which were painful.

When questioned why she did not speak up, she claimed that she did not want to openly challenge the lack of variety in the social scene. She was probably aware that this request to transform the practices would make her stand out, and so decided to keep quiet. The risk of being labelled as a trouble-maker has been noted by some research on diversity in HE, notably in the work of Sara Ahmed (2007), who found that Black and minority ethnic staff and students choose to remain silent in the face of discrimination and unfair exclusionary practices. Based on her research and experience, Ahmed (*ibid*, p.180) observes that those who speak out about the restrictions and blockages they encounter become identified with the restrictions and blockages they point out.

Shireen's reluctance to speak up could also be due to the fact that she sensed that the drinking culture was entrenched, although she claimed that there were students other than her who did not want to go out drinking, a claim that is borne out by the response of some the other students I interviewed. However, it is necessary to state that the analysis here is not about alcohol consumption but about HEIs being aware of and sensitive towards the interests of all students. In expecting the staff and the students to organise other activities, Shireen was not calling for a ban on alcohol. The point she makes is not a moral one about the evils of alcohol but about the failure of HEIs to be really diverse, and a place where all students can feel at home.

Further, Shireen's answer shows up the incomplete understanding of the SMT staff, who said at the beginning of this section (5.4), that it is mainly international students who did not feel comfortable with the alcohol-related activities on campus. Equally significant is that his answer highlights the conflicting conceptions even among the student body about what constitutes "TSE". For some students and staff, having a good time drinking is part

of a good experience, for others, it is not the case. These differences do not mean that the divide cannot be bridged, or that the difficulties arising from these differences are insurmountable. As Shireen suggested, and even the management staff alluded to this, other activities could have been organised, so that international and home students could participate, but for this to happen there has to be an acknowledgment that the difficulty is not with individual students or groups of students but with the culture that has sanction and legitimacy within HEIs. This culture can be said to conform to a particular understanding of the purpose of education, one that has little to do with instilling a sense of social responsibility and forging a sense of community. Different and separate seems to be the way things function in society and in HE, but Shireen had a different perspective.

In response to my provocative question about diversity being a cause for the difficulties she faced, Shireen offered a well-thought out rebuttal to argue about the advantages of diversity. Her impassioned and confident answer shows that she was convinced of what she was saying and this was not a top-of-the head response but a carefully argued response to an issue that was critical to her experience at university. Not conforming to the media-generated image of students, or to the prevailing norms and practices that exist in HE, requires a particularly strong sense of self in relation to others in society, and it may be said that Shireen's experience and background enabled her to develop this.

An analysis of Shireen's response according to the construct of language confirms that a topic or theme that enters the purview of an utterance is programmed with the speaker's evaluative stance. Furthermore, as both Bakhtin (1984, p.195) and Volosinov (1973, p.82) clearly explain, words and sentences may be neutral, that is anyone can use them for their own purposes, but an utterance develops from a position or stance taken by the speaker in reference to the topic of the utterance as well as to another's utterance. In this case Shireen's response is clearly expressed to counter what my question implied, that diversity could be a problem. In fact, her next comment successfully challenges the view that homogeneity of the student body is a good thing.

In the first interview Shireen had mentioned that she decided to volunteer in conservation activities to establish a sense of belonging to the institution. She attributes her loneliness to the cultural incompatibility that existed between her and the other students. It may be tempting to go along with the assumption that Shireen's isolation and anguish stemmed from her decision not to enjoy the dominant culture of partying and drinking, and that such experiences are unique to her and others who may have similar religious restrictions. This line of thinking would view her culture as restrictive and hence responsible for preventing her from enjoying a full social life at university. But some other students too seem to share her unwillingness to participate in the culture of the campus. Although they did not have

any constraints of religion, they too experienced a similar sense of not fitting in, as Michelle explains.

#### 5.4.2 *“There is such a huge emphasis on drinking so if you don't engage with it you don't fit in”*

Michelle, a year two White British student, was aware that not all students would be comfortable with partying and drinking, and tried to change the dominant social scene by organising other activities: but these did not seem to be popular.

I - Could you please tell me about the social side of university and your social experience?

M - Eh it's kind of there's there's such a huge emphasis on on drinking ehm, like some cultures don't accept drinking at all, so there needs to be more things which don't revolve around drinking but it's difficult because even I've tried to have events that like don't involve drinking, like film nights and stuff, and you don't have people turn up for them, , so it's difficult because there's such a huge emphasis on drinking, so you are quite on your own if you don't like to drink

I – So are you expected to conform to this culture?

M - Yeah when I first came here I didn't, I was against drinking I don't I'm not that much into drinking but then I didn't fit in with any group and then I decided that I will drink and then I fitted in really well, suddenly I had this huge group of friends but then the same group, just pretty much before the summer I said no more drinking I just can't keep on doing this and your group of friends suddenly shrink and then I'm back to I have very few friends because I don't engage in this drinking culture so I think there is such a huge emphasis on drinking so if you don't engage with it you don't fit in.

I - Is there a space for students to express their own unique culture and identity

M - Ehm possibly but you've really got to go out of your way to just to find find out because I've tried to do things but it doesn't happen there's probably few of us and because we are like quite quiet you have to really go out of your way to engage with something that doesn't involve drinking and having fun in various other ways that fun can be had (Michelle, p.9)

Since Michelle had already expressed some satisfaction with her academic experience, I had to find out about her social experience. She plunged right into the topic of alcohol, signalling that it was a fundamental issue in her experience. Although drinking did not constitute a key part of her being, she was drawn into it and also experienced a negative reaction when she decided not to drink. When Michelle decided to forego fun and friendships to focus on her studies, as she explained later, she lost her friends. Similar to Shireen, Michelle draws attention to the difficulties students face when they go against the norm, and she endorses what Shireen said, that students would feel included only if they participated in the dominant culture of the campus. In order to feel accepted, Michelle felt forced to conform, but when it dawned on her that she should concentrate on her studies, her circle of friends shrank as they didn't share her interests. Without in any way

expressing disapproval for the predominant culture of HE, or calling for its ban, we have to ask whether such inadvertent exclusionary practices are a cause for concern. These practices could be a factor in student engagement, retention and success, as found by Tinto (1990). Some students such as Shireen and Wilma did consider dropping out but did not, as was discussed in the section (5.3) where these students explained how they managed to deal with their feelings of isolation.

Further, there can be no straightforward explanation for cultural incompatibility at university; identifying and explaining which students experience incompatibility with the culture of the HEI cannot be neatly matched to the students' race and ethnicity. Despite the management staff member's comments about international students, Michelle, a White British student and Shireen, a Black British student, were not comfortable with engaging in social activities related to drinking, although their reasons differed. Moreover, any attempt to mechanically change the culture of the institution would meet with little success, for it is not about changing a particular practice but with addressing the roots of it. This would require an understanding of how education and "TSE" within HE are conceptualised and organised in society. Some students may subscribe to the views promoted by society, the ruling powers and the media, which sees education as an individual project and hence conceptualise "TSE" as being able to have a good time at university. Other students may consider education to be about learning, but even this can be limiting and individualistic if the social purpose of education is not considered. For this to happen, an understanding of society would be required before any attempt to change a social institution such as HE.

Another key element of Michelle's narrative is her decision to not get involved with drinking activities. This could be linked to her desire to be careful with her finances, a point she alluded to in section 4.4.3. As a working class student, the first one in her family to go to university, she did not want to squander her money, given that she felt the need to work while at university. The class dimension to "TSE" cannot be ignored, that is, students with limited financial resources do not, or cannot, participate in activities which require a splurging of money. Similar findings have been reported by Reay et al (2009) who observe that working class students in elite universities did not have the financial resources to engage in activities that their upper class students organised and participated in. Whilst some may argue that it is not the responsibility of an educational institution to address such issues, my understanding of education that is drawn from the construct of education and of critical exploration behoves an inquiry into the systemic social and economic bases to HE. If education has to be fulfil its social purpose, then educators, educational institutions and students can derive some insights from the idea that education should transcend the limits imposed on it to grasp social and material reality.

While both Shireen and Michelle talked about their experiences in terms of not feeling included because they chose not to engage with the culture of university, Ben on the other hand claimed that he didn't feel the need to belong or to participate in the social activities as he could not relate to the prevailing culture.

#### *5.4.3 "The connotation with the word student and university lifestyle is something I don't really associate that with myself"*

"TSE" has been conceptualised in many different ways, with some students emphasising the academic side, and some the social aspects. However, Ben, a mature White British student, sought to distance himself from the social dimension of "TSE" when asked how he related to the social side of the campus.

I - That's the academic side, what about the social side, your social experience?

B - Actually I don't really have much involvement with any kind of social thing, it's just that the connotation with the word student and uni culture and lifestyle is something I don't really eh sorry I don't really associate that with myself you know, I don't think of myself as a student like experience, so I don't know if that's an age thing or just me being of a stand-off disposition myself (laughs) (Ben, p.1).

Ben confidently asserted that he was not too bothered about getting involved with the social elements of university life, which he imputed to his age, or his attitude of looking down upon such frivolous activities. He insisted that he could not relate to the lifestyle that prevailed, but that did not upset him as it held no interest for him. Ben's lack of interest in what he considered to be a traditional student culture and set-up of university highlights the failure of educational institutions to bear in mind that mature students, who are actively encouraged to come to university, may neither have the time nor the inclination to engage in social events and activities which are oriented towards younger students. A drive to recruit more students, including mature ones, to university, has been ongoing for some years (Bekhradnia 2003; Hart 2010). The entire 'massification' (Biggs and Tang 2007) programme of HE may be the result of a reduction in grants to HEIs, giving rise to a need to compensate for the shortfall in institutional resources, which have to be met through increasing the number of students participating in HE for the fees they bring in. However, given the fact that in this institution there is little thought or awareness of their interests, which could also be true for the HE sector as a whole, problems with not feeling affiliated and with retention are likely.

An additional point is that by failing to engage students, mature and non-mature alike, HEIs do not seem to be working to help students develop a social purpose. In a lecture on education, Albert Einstein boldly stated that education should train the mind to think and to be aware of oneself as part of a community (1931 in Lane 1995). A related view was

advanced by Gramsci (1971), who argued that education should help students understand the world, its past, movement and change. In the light of Einstein's statement and Gramsci's views, one can question the way HE is conceptualised today, which seems to be in accordance with a narrow, instrumental view of education. There does not seem to be any thought or plans to instil a social spirit among students, which could be possible if HE had a critical edge to it. The present mass system of HE is a kind of education that Gramsci (1971, p.54) sternly condemned as reformist education to reproduce a bourgeois-paternalistic model of teaching, which claims to have noble aims of disseminating knowledge to unenlightened masses.

However, the social aspects of education as advocated by Einstein and Gramsci did not seem to be elements for all students. In fact, non-participation in the social sphere was a choice Ben exercised, but it did not leave him feeling lost or lonely. This is probably because he had a social network outside university as he did not live on campus but commuted from home. In the case of Shireen and Michelle, their understanding of a good social experience was different from the dominant one within HE, hence they chose to not engage with the social pursuits on campus, but their choice was not without consequences as discussed earlier. However, not all students wanted to stay away from the social scene, some, like the following student, wanted to engage socially, but encountered barriers.

#### *5.4.4 "It's really difficult to be a part of the people here, they are too formal yeah, I mean distant"*

For Janet, an international student, the unwelcoming behaviour she encountered left her without any option, she could not participate in the social activities, although she may have wanted to do so.

I - Why do you choose not to attend (social events)?

J - I choose (laughs) I don't know, it's just (..)

I - because you don't like partying?

J - No, it's not because I don't like partying, it's because most of the things ehm they do is like, you know they are too formal, that's one of the things, it's really difficult to be a part of the people here, they are too formal yeah, by formal I mean like distant yeah so that's why I don't go. (Janet, p.4)

Janet seemed reluctant to state the reasons for not participating in the social life at university. Her hesitation indicated that, unlike Ben, this young student yearned for a good social experience, but she did not feel included or welcomed in the social life at university. What Janet said in the interview reveals that a culture of exclusion seems to be operating within HE, an issue that was discussed in section 5.2 and 5.3. Critical conversations with people who recently did their undergraduate studies in the UK, some at this university and



some at other universities, informed me that interactions with White British students did not happen on their courses. If they had White British friends, it was at work or at their accommodation. This exclusion may not be intentional, it could be dysconsciousness (King 2006), in other words, an inability to relate to and to understand others, but it still does not absolve the HEI, from any responsibility to address this issue. The point of identifying this as dysconsciousness is not to label people i.e. students and staff, or the system, as racist or elitist but to bring issues to their conscious awareness.

The importance of social networks can be cast in an instrumental view of HE, as in some of the texts of the institution. This importance however should not be restricted to mere friendship but to solidarity and community building, to critical understanding and to developing one's conception of the world, as pointed out by Ambedkar (Naik 2003), Gramsci (2000), among others. It is in search of this aspect that I discuss the following student.

#### *5.4.5 "You have to know when to go out and when to study"*

In trying to uncover the social dimension of "TSE", that is, how this is constituted, I turn to Nuria, who claimed that the social and cultural events were not of much significance to her because they could distract her from her studies, which was the main purpose of her being at university.

I – What did you expect the social scene to be like when you came to uni?

N - Ehm my expectations were just work hard and get the best grade possible, that was my expectation because I expected it to be very difficult and I didn't know how the workload would be like so I have to like keep up to date with it, I I yeah my perception was if I don't pass I'll have to re-take so I didn't want to do that (Nuria, p.3)

I – did you do, did you take part in social activities?

N - I think before when I didn't know much about uni I just thought about like study wise I never really looked into like oh going out and u know I think it was more to do knowing that when my friends went to uni before me and I visited so I got an insight into that but ehm it was never like oh I'm going to go to uni and go out, that was never part of like yeah that's why I want to go, no, I think it comes with it when you get there but then you just have to manage, you have to know when to go out and when to study

I - so do you socialise, or go out?

N - yeah I've done that, I don't do it as much anymore because I'm in third year but before yeah yeah it's like more to know when to go out and when to study like because it's not all the time, I feel like sometimes when you go out the next day it gives you a setback

I - culture of uni

N - I feel like there should be more of other events, more to do with your course, yeah if it's that, then I like to go, like you go for like a talk or there's someone special is coming to uni,

like where I met you, stuff like that, sometimes I look for different events, public lectures that they are holding, and I know like Wednesdays people go out to clubs because on Wednesdays they do student nights, but I don't go

I - any particular reason?

N - I'm not really, I think it's to do with well I can't be bothered to go out and then Thursdays is my long day so no it's more, I go out on a when I know that it's going to be good I don't have just go out knowing just find the expectations say that it's not as good it's a waste of my money and so I'd rather just stay home (Nuria, p.4)

In this interaction Nuria represented herself not as a victim devoid of social interaction, but as an active, conscious decision-maker, with clearly defined goals and strategies to achieve her aims. As a Black British student, with no family experience of HE, Nuria had expectations of herself and not of the institution or its staff. These expectations framed her understanding of the social dimension of "TSE". She tells us that she came to university with a determination to do well, and this was because she expected the academic standards to be high. With apprehensions of not being able to cope with the work pressures, she wanted to work hard to avoid failing or getting low grades. Nuria's thoughts were formed before she came to university and were based on her perception of university. It has been suggested by some that non-traditional students tend to have an instrumental view of HE (Bamber 2008, p.59; Bamber and Tett 2000). These claim that institutional efforts should be expended on changing the attitudes of these learners as well as on providing supportive and enabling systems (Bamber and Tett 2000, p.58) and that non-traditional students should be trained to distinguish between deep and surface approaches to learning (Biggs 1987). However, Nuria in no way epitomises this assumption about non-traditional students, that is, Black and minority ethnic, mature, first generation learners. Indeed, she was strategic in planning and deciding about her studies and her social pursuits. But her preference for attending events such as public lectures, rather than going dancing and drinking, proves that she was eager to extend the frontiers of her learning, and not focused solely on the taught content of her course.

Marx's evidence-based revelations are handy in trying to make sense of Nuria's account of her interest in learning. In *Capital* (1867 in McLellan 1995), he points out that factory inspectors in England found that child workers who attended school for half a day learned as well as and often quicker and more, than children who studied full time. Marx put this down to the development of innate faculties of learning that everyone is endowed with, which in the case of the child workers was sharpened by their eagerness to learn and the academic deprivation they faced. The evidence presented by Marx suggests that given the right atmosphere for learning, and with encouraging teachers who believe in every student's ability to do well, any student could do well academically and attain good grades.

Recent studies however have greater significance, for these point to the attainment gap myth. Gillborn (2006, p.7) found that “Black students attained 20 percentage points ahead of the local average when tested at age 5 but their relative attainments plummet with age, such that their 16 year-old counterparts attained 21 percentage points below the local average”. Although this research relates to schooling, this exposé counters the misplaced, but fairly widespread view, which emanates from the work of Ramsden 2003, Morgan 2012 and others that students who have no familiarity with HE tend to be poorly prepared and require additional support. Thus blaming students’ presumed academic or language deficit for difference in attainment obscures the role of education as a “powerful engine of social reproduction” (Jones 2013, p.176). Moreover, other studies have discovered it is not just students who are learning in a second, third or fourth language who struggle (Kell and Gregson 2011). These researchers argue that assuming that particular students will find academic writing difficult is erroneous and creates stereotypes in the minds of academics. Other researchers working with school children (Grainger 2013; Grainger and Jones 2013; Labov 1972; Snell 2013; Spencer et al 2013) have robustly pointed out that the linguistic abilities of working class children were on par with children of the middle class, thus revealing the fallacy of verbal deprivation.

And yet, institutional and government policy documents assume that students who are not familiar with the academic environment at HE, because they may be among the first in their immediate or extended family to go to university, may lack a culture of, or interest in, learning, and perform poorly.

To return to the theme of this section after a necessary digression, I would like to focus on another detail of Nuria’s conceptualisation of her social experience and the culture of the campus. The fact that the money required for some of the social engagements was another deterrent for Nuria, establishes that for her, two valuable resources, her time and money, would be wasted if she participated in the non-serious social programmes. The issue of fees and funding for their education always seems to be on the minds of working class students, as research by Pennell and West (2005); Dearden et al (2011) found. This issue also influences their choice and understanding of student culture, as it did in the case of Nuria and Michelle. Their accounts also confirm that it is not only international students who feel excluded or who choose to exclude themselves because of the culture of the campus.

The discussion thus far has focused on students who did not have glowing comments to make about their social experience at university. Some of these students who did not seem to have had a positive social experience were unhappy, while some were indifferent to the social scene on campus, and some students specifically said that they could not relate to

the culture and practices of the institution. But what does the HEI have to say about the campus culture and its importance to the life of the students? To find out how this issue is perceived by the official domains is the task of the section that follows.

#### 5.4.6 “*International students are most susceptible to culture shock*”

I set out to closely examine documents issued by the institution and the government to understand two aspects - how these two domains expressed concern for students who may feel out of place because they do not find the campus culture to their liking; and what they intended to do to address this area of “TSE”. However, I could not find a single mention of these issues in government policy documents. At the institutional level, these issues did come up at the meetings of the committees I attended and they featured in some of the documents of these committees.

Key equality and diversity objectives:

to assist staff to understand the perspectives of students (and other staff) from different cultural backgrounds - to continue to enhance inter-cultural and other relevant staff development opportunities (*CCCU Equality Scheme Action Plan*, p.13)

to assist students to understand the perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds - to continue to enhance inter-cultural and other relevant student development opportunities (*ibid*)

The two parts of this document spell out that a scheme of the institution proposes to help staff and students to understand staff and students from different cultural backgrounds. We learn that the institution intends to continue creating opportunities to develop intercultural understanding. Since this text forms part of an action plan, it would not be wrong to say that according to its authors, these steps are needed to ensure and to demonstrate that the institution is committed to the principles of equality and diversity. The text claims that all students would be given opportunities to develop intercultural understanding, so that the various groups would get to know and appreciate each other's culture and way of life. The point may be made that the institution, or the authors of this text, seem to be aware that education is about developing individual's understanding about people and the diverse range of issues, cultures and value systems that abound in a global society. This would make the text aligned with the construct of education, which steadfastly maintains the critical and social elements of HE.

At another level of analysis, it is through understanding language as dialogic and socio-ideological that this text can be interpreted as written from the perspective of its authors, who have identified that these are areas which need to be addressed. This form of analysis also requires an awareness of context and co-text. Accordingly, one finds that whilst the text rightly identifies the need for promoting understanding across the different groups at

university, the fact that the need for promoting intercultural understanding features in the section on internationalisation, makes it clear that the concern is for international students, or to further the internationalisation programme of the university through partnering with international institutions or with recruiting international students.

However, it should be stated that the text has been written by a committee of the institution that is also concerned about equality and diversity in general, with statements to prove that the institution is concerned “to ensure equality issues that are brought to light by data analysis are investigated and if necessary acted upon” (p.11). Whilst it might be true that the institution does have an interest in addressing general issues to do with equality and diversity, the special importance that it gives to some aspects is undeniably strong as the theme of another text of the institution proves.

It is acknowledged that all new students will benefit from a non-academic orientation, but that must be sensitive and receptive to the needs of international students in particular. This cohort of students is most susceptible to culture shock and the problems associated with unfamiliarity of environment.

There are several different groups of international students at CCCU and it is recognised that there should be a minimum consistent standard in terms of the orientation experience each receives.

The mission of any orientation should be to support and enhance the transition into life as a student at CCCU whilst introducing individuals to both the local community and national way of life. As a result, successful orientations become good marketing tools in relation to prospective students, parents and teachers.

*(Orientation Programmes for international students at CCCU - October 2013)*

The experience of international students seems to be a matter of great concern to the institution, judging by the repeated references to it. However, although the overwhelming concern that the text expresses for international students proves that it is indeed a priority for the institution, one should not lose sight of how the institution perceives these students. The concern for international students stems from the institution’s perception of these students, that is, as unacquainted with local customs and so likely to need help adjusting to the place and the culture. This belief is stated as an indisputable truth through utterances stated in the present tense, for instance, “is most susceptible”. The source of this belief or the evidence which informs this belief is not provided, but the reader is expected to accept this information as an established fact. This belief could be on account of institutional arrogance which makes the authors of this text believe that they know best what is good for international students. I make this assertion because the text focuses on getting international students to adapt to the place, but there does not seem to be any indication that the institution would be willing to get to know the students and their lives, a point firmly

recommended by Heng (2018) and Young et al (2013). Realising that the text and its authors are making assumptions that international students are not conversant with British norms and values, brings to light another aspect.

Following van Dijk's (2002b) insistence that analysis should focus on what is said and also on what is unsaid, it is significant that the text does not mention home students. This apparent lack of concern for home students that the text and its authors seem to display, could be due to an inability to understand that the home students do not constitute a homogenous group. Or another reason could be the fees that international students bring in make the institution determined to treat them in a special way, while also harbouring condescending attitudes towards them, treating them as ingénues and trying to orient them to local ways and customs. It could be British exceptionalism or dysconsciousness (King 1991), that is an uncritical habit of the mind, that makes the authors take a patronising tone towards international students.

The text in this section betrays the mindset and the social position of the people who have authored it. The social and economic environment in which the text is generated seems to shape the institution's purpose of promoting cultural compatibility amongst the diverse groups of students. We learn that these orientation programmes, which aim to raise awareness of the diverse student groups at university, would form part of the marketing strategy of the institution to recruit students. Whilst these programmes may enable them to have a good experience, these students and their experience can be leveraged to attract more international students. This instrumental agenda may be said to override a sincere attempt to make students aware of the diversity of students on campus.

In expressing the institution's determination to have an inclusive atmosphere for students, the text seems to be unaware or perhaps feigns unawareness that the situation is in fact excluding for some home students. In a quest to learn more about the claims that are being made about providing a better student experience for all students, I decided to investigate what the students understood by this concept and how the official domains conceptualised this term, which is the next and the last section of this chapter.

### **5.5. Student experience: more than a buzzword?**

I now try to understand what the concept "TSE" means to students. The perspectives gained from this end point then helps to re-examine, to draw together and to understand the satellite issues orbiting the concept, which were explored earlier. I examine the students' perceptions of "TSE", the associations they make to the phrase and then compare the connotations that the term has for different students with the connotation in

official policies and practices. But first a look at how a member of staff of the institution frames “TSE”.

*At a committee meeting about the retention of students, the head of the committee pointed out that “TSE” is different for different groups of students. When I asked him what he meant, he pointed out that a big component of the “BME” (his words) experience in HE is that “they are not carrying the cultural heritage and I don’t mean cultural in ethnic terms I mean it’s just they don’t have the same experience of education at home and the social background, of course this applies to participants in low participating neighbourhoods as well, who are certainly affected by a precarious home environment, so a lot of the at-risk or vulnerable students who are underachieving they are coming to the table with something that is very different from say middle class white children.” (SMT2, May 2014)*

The SMT staff member here displays his awareness that “TSE” is different for different groups of students, but this awareness bears the taint of his condescending attitude towards Black and Minority ethnic and working-class students. The message of this conversation is that some groups of students are “at-risk” of withdrawing from university because of their own inadequacies or on account of their lack of familiarity with HE. These students have a different, or poor, experience at university compared to other students because, according to this member of staff, of their lack of exposure to a culture of learning. This deficit view is all the more pernicious because it is draped in tones expressing concern for these students. The concern and the focus however is on helping the students adapt to the institution and the academic curriculum, which is considered difficult for these students to cope with or to understand. The implication being that they cannot cope with their studies, they underachieve and so have a poor experience. This is similar to the institution’s view expressed in the section about fees and academic standards (4.4); according to this view, some students are thought to have some inadequacies. A view that pathologises students, and represents the institution as concerned to help them, is intended to promote a grossly false assumption that students do not have a good experience on account of their own shortcomings.

Views such as the one expressed by the staff do not emanate from an individual’s unique mind, that is, it is not a personal view of the staff but an articulation of his social position. That every utterance has its roots in the socio-ideological make-up of the person articulating it has been systematically explained by Volosinov (1973). As a White middle-class male SMT, the person I interacted with at the committee meeting probably spoke from his position of privilege, which had enabled him to get to his position in life. This position, and the realisation that accompanies it, did not however enable him to understand those from different positions. Or it probably made him view them differently, setting

himself and those of his ilk as the standard bearers of intellectual ability and of a culture of learning: a culture in which material resources, while important to intellectual development, merely add to existing, innate intellectual abilities.

The frequency, and the authority, with which such views are expressed point to their pervasive and insidious nature. They become a 'regime of truth' as Foucault (1980, p.131) would say, but he does not say from where this power of discourse or the truth effects of power spring. He explains that power is maintained through the circulation of discourse (*ibid*, pp.93-94). This may be partially true; however, I would say that a discourse such as the "cultural deficiency" of non-traditional students can be expressed with the certitude that comes from a social position, and this portends a difficult situation for students labelled as "at-risk". I say this because of my repeated encounters with people, policies across the HE sector subscribing to this view and expressing it without a twinge of humble doubt. The holders of this view seem to believe that this is an undisputable truth, when it is in fact totally unsubstantiated by evidence, or is in fact contrary to the evidence unearthed through my research as well as research by Kell and Gregson (2011).

In countering views such as the ones expressed by this SMT I draw on the work of Ambedkar and Gramsci, both of whom firmly believe that intellectual ability is universal, a theme that was covered in the conceptual framework (section 2.4). More recent evidence contesting the claims of the staff member comes from Given and Smailes (2005, p.4), who found that first generation learners, and mature students had the ability and the motivation to study. However, a rebuttal of the deficit views may be found closer home, and to find out whether it is a view shared or disputed by the students is the next item on the agenda.

### *5.5.1 "A hideously trendy coffee bar culture"*

Having already covered other aspects of "TSE" in the earlier part of the interview, my question here attempted to elicit Ben's opinion specifically about the idea of "TSE". In response to my question:

I – Could you please tell me do you think, what is what is "TSE"?

Ben, a mature, White British student exclaimed:

B - Ehm, yeah it connotes a hideously trendy coffee bar culture that's what it means to me basically - the university lifestyle and "the student experience" is yeah (laughs) it's that it's that trendy kind of thing, like that's what it connotes to me I can't really find a word to explain what I mean yeah it's not something that I feel like partaking in you know what I mean, "the student experience", I just come here for the learning

I - When you say you are here only for the learning what kind of learning do you mean?

B - ehm you know discussing academic ideas, and and engaging with new ideas and concepts, that kind of learning, that's what I enjoy. (Ben, p.8)



I – that’s your opinion, or is that the view contained in “the student experience”?

B - yeah (laughs) maybe it’s just my cynicism that I judge everything in the same way I don't know well “the student experience” when you say that or the uni lifestyle I think just means you know spend your day with Wi-Fi and costa coffee and evenings in some club, which is very judgmental of the situation but it is the truth (laughs) (Ben, p.9).

Ben provides a perspicuous explanation of his expectation of university, that is, what he wanted his experience to be about. This explanation was coated with his attitude towards the topic on which he was expounding – “TSE” and the way it is portrayed in official domains. The evaluative stance that is integral to most utterances has to be acknowledged, this attitude and the language through which it is expressed are elements of one’s socio-ideological composition. Ben, a mature student, indicated in no uncertain terms that he was unable to relate to this aspect of university life as his clear and sole intention of attending university was to learn. And in stating this intention he was dismissive of the social and cultural frills that are attached to universities, and which universities actively promote (see the promotional events and information packs of any UK universities). The humour with which he expressed his views in no way diminishes his harsh stance towards “TSE”. In dismissing the “trendy costa coffee culture” of HEIs as deplorable, and not worthy of his participation, Ben admits that he was being judgemental, but he insists that his assessment is a realistic account of the situation.

Upon first hearing Ben saying that he was there only for the learning, one would be inclined to dismiss this as an instrumental view of university education, as some experts (see Bamber 2008, p.59) claim is the way “non-traditional” students look at university. This view considers universities to be responsible for equipping students with the skills required to serve the needs of a global economy, a view that tends to feature in the discourse of policies on HE. It is because this view tends to predominate that I was prompted to ask Ben a clarificatory question, to get him to specify what he meant by “here for the learning”. His answer clarified his stance on the issue; I realised that the disdain with which Ben viewed the official interpretation of “TSE” stemmed from what he expected from university - to learn more than work skills. Ben’s account helps to counter the assumptions that exist among some people about non-traditional students and about the purpose of education; he seems to endorse the ideas discussed in the conceptual framework (Chapter Two, section 2.3) about the purpose of education.

Ben’s response dismisses the utopian imagery of university life that is a key feature of the HE sector, occurring in promotional material such as websites, brochures and policy texts. This raises questions about the depiction of “TSE” in these materials, and in particular, about the way these depictions relate to different students’ conceptualisation of their

experience. From what Ben says, he is judging HE by what he expects, and this expectation is contrary to what he has observed and experienced, that is “TSE” that is offered to students is far from what he as a mature student expects. This indicates that the idea of a normative, universally applicable “student experience” needs to be re-thought (Ainley 2008, p.615). Ainley (*ibid*, p.619), in a recommendation that coheres with Ben’s comment, suggests that instead of measuring students’ satisfaction, research should ask students what they have learned at university. He further claims that given the hierarchy of institutions and the diversity of students, decontextualized accounts of “TSE” often fail to consider the situated conditions in which HE learning is constituted.

While Ben’s description centres on the culture and practices of the institution, which caters primarily to young students interested in partying, Wilma, the next student discussed was in favour of an all-round approach to “TSE”, that is, a balance between students’ academic and personal lives.

### 5.5.2 “*The student experience is not only an academic experience*”

Towards the end of the interview I decided to question Wilma about how the concept “TSE” resonated with her. Her answer pinpointed the areas that the concept should encompass.

I - What does “the student experience” mean to you?

W - Well the student experience is supposed to be an enjoyable experience, students are supposed to be overall happy uh is what it means to me, I mean I understand where where they are coming from and why it’s very necessary for “the student experience” to be positive, let’s say I’m very happy at uni, with my course, but I’m very unhappy socially, let’s be sure that there needs to be a balance, if they are going to be happy they need to be happy all round, so if they can’t be happy in their social life, they can’t just be happy, you have to make sure that everything is balanced... I believe that when they’re talking about it from policy they are talking about it from an academic perspective, but “the student experience” is not only an academic experience, if it’s at the expense of a social life then it’s not positive and the same vice versa, it’s nice that these things are at the forefront of policy but they should, the policymakers need to be conscious of that I think it must be about it must be a balance otherwise it doesn’t work and you end up with very unhappy students (Wilma, p.14)

Wilma forcefully argued for “TSE” to be broadened to encompass every aspect of the university student’s life - in class, on campus and in the outside environment. She raised some important concerns, about how there is more to university than the academic aspect, and that what happens in students’ lives outside the classroom or the university has a bearing on their experience of learning. She also criticised institutions for failing to include the social aspect in the scheme of things, and in focusing solely on the academic aspect.

Wilma not only offered her perception of what was going on, but also put forward her suggestions of what should be done, and the consequences for students of the institution's failure to address "TSE" holistically. Her argument, that universities should widen their focus beyond the academic domain, may seem to be contradicting Ben's conception of "TSE". But in fact, her insistence on bringing the social experience into the picture, is not that different. Wilma's call for the focus on the social did not mean that she was asking for more entertainment-related activities. I did not have ask her to elaborate on what she meant by social life as I had already put this question to her earlier on in the interview.

I - When you say social life - could you explain what you mean by that?

W - oh when I had more people in my life when I wasn't lonely when I didn't feel like (..), when I compare to my first year I could go through the all day with only talking to my mother, and not to a single person (Wilma, p.5)

When Wilma insists that there needs to be a focus on both the academic and the social aspects of university life, the connotation of social that she brings into the frame is that of being aware of the fact that students may have a lot going on in their lives - in terms of social relationships with other students as well as their personal lives outside university. According to her, enjoying the academic experience may not amount to much without the complement of a stable and contented social life. Wilma's account raises awareness of the lack of community among students at university. Her insight echoes the work of experts such as Crosling et al (2008); Kuh (2006); Tinto (2000); Thomas (2011) and others, who find that if this balance is not maintained then students will not be really happy and would not benefit from the academic atmosphere, however good or enjoyable it may be.

Wilma's plea, for students to be happy, cannot be interpreted as a demand for a shallow happiness, for she clearly spelt out what her conception of social experience entailed. However, a number of academics have raised their voices against the concept of happy customers or satisfied students. Collini (2011) in particular has been forceful in exposing the absurd and facile nature of a customer-pleasing form of HE; he argues that he would prefer his students to be dissatisfied with their education and with themselves. Indeed, it may be difficult to dispute the logic of Collini's argument, however, an endorsement of it would necessarily imply condemning Wilma's point about the need for students to be happy. Doing this would betray an utter lack of understanding of the contextual reasons for her words. The fact that she had a miserable experience made her yearn for a happier time. Thus Wilma's interpretation of happy does not conform to the conception critiqued by Collini, who expects his students to be critically minded, and that is exactly what Wilma appears to be.

In talking about the limitation of HE policies, Wilma transitions between the use of I and they (the students), this interplay of pronouns, could indicate the struggle she had with talking about her unpleasant experiences and her attempt to distance herself from what she experienced. Moreover, what Wilma said has to be seen in the context of her poor, in fact, her miserable experience for the first two years of her time at university. To do so, is to heed the advice of Volosinov (1973, p.158) that both the immediate context and the wider social situation have an imprint on language. Wilma seems to have welcomed the opportunity to talk to me, given that she shared aspects of her experiences that she would not have told her White lecturers, however doing so did rekindle some of her painful memories. This could be the reason she tried to create some distance between her and her experience by projecting it on to students in general.

To return to Wilma's argument about "TSE" and happy students, merely criticising the present system is a futile exercise if this critique does not grapple with the core factors and how these affect different groups of students. These fundamental issues pertain to the situation within which the HE sector operates, and which are tackled in Chapter Six.

While Ben criticised the over-emphasis on "TSE" and Wilma pointed out the limitations of the concept, Tamara, the following student, had a different interpretation.

### *5.5.3 "I don't think that they actually take the extra measures to make sure that "TSE" is improved"*

Tamara, a student encountered in previous sections, dismissed the concept "TSE" as meaningless, hollow or deceptive.

I - "The student experience" – what do you understand by that?

T- I think it's just it's just something that that's out there I don't think that they actually take the extra measures to make sure that "the student experience" is improved, I think that ehm as long as they don't take more care to look at different students and be more attentive, sensitive to what the students are saying that they will probably be more maybe (..) ethnic minorities who drop out I don't think they've done anything to improve learning I mean you know you have ehm a teacher and ehm student, when you get like student ambassadors and stuff I don't think that works I don't think that works I know that nothing's really changed over the course of the years I think it's just there for I don't know why

I - Why doesn't it work

T- I've not I've not noticed or experienced any changes with all these new schemes, student ambassadors or whatever. Yeah maybe just to make students feel that they like have a voice like all right they have a voice. (Tamara, p.6)

Tamara believed that the term "TSE" is just tossed around without any real substance to it. She implied that a universal understanding of the concept is not sensitive to the

experiences of students like her, from minority ethnic groups. Tamara did not hesitate to say that this is because more students from minority groups discontinue their studies. When asked to explain the reasons for her scathing views, Tamara claimed that she could not detect any change in the institutional practices or attitudes towards students. This observation may be her subjective assessment but it is in fact due to the objective conditions of her situation as a Black student in HE. It may be that this position, and her relations within the predominantly White HEI, contributed to the formation of her utterance. However, this forming of Tamara's views and her utterance have to be understood in a dialectical sense, that is, whilst the content of her consciousness is social, she formulates her utterance in her own way drawing on her immediate and wider experiences.

Based on her observation of the situation at the HEI, Tamara had little faith in the measures the institution claimed to be taking to offer a good student experience. She seemed determined to expose the term as a meaningless stock phrase which is of a set piece with other schemes such as student ambassadors, which give an illusion of addressing the concerns of students. Her comments tie in with the expert comments offered by Sara Ahmed (2012) whose investigation shows that diversity measures "provides a positive, shiny image of the organisation that allows inequalities to be concealed and thus reproduced" (p.72).

Tamara's critique also summons up the work of Cribb and Gewirtz (2013, p.344), who criticise the present HE system for the "gloss and spin" of the messages and the practices of the sector. These authors express their nostalgia for the liberal education of the past. They have been thorough in uncovering the ways in which universities are being hollowed out, that is, they claim universities are losing their ethical centre. Nevertheless, these experts do not see that the liberal conception of education is in fact elitist and exclusive, a point noted by Tight (2010), who accurately dismisses the idea of the golden age as a myth because, in his view, HE in this "golden era" was only open to a select few. Adding to this discussion is the work of Brouillette (2015), who astutely points out that liberal university education was, and indeed still remains, elitist, with strong ties to capitalism and to its maintenance. But the difference is that in present times, education is being offered to a wider section of society, and to convince the under-represented groups to take up education, which is expensive, the term seems to have acquired a status in projecting a certain type of HE, one that is about selling the idea of education, and which does not seem to involve much thought about educating students but of equipping them with a set of skills.

Like Wilma, who focused on the details of students' experiences at university and not on the phrase itself, which Ben and Tamara seemed to criticise, the next student described what should constitute students' experience of HE.

#### *5.5.4 "To increase "the student experience" I would say you can get into social groups"*

Another take on the social aspect of "TSE" is what Debbie, a White British student said.

I – What is your understanding of the term – "the student experience"?

D - "The student experience" is what it's it enables you to make friends but it kind of almost forces you to do it in a way, living away from home otherwise if you don't make friends you will feel lonely (laughs) it makes you do that, I'm somebody who can make friends with anybody but it increases the importance of doing that so I would say that is something that has helped, however people who haven't, who have to commute, or choose to commute for whatever reason, to increase "the student experience" I would say if you if you can make some form of uhm uhm I don't know how to say this some form of study groups or if you can try and get into social groups of some description, yeah doing something of what maybe one day a week, football or other sports (Debbie, p.6)

Debbie echoes the point about collaborative learning that some of the other students made in section 5.2, and what this could mean for a better experience at university. She also highlights the importance of friends, and of forming social groups for those unable to participate in the social life on campus. She seems to believe that "TSE" is important and that the way to go about it is to make friends. Her suggestions for those who are unable to participate in the activities on campus, because of commuting or for other reasons, seem good. However, these well-meaning recommendations may be relevant to students like her, and not to students who do not feel a sense of belonging, or who feel excluded by the culture and practices of the institution. As a White British middle-class student Debbie did not feel marginalised at university, she was able to participate actively in sports and other activities, and hence she recommends this as a way to make friends.

Analysing Debbie's narration through the conceptual lenses requires an understanding of her social situation, which allows a comparison of her spoken text with the accounts given by other students. In doing so, it gives insights into the varied experiences that the different students had, and the reasons for these variations. More accurately, it means that an utterance emerges through a nexus of the social environment at university, and the author's assumed and assigned position. Thus, going beyond the forms of Debbie's speech to explore its content in context, realises a crucial point, that a singular understanding of "TSE" is both simplistic and fallacious. While Debbie was positive about "TSE", the next student brought his critical perspective to bear on this concept.

### 5.5.5 *“The student experience” is that little bit extra on university CVs that would attract students*

When asked to state his understanding of the term, the student experience, Joel offered his critical examination of this concept, which he thought was part of a marketing strategy.

I - Running through the policies is the concept of “the student experience” – what do you understand by that?

J - “The student experience”, well it’s quite funny because considering that the people who came up with this concept are trying to advocate “the student experience” as probably trying to increase sort of inclusion but universities are more more than ever businesses than an academic institution and even more so with increasing globalised competition and also national and international competition that unis have to sell something extra it’s almost like “the student experience” is that little bit extra on university cvs that would attract students because we are paying, especially the fees have even gone higher so the unis have increasingly to justify why students should come and study here but “the student experience” is essentially what else am I getting out of uni, but on a more sort of ehm non strict academic basis so to speak

I - So a package of /

J - / Yeah yeah it could be anything from how can you make your academic life more entertaining or more attentive to yourself, or prepare yourself better, it could be stuff like that, it could be what academic workshops, or events in university, it depends on the individual but I think like I said before, universities have to sell themselves rather than this is a great place for learning, this is a great place for socialising, that extra claim probably as far as I’m aware wasn’t such a big thing with universities advertising probably since I would say probably since the late 80s, since probably the mid-90s unis have to constantly advertise look come to us, because we will provide you with an extra student experience in addition to just all fantastic academic processes we have (Joel2, p.6)

Joel, a first-generation White British student, zeroes in on the contradictions of the concept and what it connotes: he points out that on the one hand, it appears to be about inclusion, and on the other hand it seems to be a marketing tool to sell HE. Joel’s ability to note this distinction could lie in his interests; a keen student of the social sciences, which he told us about in Chapter Four, sub-section 4.5.1, he seems to be well aware of social processes and forces at play within HE. His awareness may also be due to the fact that as a student who came in through the widening participation policies, he told us in section 4.5 that no one from his family has even A levels, he expected HE to have a greater focus on learning and he was disappointed that it was not the case.

The construct of language provides a lens to understand Joel’s utterance as a two-sided act, that is, whose word it is and for whom it is meant (Volosinov 1973, p.88). Since this was the second interview with Joel, he may have established from the post-interview chat

of the first interview that I would be inclined to share his views, hence he confidently elaborated his description of how HEIs package “TSE”.

The significance of Joel’s point is that he explains that learning or intellectual development is not emphasised through this phrase, a point that has been made by some experts on the HE sector. For instance, Sabri (2011, pp.664-665) unpacks the phrase, which, in her view, bears no connection with *students* and *experience* but is utilised to sustain a “market-oriented discourse of HE”. In pointing out how “TSE” is used to advertise non-academic frills, and to lure students to HE or to a particular HEI, Joel’s perceptive insights expose how far the institutional and government understanding of education is from the construct of education which forms an integral part of this thesis. This construct of education combines the ideas of the critical and social purposes of education; in alignment with this construct Joel seems to have grasped that the buzzwords circulating within HE have a specific agenda, which bears little relation to what in his view should be the real purpose of education – academic learning and development.

Although the five students’ conceptualisations of “TSE” differed in some ways, with some critiquing the stock phrase, and some focusing on actual experiences of students, their views seem to be aligned with one another. It is now time to see how the official domains conceptualise this term.

#### 5.5.6 “A high quality holistic student experience”

This text from the institution expresses its intention to provide a good student experience, but it also reveals the reasoning behind this intention.

To provide our diverse student body with a high quality holistic student experience in relation to learning, the wider experience of the University and global citizenship.

To provide a distinctive and broader student experience through opportunities for external engagement through placements, internships, study abroad, language learning and community engagement as part of developing intelligent citizenship. (*Strategic Framework*)

The text is a key document of the institution, which clearly states that the institution is going to ensure that the different groups of students at university have a good experience. This determination relates to a wide understanding of “TSE” as comprising a range of elements. However, the commitment to providing a comprehensive but high quality and distinctive student experience does not mask the marketing driven agenda of this text. In spelling out the variety of ways through which the institution intends to fulfil its promise of a good student experience for its diverse student body, the text seems to conform to the business trends of the HE sector, which have been identified by Joel (see section 5.5.5) and some of the other students as well by some commentators on HE such as Sabri (2011).



However, in connecting “TSE” to social responsibility and citizenship, the text seems to conform to the construct of education. This may be partially true because the construct of education strongly associates the critical and social aspects of HE, which entails understanding and questioning the underlying ideology in education. And the link between education and citizenship, which is well established in liberal conceptions of education, articulate the aims of education as being to realise the democratic ideal (Dewey 1916). This conception was taken on board by the *Robbins Report* and was later endorsed by David Blunkett (2005), Secretary of State for Education in the Labour government of Tony Blair. But as Ellen Meiskins Wood argued, abstract notions of citizenship can be but tenuous, in a situation where capitalist democracy tries to “unite extremes of social inequality and conflicting interests” (1995, p.212). It is fair to say that attempts to link “TSE” to citizenship education, as in the institution’s text, while possibly well-intentioned may result in cosmetic rather than structural changes to HE (Mann 2001).

The text under analysis seems to be setting out the institution’s programme of action, and is probably drafted or approved by the management of the institution, who would be aware of the kind of text that would appeal to a wide section of people, but could also convince prospective students to consider studying at this institution. Once again, with the aid of the conceptual construct of language, we can see that this utterance is directed to an intended audience. Hence it seeks to portray the institution as concerned about education along with a wide assortment of aims. The final task in this section is to analyse the utterances from the government policy domain to see the relation across the three focal areas of this study.

#### *5.5.7 “All universities must offer a good student experience to remain competitive”*

A policy text from the Coalition government in 2011 conceptualises “TSE” in terms of responding to students’ needs. This conceptualisation is part of a package of measures that include financial reform of the sector and promotion of social mobility.

The Coalition will reform the financing of higher education, promote a better student experience and foster social mobility. Our overall goal is a sector that is freed to respond in new ways to the needs of students. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011)  
We will move away from the tight number controls that constrain individual higher education institutions, so that there is a more dynamic sector in which popular institutions can grow and where all universities must offer a good student experience to remain competitive. We will manage this transition carefully to avoid unnecessary instability and keep within the overall budget. (*ibid*)

Unlike the institution’s text, this policy document seems to have a restricted understanding of “TSE” as pertaining to satisfying students’ needs. However, scrolling through all the 83

pages of this document to gain clarity about the needs of students that the document refers to, does not help to understand what the specific needs are. From the absence of this crucial information I can say that it is a vague phrase that does not seem to be grounded in an understanding of real needs but on assumed ones. The link in this text between “TSE” social and financial reforms to the HE sector does not reveal how the experience of students would be better, but it seems to be committed to the goal of freedom for HEIs to operate as businesses.

Analysing this text through the socio-ideological lens of language brings the focus on to the concerns or main issues expressed in this policy document. And from this focus one can delve into the evolving and dynamic nature of the context to a text. In so doing, we try to understand the social position of the authors of this text and the relations between them and others in the HE environment. This text is purportedly authored by the Secretary for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Minister for Universities and Science, and seems to be carrying through the thought processes outlined by the government of the day in a document (Cabinet Office, 2010a), which is to ensure that the HE sector is competitive. As ministers in the Coalition government, the authors of the text, or those authoring the text on behalf of the ministers, seem to be walking along the path laid out, which is a path that leads HE towards a business way of functioning. One can also notice that the text is internally dialogic with residues of past texts and in response to anticipated comments (Bakhtin 1981, p.279), such as instability of the sector. Aware that there would be opposition to the government’s plans to raise fees and to cut spending on education, welfare and other services, the text assures the public that the government will spend responsibly as well as get people to take responsibility too.

The text, and the assumption it makes about students’ needs, along with its stated goal of encouraging competition among HEIs and of freeing the sector from any limits on student numbers, echoes the core arguments of Milton Friedman (2009 [1955]) in *Capitalism and Freedom*. He makes a strong case for a free enterprise society that would be unconstrained by government intervention and which would allow competitive capitalism to thrive. Thus, in recommending that institutions could link the delivery of a good student experience to competition with other HEIs, the text under analysis appears to be consistent with the overpowering odour of capitalism that seems to be washing over the HE sector.

However, the point about non-interference of the government may not be wholly true, because there does seem to be some form of regulation of the sector, in terms of skewed nature of funding, that is funds for STEM subjects are in place while for arts and humanities and social sciences it is being cut (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2011). In fact this seems to

be a way to promote a certain type of HE that would cater to skills' training of the future workforce of the economy.

### **5.6. Concluding comments**

This chapter focused on analysing "TSE" in terms of the dimensions of diversity in HE and what it portends for the diverse groups of students. The ideas and the language relating to the nature, culture and practices of the sector were analysed. This process of inquiry uncovered a great disparity in the views of those affiliated with HE as students, as institutional staff and as policymakers. The analysis focused on the implications for students of the lack of congruence between their conceptualisations of this aspect of "TSE" and those of the official domains. If an examination of the language of HE is not going to be a futile exercise but is one that identifies what ails the sector, then one has to critically engage in revolutionary change. In analysing the social dimensions of "TSE" this chapter reiterated the validity of the conceptual framework in making sense of the language of those affiliated with HE. However, this aspect is dealt with in a comprehensive way in the next chapter.

## **6. Discussing the findings with the aid of the conceptual constructs and the research questions**

The foundation on which my research is built comprises an understanding of the social and material conditions within which HE and its language operate. A logical outflow of this premise is that I seek to grasp what is going on in HE, and in society, through understanding the language around “TSE”. This approach to analysis enabled a range of findings about the constituent elements of “TSE”, and the ways in which these were framed across the different sections of data. The main findings from the analysis of the themes in the preceding two chapters are discussed in greater detail here. With the set-up in place, it is possible to go about discussing the findings in terms of what is said, why, what is left out of the equation and what these reveal about HE and society.

### **6.1. Conflicting Assumptions and expectations**

The first chapter analysing the data (Chapter Four) engaged with the themes around the role and purpose of education. The first finding relates to a discrepancy between an instrumental and a critical view of HE. The second finding is about a conflicting understanding of the relationship between students and staff, and the expectation that it is the responsibility of the staff to offer a good experience. The differing views on widening participation in a fee-paying HE system was the next finding to emerge from the analysis of the data. The final finding of the first data chapter is about the misconceptions about the factors in students’ attainment and retention in HE.

#### *6.1.1 Instrumental gains vs. critical learning*

The interlinked deployment of the conceptual constructs enables a comprehensive understanding of the texts across the three areas investigated for this study. Picking up the first of the themes that I delved into in sections 4.2 to 4.5, I attempt to understand the different conceptualisations of “TSE” across the different domains which form the foci of my study. This process of examining the language around “TSE” revealed that the various perspectives on the role or purpose of education were contradictory. Within this theme, there were striking differences in the perceptions about the benefits or gains of education: the students talked about the gains that accrued to them, that is, better knowledge, understanding and thinking; the institution saw education as necessary to train students for work, and focused on its responsibility to help students gain employability skills; and government policies dwelt on the contribution of HE to society and the economy.

Relating the texts to the constructs of education and the ideas contained therein, it can be noted that the official texts seem to lack an understanding of education as developing students’ critical faculties. However, the students highlighted their academic experience and what their education contributed to their lives in broader terms. The three students

featured in section 4.2 described their experiences and in the process made it clear that their education was not confined to gaining knowledge of the discipline they were studying, or to acquiring job-related skills. They all spoke of the broader reach of university education, in other words, according to them, the skills and the learning they developed seem to have value academically, professionally and socially too. Further, they did not view these skills or gains merely as stepping stones to monetary gains, resulting from employment opportunities that would come their way with an educational degree. This runs counter to Bamber's (2008) claims that non-traditional students have an instrumental view of education, seeing it as a way to attain qualifications needed for a career.

It has to be said though that it is possible that some students may profess views along the lines of the institution and the government. In other words, they may consider the employment-related aspects of HE as important, but this could be a result of contradictory consciousness (Gramsci 2000). Gramsci's explanation of this contradiction is that people may uncritically absorb influential and dominant thoughts and ideas, which conflict with their innate consciousness that is formed through their membership of a specific group (*ibid*, p333). In plain terms, this means that official views may seep into the consciousness of the students without them being aware of this. This may be the reason that some students believe that education will get them onto a career, as it is a view firmly held and actively promoted by the other two domains analysed for this study (see sections 4.2.5 and 4.2.6). This could also be the reason that the critical component of education was not stated categorically in the perspectives of Debbie and Tamara, but was prominent in Wilma's conception of education. However, this aspect was totally lacking in the other two domains. In fact, these two spheres of HE contained practically nothing about the learning aspect of HE: education was not viewed in terms of the learning that takes place but as the skills that could be gained, notably skills necessary for making students employable.

Bearing in mind the dialogic nature of language, one can understand that the spoken and written texts are not just stating ideas, but actually addressing a person or a group of people to push these ideas and to sway the thinking of those addressed. However, as Blommaert (2001, p.23) observes, not all ideas succeed in influencing others, this is due to the unequal relations of power and influence, which determine whose ideas are dominant and are able to be dominate others. The repetition of some ideas *ad nauseam* by those in dominant positions may succeed in promoting these ideas, in particular about the narrow, job-oriented gains of education, and in ensuring that these gain acceptance among some students. However, this recontextualisation is not a straightforward appropriation of ideas, but could involve contestation, transformation as well as acceptance depending on the purpose and the situation.

Every text or utterance is draped in ideological evaluation, which is the socially formed consciousness of the author of the utterance. It should be emphasised that it is not a simplistic, mechanical relationship between language or utterances and the socio-material reality. According to the thesis advanced by Volosinov (1973, p.9), an utterance reflects existence and refracts it in the process of becoming an established idea or articulated utterance. The essential point he makes is that language as ideological refracts reality. Taking the texts of the institution to illustrate, one can see that the texts expressing a firm belief in the role of education is conveying the dominant ideas but also serving to further the interests of the institution, that is, to strengthen its position as an HEI competing with other HEIs.

Moving on to the students' utterances, these can be understood as emerging from their social environment. More accurately, their views and ideas may be said to have taken shape along with their experience, as products of the social and economic relations which place students in certain designated social positions. This enables us to interpret the students' eagerness to learn as being due to their desire to prove to themselves and to others that they, despite their station in life, can and do enjoy learning. This social station could be as Black British students in the case of Tamara and Wilma, or as a White British young person in the case of Debbie.

Through critically exploring the texts, I realised that the narrow, limited view of education in the policy documents was not a new idea, but an intensification of earlier trends, geared towards strengthening the link between education and capitalist society. Although the *Robbins Report* (1963) did not recommend fees nor view education as a commodity and students as consumers, it did view education as contributing to the economy through preparing students for the world of work. These views and trends have been relentlessly criticised (see Brown and Carasso 2013; Fairclough 2007; Saunston and Morrish 2001; etc), but these criticisms often fail to realise that a limited view of education as training people for work, and to contribute to the economy, is not a novel one, but is a belief that has thrived in the HE sector for a long time, as McCaig (2014) and Tight (2010) point out.

Moreover, it is often claimed, falsely I might add, that education can be emancipatory and liberating (Nussbaum 2003, 2009, 2010), and that this instrumental view of education is a new trend as a result of neoliberal thinking taking over the sector. However, despite what these commentators seem to believe, education, from its early days, has often been elitist (Brouillette 2015) with a broad, liberal orientation, but for the masses it has always been skills-focused and instrumental. As Chitty (2014) observes to improve the economic prosperity of the country it was thought necessary to widen the pool of trained and skilled workers. What seems to be new is the perception of how these objectives can be met,

which, according to the framers of policy and the adherents in HEIs, is through the commodification and marketisation of HE. Those who vocally challenge these trends do not attempt to question the forces that are responsible for their development and persistence. To do so would involve first acknowledging these conditions and then trying to make transparent the connections between the trends such as commodification or credit expansion and the capitalist processes that result in these trends.

The institution in which I conducted my research seems to have succumbed to the ruling ideas, especially since it sees itself as a new university, recruiting rather than selecting students. As a new university, it appears to be in competition with other new and established institutions, and is trying to hoist itself in the league tables. It apparently believes that the way to do this is through branding and promoting the institution, which it does by focusing on employment and on its Christian foundation. This competitive spirit, as sub-sections 4.4.7 and 5.5.7 indicated, is actively encouraged by government policies, which expect HEIs to compete with one another for students (see section 4.3.10).

Another aspect that surfaces through the analysis of the policy texts is the idea of model citizens that is sought to be promoted by the government, a task which it entrusts to education and HEIs. The texts discussed in section 4.2.5 state that people need to be trained to be active and hardworking, implying that they are not naturally inclined to be that way. Moreover, the stark and recurring message is that people have to be moulded according to the norms and values of the day. This is possibly according to the logic of capitalism, which needs productive and submissive workers. Moreover, the texts construct a rosy and fictitious scenario of successful, well-paid graduates, who will be compliant and law-abiding model citizens.

Looking at the texts through the lens of critical exploration requires a concrete analysis of the conjuncture of the texts and the situational factors of society and the economy. This is necessary to grasp the essence and not merely the appearance of what the texts are about. At their core, the texts appear to have an agenda to further the cause of a capitalist economy. This agenda becomes clear if one takes note that the coalition government in 2010 decided to slash grants to universities (Lupton et al 2015), and instructed HEIs to raise their own resources. Accordingly, to enable institutions to replace the reduced grants with tuition fees, the cap on the recruitment of students was lifted so that HEIs could draw in more students. To achieve this objective, education has to be sold, consequently it has to be dressed in fancy terms to make it more attractive. And that is indeed what these texts seem to be doing. The texts show little awareness of or attempt to understand the stresses and strains that many students face, or of the difficulties they encounter because they are perceived as not fitting the norms. This could be a deliberate decision so as not to tarnish the

pretty picture by giving students a realistic account of the possible problems and pitfalls they might encounter. Besides, access to education may not lead to social mobility if opportunities for employment are scarce (Johnston 2005, p.140). The absence of a realistic depiction of HE in the official texts may lead to distorted understanding of HE and to unrealistic expectations. I found that this was not the case for the students who participated in this study, but it seems to be an internalisation of its own ideology on the part of the official domains, which is discussed in the following section.

### *6.1.2 Assumed vs. real expectations*

The second satellite issue that I found emanating from “TSE” relates to the assumed or real expectations of students; embedded within this are views on whose responsibility it is to meet these expectations. A comparative analysis of the statements across the three domains showed that the institution and the government policies assume that for institutions to be considered successful they should offer a good student experience. And to provide this, institutions are expected to offer students choice, innovation, and better services. However, for many of the students discussed in section 4.3, a successful academic experience has to do with the relationship between students and teachers. These students emphasized the role of their lecturers or tutors in helping them to learn and to succeed. The work of Thomas (2012, p.17), who does not hesitate in stating that the relationship with staff is crucial to students’ experience and achievement at university, substantiates this finding. However, although most of the students I interviewed appreciated the work of their teachers, some did mention that they had some unmet expectations of some their tutors, mainly because of the high fees they were paying.

Going by the accounts given by many of the students in section 4.3, it seemed that they and their teachers acknowledged that with adequate support of the staff, all students could realise their potential, that is, their ability to learn. This ties in with the idea of universal academic ability, a key component of the construct of education, which may be said to have found its way into the thinking of some of the institution’s staff, who took on the responsibility of supporting students to achieve their potential. A completely opposite perspective was offered by the text analysed in section 4.3.9, which stated that the institution was committed to investing in technology to meet students’ expectations. And although the administrative staff, whose views were described at the beginning of section 4.3, thought that the relationship between staff and students was crucial to a good student experience, this was seen as pastoral support rather than academic guidance, which most of the students I interviewed said they received and appreciated. In fact, encouraging and supportive teachers did help, especially those students who encountered difficulties because of the lack of friendship from their peers, to cope with the situation. It can thus be



said that the patience and understanding of the academic staff did compensate for the lack of friendly overtures from classmates.

A difference in perception can be detected in the responses of the different students. This difference may be explained by the construct of language which apprises us of the social nature of language. Some students claimed that their position as student representatives made them feel confident to approach the teaching staff for help. But the fact that even some of the students who were not representatives said that they gained in confidence, indicates that at least some lecturers of the institution seem aware of the importance of enabling all students to learn.

Two other perspectives deserve special attention, notably the view of the international student (see section 4.3.4), who informed us that HEIs and their staff are sensitive to the needs of international students. This may be due to the fact that international students are seen to be a lucrative market, which could influence institutional thinking because this clientele should be nurtured so as not to lose this source of revenue, particularly when resources to the HE sector are being slashed. Nevertheless, this concern for the revenue that international students bring did extend to a concern for their wellbeing, and the resultant encouragement and support of the staff helped the student to overcome the lack of positive interactions with her peers.

Another important viewpoint is that of the Black British student (see section 4.3.8), who described the negative attitude of the staff. The issue raised by this student is not one to be dismissed lightly, for it shows the institution to be not as inclusive and welcoming of all students. More pertinently, it raises questions about the attitude and culture of the institution and of its staff. This is not unique to this particular institution, findings from research conducted in the US (Mackinnon and Floyd 2011; Trueba 2011) suggest that in institutions where black students have a supportive environment through the predominance of black staff and peers, they are better adjusted to university. We have already noted that a factor in student engagement is the relationship between staff and students. Another body of experts have noted the shortage of Black and Minority Ethnic staff in the HE sector. According to a study by the Equality Challenge Unit (2013), minority ethnic staff are under-represented at senior ranks of the HE sector. This has implications because they could help students feel engaged and encouraged.

The language of the official texts seems to be aligned in their thinking that choice, innovation, flexibility, and consumer satisfaction are what students expect from HE. This can be explained with reference to the conceptual construct of language which emphasises its socio-ideological nature. More precisely, this means that the officials

authoring these texts are not creating them off the top of their heads, but from the circumstances in which they find themselves. These circumstances have to be understood, and one realises that the trends of the sector and the business orientation of HE seem to compulsorily require texts which send out a message to students about meeting their needs and expectations. Texts with marketing jargon seem natural in a competitive environment where institutions are trying to draw in students by selling their education.

However, to understand why HEIs and the sector itself are functioning in a competitive business environment, one has to connect the texts to the wider social and economic environment. This requires moving to the next layer of analysis, which is the construct of critical exploration. As discussed in Chapter Two, section 2.4, inquiry into any social phenomenon should begin with concrete reality. Following this guideline, one has to understand society and the economy to understand the inner working of HE. A systematic inquiry into the trends and processes in society and the economy takes us into the world of the capitalist system with its emphasis on competition and profit-making. This throws fresh light on the message of the official texts to be attentive to the needs of students. The intention may be seen as stemming from a need to maintain the profitability of the institution and of the sector, by trying to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty. This may be particularly true in a fee-paying HE, which will be discussed in the next section.

### *6.1.3 Widening Participation or Credit Expansion*

The issue of tuition fees sparked off a range of views from in favour of fees to vehemently against. These varied and diametrically opposed views span across the different domains analysed. The students were forthright in condemning the fee regime and all that it entailed – indebtedness, the pressure to work while studying, the incongruence with widening participation, etc. The institution, on the other hand, seemed aware of the negative impact on some students due to the changes to the fee and funding structure, but its opposition was more muted. However, the government policy texts sought to justify the imposition and the raising of tuition fees.

The analysis of these texts through the construct of language shows that most of the students in this study seem to be expressing their views on behalf of the community of students. Their utterances can be explained by the sense of solidarity that they felt because of their social position, and by the dialogic nature of their utterances (Bakhtin 1984) conveying their indignation at what the policymakers were saying about fees. Put differently, their utterances were formed in response to and in anticipation of future utterances by policymakers. As discussed in Chapter Two, we can rely on the explanation given by Bakhtin that an “utterance is oriented to the already uttered” to analyse the

students' utterances. With this we understand that an utterance is "born in dialogue as a living rejoinder within it" (*ibid*, p.279). Bakhtin goes on to develop this point by stating that "language is heteroglot, it represents the co-existence of the socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past.... between different socio-ideological groups (*ibid*, p.291). In accordance with this explanation we can see that the students' utterances are responding to the utterances of others as well as giving their critical perception of these.

Moving on to the finding that institutions' texts varied according to the social position of the authors of the texts, it may be said that the tension and struggles that the institutional staff experienced were probably because they were on the one hand constrained by the policy decisions, and on the other hand by their conscience and their concern for students likely to be affected by the policies, in particular the cut in grants. Once again Bakhtin's work helps to understand the findings, notably with his profound insight that "language struggles and evolves in an environment of social heteroglossia" (*ibid*, p.292). In other words, the meanings that an utterance expresses, and which give it substance, is because words imbibe the flavours of a particular genre, a profession, and a person, but also absorb the flavour of the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life. This gives it its heteroglot nature (p.293). So, what appears to be unitary language, in this case the institutional text or utterance, has varied contexts giving it substance. These, as stated earlier, are the policy contexts, which will be explored later, and the situation in terms of the impact on some students of the fee regime and the withdrawal of grants.

Continuing with the construct of language to explain the policy texts, with their emphasis on getting students to pay fees because "they are the ones benefitting from their education", we find that these are similarly "populated with other voices, and the social practices and contexts they invoke" (Bakhtin 1981, pp.293-4). Accordingly, to understand the finding that the texts have intertextual chains to other texts, we have to see the texts as coming into being in specific social and historical contexts: that these utterances proclaim that students should contribute to their own education should not seem unusual, given the verbal-ideological and social belief systems of the context.

The context, and consequently the agenda being promoted in HE, becomes apparent through a critical exploration of the language of HE. This deeply contextualised understanding of what transpires (Ladson-Billings 2003, p.11) leads me to delve into the socio-economic situation within which HE is operating. In tune with Ladson-Billings I do not look at a distinct part of the process of fees or widening participation, but try to draw out the complex connections between these. My attempt to make sense of these processes of tuition fees, student loans and related themes led me to read a range of

literature. In *Capital Volume One (1867 / 1995)*, Marx cogently explains the circulation of money under finance capital as being abridged to one of money to money. This form of interest-bearing capital serves to increase the value of capital, without having to enter into production or sale of commodities, in other words bypassing labour and production processes and the potential demands – wages and technological investments for instance - these make on the profitability of capital. Thus in the texts under analysis we can see that through fees, in the form of student loans, students are being drawn into capitalist credit relations.

In section 4.4 the students astutely identified the notion that they benefit from HE as not only simplistic, but also spurious. More importantly, the students, as well as some of the institution's staff, also noted the paradoxical nature of the policies. They pointed out that the decision to hike fees could make education unaffordable for some students, and could be potentially detrimental to widening participation, which the policies claim is the government's intention. However, the policy intention to get more students into university and the new fee regime may not be anomalous at all. In fact, widening participation may be seen as a strategic move to expand credit markets.

Descriptive accounts of the sleight of hand that operates in HE, as in Fairclough (2007), do not link these policy texts to the nature of capitalism, to the need to expand credit and to allow the economy to expand, or to create an illusion of growth. To do this one has to move beyond a focus on the discourse of HE, to understand the practices which craft the potential for these texts to emerge. In seeking to understand the conjuncture of events and forces operating within and on the HE sector through a critical exploration, a useful body of work is that of McGettigan (2012), who insightfully notes that far from empowering students, the new fee regime ensures that students are trapped in debt. Indeed, credit expansion, according to Amsler (2008); Gamble (2015); Kliman (2009); and Smyth (n.d.) among others, is as an attempt to camouflage economic stagnation and to boost the capitalist economy and society.

Another angle to widening participation and the new fee regime is that students are being asked to pay for their own education. To mobilise support for this move, and for the package of austerity measures, which include public sector spending cuts and welfare reform, the policy texts attempt to circulate ideas of taking responsibility and contributing to one's own future. This duplicitous move of widening participation is sought to be justified by convincing students that they are benefitting by education and so should have to pay for it. However, apparently not convinced by its own arguments, the government, through the policy development, presents another ploy, which is to convince the public that

resources have to be raised because it costs more to educate some groups of students, which is the next finding that is discussed.

#### *6.1.4 Individualism in HE*

The main finding in section 4.5 was that the students thought the academic standards of the institution were not as high as they expected, but to add to their disappointment they encountered the institutional attitude, that tried to convince them that students had to do their own work to have a better academic experience. The unapologetically individualistic tone of this injunction is anomalous to the critical construct of education, which spells out the critical and social roles that education could have. Further, the institutional text, which was examined in section 4.5.5, extends the distance between the institution's idea of HE and that of the construct of education, but this time the divergence is from the idea that academic ability is universal. More specifically, in claiming that students from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to perform poorly, to be at risk of dropping out and consequently have to be helped, the institution seems to have an entrenched belief that because students are from non-traditional backgrounds they are academically deficient. This deficit view is camouflaged with the claim that the intention is to help these students.

The benevolent tone that the institution seems to adopt is complemented by government policy texts, which insist that the government is determined to widen participation of non-traditional groups to HE. However, the altruism of the policy texts stands exposed as fake with the claim that students from less traditional backgrounds create additional costs and responsibilities for HEIs and their staff. Similar to the institution's text, this claim falls far short of a key idea of the construct of education, which is that educational ability is universal. As the students clearly demonstrated, although they were from under-represented groups – Blacks, mature, working class – they were academically competent.

Returning to the finding of the individualistic nature of HE that the institution seeks to promote, it can be said that this appears to be consistent with a fundamental idea of British capitalism, as declared by Margaret Thatcher in 1987, "They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." The former Prime Minister may have acquired this view through her fascination with the work of Friedrich Hayek, who wrote in detail about individualism and individual freedom as being necessary for a strong capitalist economic order (1944). The idea of individualism has been well received "in contemporary capitalist societies where success and failure are individualised" (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, p.567), and finding it in the texts of the institution can be explained by the social nature of language.

Approached in this way, we can understand that an utterance is hewn into shape from the raw material of another's utterance, but the tools with which it is shaped are those of the author who shapes it according to his or her own intention (Bakhtin 1981, p.358). In this case, we find that the text is authored according to the circulation and enforcement, casual or otherwise, of ideas stemming from the capitalist nature of HE. More precisely, the institution's staff seem to have imbibed the thoughts and ideas which have dominance and force of authority. The appropriateness of this form of analysis is that it helps to realise that "language like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness lives is never unitary" (ibid, p.288) but is filled with ideological conceptualisations. The words of the author represent and frame another's speech and give it a perspective, this is similar to Volosinov's (1973) explanation of language reflecting and refracting reality. Thus, although the teachers may not be fully paid up members of the club of capitalists, they seem to profess views aligned with Milton Friedman's declaration that education is a form of human capital investment to raise the productivity of the human being (2009 [1955]). Challenging individualism in education that human capital theories promote, Marginson (2016) explains that when teachers use the language of human capital theory it demonstrates that these ideas and practices are not just prevalent, but actually created through discursive formation. He echoes Foucault in stating that discourse forms the object of which it speaks. Whilst sharing Marginson's dismay (*ibid*) that teachers and students tend to be subjugated by individualism, I do not share his view that individualism in HE is conjured up by speaking about it. Instead I firmly hold on to the idea that to understand the ideas and language of the people within HE, one has to explore the situational and contextual conjuncture.

Having already established that the intention of the policies is to widen participation to expand credit markets, but that this is often portrayed as a noble gesture of drawing in previously under-represented groups into HE, I now turn to another finding in this section - that the move is not at all altruistic for an additional reason. The policies seek to justify charging students fees by portraying under-represented students, invited to participate in HE, as being deficient, and thus requiring more effort to educate and consequently raising the cost of educating and retaining them. This finding is salient for what it reveals about HE and society, and this revelation is only possible through critically exploring the objective conditions which enable a text to come into being.

For one, it would mean going beyond the immediate parameters of a text to trace the evolution of the ideas which inform a text, as Stephen Jay Gould did in his critique of *The Bell Curve*, a book which claimed to prove that there are biological and genetic reasons for differences in intelligence and educational outcomes. Refuting the flawed and

manipulated science of the authors of *The Bell Curve*, Gould (1994 and 1996) went on to discuss the reasons for a resurgence of views attributing differences in education to race and class. According to him, efforts to prove that inequalities in outcomes are due to genetic factors can be used to justify slashing of funds to the education of some sections of society. As he puts it, it is “a manifesto of conservative ideology” whose primary purpose is “to eliminate welfare” (1996, p.28). Gould’s arguments gain added relevance and validity in the light of utterances in the policy texts, and in an environment where governments are trying to cut down on welfare payments and to cut public sector budgets.

Evidence supporting the point that the British government is determined to cut spending is not hard to find, see for instance the Comprehensive spending review (HM Treasury 2010); moreover, the Institute of Fiscal Studies documents testify to this trend, and especially to the slashing of funding to HE (Belfield et al 2017). But more important than identifying the trend is to understand the reasoning that is directing the trend of austerity. The idea of austerity, or the arguments in favour of cutting government spending, seems to combine economic necessity with a moral appeal, as the Coalition leaders stated in a press conference, to slash government debt and deficit (Cabinet Office, 2010b). However, going by evidence presented by various economic analysts such as Paul Krugman (2010, 2011, 2012), the austerity drive is not about debt and deficits, but about using deficit panic as an excuse to dismantle social welfare programmes.

The complicity of some academics in inadvertently, or perhaps deliberately, endorsing this agenda can be detected. The idea that some students require special efforts to be educated and retained is fairly common with regular appearances in the literature. For instance, although Crosling et al (2008) seem to understand that the factors affecting student retention are both academic and social, they attribute some students’ feeling of alienation and dissatisfaction to a mismatch between students’ expectations and those of the institution. These experts on HE and research of the field suggest that some students are likely to experience a form of disconnect between their experiences and the way the institution structures or constructs “TSE”. The patronising tone of these writers advocating widening participation is to help students new to HE because it is thought that they are in need of help because they may lack academic ability or familiarity with academic language. Thus, they too seem to absolve institutions of any responsibility to change institutional structures and seem to endorse the point made by the policy text that it is more expensive to educate non-traditional students.

The time, attention and efforts expended on talking about the attainment gap in HE by HEA, Universities UK, and several universities and the unwillingness to address the barriers to attainment, or to take note of the literature proving the fallacy of academic

inability, provide some evidence of the underlying motives to the deficit views. A number of writers have successfully demonstrated that the gap in attainment between students (in schools and in HE) from different groups has nothing to do with verbal deprivation (Labov 1972); linguistic deficit (Grainger and Jones 2013; Spencer, Clegg, and Stackhouse 2013; Snell 2013); incompetence in academic language (Bourdieu and Passeron 1994) and academic inability (Cummins 2009; Lambirth 2011). And yet the deficit views survive.

From the discussion thus far it may be said that the purpose of HE according to the official domains is to attract students to HE because it is good to have an educated workforce, who pay for their education and training and thus contribute to the expansion of the capitalist system. Since the composition of the student body is changing as a result of moves to widen participation, the next section of the discussion critically assesses the dimensions of “TSE” in a diverse HE system.

## **6.2. Diverse views on Diversity**

The findings uncovered through analysing the different sets of data in this chapter tell an interesting story about the dimensions of diversity in an increasingly diverse and stratified HE system. The implications of this diversity and stratification for students’ experience of HE also become clear, along with an understanding of the different conceptualisations of this aspect of “TSE”. In particular, the findings reveal the absence of an enabling environment for students to come together as a community. The absence of a feeling of community affected some students’ experience; given the alienating environment that some students experienced, I found that students had to craft their own ways to feel a sense of belonging to the institution. There also seemed to be a misconception, at the institutional level, about the abilities and the culture of some groups of students, and a complete absence of understanding of the importance of the social dimensions of “TSE” at the policy level. The distorted understanding and the absence of understanding seem to have led to misguided ways of addressing “TSE”. The official views on the ways of providing a good student experience differed in significant ways from the students’ understanding of what constitutes a good student experience.

### *6.2.1 Barriers that Need Dismantling*

The students discussed in section 5.2 spoke of the limited interactions between students in class, but more significantly, this was even amongst students who had some characteristics in common. For instance, students who shared the same national identity could not relate to each other because they had different ethnic backgrounds. And students of the same ethnic background but with different national identity also seemed unable to relate to each other. This barrier that some students perceived is significant, for



it reveals that HE is constituted as an individual enterprise and that the individualism of HE seems to be a feature of both the academic as well as the social spheres. Although the students seemed to understand the benefits of collaborative learning and of creating a community of students, which could potentially hold good for developing the social understanding of the student body, the institution had a partial understanding of the importance of a community of students, and the government policies did not deem this an important issue.

The main finding is that students seem to realise the role and the importance of a student community for enriching the learning environment at university. The construct of education guides the analysis of the students' utterances, with its emphasis on education, and in particular, HE has having a social purpose, which entails developing an understanding of people in society, the nature of society and the economy (Targ 2009 Monthly review). Expanding on the practical significance of this point, Stevenson and Whelan (2013, p.16) note that allowing students to reflect on issues of class, race and power through developing a sense of community for bringing about social change goes way beyond token ways of promoting cultural diversity and inclusion.

The institutional texts' focus on peer mentoring to tackle the attainment of some students, and its failure to acknowledge the need for a critical community, raises questions about the purpose of this focus. This is particularly so in the light of some of the literature on mentoring (Colley 2002; Margolis and Romero 2001; and Woodrow 1994, which identifies it as a process that is designed to mould students according to established norms, a point that was discussed in section 5.2.10. Given the inadequacy and inappropriateness of some institutional measures, others have called for a mindset for change, which realises that the university is a learning community with a moral as well as a social purpose (Tinto 2003). This discussion highlights the limited, and limiting, role of piecemeal steps such as peer mentoring in developing a critical community of students. However, the fact that peer mentoring was mentioned as a way to improve the attainment of some groups of students is significant, for what it reveals about the mindset of the authors of this text, which I will come to a little later.

Moreover, since many of the students drew attention to the barrier between groups, in particular with White British students being perceived as unapproachable, the finding that a barrier exists and is allowed to persist reveals the inability of the institutional staff to identify the barrier in the first place, and their subsequent inability to find ways of overcoming it. This absence or inability can be explored and explained through the conceptual construct of language. The point that a theme, that enters the purview of an utterance, is encoded with the author's ideological evaluation of it can be supplemented

with the suggestion that analysis should deal with what is said as well as with what is left unsaid (van Dijk 2002b). Through reassembling the logic of the socio-ideological nature of language, one can understand why there is no mention of the divide in the institutional texts. In leaving this crucial point out of the equation, the attempt may be to orient the focus onto students, that is, onto the fictitious attainment problems of some students. In claiming that the magic of peer mentoring could solve the difference in attainment, the text points to imagined deficiencies of students and not to the institution's responsibility to ensure that a sense of community exists amongst the students at university.

I find that the institutional understanding of this dimension of "TSE" is nothing more than a mechanical quick-fix that stems from dysconsciousness (King 1991), which is an inability to grasp reality from another's perspective. King, in her role as a teacher educator, accurately captured the way some of her students were able to perceive reality in a limited way. She describes this as "the inability to think certain thoughts" and she defines dysconsciousness as "an impaired way of thinking because of miseducation" (King in interview with Brandon 2006). King's explanation is useful to interpret the suggestion of peer mentoring that the institution has in mind to foster interaction, engagement and attainment.

It is precisely through a critical exploration of HE that the dysconscious thinking, and the lack of dialectical thinking of the text become clear. That is, the authors of the text see issues such as the attainment gap or retention as static facts or events and not as processes that develop through the interaction of different processes. Gramsci, referring to another context, made a reliable observation that deficiencies are not inherent in people but are products of past history and the social conditions of the present (2000 p.471). Refocusing on the tool of critical exploration, which is drawn from the writings of Marx and Engels (1998), helps to explore more than the surface features of a spoken or written text, to understand that issues, institutions, events and people do not exist in an ahistorical social vacuum. In failing to take into consideration how the institutional environment could affect some students' attainment and retention, the institution appears to bear out King's explanation of dysconscious thinking.

Given that the institution's solution was off-target, I found that students had to come up with their own ways of developing feelings of community and belonging, which is the next finding to be discussed.

### *6.2.2 Self-styled ways to overcoming alienation*

Through analysing the data in section 5.3, I found that a sense of belonging, which could come about with an interactive atmosphere at university, is an important factor in student

retention and attainment. However, this did not seem important enough to the policymakers to merit a mention in their texts. Although the institution seemed to realise that some students were not feeling engaged, it attributed this to a problem with the students. Hence it proposed to put in place a smart way to monitor their attendance and to have early assessment so that the potential risk of withdrawal because of poor attainment could be tackled before it reached a crisis situation. Once again, the institution seemed to have come up with a magic solution to an imaginary or assumed problem, or what Tight (1998) refers to as “victim blaming” (p.483), that is, holding students responsible for an institutional failure to offer an enabling environment.

The finding that students had to devise their own ways to have a sense of engagement and belonging, and that the lack of engagement affected their academic performance, as well as threatened their continuation, are noteworthy; the institution either seemed blissfully unaware or unwilling to consider that it had to address the social environment to deal with issues of engagement, attainment, attendance and retention. The importance of the social environment was made abundantly clear by Joel in section 5.3.1, who chose to continue his education at this university because of his strong network of friends. Similarly, numerous scholarly works (Kahu 2013; Thomas 2012; Tinto 2000) have delved into the issue of student engagement, and there is overwhelming evidence that the more students interact with other students and staff, the more likely they are to persist.

Having already examined the texts through the conceptual lenses of education and language, I draw on the lens of critical exploration to explain the finding that the policymakers and the institution do not consider the social environment to be a factor in students’ social and academic engagement. The policies that I scrutinised are from 2010 to 2014, from the early days of the Coalition government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg. The main focus of the government seems to have been to reduce national debt and to cut government spending to reduce the deficit (Gamble 2015). Without going into the merits or demerits of these policies, or to discuss whether they are economically sound or not, one can say that these policies (and preceding policies since the 1963 *Robbins Report*) led the government to try to increase the number of students at university and to slash social welfare programmes. With these aims in mind, it is unlikely that it would cast a light on the social potholes on the road to university, as doing so could deter students from taking this route. Besides, since universities are increasingly encouraged to be profit-making enterprises (Papadopoulos 2000, p.34), the social agenda is likely to receive marginal attention in a business environment which is at odds with notions of compassion. But this business environment is itself a product of the economic policies which are directing the nature of the HE sector.

Whilst the policymakers promulgate policies, institutions are tasked with implementing them. It seems that in their sincere attempts to implement policies, institutional staff come up with technological solutions to attainment and retention instead of trying to understand and promote student engagement and belonging at university. A sense of belonging has received much attention among researchers on HE because of issues to do with student retention (Crosling et al 2008, Thomas 2011a). These researchers insist that it is important to understand students' perception of what it means to belong to a university. They find that students can feel lonely at university and may have difficulty identifying with their peers and with the university culture. However, they also find that if students feel they are appreciated, they feel connected to the institution. This finding could have some relevance in the increasingly diverse HE environment in the UK.

### *6.2.3 Celebrating diversity or cultural incompatibility*

The next important finding to emerge from the analysis of the data across the different domains of this study is how "TSE" relates to the culture on the campus. Nowhere in the government policies I examined, did I find any concern expressed for students who feel excluded because they are not willing participants in the culture of the campus. Given that there is much discussion of ways to increase the representation of under-represented groups in HE, a mention along these lines would not be out of place. It should be reiterated however that representation of different groups in HE has increased but so too has talk about problems to do with the retention and success of some students. But, as Powell (1998, p.102) pointed out while describing the situation of HE in the U.S., researchers fail to draw links between students' experiences, performance and persistence. And when one encounters phrases such as 'improving' "TSE" in policy documents, the discourse deals with providing students value for money in terms of choice and information about courses, but not about a better social experience in terms of a sense of belonging or feeling academically and socially engaged

The students I interviewed spoke of their inability to relate to the prevailing culture and practices on campus, which mainly revolved around alcohol. Whilst one of the students thought the student culture was juvenile, the others considered it to be a waste of time and money. The government policies once again had nothing to say on this issue, and the institutional texts expressed a concern for the issue of cultural incompatibility, but this concern was primarily for international students. Thus, despite claiming a determination to widen participation and to increase diversity, the HE sector either tends to demand homogeneity in terms of the practices on campus or fails to nurture an educationally and socially purposive culture. Stressing the importance for HEIs to understand student culture and subcultures, MacKinnon and Floyd (2011) observe that this would help to encourage

those cultural elements that have relevant educational purposes and would discourage practices that are irrelevant and counterproductive.

Going by the utterances of the students and the institution it seems that at one level the institution recognises the need for enhancing intercultural understanding. This is probably linked to its perception that international students in particular cannot relate to the culture on campus. The benevolent gesture has another agenda, which is to make sure international students have a good experience so that they can be brand ambassadors for the institution, as declared in the text in sub-section 5.4.6. Also, as Malcolm (2000), Stuart (2000) and Thompson (2000) point out, expecting students to adjust to the institutional culture does not seem to recognise the value of the students' culture.

Once again, the construct of language can help to explain the finding that whilst the focus on home students is feeble, the concern for international students is overpowering. A topic becomes an utterance only if it has value and meaning for its author in a particular context (Volosinov 1973, pp.110-111). Taking this insight into consideration, we can see that the institutional text chooses to concentrate on the cultural situation for international students, because they pay international fees and are a source of much needed revenue. Home students do pay fees and institutions claim to be concerned to retain them, but they seem to be side-lined here. A further aspect to the neglect of cultural compatibility is that an institution may not want to acknowledge that there is a problem because this would mean admitting that the institution is not really an inclusive place. The interviews with students found that despite superficial diversity, divides between groups are firmly in place. This divide could and does have a negative impact on students' learning experience, and could be a factor in attainment and retention. We noted earlier that a sense of engagement with the course of study and the institution has been recognised as important by some in the academic arena (Astin 1984). Yet even here the alienation that is caused by the culture of the institution is rarely mentioned, a neglect that Quaye and Harper (2014, pp. 6-7) attempt to address. They bluntly point out that students are unlikely to develop intercultural understanding merely through greater diversity of groups represented on campuses. They recommend facilitated discussions which would allow students to understand and to interrogate themselves in relation to others. Quaye and Harper's suggestion seems to draw on the seminal work of bell hooks on education; she passionately explains that an "exciting learning process" (1994, p.8), is one that fires up students' interest in ideas and in one another's presence.

Connecting the findings about the lack of cultural compatibility, and the failure to acknowledge and to deal with it by the official domains, to the conceptual construct of critical exploration, leads the discussion towards the socio-economic reality of HE and

society. The former finding may be seen as consistent with the individualistic nature of HE, which would be incapable of forging a spirit of community amongst students. The latter finding could be explained by the elitism of the sector, which whilst keen to draw in students from non-traditional and international backgrounds, expects them to conform to the established ways of the education system. Also in refusing to admit that there are flaws in the system, the institution and the policymakers can thus absolve themselves of any responsibility for attainment and retention issues that students would face if they do not feel comfortable in the cultural climate at university. And in ignoring cultural incompatibility, these officials could avoid transforming the institutional culture and practices. It would of course be naïve to expect a revolutionary transformation of HE in a society which appears to function according to the norms of a capitalist system. Hence when cultural compatibility is addressed by the institution, it is because of its potential economic benefit to the institution.

#### *6.2.4 The student experience and targeted interventions: a mismatched approach?*

The final finding is that there is a glaring discrepancy in the way the different domains understand the notion of “TSE”. The students exposed the hollowness of the concept, the institution appeared to have a holistic understanding of the concept, and the policymakers seemed to see it as a marketing tool to attract students.

The composite construct of education with a well-rounded view of the purpose, the abilities and the responsibilities of the people affiliated with education offers a tool to make intelligible the different interpretations of the concept. The students on the whole despite some dissimilarities thought that the concept had been rendered meaningless, and that it should be either discarded, or revitalised, to make it less pretentious and more meaningful to the diverse groups of students. The fact that the other two domains seemed to have a superficial understanding of the term indicates that the institutional staff and the policy makers had a narrow view of education. Although the institutional document did profess to broaden the scope of “TSE”, this appeared to be a glib brand promotion exercise that did not amount to a substantial divergence from the policy text. This claim is tenable because the analyses and findings of the preceding sections clearly indicated that the institution’s staff were more or less conforming to the policy guidelines either out of compulsion or concurrence.

Furthermore, the institutional focus on citizenship seems to crumble when read along with Bernard Crick’s (2002, p.503) refinement of the concept of citizenship education, which clearly identifies its social aspect:

...it is a poor and incomplete self that is not social. Morality is not the individual purity of standing aside with clean hands: it is concerned and responsible interaction with the problems of others.

Given the institution's emphasis on individual efforts (section 4.5) and its failure to enable students to feel a sense of community (section 5.2), its conceptualisation of "TSE" seems to be missing the core elements of the construct of education – critical and social aspects. The policy domain by connecting "TSE" to the financial reforms of HE seems to lack even an attempt to address the critical and social purpose of education or to acknowledge the structural issues in the social and academic engagement of some students, and the implications for "TSE" of these students.

The socio-ideological nature of language affords another way to account for the finding that the different domains had somewhat disparate ways of conceptualising the term. In particular, the social basis of language helps to explain the alignment of the utterances of the two official domains. The dialogically formed utterance in the case of the institution seems to have its own intention and message to convey, to serve its own interests. But this utterance is also formed by taking into consideration the views and responses of the other two domains – the students and the policymakers – and so it attempts to present an image of "TSE" as comprehensive. However, the policy domain, with its focus on a business model for HE, does not seem to be pulled in different directions but has a clear-cut agenda, which it devises and seeks to enforce. As Levidow (2005), and Harvey (2006) observe, the state under neoliberalism seems to be functioning to expand capital and so education in a capitalist state seems to share this orientation.

The finding that the text seems to be directing the sector to adopt a business orientation has to be connected to the structural crisis of capitalism, as advocated by Lipman (2011). In trying to make this connection, I am reminded of Marx's (1965) terse comment that ideas do not emerge from the heads of people but are rooted in their life conditions. Accordingly, the idea of "TSE" as a buzzword has to be understood in the context which creates the grounds for the idea to be formed. This is the economic and social reality of HE, which requires a critical exploration of the trends in the sector as evolving processes and not as static facts. Through this approach it is possible to arrive at the finding that "TSE" as a key concept of HE evolves from the dynamic interplay of economic forces and the ideological orientation of people in dominant positions in the sector. Besides, the concept is an ideological construct that is broad, bland and vague, and which claims to appeal to a cross section of students and that promises much but delivers little. It thus serves as a smokescreen to obfuscate the developments and divisions in the sector. From this

discussion one can conclude that the idea that there can be a singular, universally applicable concept of “TSE” is misleading.

### **6.3. Concluding comments**

This chapter presented a synthesis of the findings explained through the conceptual constructs. These conceptual lenses were deployed as per their relevance and appropriateness. Through this interweaving of the key constructs I discussed the conflicting conceptions and assumptions about students, their abilities and their expectations. The diverse views on “TSE” as it relates to diversity in and of the HE sector were brought out through using a similar approach. The contradictions within and across domains thus became apparent through juxtaposing the utterances and relating these to sectoral and societal contexts. This exercise showed that the policymakers’ decision to widen participation were not innocent or benign but were in fact disparaging of students enticed to access HE. In other words, much is made of the need to increase the number of students in HE, ostensibly to help sections of society who were not participating in HE, but these inclusive measures both patronise and pathologise students as deficient and in need of remedial support. Thus the official domains portray the outward appearance of diversity but seem reluctant to relinquish their epistemological hold over HE or to raise awareness of the control and production of knowledge. Given this situation, wherein diverse views and knowledge systems are not considered but superficial diversity is celebrated, questions arise about the intentions of this move to widen participation or to promote diversity in HE. Moreover, a singular conception of “TSE” seems incongruous in a diverse HE system. The implications of these contradictions and what they reveal or conceal will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.



## **7. Taking stock and looking ahead**

### **7.1. Introductory remarks**

This final section of the thesis reiterates the purpose and the basic premise of this research. Through revisiting the research questions it will remind the reader of the collaborative workings of the conceptual and methodological issues on the analysis of the data to arrive at a set of findings, and will discuss the significance of the findings in the light of previous studies. I will then go on to discuss the limitations of this research project and the contribution of this study and its findings, before concluding with a look at avenues to extending the research, and final thoughts on the research project.

### **7.2. Overview of the thesis**

This thesis set out to explore the language around “TSE” of HE with the aim of understanding what this language reveals or conceals about HE and society. This aim is linked to the research objectives, which are: to understand the different conceptualisations of “TSE”; to explore why the term was moved to the centre-stage of the HE sector; and to unravel the concepts and issues entangled in this term. In seeking to investigate the language of HE, this research adopts the view that to understand any social phenomenon, such as the language of HE, one has to consider the real conditions which influence any phenomenon. The focus of this research and its aim originate in the belief that HE is enveloped by social, economic and political processes. This view is aligned with the conviction that inquiry should shed light on the processes which seem to be driving the changes that HE is undergoing. Some of these changes are gradual and minor, and some are rapid and radical. The plan and design of these changes reflect the influence of these forces and the impact they could have on the sector and the people affiliated with it – staff and students. Thus this research had a specific purpose, to raise awareness of what is going on in HE, and of the possible reasons for these developments. For these reasons in particular, this is certainly an area worthy of investigation.

Whilst previous studies on the HE experience (Ainley 2008; Bowl 2001; Crosling et al 2008; Thomas et al 2008) or the language of the sector (Fairclough 1993; Holborow 2015; Mautner 2005; and others) have mainly explored one of the three domains, I have tried to compare and contrast the perspectives of each of these domains. I have thus tried to understand whether the ideas and the language from the national policies on HE seep into the language at the local level – the HEI and even some of the students. Moreover, although some of the studies which have analysed the language of the sector have identified the features of the language which hint at the processes of commodification or marketisation in HE, these studies have not attempted to engage with the underlying processes in society and the economy. Decontextualized analyses of language abstracted

from the social environment in studies (for instance in Fairclough 1993; Mautner 2005) would be often limited to focusing on the churning within HE and on the angst that students, scholars and commentators on HE are experiencing on account of this churning. In the words of Palmer (1990, p.216), “the advocates of discourse stop their analytic and political gaze short of a consideration of precisely the social and economic realms”. Hence the approach to analysis I take allows a consideration of context, rather than a mere analysis of the surface features of a text or talk.

With the help of the conceptual constructs of language and critical exploration I have tried to explain the different interpretations of “TSE”. In this way I have endeavoured to demonstrate how the views, perceptions and utterances of people affiliated with HE are dynamically linked to the social and economic conditions and the utterers’ respective positioning in a situation. The theoretical framework, which also included the construct of education with its ideas of universal intellectual ability and the critical and social components of HE, required a qualitative research methodology with interviews, observations, field notes and textual analysis. This approach to assembling data and to analysis allowed the researcher and the participants to make context-specific meaning, which are presented in the form of findings.

### **7.3. The findings linked to the research questions**

The primary research question was to understand what the language of HE revealed and concealed about the functioning of HE in society. This probe relied on subsidiary research questions to unravel the different dimensions of the language around “TSE” of HE across the three focal areas of this research – the students, the institution and the policies. In attempting to answer the main research question I put the spotlight on each of the three domains, focusing on how each conceptualises the different issues that emerged as themes for this study.

#### *7.3.1 What does the language around “the student experience” reveal?*

Firstly, I find that the different conceptualisations of “TSE” relate to differing views on the role and purpose of HE. Whilst the institutional and state spheres subscribe to the idea of education as having a responsibility to train students for a modern economy, the students I interviewed almost unanimously believe that their education was enriching and that it gave them more than training for a job. But in finding that the official domains have an overtly instrumental view of HE, the research, because of its conceptual contours, is able to link this to the social and economic situation within which HE functions. This linkage relates to the main research question and reveals that the language of HE from the official domains conforms to the prevailing socioeconomic climate.

Another area of dissonance between the different domains examined for this study relates to conflicting views on the ways of managing students' assumed or real expectations in a fee-paying HE. Whilst the official domains assume that it is possible to offer students customer satisfaction through choice, technology, and responsive and attentive staff, the students saw the relationship with the staff in terms of the learning environment. The students' view I would say is aligned with the idea that the potential for intellectual ability is universal (Ambedkar 1924 in Naik 2003; Gramsci 2000), but this ability has to be nurtured through encouraging and supportive staff. The difference in views across the three domains on the role and the responsibility of the academic staff and about students' expectations reveals the connection or the distance of these views to the construct of education. In expecting an enriching learning environment, the students conceptualised "TSE" in terms of learning and not as a transaction, as the official domains did. The difference in conceptualising experience and expectations reveals the business orientation of HE policies and its transmission to the HEI.

The three domains also expressed divergent views on academic standards, on the academic abilities of non-traditional students and the factors affecting student retention. The determination to attract non-traditional students to HE has been a long-standing concern of government policies (see the *Robbins Report* 1963). This concern was primarily because the UK was seen as lagging behind other countries in terms of participation of the relevant age group in HE, and this was viewed as having a detrimental effect on the economy and in terms of preparing workers for a knowledge economy. However, a slight shift in the agenda since 2010 was that students invited to participate in HE are now being asked to pay for their education. In trying to justify charging tuition fees, the authors of the policy put forward two claims: the first that since students are the ones who are going to benefit from HE, they should pay for their own education; the second claim is that the non-traditional students, who are encouraged to participate in HE, are more difficult to teach, thus raising the cost of educating them. By exploring the students' views on academic standards, I found that the non-traditional students were as capable as other students. In fact, although the students in the study insisted that they would have liked a tougher academic challenge, they were dismissed with the instruction that they had to do their own independent work to improve their academic experience. The first claim, namely that students should pay fees because they stand to benefit from HE, reveals the individualism that pervades the sector.

Examining the views across domains allowed me to realise that the second claim, which is the "official" view of non-traditional students as deficient, is false. This realisation required an exploration of the reasons for this spurious claim made by the official domains.

Since both the *Robbins Report* (1963) and the *Dearing Report* (1997) dismissed the view that opening the doors of HE to students from under-represented groups would lead to a fall in standards, it is indeed curious that this claim was being made in the 2010 *Browne Review* and is sometimes echoed by so-called experts on HE (Biggs and Tang 2007; Ramsden 2003). It might be pertinent to remember that the *Browne Report* was drafted by a committee appointed by the Labour government to make the HE system financially sustainable. This was soon after the financial crisis of 2008. Faced with a crisis in global capital, many governments around the world sought to impose a cost-cutting austerity programme. In keeping with the terms of this agenda a spurious claim had to be made as a pretext to raising tuition fees. The question that arises here is - if non-traditional students are difficult to teach, then why are they being recruited to university? The answer may lie in the next section.

### *7.3.2 What does the language around “the student experience” conceal?*

Analysing the language about fees and widening participation provided an answer to another aspect of the main research question. The differences in the views relating to fees revealed the real reason for widening participation in HE, which the policymakers sought to conceal. I found that the students talked about their difficulties and their perceptions of the fee structure and how it affected their experience; the institutional staff showed some understanding of the situation facing students. However, the commitment of the policies to widening participation stood exposed by the policy insistence that those who benefit should pay and by the denigrating views on the academic ability of students recruited to university. This almost seems to be an inconsistency between rhetoric and practice, but it is in fact perfectly consistent with the move to expand participation in a capitalist credit system. This finding was made possible by considering that policy utterances are not arbitrary statements but are socio-ideological (Volosinov 1973, p.91), that is, consistent with the socially formed values and beliefs of the author/s of the utterances. As discussed in section 4.3, the policymakers who profess a commitment to widening participation while at the same time asking students to pay high fees, are not conflicted, but are in fact using widening participation to get more students into HE and into taking loans to finance their education, thus expanding the credit system. As Levidow (2005) points out, the state under neoliberal capitalism performs the function of expanding credit relations, but since the policymakers would not want to be seen as performing this role, they need to cover up their actions, and claims about widening participation or social mobility offer the perfect smokescreen. Without the aid of this insight, the finding would have halted at noticing the discrepancy between the move to widen participation and to raise fees.

Second, having realised that there is an incompatibility in the conceptualisation of “TSE”, it should come as no surprise that a sense of belonging and feelings of engagement, which are considered to be elements of “TSE” by the students and even by some of the institution’s staff, do not have a place in the policies of the state and have a distorted interpretation in the institutional domain. The reasons for this absence or misinterpretation could be understood as a sign of dysconsciousness (King 1991) within the institutional and government levels of HE, that is, some people and some of the policies at these levels hold on to grossly inaccurate ideas and beliefs about some students and their academic abilities. These are not naïve, or unconscious beliefs but stem from their perceptions of these students as somehow deficient in academic experience and so in academic ability. In other words, these perceptions and the assumptions that accompany them stem from an impaired consciousness, an inability to see things from another’s perspective.

However, institutional measures to address retention and engagement such as peer mentoring, attendance monitoring and identifying “at-risk” students along with the absence of these issues in the policy domain could be a ploy to conceal the real issues facing students. These issues are the absence of a sense of community or of belonging, for which students had to devise their own ways of overcoming their alienation or risk dropping out. Moreover, the institution’s labelling of non-traditional students as “at-risk” pathologises these students as problems and conceals its failure to address the barriers in HE. The targeted interventions divert attention from institutional culture and practices which obstruct the academic and social engagement of some students. In short, the official domains seem to pay merely lip-service to diversity. I argue that diversity in HE is not just about increasing the representation of diverse groups in HE but also about diversifying the culture and the curriculum as well as the staff in HE, which have not received adequate attention in the conceptualisation of “TSE” by the official domains.

### *7.3.3 The different dimensions of the student experience*

Through studying the language around “TSE” of HE in the UK, by analysing the different conceptions of what constitutes “TSE”, I find that there are conflicting conceptions of this concept and its satellite issues. I find that for many of the students I interviewed “TSE” was about learning in HE, for the institution it was seen as a tool to recruit students by promising a good student experience; for the government it was similarly about increasing competition among institutions, about the contribution to the economy, and about preparing students for the world of work.

The juxtaposition of the different perspectives on “TSE” conforms to the theoretical contours of this study, which entailed examining issues not as static but in their dynamic interconnections. This research and analysis show that the language around “TSE” at the

official domains seems to be directed towards instilling an individualistic outlook among students, who are encouraged to strive for personal success. On account of this, if some students to subscribe to the instrumentalist view of HE, it may not be unusual because this view gets reiterated across the HE sector. Indeed, some students tend to get swayed by the leitmotif of personal gain, since little thought and attention is given to creating public-spirited students, who are motivated to work towards collective progress and solidarity with others in society. I argue that the views expressed in the policies of the institution and the government are redolent of capitalist economic and social relations that continue to exist in society and in HE. In sum, the concept – “TSE” - seems to be nothing more than a marketing slogan, which is compatible with a profit-oriented capitalist mind-set that is consistent with the social reality of the sector. Finally, since the critical exploration of the language around “TSE” reveals that HE is functioning under capitalist norms, I make the point that calling for a transformation of practices would amount to little within the existing structure of the HE sector.

#### **7.4. Limitations of this research project**

While planning this project I had to set boundaries to the area and scope of this research as I did not want to risk the project becoming unwieldy and lacking focus. With this aim in mind, I decided to focus on three domains affiliated with HE – students, institution and government policies. Although the academic staff are an important constituent of the HE sector, I did not include their views in this study except for staff who were directly involved in some of the committees I observed. My reason for leaving this domain out of the investigation was well-thought out as I wanted to focus on the key element of HE – the students. However, the insights of academic staff may have been useful because I would have had access to another set of perspectives on the concept “TSE”. These perspectives could also have enriched the understanding of how different groups of students experienced HE. In addition, the views of the academic staff would have contributed their perspective on the policies of HE and their impact on the sector and the people affiliated with it. This decision to leave academic staff out of the investigation was in line with another decision I had to make.

When I first embarked on the PhD and even before, I had thought of comparing two or more institutions. However, as I started to immerse myself into the research through engaging with the literature of the area, through tackling the required procedures necessary for gathering data, and by refining my thoughts and ideas, I realised that I should focus on one institution if I wanted an in-depth investigation. Comparing and contrasting the language, culture and practices of two or more institutions, of different types, may have shed light on how students from different types of institutions perceived

and experienced HE. The cross institutional perspectives could also have allowed us to understand whether there were differences in the way new and established universities conceptualised “TSE”, in a similar way that Temple et al (2014) explored “TSE” of different types of universities, or Ayers (2012) examined the missions statements of diverse types of HEIs. These studies found a difference in the way different types of HEIs interpreted and responded to policy directives. An intra-sectoral investigation could thus have offered insights into whether there were differences in perspectives which were aligned with the institutional rank and the type of students in different institutions. This inquiry and findings would have strengthened the claim that the language of HE is more or less consistent across the sector and in conformity with the socio-economic reality which surrounds HE.

### **7.5. Possible areas for further exploration**

Having looked at the language around “TSE” and the issues surrounding the concept, I realise that HE is a complex and diverse sector in many ways. The multiple issues, trends and the concepts that spring from this complexity and diversity can be explored. For instance, a major ideological construct in education and in HE is the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006) forcefully argues that this phrase is over-used and mis-used, and this obsession results in short-term solutions without addressing the underlying problems (pp.3-4). Institutional data on the grades attained by different groups of students have been used to prove that an achievement gap exists among some groups of students. However, a contextualised approach to investigating the achievement gap, could either confirm or refute whether a gap exists and could throw light on the reasons for its existence. This investigation could explore in detail the background to this ideological construct, the surrounding terrain for its emergence or recurrence, the perspectives of students on either side of the dividing line, and the perspectives of academic staff.

Another area that could provide interesting insights into the HE sector would be a historical exploration of the language of HE in a particular country or in two or more countries. This comparative analysis of the HE sector in different phases of capitalist development could focus on selected words or concepts and could be supplemented with the aid of corpus linguistics. The latter could help to identify keywords which gained prominence at different times and in different countries. Then a socio-ideological understanding of language could be harnessed to flesh out the initial significance of the keywords.

### **7.6. Contribution of this research**

It is a matter of great concern for many that HE is under the sway of neoliberal policies, but this is a partial insight for it does not go far enough in examining the prevailing forces that are propelling HE into ever greater alignment with neoliberal thinking and ways of functioning. Through critically exploring the language of HE around “TSE” this study

reinforced the insightful ideas about the socio-ideological nature of language and re-emphasized the need for a critical exploration that goes beyond analysis of the surface features of spoken and written texts. In conjunction with the construct of education these strategies revitalised thinking on education and the purpose of HE.

However, it is the investigation of views across regions that contributes to the originality of this research. Previous studies on the language of HE have focused on one area as the object of analysis - either the institutional domain, or students' views, or the policies on HE. I have explored all three areas to uncover the connections or disconnections across the language of these three levels. Through this interlinked exploration I have shown how some students and some institutional staff tend to succumb to the ideological influences of the policy sphere, because their messages seem to carry the stamp of authority, which ensures that they reach across spheres. In addition, I pointed out that tension within one area, for instance at the institutional level, and resistance to some of the messages of another area is possible because of the dynamic of social relations. In other words, the social positioning of the text framers could determine whether their utterances are responding to previous and anticipated utterances as acceptance of these or as resistance. Thus the socio-ideological nature of language allowed me to see the utterances not as static texts but in their dialogic interaction with other texts.

An illustration of the contribution of this research is its exploration of views across the three domains about the academic ability of non-traditional students. I found that the deficit view gets aired and also succeeds in colonising the minds of people because the initiators of this view and those who accept it are socialised into believing that some groups of students are academically inferior because of their class, race, ethnicity or gender. However, since I focused on the views across domains, I came to realise that the purveyors of the deficit views (from the official domains) were wrong as I found that students from under-represented groups were as capable as students from traditional backgrounds. More significantly, I found that the peddling of false news was in fact deliberate. This realisation came about through critically exploring the contextual factors to this dissemination of deficit views of non-traditional students' academic ability. Crucially, in discussing the official domains' false assumptions about non-traditional students, that is those from minority ethnic groups, working class, mature learners, first generation learners, etc. – I have exposed dysconsciousness in HE.

The composite nature of this research activates critical awareness of the concepts and issues clustering "TSE"; draws attention to the thought and language of these clusters and the way some issues are given prominence and others side-lined; triggers debate on the



views that this language around “TSE” seeks to promote; raises awareness of the direction of HE; and reminds the reader that a transformation of HE is possible only in a transformed society and economy.

### **7.7. Final thoughts**

This thesis is in one sense a culmination of my exploratory research into the language of HE, but it is also a continuation and a development of my thought processes. Through engaging with the topic, the research procedures and the work of other writers, I have gained fresh insights into the HE sector as well as into academic and research practices. My work would be certainly useful in illuminating the research landscape in general and research on language as socio-ideological in particular. This hope springs from my experience of trying to clear a path through the knots and tangles that I encountered during the course of my research. I have been able to gradually find my way through interacting with others, and so I think there are lessons to be learned in recalling our struggles and in sharing our stories.

## 8. References

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## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Consents



## CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project:** Critical exploration of the language around the student experience of higher education in the UK

**Name of Researcher:** Chrissie DCosta

**Contact details:**

Address:

The Graduate School, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, CT1 1QU.

Tel:

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Email:

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**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.




## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

### **TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

**The role of linguistic capital in higher education (Critical exploration of the language around the student experience of higher education in the UK)** - A research study is being conducted at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) by Chrissie DaCosta.

#### Background

This research seeks to understand the experiences of students from different language backgrounds studying at the undergraduate level in the UK.

### **What will you be required to do?**

Participants in this study will be required to participate in interviews, to share their experiences at the interview stage, and maybe share samples of their written work.

### **To participate in this research you must:**

Be an undergraduate student of the university.

#### Procedures

**Observations:** I would like to observe some meetings of different university committees.

**Interviews:** First and follow-up interviews with the participants and key informants.

**Document analyses:** I plan to examine some of the documents circulated at the committee meetings, mission statements, and strategic plans of the University and some samples of the students' work.

### **Feedback**

After I have listened to the recordings of the observations and interviews, and have made notes of these, I will discuss key points with you, and ask if you would like to clarify any points.

### **Confidentiality**

All data and personal information will be stored securely within CCCU premises in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the University's own data protection requirements. Data can only be accessed by me. After completion of the study, all data will be made anonymous (i.e. all personal information associated with the data will be removed).

### **Dissemination of results**

The results of the study will be published as part of my PhD dissertation, and perhaps in academic journals. But your personal details (names, etc) will not appear anywhere.

**Deciding whether to participate**

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedures or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact me. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason.

**If you have any questions**

Please contact Chrissie DaCosta through email:-----, or via The Graduate School, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, CT1 1QU.



## 9.2. Sample Interview:

Good morning Tamara, I have a few follow up questions to the earlier interview

I - You mentioned in the previous interview about friends, about not having friends on the course, could you please tell me what you mean?

T- Yeah, I mean the people I spoke to there's no I can't go about saying that those are the friends that I made, they are people I spoke to, they are just acquaintances

I - Do you think it is important to have friends?/-

T - Yeah yeah definitely

I - How would it help?

T - I think that in terms of if you have any concerns or you need to check about your course if you have someone to talk to it would a lot easier, but I think most of the time I felt a bit isolated so if I had to probably do it again I would change maybe maybe go to a uni that is more racially diverse that have the opportunities to mix more

I - But in your business course did you have friends?

T - Oh yeah I had in the business course I had lots of friends and I met new friends from, I met some friends from, actually not really in the uni, actually met one friend who I ended up speaking to and I ended up living with her then, so yeah definitely in the business school I made a lot more friends I felt I was more comfortable there

I - What nationality were these friends?

T - Eh there were I think most were African, but British born yeah yeah and some other, say Europeans. Eh eh apart from, one thing I've noticed in terms of seating arrangement, when people come in and see that the black students sit together and the rest of the students sit together, so very little interaction, it would be just black students and white separately

I - Did some teachers tell students to re-arrange where they sit?

T - There was one but no not really

I - Did you have group work?

T - Oh yeah we had group work but that was just you chose your groups so you worked with people you knew, eh yeah by and large people form their own grp

I - And did that work well?

T - Yeah yeah, I enjoyed the group work, working with people I hadn't spoken to before

I - And did you continue speaking to them after after the work?

T - Eh yeah the international I met some international students but that was the few people mainly that I spoke to in my classes – they were European students. I think eh it's the minority, these Europeans also are in a minority, so we tend to get along to make friends with each other

I - So what would you say, how to improve the experience of students, how is it possible to make sure students have a better experience?

T - I think again it's the group thing as well I think I wouldn't want, if it's I wouldn't want to be compulsorily put into a group I think I would find that uncomfortable but at the same time, in the first year you know just having, I don't know I know like just asking people to introduce yourself

I - That has never happened?

T - No no, I think for marketing the classes are too big and then for theology I think we had the capability of doing it but we never did that, I think that would have helped a lot, some of us may know each other by names but that's about it we know a nothing but why they are here, the kind of lives they lead, etc,

I - So how would that help, getting to know about the students on your course?

T - By by eh maybe to help with the academic side of things and also social relationships (.)

I – You said you had a friend who dropped out /-

T - I mean I I nearly dropped out in year two it was I think it was

I - Why did you think of nearly dropping out, and what made you stay?

T - I didn't feel comfortable yeah I didn't feel comfortable, didn't have friends I thought maybe I wasn't doing the right degree and then I thought that maybe if I left I'll get a bit a better experience somewhere else so I spoke to the department so I'm yeah and my other friend she is I think she's gone back in terms of formal relationship with her tutors it didn't actually work out that well so you know she said she felt she they wouldn't give her support and guidance

I - Did you think of joining any society?

T - I went to a society, when I first joined uni, I looked at the society page but then there was nothing nothing I was interested in and I thought like doing sports, but then I spoke to the team manager or something it was just I was put off

I - What was it – the attitude, or what?

T - Eh I think one thing I've learnt that I don't know the team wasn't it's just that it wasn't diverse, I just didn't feel that I would be at home

I - What team was it?

T - It was netball team, and football team yeah and I don't drink at all so that was another factor that I decided not to join

I – Why do you say that, how do you know that they go out and drink?

T - Ehm I do eh lot of people want to go out and drink, I don't drink anyway so it would be a little bit strange if I have to go out and start drinking, I mean I'm not going to start drinking just because it's the done thing.

I - So what would you say about the culture of at uni, are other forms of entertainment possible?

T - There is potential to organise something different but people don't want to do that, they just prefer partying, drinking.

I – Coming to an end now of the social experience – what has been your academic experience at uni?

T - What do you mean by that?

I - In terms of the way the course is structured, the content, the quality, anything?

T - It depends on the teaching, on the course work, I know that different teachers that have different ehm teaching styles so if one, I know that one lecturer was with regard to the discussion and the reading you've got to be working on the reading and then he asks questions and everybody gets involved and I thought that was quite good and he'd go around the class and ask everybody what they read and understood, and then some lecturers prefer to just give the information out and we have to just take it down, and not really engage us, I don't think I don't think I didn't learn much as when I was interacting with other students and with the other lecturer

I - So what was overall experience? Positive or negative and why?

T - Ok ehm I think coming towards the end of it, the dissertation I was more positive and more proud of the work that I completed and I'm happy that I was able to give three years but at the same time I think that if sometimes if I could go back to when I was 18 and someone told me that I had to go to uni if I had to decide to go to uni I would have opted out, it's completely changed my mind, I realise that uni is good but it may not be the place for everyone

I - So why?

T - Yeah I don't think I am going to be eh using not really the degree but using other knowledge and skills

I – But anything positive about your education?

T - Ehm I im I really liked the learning so, I'm happy that I could learn, if I could take anything away over the three years especially the learning, learning about different stuff I found that really good, I think that also being put inside this kind of social environment you kind of learn what type of person you are so I know that maybe on my part what I can do to improve my social self I think that's positive, that's a positive thing, and like and doing presentations, being just completely doing everything by myself and with a group and how you work with a group

I - So you have learned to be independent, so is that positive?

T - Yeah, definitely yeah, learning responsibility

I - Last few questions – UK policy and institutions talk about the student experience – what do you understand by that?

T - I think it's just it's just something that that's out there I don't think that they actually take the extra measures to make sure that the student experience is improved or I think that ehm as long as they don't take more care to look at different students and be more attentive sensitive to what the students are saying that they will probably be more maybe ethnic minorities who drop out I don't think they've done anything to improve learning I mean you know you have ehm a teacher and ehm student, when you get like student ambassadors and stuff I don't think that works I don't think that works

I – Why

T - I know that nothing's really changed for the course over the years I think it's just there for I don't know yeah maybe just to make students feel that they like have a voice like all right they have a voice

I – Moving on to something else, well the policies say that everyone with the ability should have the opportunity to go to uni? Do you think that is being realised?

T - No I think that ehm there's so, especially when you go to a redbrick uni there's always a stigmatisation of different ethnic minorities I think the higher up you go you see that more there are less and less students from ethnic minority backgrounds, because then you get, when you have less interaction with other different people from what you normally

associate with you tend to be more ignorant, I think that especially as go up the uni ladder it becomes less and less, less representative

I – Are you saying that there is less diversity in HE?

T - Again it depends on the uni and the location ehm someone from my school she goes to Bristol and she says that she most of the people that she goes to uni with are more middle class yeah perhaps their parents are quite wealthy so she felt she felt that she was uncomfortable and in an intellectual sense it was that she felt inadequate because of her social background and even though I thought she she you know she's really intelligent, it's surprising that she thought that she can't engage with anyone even in fact what I thought about, what I was really angry about, my sister she said that her lecturer, you know in her seminar, her teacher said something like, they were reading Huckleberry Finn and then her seminar her seminar teacher said that afterwards called her back and said well you should be more engaged with it and I was I was angry because I thought why should only she be engaged and then she said you should be contributing more because it's Huckleberry Finn, I mean I told her to report her and the other thing that really did bother me in the recent election, is where there's more strong you know presence of UKIP that's where you know that more racial diversity is needed

I – How how would diversity help? Can could you please explain?

T - Yeah yeah some of my friends have gone to nursing, I thought it was a real shame because most of them they had potential to be doctors one of my friends she's really intelligent and I don't understand she could have been a doctor but she ended up doing nursing, which I don't understand and most of female students who are black end up doing nursing, health and social care, or those kind of jobs and I didn't want to be part of that I wanted to go beyond and just do something different.

I – Do you do you mean the way black students are constructed?

T - Yeah yeah there's a sense of that there's nothing beyond say music, rap music for boys. Sometimes when I you know I found that you know in one of our classes we were learning about black culture, and the whole time they'll ask questions and the questions, it wasn't you know questions about what I thought it was real simple stuff, and anyone should be aware of these, all questions were directed at us, I thought these are real simple questions, you should know these and you know there's only two black students, me and another girl and I got annoyed when someone got our names mixed up, and we look nothing alike, and then they just assume we are all the same.

I - There are people who say that by opening the doors of uni to all you are dumbing down/-

T - Actually it's creating a social hierarchy then if because if you are only allowing predominantly white students to go to redbrick universities then then it's that yeah I don't know maybe there are some lecturers out there who can't relate to students but I feel think that but it's your profession you have to teach all kinds, I'm quite annoyed by that

I – Also it is said that, in the policies that those who benefit the most from education should contribute more?

T - No not really ehm you should go to uni to have a really good experience and then come out and then if you find out that you can't really use your degree or you can't benefit from that so you end up with a job that is it depends on how, what you can take away from the experience, I don't think it's anything to do with benefiting more, it's a very narrow understanding of the system, if I didn't benefit, if I felt that I didn't benefit that much should I pay nothing then? so this is something from the current government, yeah so obviously I think it's reflective of of the government and how it views education

I - One last thing – your expectations of uni have they been met?

T - Eh eh I think everyone has their own expectations, when I first thought of uni I thought it would be, I thought I would enjoy it more, in terms of academic I quite did but in terms of the social side of things I didn't

I - Ok, thanks very much for you time

### 9.3. Worked Transcripts

#### 9.3.1 Extract 1

Last few questions now – the student experience - what do you understand by that?

I think it's just something that that's out there I don't think that they **actually take the extra measures to make sure that the student experience is improved** or I think that ehm as long as they **don't take more care to look at different students and be more attentive, sensitive** to what the students are saying that there will probably be more maybe (..) **ethnic minorities who drop out** I don't think they've done anything to improve learning I mean you know you have ehm teachers and ehm students, when you get like student ambassadors and stuff I don't think that works I don't think that works I know that nothing's really changed over the years, I think it's just there for I don't know why (Tamara, p.6)

- Meaningless / vague concept
- (Similar to Joel, also relates to literature - Ainley / Collini – TSE should be about learning)
- **questions institutional measures to ensure a good student experience**
  - **lack of attention to student diversity (connects with Sara Ahmed – appearance of diversity)**
- retention of ethnic minorities (concern of HEIs, literature on student retention)
- Questions: can there be singular idea of TSE that is universally applicable? Why are minority ethnic students over-represented among those who drop out?

#### 9.3.2 Extract 2

Could you please tell me about the culture of the institution, the social side of university, and your social experience?

Eh it's kind of there's there's such a **huge emphasis on on drinking** ehm like **some cultures don't accept drinking** at all so there needs to be more things which don't revolve around drinking but it's difficult because even i've tried to have events that don't like involve drinking **like film nights** and stuff and you don't have people turn up for them, so it's difficult because there's such a huge emphasis on drinking, so you are quite on your own if you don't like to drink (Michelle, p.7)

Loneliness, (relates to Shireen, the culture of the institution)

- **Cultural and religious reasons for not drinking? Relates to SMT, but Pilkington presents other evidence**
- social purpose of education**

**Space for other events, as Nuria was interested in**

Questions: what is the institution doing about the culture on campus? Should it do something? Why?

Home students – feel alienated by the culture of the campus?

#### **9.4. Transcription codes -**

I decided to use punctuation sparingly because I wanted the spoken texts to express the meaning of the authors. Accordingly, the few transcriptions symbols that I used with the transcribed data are as follows:

(.) short pause in the conversation

/ interruptions or overlapping talk

(..) long pause

(----) incomprehensible

(laughs) expressed emotion

Upper case – speaker's emphasis

**Bold font** – raised voice



### 9.5. Account of committee meetings attended

Committees	Dates of meetings attended	Time	Duration	Number of participants
Committee 1 (retention)	29 Jan 2014 2 Apr 2014 2 Jul 2014	9.30 am – 11.30 am	2 hours	12 - 15
Committee 2 (widening access)	27 Jan 2014 12 May 2014 6 Oct 2014	9.30 am – 11.30 am	2 hours	12 - 15
Committee 3 (equality, diversity)	21 Jan 2014 29 Apr 2014 10 Jul 2014	2 pm – 4 pm	2 hours	15 - 20

## 9.6. Details of interviews

1	Peter	White British	5 Nov 2013 – 1 hour	7 Dec 2013 – 1 hour
2	Keith	White European	4 Nov 2013 – 1 hour	29 Nov 2013 – 1 hour
3	Abraham	WE	31 Oct 2013 – 1 hour	26 Nov 2013 – 1 hour
4	Janet	International	31 Oct 2013 – 1 hour	16 Nov 2013 – 1 hour 30 minutes
5	Miriam	WE	29 Oct 2013 – 1 hour 20 minutes	13 Nov 2013 – 1 hour 15 minutes
6	Michelle	WB	25 Oct 2013 – 2 hours	12 Nov 2013 – 1 hour
7	Martha	WE	22 Oct 2013 – 1 hour	12 Nov 2013 – 1 hour
8	Joel	2WB	22 Oct 2013 – 2 hours 20 minutes	11 Nov 2013 – 1 hour 15 minutes
9	Shireen	BB	18 Oct 2013 – 1 hour 45 minutes	11 Nov 2013 – 1 hour 30 minutes
10	Wilma	BB	4 Jun 2014 – 2 hours	10 July 2014 – 2 hours
11	Penny	BB	24 Jun 2014 – 2 hours	24 July 2014 – 2 hours
12	Ben	WB	24 Jun 2014 – 1 hour 45 minutes	10 July 2014 – 1 hour
13	Nuria	BB	31 Oct 2013 – 1 hour 30 minutes	25 Nov 2013 – 1 hour
14	Debbie	WB	22 Oct 2013 – 1 hour 20 minutes	7 Dec 2013 – 1 hour 30 minutes
15	Tamara	BB	18 Oct 2013 – 2 hours	28 May 2014 – 1 hour 30 minutes

## **9.7. Observation Notes**

### Notes of Jan 2014 meeting of Committee 1

There was a discussion of a new software, Sunrise, to record and identify students who are in danger of leaving. It was explained that once a student has had an entry on Sunrise, an audit trail can be established. Academics departments should start using Sunrise.

- a proposal to implement an early alert system to identify students at risk of leaving will be fully operational from September 2014. A new attendance policy is in the process of being introduced. It was suggested that electronic registers could improve the process. At the moment it takes too long to address poor attendance, a much earlier intervention is needed.

A draft of the attendance policy and guidance procedures was circulated for discussion. It strongly affirmed the university's commitment to enabling students to achieve their learning potential.

It stated that learning is a shared experience and students are expected to play a part in collective learning experience. It spelt out the requirements regarding student attendance, that is, what and how students were expected to attend.

The draft also dealt with attendance monitoring and the action likely to be taken in the event of non-attendance, referral to student health and well-being under the cause for care and concern

### Notes of April 2014 meeting of committee 1

There was an update on the forthcoming Access Agreement and possible areas for action were identified, including the link between retention and attendance. Definition of non-attendance was thought to have no teeth - nothing could be done to pull up students who were not attending. This seems to be a case of treating the symptoms not the cause. It was suggested by a member (P) that a case worker is needed to follow up students at risk of withdrawing. It was thought that these students needed help and advice to prevent them from falling through the system that has been set up to enable all students to reach their potential .

Also on the table was a request to reconsider the policy of withdrawing students' email accounts as support services would be unable to contact students and to support them.

A member (S) pointed out that BME students are known to be underachieving and not progressing into employment. Strong emphasis on the use of attendance policy to identify students at risk

International affairs - how university and the students' union should be working to integrate and improve the quality of intercultural communication and not just recording the number of different international nationalities entering university.

Offa does not conclusively prove that bursaries support retention - there was a lot of discussion about the implications of the funding cuts, which students would be affected and the steps the university would have to take to redistribute resources. It seemed that further cuts were imminent. Only 1500 students would receive bursaries although 2200 students were eligible. One member of the group responded that students were all chatting with each other on Facebook, and that there was an inclusive atmosphere. An event was being discussed to try to bring students together - a series of intercultural events to promote diversity.

My thoughts

At the Jan meeting an attendance policy was introduced - focus on attendance monitoring - seems to be a case of treating symptoms not the cause - measures to make students re-engage with university.

There was no discussion of ways to make students feel comfortable or to understand the issues that may have led to a lack of belonging, or of feeling at home or accepted or in tune with the culture and practices of the institution.

There seems to be awareness that not all students may feel comfortable, but this does not seem to be the primary focus of the retention and success delivery group or of the university itself. The

#### Notes of January 2014 meeting of Committee 2

Underachievement, attain rates of BME students came up for discussion, so did concerns about withdrawal, interruption of BME and international students. Social mobility and the university's role in this regard were the main talking points. Member (M) suggested that academic staff are the first point of contact with students, should be trained to identify potential risks, difficulties.

Another member (D) commented that targets about retention should not just be imposed, but the institution should work towards engaging students. It was a national concern that BME students were under-achieving, claimed another member (C).

Changes to the national scholarship programme were also discussed.

After spending hours pouring over reams of documents and field notes of observations of the three committees which I observed I noticed that retention and success seemed to be major concerns of the committees I was observing. This concern manifested itself in the discussions I was witness to and in the documents circulated at these meetings. The task then was to look for evidence to support the contention that the committees focus a great deal on the retention and attainment of some groups of students. Also on the agenda of my research was to identify who are these students and why is there undue emphasis, is this emphasis justified - these are some of the issues that I have to explore.

My thoughts

In the three meetings that I attended there were repeated references to finding ways to tackle students' withdrawing from their studies, and ways to monitor irregularities in attendance

### Notes of January 2014 meeting of Committee 3

There was talk of designing an inclusive curriculum, so here too the focus was on making the students adapt to the curriculum, which was considered unsuitable or difficult for these students to cope or understand, talk of electronic monitoring of attendance - technical solutions without really understanding or addressing the human, or investigating the human aspect of the students' decision to withdraw or stop attending.

I wondered whether there were academic or social reasons for students lack of engagement with university

It started off by stating that students are active agents in their own learning

The focus was on retention of non-traditional students and how to tackle this problem

The focus however was on the problem and how to tackle it but not really discussion of the causes of the problem, the discussion centred on identifying students at risk of withdrawing early identification and preventing withdrawal, technical solutions to issues requiring an understanding of what makes some students consider discontinuing from

education. why do they drop out, do they feel uncomfortable or unable to survive in the higher education environment.

the underlying reasons do not seem to be explored, but an assumption is made that these students are unfamiliar with the academic environment so feel out of place and unable to deal with the academic standards required of them. they seem to be labelled as inadequate or deficient in some ways as compared to their more able peers. it is often the non-traditional students who are perceived as lacking but when i put a question to them about their attainment and whether they indulged in partying, they replied that their socialising involved chatting and working in the library, and they had no time for drinking and partying because they could not go home with bad grades as there were too many expectations from folks back home who expected them to do well.

At one of the meetings of the committee, the representative of career development outlined in speech and in writing the steps taken by the career services to ensure student retention. it spelt out the benefits of placement in terms of attainment, supporting students with financial concerns, preparing students for career pathways, and helping students gain work experience and transferable skills to improve their career prospects.

## 9.8. CCCU Strategic Framework 2015-2020

# CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK 2015-2020

### MISSION

*Inspired by our Church of England foundation, the University's mission is to pursue excellence in higher education: transforming individuals, creating knowledge, enriching communities and building a sustainable future*

### VALUES

*We value:*

- the development of the whole person, respecting and nurturing the inherent dignity and potential of each individual
- the integration of excellent teaching, research and knowledge exchange
- the power of higher education to enrich individuals, communities and nations
- our friendly, inclusive and professional community of students and staff, preparing individuals to contribute to a just and sustainable future.



## STRATEGIC AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### STUDENT EXPERIENCE

#### Strategic Aim

*To provide our diverse student body with a high quality holistic student experience in relation to learning, the wider experience of the University and global citizenship.*

#### Strategic Objectives

1. To work with students as partners throughout the entire student journey from pre-arrival, through University study and on to graduation, employment and alumni engagement.
2. To understand the demographic and geographical distribution of our student body, including those studying with collaborative partners in the UK and overseas, and provide high quality support and services which are relevant to their individual and collective needs.
3. To provide a distinctive and broader student experience through opportunities for external engagement through placements, internships, study abroad, language learning and community engagement as part of developing intelligent citizenship.
4. To provide stimulating teaching that demonstrates an academic's personal commitment to the subject area, including through research involved and research informed teaching.
5. To actively reach out to students from disadvantaged groups to raise aspirations, attainment and employment and work in partnerships with schools and colleges.
6. To provide high quality services and facilities across all our campuses, increasingly on a 24/7 basis.
7. To ensure that there are effective mechanisms to receive and act upon student feedback.

### EDUCATION

#### Strategic Aim

*To maintain and enhance a high quality, broadly based academic portfolio which builds on and further develops areas of University strength and potential including in relation to the public services.*

#### Strategic Objectives

1. To further develop and diversify the academic portfolio in areas such as Science, Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM), STEM education and new areas of health related provision.
2. To develop innovative new programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels including cross-disciplinary programmes.
3. To explore different models of curriculum delivery such as compressed degrees and the integration of year abroad or work placement in partnership with other organisations.
4. To develop a distinctive curriculum experience through embedding for all students a commitment to enhancing graduate employability, internationalisation, and education for social and environmental responsibility.
5. To strengthen the University's focus on postgraduate taught provision including through a more integrated approach to curriculum development from Foundation Year / level 4 to level 8.
6. To develop increasingly flexible modes of delivery including through part-time and blended learning opportunities.

### RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

#### Strategic Aim

*To extend our research and knowledge exchange activity to continue to contribute to intellectual, social, economic, cultural prosperity at a regional, national and international level.*

#### Strategic Objectives

1. To ensure our curricula and teaching methods are informed by staff research and scholarly activity and our students are involved in research.
2. To ensure academic staff are engaged in scholarship, research and/or knowledge exchange.
3. To deliver research and knowledge exchange outputs which are both high quality and impactful.
4. To increase our research student numbers and research income through a diverse range of regional, national and international sources.
5. To ensure that research students and visiting scholars receive a high quality experience and are integrated into the University's research community.
6. To actively promote research and knowledge exchange activity that is underpinned by high ethical, social and environmental standards.
7. To proactively develop regional, national and international strategic research and knowledge exchange partnerships with the public, private and third sectors.

### RESOURCES

#### Strategic Aim

*To provide an effective, efficient, innovative and sustainable use of the institution's resources to deliver the University's strategic goals across all our campuses.*

#### Strategic Objectives

1. To ensure that the University is an inspiring place to work where individuals and teams will be able to develop and realise their potential and work as part of a learning community and contribute to the delivery of the University's core objectives.
2. To manage our financial resources appropriately and efficiently in line with agreed strategic priorities and financial targets.
3. To develop the future estate so that it is cutting edge, sustainable, supports academic achievement and the student experience through targeted investment informed by a comprehensive master plan.
4. To ensure that the University's technology and systems infrastructure enables and supports the delivery of high quality, customer focused business processes as well as new innovations in teaching, learning, research and knowledge exchange in an increasingly 24/7 environment.

### CROSS CUTTING THEMES

Internationalisation	Widening Access, Inclusion and Participation	Employability	Sustainability	Partnerships and Community	Technology
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### KEY UNDERPINNING STRATEGIES

Learning and Teaching Strategy	Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy	People Strategy	Finance Strategy	Estate Strategy
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THREE YEAR SCHOOL/DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS PLANS INCLUDING KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

## 9.9. Government Policy Document



## Policy

# Making the higher education system more efficient and diverse

From: [Department for Business, Innovation & Skills and The Rt Hon Greg Clark MP](#)  
History: Updated 12 December 2012, [see all updates](#)  
Part of: [Higher education](#)  
Applies to: [England](#)

Policy

Detail

Latest

## Issue

The government wants to ensure the system for funding universities is financially sustainable. We think we can achieve this by asking graduates - the people who benefit most from higher education - to pay more towards their education than they have in the past.

We also want to ensure higher education institutions provide innovative, high quality learning. We believe the way to do this is by making institutions compete to attract students and the funding they bring with them.

## Actions

We have:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/making-the-higher-education-system-more-efficient-and-diverse>[15/08/2014 15:37:49]

- [created a new funding system for higher education](#), where graduates contribute more to their education
- [created a more diverse, competitive higher education sector](#) by reviewing the way alternative providers can access funding

## Background

In May 2010 the government's [coalition agreement](#) <sup>↗</sup> stated our aim to create a more sustainable way of funding higher education.

The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance identified 3 problems with the existing funding system:

- the need for financial sustainability
- wider participation
- higher quality.

Its report, [Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education](#) <sup>↗</sup>, published in October 2010, looked at the case for a number of possible solutions.

The options considered were:

1. do nothing (keep current system with no reduction in government funding)
2. cut the number of students
3. reduce government funding

The impact assessment in the June 2011 consultation [Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system](#) gives full details of these options. The consultation asked for views on proposals to create a more sustainable way of funding higher education in June 2011.

## Who we've consulted

We consulted on [applying student number controls to alternative providers with designated courses](#). We concluded that alternative providers need to meet new conditions so they can be designated for student support purposes.

## Bills and legislation

The [Higher Education Act 2004](#) <sup>↗</sup> enabled universities to set their own tuition fees, known as 'variable tuition costs'. They were introduced from academic year 2006 to 2007.

The [Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998](#) <sup>↗</sup> gives the Secretary of State power to make annual regulations setting out the support available to students going into higher

education, and how and when student loans will be repaid.

Since academic year 2006 to 2007 a loan to cover the full cost of tuition has been available to eligible students studying at publicly funded providers, which is repaid only after the student has secured employment. This means that no eligible student is required to pay for their tuition up front.

## Impact

In 2010 we carried out an impact assessment on our proposals for higher education funding and student finance: [Interim impact assessment: urgent reforms to higher education funding and student finance](#).

## Partner organisations

The [Office for Fair Access \(OFFA\)](#) - an independent body that promotes fair access to higher education by monitoring 'access agreements'. All English universities and colleges that want to charge higher fees must have an 'access agreement'. This outlines what each institution will do to attract and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds

[Higher Education Funding Council for England \(HEFCE\)](#), which administers public money for higher education teaching and research to universities and colleges. HEFCE helps ensure accountability and promotes good practice in the sector.

[Student Loans Company \(SLC\)](#) - a non-profit making organisation that provides loans and grants to students in universities

The [Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education \(OIA\)](#) - an independent body that runs a student complaints scheme in England and Wales

[UCAS](#), which manages applications to higher education courses in the UK

The [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#) - an independent body that assures standards and improves the quality of higher education

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