

Transitional Experiences from Home Education to Further
Education

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Statement of originality

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Acknowledgements

My patient family and those who participated in this research.

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Abstract

The increasing phenomena of home education in the UK will result in significant numbers of a new kind of student entering post compulsory education at 16.

This research is an exploration of the experiences of these young people when making the transition from home education to post compulsory education. It focuses on their expectations and actual experiences in moving from informal to institutionalised education. Ten previously home educated participants were interviewed and asked to recall and reflect on their personal experiences of this transition into post compulsory education.

The findings of this study give a refreshingly optimistic impression of post compulsory education, its staff, facilities and students through the eyes of newcomers to these institutions. While they praise lecturers, fellow students and facilities; they give a critical view of the curriculum, organisation and assessment.

This positivity contrasts to the scepticism and polarisation discovered through an extensive literature review recounting the views of educational professionals, policy makers and home educating parents themselves.

Although this small-scale case study does not claim generalizability, there are wider relatable implications and tentative recommendations for all the stakeholders involved in the post compulsory education sector.

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Chapter One

An Introduction

As a family we home educate our two young children, Ursula and Toby. We hope to equip them with skills of flexibility and innovation whilst encouraging an enthusiasm for learning, self confidence and reflectivity. Together, we regularly review our learning and plan to continue home educating as long as it is a positive, enjoyable and successful experience for all the family. However, all most inevitably, Ursula and Toby will need to enter institutionalised learning at some stage whether it be school, college, university or for work-based training.

As an Initial Teacher Trainer, I teach and mentor many of my colleagues, some of whom are sceptical about previously home educated students and their abilities to fit into institutionalised learning. These views conflict with our family aspiration that home education would excellently prepare Ursula and Toby for their future, and I needed to discover more.

This project has given me an opportunity to interview ten young people who have been previously home educated, and, explore their experiences of institutionalised learning. Some of their experiences will directly inform my family's direction; others are reassuring, all are interesting and at times amusing too.

The diversity of post compulsory education options available to those of school leaving age (currently 16) is large and incorporates vocational qualifications, A-level programmes and a plethora of part-time options. For clarity, this research focuses on full-time post compulsory education delivered at Sixth Form either at school or college and vocational college courses. I have used the term Further Education (FE) to encapsulate all these level one, two and three courses, drawing a distinction between them and Higher Education as defined by the Education Act 1996 (Crown Copyright 1996). The participants in this research represent each type of FE institution fairly evenly.

The central research question for this dissertation is:

‘What are the expectations and the reality of post compulsory further education(FE) for previously home educated students and what are their experiences of this transition.’

This research explores the experience of a minority group and their transition into FE. The sample group have all been home educated for a significant period during their compulsory age education, and have subsequently participated in FE.

The figure of home educated children in England is estimated at 11,600, although the true number is probably much higher (Maddern 2010:7). With home education becoming an increasing trend in the UK (Rothermel 2001) this will surely result in increased numbers applying and attending FE. Their integration may bring opportunities to celebrate diversity and challenges in promoting inclusion.

The aim of this empirically based case study is to explore the transition from home education into FE by recounting the experiences of ten participants, all of whom have attended or are still attending FE.

This exploration of both research literature and the participants' actual experiences, has given significant insight into the phenomenon of previously home educated students entering institutionalised learning. I hope these will be useful for my family, other parents, educational professionals and home educated young people themselves.

The chapters in this dissertation have been arranged following the structure recommended by Thomas (2009). In chapter two a comprehensive critical literature review has been undertaken; utilising much contemporary research on home education and interrelating their findings whilst focusing on the research question.

The literature review proceeds by defining home education, then discusses the types of people involved and their motivations. The perceptions of both institutional and home educators are investigated, followed by a broad discussion regarding socialisation, attitude and peer interaction. Finally, the literature review considers access to FE and preparation of prospective students.

Once the aim of this research has been soundly grounded in relevant contemporary literature, in chapter three the research methodology is described and justified. Substantial reference is made to relevant research literature with key elements being investigated, and integrated into the method employed. The methodology chapter documents the evolution of the research question; justifying the strategies used, data collection and ethical considerations, all in the context of best research practice.

Both data presentation and its discussion are found in chapter four; this amalgamation facilitates a “thick description” (Thomas 2010:202) giving the reader an insight into the experiences of the sample group in the context of both literature review and research question. My own explanations and insights are offered in this section too.

In chapter five a critical evaluation of both the methodology and findings are offered. It documents the evolution of this research, its significance and tentative recommendations for educational professionals, parents and home educated children themselves. Finally, recommendations for improvements to this research and future opportunities are offered. Reflections of generalizability and relatability are offered to complete the research cycle..

This research took place in Warwickshire, Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. The participants attended a mixture of FE and sixth form colleges, some of which were attached to schools. The descriptor “FE” has been applied to all of these institutions, unless it was specifically relevant to differentiate.

The teachers, tutors and lecturers who deliver learning in FE have all been given the title Lecturer; this both identifies the sector in which they work but also acknowledges some will not possess either Qualified Teacher Status or Qualified Teacher in Life Long Learning Status.

Other than these, you will find this dissertation free from terminological ambiguity and I hope you enjoy reading it.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The following review has been undertaken whilst reading a significant quantity of published literature including government documents, research reports, books and journal articles. Throughout the review, I kept the research focused on transition from home to institutionalised education, while describing the wider context around home education. A critical view was maintained questioning both the writer's motivation and its relevance to both my family and the research question.

Definition of Home Education

Initially it is worth considering a definition of home education or home schooling as it commonly referred to in North America to ensure common understanding;

'the full-time education of children in and around the home by their parents or guardians or by tutors appointed by the parents or guardians.' (Petrie et al 1999 cited in Rothermel and Fiddy 2001:1)

Whilst useful, this definition does not acknowledge the significance of experiential learning in the child's community and friendships with both home and school educated children (Rothermel and Fiddy 2001). Thomas and Pattison(2007:23) term this learning as "cultural apprenticeships".

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining home education as an effective education in the child's society based around family, that does not take place in school. Although a quantifiable assessment of effective education is near impossible, I will use the definition, one that prepares children for modern society enabling them to achieve their potential. This concurs with the legal definition clarified in 1981 in the case of *Harrison & Harrison v Stevenson*, Crown Copyright (1996).

A plethora of British research has been undertaken regarding home education yet these researchers appear to have overlooked the fascinating phenomenon of the young people's transition into post compulsory education. A greater body of research is easily discovered pertaining to experiences in North America, and although their education system is significantly different, some interesting observations were discovered. Stevens (2003:97) attributes the volume of research to home education's progressive normalisation there, with colleges and schools taking this new cohort's

successful transition very seriously. Concurrently, the success of these students is expected, with 22% of American admission officers expecting home educated graduates to be more successful than their schooled counterparts (Jones and Gloeckner 2004:18). These American expectations contrast starkly with UK local authority figures journalistically reported by Helen Ward who claims:

“Home-educated children 'four times as likely' to become Neets [not in education, employment or training], as schooled peers.” (Ward 2009:7).

If research regarding the progress of these young people into FE and adulthood appears lacking, research contextualising home education is more forthcoming.

People that choose to home educate and their reasons

The UK Department of Children Schools and Education estimate 11,600 children are taught at home, although this figure is estimated at over double this by some home education groups (Maddern 2010:7). This surprising discrepancy might be accounted for by the tendency of some families not to register their children as home educated. Rothermel and Fiddey (2001) reassure readers of the legality of omitting to register children as home educated. The inability for authorities to accurately estimate numbers by simply subtracting school attendees from registers of births and deaths, is not explained by any of the literature, although I presume data protection legislation and transient populations may prevent this simple calculation.

It could be hypothesised that parental decisions to home educate in preference to school, is central to the subsequent education received. Thus, the type of parent and their motivations to pursue this choice is worthy of discussion. In America, Stevens (2003:90) suggests the type of parent who is more likely to selectively home educate is unconventional. With Knowels et al (1992), cited in Neuman and Aviran (2003:133) developing polarised taxonomy as either unconventionally liberal or having strong religious convictions. In the UK this unconventionality also noted by Rothermel (2003:82), whose participants noted an evolving propensity for the unconventional in many facets of their lives.

The American researcher Lubienski, further develops the unconventional label, suggesting that home education is just one example of liberalisation and people opting out of society.

“rejecting interference from, and accountability to, any external authority”
Lubienski (2003:167).

He also implicitly suggests tension between conservative capitalism and home education. Lubienski's views contrast with Stevens (2003), who suggests home education is one way minority groups might ensure their religious, linguistic and ethnic identity is maintained. However, provisions within the UK Education and Inspections Act (2006) to secure diversity within schools, hopefully ensures minorities are fully represented and respected.

Stevens (2003) further develops links between fundamental American Protestantism and home education, suggesting it is encouraged by a culture where women stay at home to look after children. This view concurs with the American researcher Knowels et al. (1992), cited in Neuman and Aviran(2003:133).

Here in the UK, Chartered Psychologist Rothermel (2003:82), downplays the importance of religion. Despite just over one quarter of the 400 families surveyed having a religious tendency, this was not their primary motivation to home educate. Indeed the single most homogenous group of home educators that cause concern for UK authorities is the travelling community (McIntyre-Bhatty, 2007) despite their view of home education as being:

“integral to the family's social and economic fabric.” Rothermel and Fiddy (2001:3).

In her preliminary analysis of over 400 surveys Rothermel's results generate considerable and interesting quantitative data about parents who home educate. She describes a typology of heterosexual, university educated parents who predominantly have worked in the public sector with educators making up the largest single group (Rothermel 2003). Significantly, just over half were dissatisfied with their own schooling. The prevalence of teachers who subsequently home educate their own children is not explained by Rothermel or others, and whether this choice is influenced by negative school experiences, increased teaching confidence or other reasons would be worthy of investigation. My experience as a lecturer has given me confidence in our ability to facilitate my children's home education.

If a profile of home educating parents in the UK can be quantitatively formulated, a taxonomy of their motivations to pursue this educational option is more difficult.

There is a plethora of reasons a family might choose to home educate their children. The reaffirmation of cultural or ethnic identification (Stevens 2003) has already been mentioned, whilst Meighan (1995) convincingly argues for the pedagogical efficiency of home education with Merry and Howell (2009) claiming more resilient family bonding. The minimisation of unsuitable peer socialisation and increased child safeguarding is suggested in an unpublished dissertation by Yeager (1999) cited in Lines (2000:162) with Atkinson et al (2007) reporting a greater individualised educational provision to be a significant motivator. Kendall and Atkinson (2006:10,11) offer a long and positive list of benefits with the child positioned firmly at the centre of learning with resultant pedagogical and emotional benefit.

Child centred learning was also discussed in an Australian small scale study by Clery (1998), with the home schooled participants enjoying the autonomy and control over their work. Their ability to motivate themselves and work alone is a recurrent theme throughout the literature read and comments from the participants.

The former Special Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham, Roland Meighan, discusses the efficiency of child centred learning in a home education context citing the example:

“They [home educated children] say that they have frequently learnt more by coffee-time at home than in a whole day at school . . .” (Meighan 1995:11)

Suggesting that this increased efficiency could academically advance them between two and ten years ahead of schooled peers.

With this diversity of motivations it is perhaps unsurprising that academics seek an efficient taxonomy of why people choose to home educate. Koonce categorises motivations as:

“Pedagogical and ideological” (Koonce 2007:95).

Rothermel blurs the lines between these two distinct categories, implying that teaching and learning might be entwined into the families ideology, an especially poignant comment considering the prevalence of teachers choosing home education.

After preliminary qualitative analysis of over 400 surveys Rothermel cites three main motivations for home education. These being, disappointment with education and schools, an enduring intention to home educate, and stress or bullying being experienced by their child (Rothermel 2003).

Cox (2003) cited in Boyle et al (2007:638), also suggests categories of motivations along the same lines as Rothermel but adds religion and morality. Others cited by Rothermel (2003) use a plethora of categories such as, earth based, heaven based, New Age, competitors, rebels and compensators. (Stevens 2001, Apostoleris 2002, Mayberry 1989 and Blacker 1981 cited in Rothermel 2003:77,78)

To add to the confusion of motivational taxonomies, Rothermel (2003) eventually concedes parental motivations will alter, depending on the sibling referred to, their stage of development, and even who is asking the question.

I would suggest the diversity of people who home educate and their motivations are too great for neat categorisation. However, none of the authors dispute the attentiveness of these parents, with Merry and Howell (2009:365) taking this concept further, by suggesting a closer familial bond and friendship between parent and child being sustained opposed to those who undergo the transition into school (Merry and Howell 2009).

Whilst all the motivations discussed are intrinsically family oriented, it could be argued that such an introspective approach is self-centred and may be detrimental to wider society.

When writing in the International Journal of Elementary Education published in Germany, where home education is currently illegal, Reimer (2010), discusses the importance of promoting tolerance, inclusion and a celebration of diversity. He concedes that whilst school is the best place for this promotion, it is also discriminatory to ban home education so long as it does not negatively impact on others. He then conversely suggests minorities have proven to be creative despite not integrated.

In his critical view of home education, Lubienski (2003), recognises with some disdain that whilst middle class professionals may be able to give strong justifications for home education, this desire to give their child an advantage, in-turn disadvantages state schools, indirectly promoting consumerist society.

He makes the assertion that school society is more heterogeneous than the nuclear family (Lubienski 2003:175) thus inferring home schooling might result in a narrowed view. A truism which neglects the wider social networks these children reportedly experience. Indeed Cohen (2000) cited in Koonce (2007) suggests that these children engage socially in multi-aged situations more frequently than their schooled peers, whilst Thomas and Pattison (2007:23) use the term “cultural apprenticeships” to describe this informal learning within society.

Lubienski (2003:171) also makes the assumption that families tend to have increased finances and time thus their children would prosper equally in school, as a result of their parenting, and infers taking these children out of school denies the school of potentially successful children.

Despite their educational history, inevitably these children will grow older and along with schooled peers many will attend FE. This transition is central to my research in trying to discover the affect home education might have and subsequent experiences in FE.

Perceptions of home educators about institutionalised learning

The perceptions and expectations of FE remain majoritively under-researched in the UK. However Koonce, an experienced American school administrator, identifies that it is the responsibility of home educating families to educate for the positive benefits of school. He acknowledges that defensiveness is understandable between the two parties however suggests a receptive mind is imperative to avoid negative perception of the educational environment.(Koonce 2007).

In the UK this defensiveness between authority and home educators appears exaggerated with both Kendall and Atkinson (2006), and Ivatts (2006) claiming a bias against home education, recommending that home educators and local authorities should work together more readily.

Despite perceived tensions between families and schools, the participants in Jackson's (2007) case study of the perceptions of three home educated children starting school, stated that their main concern was not being able to keep up with peers. Subsequently, these participants kept up well and soon fitted in, discovering academically they were comparable (Jackson 2007).

Other than Jackson's small scale research regarding perceptions of what formal education would be like, no other research can be found. Interestingly, considerably more is written about educators perceptions of the home educated, possibly indicating the introspective nature of educators, or maybe their empathy, remembering teachers constitute the largest single group of home educating parents. Indeed it could be argued as a Lecturer I am also offering my perceptions of home educated people, and it was the views of my lecturer colleagues, that initiated this research project.

Educators perceptions of home educated children

Koonce (2007:105) recognises the preconceptions of educators about these children are less than positive, with many exaggerated misconceptions and misunderstandings amongst school personnel.

According to Koonce, educators unfair misconceptions include the social skills of home educated students. In fact, five of the thirteen families interviewed in North America cited this as being their primary transition difficulty (Koonce 2007).

In the UK, the situation appears equally exclusive with Rothermel (2003) linking the lack of compulsion to register or follow the national curriculum and educators hostility as actually causing educators to perceive a problem that simply does not exist. From personal experience, I would suggest this is possibly a reaction to over regulation and inspection of educational professionals with Monk commenting :

'parents who choose to home educate are pathologised; perceived at best as somewhat eccentric or odd and at worst viewed with a degree of suspicion and unease' (Monk 2004:14).

Another reason for educationalists' hostility is the tendency for home educators to flexibly opt in and out of the system (Webb 1999). However, Webb does concede that, within her sample, the students resistance to school rules did not help. Subsequently she describes a guarded yet supportive attitude to home education from lecturers and policy makers.

Concurring with UK educators, Koonce refers to a study by (Denoia, 2001) in which 67% of school administrators in New Jersey believed lack of socialisation was the greatest detriment to home schooling (Koonce 2007:34). Other reports however, suggest perceptions of staff in the USA may be becoming more positive (Jones and Gloeckner 2004).

It could be surmised that the growth in home education might be perceived as a challenge to the experience and qualifications of teachers in UK society which in turn creates a perceived problem (Rothermel 2003). However this problem does not exist in the view of two American college administrators Jones and Gloeckner who found most admission officers expect homeschool graduates to be as successful as traditional high school graduates (Jones and Gloeckner 2004 :18).

Regarding their social ability, a polarisation was revealed by Jones and Gloeckner(2004). They describe how 43.6% of administrators expected home school graduates to cope well whilst 35% expected them not to. This dichotomy raises the pertinent question; are these perceptions formed upon personal experience or presumption?

In another American study regarding educational partnership projects, Yeager (1999) cited in Lines (2000:162) discovered a minority of school superintendents stereotyping the home educated as social and educational dropouts, yet most were supportive of projects if funding was available. This indicates a positive shift in perception and an acceptance to work together (Lines 2000).

Both Lines (2000) and Jones and Gloeckner (2004) studied administrators not classroom teachers themselves. It could be suggested the school administrators are more focused on achievement and funding than the actual teaching of these non schooled students. They also comment on the dramatic increase in expectations of home educated students in recent years when comparing their study to Barnebey's (1986) 18 years previously.

If the perceptions amongst teachers in the UK are sceptical the actual experiences tended to be more positive:

“Where young people had accessed FE, experiences were positive, for instance, the home educated young people were deemed more mature for their age group and were reported to do well in the environment.” (Atkinson et al 2007:38)

As home education becomes more common and normalised in USA, so the views of school administrators and the public becomes more accepting, as described by Stevens (2003), who suggests this transition from scepticism and hostility to normalisation has only taken 25 years, and, that American advocates have made this normalisation easier for other countries (Stevens 2003).

The normalisation, that many home educators in the UK hope for might indeed be facilitated by the American experience, although the political and fiscal power yielded by the American conservative Protestant is unique to the USA and differences between political and religious landscapes should not be overlooked.

Home Educated peoples attitude towards institutionalised education

If, as Lubienski (2003) suggests, many families choose home education for child centred reasons, then it could be argued previously home educated students enter college or school with the perception that educational resources are solely for their own benefit.

This concurs with UK researchers including Webb (1999) who describe how participants successfully make use of the system for facilities and qualifications extracting education on their own terms whilst finding the authority of the teachers and attendance regulations of the system difficult to accept. This flexible approach to education on their terms and convenience, was not conducive to winning the teachers acceptance. Meighan (1995), Thomas and Pattison (2007) also describe this semi autonomous approach to institutionalised education suggesting the informal and relaxed environment of home education empowers these students with the confidence to manage their own learning. Webb (1999), Meighan (1995), Thomas and Patterson (2007) are all careful to cite examples of post graduate success.

If the literature implies that these students use institutionalised education to their benefit, Jackson (2007) reports one participant finding it difficult to access the teacher and taking this personally. She completed her work more slowly than classmates, which resulted in being kept in during lunch, and observed the “Teachers yell a lot” (Jackson 2007:74). The difficulties this student reported could be attributed to the contrast with her previous home educational experience.

Accessing learning through asking questions and 1:1 facilitation is a recurrent theme for UK educational researchers (Meighan 1995, Thomas and Pattison 2007) for whom, asking questions is central to the learning process of home education. Meighan (1995) also suggest these children ask more questions compared to schooled peers, concurring with Thomas and Pattison (2007) who clarify that the children are asking questions to understand, not the teacher asking the question to check understanding. It is certainly my experience that my children appear to ask questions to learn more frequently than my college students.

The opportunity to ask questions is less frequent in institutionalised learning with about three times more questions being asked by a child at home than at school (Wells 2009:96). The possibility this inhibits their successful transition is investigated later.

Bolle et al (2007:648) reports these students initially struggled to gain strong passes in their modules. I surmise these difficulties can be attributed to the change in teaching approach. Later Boyle et al (2007) also explains how initially comparing home educated with school educated students' attainment is problematic, however they appear to adapt and prosper quickly.

Socialisation and integration into an institutionalised education environment

If Webb (1999) and Jackson's (2007) participants had negative perceptions of authoritarian teaching staff, this is not the case with their friendship groups amongst fellow students. Both Webb and Bolle et al (2007) describe a very positive approach to fitting in, with them confidently initiating friendships. This proactive approach to socialisation concurs with Thomas and Pattison (2007), who suggest an ability to observe and assimilate social interactions to avoid isolation.

Indeed, the research seems to suggest home schooled children actually have an advantage socially as they are exposed to a wider variety of social groups than their peers, engaging socially in multi-aged situations beyond the classroom walls (Cohen, 2000) cited in Koonce (2007:19).

The very normality of social interaction between home educated students and those traditionally educated both in friendship, sports and interest groups is perhaps the most striking point made by both UK and American researchers (Webb 1999, Bolle et al 2007, Clery 1998 and Koonce 2007).

“They led typical student lives, with no suggestion of home education having anything other than a positive effect on their social ability.” (Webb 1999:51)

Jackson’s (2007:75) participants do add the precautionary caveat, describing an acute sense of “otherness” when they were struggling academically. Webb (1999) Bolle et al (2007) and Koonce (2007) all describe occasional feelings of social isolation and naivety when conforming more readily to their parent’s ideology, than their peer groups’.

When considering membership of student associations Stevens (2003) reports that : “home schoolers are remarkably active in formal civil life” (Stevens 2003:94) and describes a general tendency of unconventional groups for political activism.

If both researchers and previously home educated students perceive a positive integration into institutionalised learning, a paradox between stereotype and reality appears to exist with their new friends. Both Koonce (2007), and Bolle et al (2007), describe the dissonance between negative stereotype held by schooled peers and their actual experience of home educated students. Interestingly this stereotype was enduring, although acknowledged as not applicable to their new friend. Webb (1999) comments that the prevailing reaction towards home education from peers is jealousy that they did not have to attend school, and nothing more malignant.

The question “how will your children learn to be socialised?” is regularly asked of home educating parents, and, it is reassuring that none of the research found any specific difficulties. The enduring nature of stereotypes did help me understand some of the negative preconceptions encountered personally.

Accessing Further and Higher Education

Although the transition into institutionalised learning appears generally unproblematic, admission policy in the UK appears more troublesome for home educated children. This is not the case in North America and this discrepancy will now be discussed.

In their report on American college admission policy Jones and Gloeckner (2004:16), found 74.5% of the respondent colleges has an official policy on admission of home educated applicants. However for those with no official qualifications these policy varied in the degree of inclusion. A small number of institutions did not accept home educated applicants, citing they were not ready for college, or their lack of the required high school accreditation was contrary to state admission policy (Jones and Gloeckner 2004).

Lines (2000) discusses the acceptance of substantive equivalence as entry to both colleges and other governmental organisations for example the US Military. Although evidencing proof of equivalence can also be problematic in some cases, others can simply self certify equivalence for both funding and entry (Callaway 2004).

If the situation in North America is inconsistent, entry into UK FE appears haphazard with inadequate research available.

While Atkinson et al (2007:39) acknowledges that GCSE or equivalents were a prerequisite to accessing FE, basic skills tests and portfolios were also mentioned. Their entry level also caused concern, with access courses being tailored for adults or disaffected youths as opposed to young people who missed GCSEs or who simply need to re-take. (Atkinson et al 2007).

Age appears to be a barrier in the UK too, with under 18s being unable to access Open University resources (Atkinson et al 2007:38). Although some support is offered for 14 to 16 year olds through the National Extension College and often supplemented with private tutors (Atkinson et al 2007).

Despite various modes of study being available for home educated students to undertake GCSE coursework, physical access to examination centres continues to be problematic (Atkinson et al 2007). The reasons given vary from funding to insurance,

however potential effects on school league tables may also be an important barrier to inclusion for these students.

It would appear more information is necessary for families, possibly being offered through the careers service “Connexions” (OfSTED 2010).

It is perhaps the barriers to finding GCSE examination centres that precipitates the statistic that home educated children are four times more likely to be “NEETS” (not in education, employment or training), reported in the Times Education Supplement (Ward 2009).

Despite initial entry difficulties, Webb (1999), notes the disproportional high number of Oxbridge students in her research that focused on adults who were previously home educated. It could be argued Webb’s (1999) findings simply reflects the typology of those who volunteer to participate in research, however she ascertains that Universities are positively selecting previously home educated students and attributes this to their ability for independent study.

Preparation for institutionalised education

If FE is the aspiration of many home educated young people, which the evidence seem to indicate, then their parents must also help prepare their children for this transition.

With the acceptance of self certification and portfolios as an entry requirement in America, Koonce (2007) recommends keeping detailed records of the child’s achievements, suggesting that no records could seriously disadvantage the child. Whilst more radical parents might perceive records as simply indulging the teaching professionals, they might prove essential in ensuring an appropriate entry level and thus avoiding the less favourable social interaction of the remedial class (Koonce 2007). He then proceeds to make the seemingly emotive and unqualified statement :

“An unstructured, undisciplined approach will academically hurt [the home schooled children], regardless of the nobility of one’s motives in home schooling.” (Koonce 2007:101)

Although these sentiments are rigorously disputed by Thomas and Pattison (2007), both parties do agree that community socialisation is beneficial and that reclusive families are socially disadvantaging their children (Koonce 2007, Thomas and Patterson 2007).

Webb (1999) also concedes that on reflection some participants suggested they had not received as broad a curriculum of education as their schooled peers, and this became apparent when entering formal education or doing examinations. Interestingly it was not the content of the examinations but exam and revision techniques that caused difficulty (Webb 1999). Finally Jackson (2007:80) recommends parents monitor and record their children's progress against the National Curriculum to alleviate anxieties.

Undertaking this literature review has helped ground many of my perceptions regarding home education within established research. Detrimental aspects of home education for the children appear reassuring scarce, contradicting the more populous views of some educators and politicians. Reading others work has been an excellent opportunity to discover contemporary research and helps motivate us during those inevitable, "difficult days" and insecurities about our family's educational direction.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter describes and justifies the methods used during the research. It aims to be an honest account with sufficient detail to give the resultant conclusions credibility and allow the reader to replicate the methods if they wish, as recommended by Robson (1997). Initially the evolution of the research question is discussed, general approach and design. Subsequently the strategy, sampling methods and data collection, finally ethical considerations and generalizability are discussed.

This research explores the experiences of ten people who have been home educated for some or all of their formative years and subsequently embarked on FE. This aim is described by Bassey (1999:66) as a 'research issue', and is the least defined category without a hypothesis to be tested. Robson (1997:43) uses the term 'exploratory research' as concerned with seeking insights assessing phenomena in way that is new. Exploration is the intention of the research, opposed to theory seeking or testing (Bassey 1999). The exploration of the participants' experience offer insights to help predict how others, including my own children might find attending FE.

This chapter will demonstrates a transparent and honest, ethical approach respecting both a truthful account of data collection and its analysis. Respect for the participants freedom to participate and their ownership of data as described by Bassey (1999) was ensured, and is documented below. The project methodology is approved by the Oxford Brookes Research Ethics officer (appendix i).

My position as both a FE Lecturer and home educating parent has resulted in a particular interest in the transition from home education to FE as described in the introductory chapter.

This explicit declaration of interest or 'researcher positionality' (Thomas 2009:109) will inform the reader of the undeniable link between my pedagogical ideology and interpretation of the results.

Observer bias as a threat to credibility of this study (Robson 1997) is acknowledged, however the explicit honesty of my position augmented with the methodology chosen should reassure the reader of the value of my findings as a piece of educational research.

This acknowledgement and of observer bias and my reflexivity is apparent in the evolution of the research question and documented in the following few paragraphs.

The original focus of this research presumed and focused on perceived tensions between lecturers and previously home educated students at my college. This ill conceived preconception was formed after negative comments from colleagues and reading the North American report by Koonce (2007), who claimed.

“that dealing with the negative perception of home schooling by public school personnel is the most difficult part of transition from home school to public school . . .” (Koonce 2007:95).

Whilst reviewing much literature and piloting interviews, it became apparent that actual tensions between lectures and students were not experienced by the participants themselves. Thus the initial research question:

‘What are the experiences of previously home educated students in college and does their preconceptions and expectations of lecturers impact upon their integration?’

no longer appeared relevant and risked evoking both researcher and subject bias.

The resultant research question is an exploration of the expectations and realities of the transition into FE by previously home educated people:

‘What are the expectations and the reality of post compulsory further education (FE) for previously home educated students and what are their experiences of this transition?’

Whilst the main research aim is purely exploratory, I hope that existing good practice might be disseminated to both young people and their parents currently engaged in home education to aid the transition into FE, if this is their desired route.

This hope of offering an account of good practice for home educators to aid their transition into FE places the research firmly into the ‘practice’ category as defined by Wallace and Poulson (2003:42), opposed to pure theory or policy research.

To help ground the research, an informal consideration of data collected from the National Student Survey 2010 (NSS), (HEFCE 2010) was undertaken; although this is a secondary source it aids construct validity (Robson 1997) to the results helping ensure the results apply to previously home educated students, not the wider student population.

Identification of research design

Thomas (2009) suggests two fundamental approaches or 'paradigms' in research, the first being the positivist, with the second interpretive. With my Veterinary Nursing background this approach is commonly used by clinical researchers measuring the beneficial efficacy of a medication or technique. This research is characterised by large scale clinical studies gathering objective quantitative data and governed by strict regulation to minimise bias. The results of positivist research should be repeatable with the researchers claiming clear generalizability. Benefit must also outweigh side effects in light of the larger population.

Whilst the use of positivist research in clinical studies as a 'fact finding' exercise is reassuring, a more human scale approach is necessary for the exploration in this research project.

The interpretive paradigm offers a different and refreshing option, it acknowledges how the interpretation of events informs understanding and the importance of individuals perceptions and experiences. Interestingly, Thomas (2009) makes a subtle but important distinction, often using the term 'knowledge' when referring to positivist research and 'understanding' when discussing interpretivism. Positivist research is about discovering a single truth whilst interpretivism is more concerned with understanding the nature of a situation.

The primary data gathered, employed semi structured interviews to formulate a case study and Bassey (1999) attributes this technique to qualitative interpretive research.

The use of NSS data is clearly quantitative, however its relevance to the research finding should not be overstated and it is intended only to offer a backdrop for the main research. The overriding interpretive paradigm remains.

Throughout the research literature the terms validity and reliability are repeatedly used (Robson 1997, Thomas 2009, Bassey 1999). This chapter describes and justifies the methods to ensure credibility whilst considering both validity and reliability.

Robson (1997:66) defines validity of a project as its ability to measure what was intended in the research question and methodology. Whilst the term 'measure' is somewhat of a misnomer for this exploration it was still important to consider if the design frame really explored the preconceptions and experiences of previously home educated people as opposed to that of the general student population. Robson (1997) suggests one partial solution is to take a multi-method approach to data gathering and whilst an indisputable link cannot be claimed, some assumptions are formed. These are compounded when a secondary data source (NSS) is considered.

While both Bassey (1999) and Thomas (2009) suggest reliability it is important to ensure repeated results in positivist experimental research. It is less applicable for exploratory research of this type. An infinite number of variables might affect my participants responses, including my personal choice to home educate, which was shared with them during selection. These threats to reliability are to be expected with the interpretivist paradigm and data analysis offers insights opposed to generalisation (Thomas 2009). These terms, validity and reliability, are concepts that are revisited several times during this chapter.

The research strategy

Within sociological research Thomas (2009) discusses a bewildering number of design frames. Of these, action research, evaluation, comparative studies, survey and case studies initially appeared the most applicable.

Action research

The appeal of action research is the emphasis on change to help problem solving (Thomas 2009). A secondary aim of this project is to disseminate good preparatory practice for transition to FE. Only anecdotal comments from lecturer colleagues about difficulties existed, so it was an overly presumptuous design frame choice. Action research is generally done by the researcher altering their own practice (Thomas 2009). As I do not have direct professional contact with previously home educated students and pilot interviews debunked a perceived problem the action research design was not deemed appropriate.

Evaluation

Despite it being a common design frame the evaluation of previously home educated people's transition into FE would necessitate both a change in practice and an instrument to measure this change (Thomas 2009:112). In common with action research this would require prior evidence that a problem exists and presumption it might be possible to measure the affect of an intervention. As neither situation is likely, an evaluative study was also rejected.

Comparative Study

Although initially appealing in light of comments from colleagues. A comparative study of lecturers' and students' perceptions of their integration was quickly rejected as unreliable and potentially divisive. A comparative study usually refers to "cross national comparisons" (Thomas 2009:137) and although some comparison is made between experiences in the UK and America in the literature survey, a reliable international comparison was unlikely, given the inconsistency of dates of research papers. A comparative study would also fail to address the research question adequately.

Survey

Although a survey appears more akin to a data collection than a true design frame it is commonly included in the categorisation of design methods (Thomas 2009:112). In the interpretivist paradigm survey data can be collected and analysed for the existence of trends and relationships. Due to the statistically small percentage of home educators and the diversity of their background a survey as the sole method would fail to adequately explore the complex nature of this research.

The NSS, was used as secondary data, not to form comparisons but to help contextualize the views of the sample group with those of a wider national sample.

Justification of research strategy

With the more experimental type research designs being rejected due to lack of the required scientific rigour necessary to claim validity and reliability, a more exploratory and flexible approach was adopted. Amongst the interpretative research paradigm Robinson (1997) suggests case studies are most positively aligned with projects of an exploratory nature.

The ability of the case study to explore and probe specific groups at certain times with attention to detail, subtlety and complexity is well documented in the research literature (Bell 2002, Bassey 1999, Blaxter et al 2010). To explore the expectations and experiences of previously home educated people, who may have been home educated for a variety of reasons and lengths of time, lead to a very heterogeneous group thus the research strategy needed to accommodate individuals. The only constant between participants was that they have been home educated and later attended FE. Reassuringly, Robson (1997) also discusses a sense that the flexibility of case study lends itself to exploration of complex phenomenon using multiple sources of evidence in a real life context whilst acknowledging that case study can be used for explanatory purposes too.

The positive ability of the case study to make suggestions for good practice and change is discussed (Blaxter et al 2010). Hence the case study approach satisfied both the exploratory aim regarding experiences, and the sub aim to offer insight into good practice aiding others transition to FE.

The vast majority of the research undertaken in this project is interpreting qualitative case study data collected by interview, yet it must be acknowledged that consideration of survey data collected by the NSS is used to help ground the exploration in the wider context of student experience. The technique of combining strategies is endorsed by Robson (1997) to increase validity and reliability, however these concepts are given less emphasis by Bassey (1999) in the case study. This aside I will try to explain methods undertaken to acknowledge the goal of reliability and validity in this method.

During the presentation and analysis of findings, the literature review will be referred to and considered. This is good practice concurring with Bassey (1999:11) who, when citing Hargreaves (1996) suggests cumulative research that builds upon the work of others is important and under represented.

Sample size and recruitment

Thomas (2009:102) defines the term "sample" as the group of people who are participating in the research. He warns that this term can be misleading in

interpretative exploratory research, especially case studies as it could incorrectly indicate that the participant group is representative of the whole population (Thomas 2009:103). In this study, the population consists of previously home educated people who attended FE. This research does not claim that the sample group is representative of the wider population and it's accepted that selection bias might be present.

Recruitment of the participants is discussed below. In reality all the volunteers were interviewed and all their data is represented in the analysis. Thomas (2009:102) describes three sampling types; random, convenience and stratified. The type used is the convenience sample (or purposive sample) as only previously home educated people who attended FE were approached to participate. Whilst Thomas concedes this method has many associated problems where the researcher intends to generalise from the results, this is recognised and no claims of generalisation are made later in this chapter.

Approaching participants

Next the process of approaching the participants and inviting to contribute will be discussed. In this section I hope to demonstrate a clear respect for my sample group and commitment to research ethics.

Initially it was envisaged that all the sample group would comprise entirely of students attending my FE college. Whilst only four previously home educated students were known to me, I presumed a larger number could be recruited.

Seidman (1998) suggests that initial personal contact with participants is preferential however does then concede that when selecting students this may not be possible. The first step was to seek out the formal gate keeper and ask their permission to undertake research with students (Seidman 1998). The Vice Principal for Quality gave this permission. The Quality Manager required the college based interviews be undertaken in a quiet room within the college libraries that was clearly visible to staff to comply with college safeguarding policy.

Permission was also sought and gained from the Principal's Secretary to send a cross college email to all personal tutors. The message (appendix ii) asked tutors, if any of their students previously disclosed a home education history. At this stage names

were not requested. Ten tutors responded to this email, reporting they knew of previously home educated students.

An invitation letter was sent to potential participants again via their tutors (appendix iii). This contained a slip to return in the addressed envelope if they consented to me contacting them directly (appendix iv), five contact slips were returned.

From the five replies, telephone contact was attempted. Initial difficulties were experienced as mobile phones were either turned off or calls not answered. One student subsequently explained, she will not answer calls with unfamiliar numbers, and another was too short of credit to listen to messages.

Once phone contact was made, a landline number was requested. As recommended (Seidman 1998) my position was explained, together with the research aims and their role. Any questions could be fully answered due to my implicit understanding of the project. At this point the participant pack was posted to their home address (appendices v, vii, viii) , and a week later another phone call to check they were still willing to participate and arrange an interview date and time. Two potential college participants were under 18 years old, both of these student's parents were spoken to explaining the project and consent was sought (appendix vi, ix).

Out of the eleven known previously home students at the college only three consented to interview. The exact reason for this reluctance is unknown, however three withdrew from the study citing their own academic workload, others simply failed to reply and there was some evidence that several had left the college. The reason for withdrawal is protected data.

The college information data base was not used at any stage during this research, in line with the Data Protection Act 1998 (Information Commissioners Office 2011) that necessitates participant information being directly volunteered (Bee 2010). The collected data will be securely stored remotely for five years and not transmitted unless necessary (Oliver 2003).

On reflection, being a Lecturer or 'insider' might have hindered participant recruitment. Indeed Seidman (1998) suggests any relationships where there is a potential power imbalance will cause difficulties. Seidman (1998) recommends access is established through peers, friends and family, so the decision to recruit a complementary cohort of participants was made to facilitate the study.

The second cohort of participants originated from home educating acquaintances, who have older siblings, friends or children who have subsequently attended FE. A simple A4 flyer was created (appendix x), this was designed to be informative yet friendly and non-threatening, making my position to home education explicit, encouraging participation. These simple adverts were distributed via a home education workshop in December 2010. To my surprise six participants responded within days, albeit four from the same family.

A slightly amended participant pack was either posted or emailed to the potential volunteers (appendix xi), and again queries and a convenient date were discussed during a telephone call. An additional participant was recruited by a lecturer colleague and the process followed was as described above.

It is acknowledged that my acquaintance with these participant's parents may result in a degree of indirect cohesion, however as described above an ethical approach was followed and selection bias is also acknowledged above.

Considerable effort was invested, personally communicating with all the participants both at initial contact and later, emphasising their ownership over data and ability to withdraw, fostering a co-operative relationship as recommended by both Oliver (2003) and Seidman (1998) who correctly predict this will improve the subsequent interview quality.

The results of data collected from both cohorts are represented in the analysis side by side and the clear categorisation of insider versus outsider research appears problematic .

Both Seidman (1998) and Blaxter et al (2010) imply that insider research refers to interviewing ones' own students within your own place of employment. Both warn of potential threats to honesty of interviewees and pressure of interpretation of resultant

data with Robson (1997:74) recommending a distance to protect objectivity and subsequent validity.

I would use the term informed outsider to describe my position as none of the participants were personal friends or students thus some extent of objectivity is maintained through this distance. Conversely it is noteworthy that Robson concedes that some view the artificial pursuit of objectivity as:

“lethal for any real understanding of phenomena involving people in social settings” Robson (1997:74).

Sample Size

The exact number of sample size necessary is not quantifiable. However Thomas (2009:104) suggests the term “Theoretical Sample”, defining this as the amount of data the researcher needs to analyse before they are confident the category is saturated. Whilst Seidman (1998) concurs that sufficiency and saturation are useful he warns that practicalities of time and finance will play an important role.

The final number of interviews performed and analysed was ten. It was decided to stop recruiting for more participants once recurrent themes in the data were emerging and additional participants ceased to volunteer.

Linked to the size of the sample is the notion that Robson (1997:67) calls “Subject bias”. He explains this is a threat to validity when the subject answers questions in a way that they believe might please or help your research. Whilst the participants knew my position as a FE lecturer and home educating parent they appeared to be honest in their discussions this was compounded by common themes in their answers. Whilst all the participants were positive about FE they were vocally critical of specific aspects of their experience, again indicating an honesty and negating suspicion of subject bias. Consideration of the NSS aids validity by offering an indication of the wider student population’s views.

Data collection techniques

Thomas (2009), describes several different data gathering tools:

Diaries

These are reflective notes made after an event usually in chronological order. They are particularly useful when the research is based within the work context with regular

observations and reflections. This research was based upon several interviews with participants. The research was not undertaken in the field or indeed the workplace as such. Diaries were not deemed necessary or satisfactory data collection methods in this research.

Group Interviews and Focus Groups

Thomas states these two methods are 'interchangeable' (2009:170) with several people discussing a topic in a group. Thomas (2009:169) describes the social phenomenon he calls 'risky shift phenomenon', where a group may vocalise a more radical opinion than an individual. All the participants in this research were interviewed in isolation, with the exception of two friends who were interviewed one after another in the same room. In this circumstance the second participant was more vocal, however this appears consistent with her character.

Document interrogation

This is applicable with both the National Student Survey 2010 and research detailed in the literature review. Both these sources are considered secondary to the interview data and used to help add context to analysis made.

Choice of data collection tool

Due to the exploratory nature of the research question, a flexible data collection tool was necessary. As Cohen et al (2007) remark, the ability of the interview to balance focus and conversational spontaneity enables both interviewer and interviewee to discuss their interpretations of the world.

Thomas (2009:160) describes the enthusiasm participants demonstrate when given the opportunity to voice their opinions and be listened to. He also suggests consideration should be given to how the interviewer wants to appear, i.e. in authority, an observer or with parity to the interviewee (Thomas 2009). This project positions itself carefully between insider and outsider, however my natural tendency is towards equality with and seeking commonality with the interviewee.

The design frame necessitates an exploration or

“interpreting what your respondents say for illumination of the research scene”
(Thomas 2009:161)

Active listening skills including paraphrasing and affirmation were employed to ensure the interviewee felt valued, while keeping interviews light hearted and discursive.

The balance of control and interview structure are important considerations. These range from fully structured to unstructured interviews (Robson 2002:271). He suggests informant interviews are particularly useful when trying to ascertain the participants' perceptions (Robson 2002:271), as in this project.

A semi structured informant interview was employed, using a list of topics to be discussed, while allowing the sequence to be adapted spontaneously (Robson 1997, Cohen et al 2007).

Cohen et al (2007) warns that important topics can be omitted, and it was ensured this did not happen by subtly ticking off topics on the schedule as they were discussed. The outline also aided data coding and comparison offering a similar structure as predicted by Cohen et al (2007). In all cases the interviewees led the discussion and naturally answered the majority of the topics with actual questioning limited to filling gaps not volunteered by the respondents.

The opportunity to meet and discuss their experiences, face to face was particularly appealing to me as a researcher and parent as it gave me an holistic impression of what grown up home educated people are really like.

Data recording tool

A computer and audio recording software 'Audacity ©' was demonstrated to the participant before the interview. It was explained that the recording could be paused if they wish to consider their response or stopped entirely, as suggested by Oliver (2003). Interestingly this was not requested, possibly due to the screen quickly turning off resulting in the computer being unobtrusive and easily forgotten. Basse (1999) notes how using this method the researcher can listen actively whilst concentrating on the direction of the interview as opposed to note taking. This software offers other advantages, including immediacy of copying the file for the participant to subsequently take home for validation and the extreme accuracy of the location counter. This facilitated interview summation and cross reference.

Conversion of audio to text

Bassey (1999:81) describes two methods of converting audio to text, transcribing the interview verbatim and paraphrasing. Bassey explains the former is extremely time consuming and somewhat inefficient as large sections will subsequently be deleted. Paraphrasing the interview might lose some subtlety but is considerably more efficient. The latter method was chosen, as the interviews tended to be lengthy and allowed to digress from the schedule unhindered. Paraphrased comments were loosely sorted under the original headings in the schedule with additional headings as required and the counter reference being carefully recorded to allow easy relocation from the audio file.

Participant validation

Once the interview was digitally recorded, a copy was burned onto a compact disc (CD) in MP3 format. Participant validation is necessary to ensure the interview accurately reflects the intentions of the participant (Oliver 2003). While Bassey (1999) describes giving the full transcript to the participant he acknowledges this might be daunting, especially for poor readers. Due to the high level of computer literacy demonstrated during discussion with the participants, it was decided to post a CD with full digital recording to the participant alongside a self addressed envelope and validation form for their consideration (appendix xiii).

The participants were encouraged to listen to the recording and validate its authenticity and accuracy representing their intentions (Oliver 2003). They were requested to identify any sections they wished to be removed, or indeed delete the whole interview. I thought they would be more inclined to listen to an MP3 file than read an extended transcript. None of the participants requested deletions, and validation and permission to use their comments was received from all ten.

Details of dates and locations

Ten semi structured interviews were undertaken, between 16th December 2010 and 26th January 2011. The three college based students utilised an interview room in the library with the remaining seven taking place in peoples houses. Six of the interviews took place in Warwickshire and four in Gloucestershire. All ten participants had been home educated during compulsory education age for a period between one and 13 years. The ages of the participants were also varied ranging from 16 to 31 years old. The primary initial reason for home education also varied although as described in the literature review this cannot be conveniently categorised. All of the participants have

attended either college or a sixth form centre affiliated with school. Both vocational and academic courses were represented between level one and three. One participant has additional educational needs. Their data is included in this study as any attempt to homogenise the sample group was futile, and the most honest approach was to include all the participants. Although criticism of validity is acknowledged, his opinions are as equally valid as the other participants.

Data analysis

As the interviews progressed the schedule emphasis subtly changed. My initial expected antagonism between teachers and participants quickly evaporated. It soon became apparent the participants experiences were broadly positive and the interviews became more discursive and relaxed.

The qualitative case study approach utilising semi-structured interviews required the analysis of words with no intention of converting them to numbers, a method Thomas (2009:198) defines as “illuminative analysis”.

While the interviews were paraphrased the location counter was noted and comments were loosely categorised or “coded” (Robson 1997:286) under headings. Some interviews required additional headings, and others did not require all the original ones.

The transcripts were then further colour coded for each participant and the files merged. Once in one document they could be compared and contrasted. The method used to analyse the data is essentially, the “constant comparative method” described by Thomas (2009:198).

The secondary and quantitative data provided by the NSS was not formally analysed but considered as additional data, enabling interesting information about the wider student population to be considered.

Ethical issues not previously discussed

The ethical implications of this proposal have been considered following Oxford Brookes Ethical Standards Code of Practice (2000).

The general moral justification to acquire knowledge (Oliver 2003), has been the basis of this research and participant involvement was carefully considered. The research

information sheet acknowledged a potential emotional disturbance caused by recalling events, however several participants actually commented how much they enjoyed reflecting on their FE experiences. Hopefully this research will benefit both them and wider society, through reflection.

Potential harm is more difficult to predict (Oliver 2003), but could have included participants being identified or challenged about their comments. Whilst this has not become apparent, various measures have been taken to ensure ethical fidelity with most having been already discussed above. Additional considerations are discussed below:

A certain distance was maintained from the participants by using the Oxford Brookes interview pack, which included research question, the expected benefits of the research, possible harm, information about confidentiality, data presentation and storage and publishing of the research (Thomas, 2009).

The anonymity of the participants was maintained by using pseudonyms in the published work however remaining unrecognisable can be more difficult (Seidman, 1998:). Exact location, ethnicity, and educational establishment attended was insignificant for this study therefore will not be reported. Experience and subject area are more important although it is very unlikely the participants can be identified by these alone. The data analysis was the “constant comparative” (Thomas, 2009:198) which involves finding themes and categorising them. These categories are reported sequentially during analysis and conclusions, therefore the splicing of responses further promotes anonymity and prevents recognition.

Whilst every reasonable effort has been made to ensure the quality of this research, within the restrictions of a Masters Dissertation, some critique follows.

Threats to validity include, the differing lengths of time between attending college and the interview with resultant effect on memories. In this respect validity might have been improved if all the participants had been currently attending college, probably in their first year.

As discussed earlier the first ten volunteers that came forward were used for the study. It might have been beneficial to use what Thomas (2009:102) describes as a

“stratified” sample, where my sample mirrors the national demographic with regards to gender, race and possibly reason for being home educated too.

The final acknowledged threat to validity is, to what extent the results link to their previous educational history or whether their experiences are common to most students? This has been partially addressed by using the NSS, however another method might have been to interview a number of schooled students using the same interview schedule. This was not deemed appropriate because it is unlikely anything new would be discovered and it may encourage an unreliable and divisive comparison.

The final consideration for this methodology is the vexatious issue of generalisation of the results. Generalizability is defined as “providing accurate predictions “ (Thomas 2009:109). Robson (2002) suggests external generalizability requires a truly representative selection of the wider population. As discussed earlier the sample group does not claim to be truly representative thus a claim to external generalizability cannot be made.

Whilst direct external generalizability is outside the scope of this dissertation, elements of what Robson (2002:177) describe as “theoretical generalisation” do apply. The exploration of perceptions and expectations might be usefully used to predict other home educated peoples experiences. The experienced researcher Bassey (1999) confesses to considering the issue of generalizability for 30 years and subsequently suggests the concept of “fuzzy generalisation”. This arises from studies of a singularity that can relate to similar situations. Suggesting that we “make no absolute claim to knowledge, but hedges its claim with uncertainties.” (Bassey 1999:12)

It is my sincere hope that this exploratory research will be of interest to both traditional and home educators and that the findings might inform both young people and their parents.

Chapter Four

Data Presentation and Analysis

During this chapter I will present the data collected from the ten semi-structured interviews with previously home educated people, and studied by constant comparison as described by Thomas (2010) with the analysis interwoven. An initial attempt to separate presentation from analysis was unsatisfactory, as analysis actually took place during all stages of the research. The sense of describing a situation whilst intelligently reflecting upon, and thematically reporting ideas is something Thomas describes as “thick description” (2010:202) and is the form of analysis presented here.

The research question:

‘What are the expectations and the reality of post compulsory further education for previously home educated students and what are their experiences of this transition?’

-will be central to discussions and analysis, although consideration of the findings presented in the literature review is included, as are the NSS results to contextualise findings with the wider student population.

During both interviewing and subsequent analysis themes were observed in the data. These are used below to offer structure and whilst they have been presented in a logical order, it should be noted, topics were naturally discussed as they arose.

Commencement of Home Education

To facilitate a general overview the participants were initially asked to discuss the reasons why they were home educated and when this commenced. Two participants, Hazel and Maple, who were both younger siblings, had not attended foundation school, so for them home education started at birth.

Four participants Ewan, Willow, Holly, and Rose attended nursery school for a short period, describing these schools as small and friendly. Of these, three were withdrawn when they were due to be transferred to a much larger primary school that would involve more travelling. Rose reported never liking school and after persevering

for a year being withdrawn. Rowan attended day care for a while and was subsequently home educated.

The remaining three participants, Olive, Ashley and Oakley were withdrawn from school in their early teens, with stress or explicit bullying being cited. . . Ashley stated:

“I was very depressed [at school].”

With Olive commenting:

“I was bullied in junior and when I got to high school it only got worse, it made me really, really upset so they took me out.”

School closure, stress and bullying are all cited by Rothermel (2003), as reasons for electing to home education. Whilst home education might be an initial reaction to negative experiences, a more ideological perspective seems to evolve once it is commenced. This is evident where younger siblings were not subsequently registered. This pattern reflects Rothermel's (2003) findings too.

An impression of the family unit

As the participants discussed their formative educational an impression of their family unit was formed. Whilst not directly linked to the research question, it does offer some useful context to the results, if only to demonstrate the normality of the sample group.

Eight out of the ten participants discuss a traditional family unit, with both parents being involved in the decision to home educate. The remaining two, Ashley and Willow did not mention their biological fathers. Predominately the mother appears to take the most active role in researching home education and subsequently leading learning, with siblings and grandparents being regularly discussed. This leads to the impression that home education was something the whole family was involved with.

A nuclear family with two heterosexual parents fits Rothermel's (2003) description too. The parents' employment was not relevant to the research question and not specifically discussed thus this aspect cannot be compared with her stereotype.

Child's choice regarding home education

With Rothermel (2003) describing how parental views tended to evolve and become generally more holistic, it appeared relevant to get an impression of the participants

role in choosing home education and I predicted it might give subtle insight into why the participant had subsequently embarked into FE.

The two participants who never experienced primary school, Hazel and Maple, both report their parents actively discussing school and giving them the opportunity to enrol whenever they wished. Some aspects of school were appealing to Hazel especially, social aspects and drama, however the necessity to attend all day delayed her decision until she was 13 years old, when she enrolled at school and enjoyed the social experience.

The participants who were actively withdrawn after experiencing stress or bullying in their early teen years, Olive, Ashley and Oakley, all give the impression of elation at the opportunity of leaving school, and enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to be home educated.

Although happy to be away from “the aggravation” at school, Oakley did express a sense of loneliness missing the company of people his own age.

The remaining five participants were withdrawn after a short school career of one or two years. Even at a young age a sense of consultation between parent and participant was apparent. With the option to return to school if they desired, Willow recalls how:

“Mum said I could go to school if I would like to, and me just thinking no way!”

A short investigation into how learning occurred

It was both relevant and interesting to consider the approach to learning that was adopted by my sample group and their families. If a continuum between formal structured and informal unstructured teaching can be imagined. This sample group learned by a naturalistic mixture of scheduled book learning and opportunistic experiential learning with a general tendency towards the formal structured approach.

All of the participants describe using workbooks especially for literacy and mathematics, with structured learning taking place in the morning. An informal curriculum was prepared and followed by their parents who appeared mindful of what their peer school group would be covering. These structured morning periods ranged from one hour to the whole morning. Some of the families segmented their curriculum into subjects whilst others concentrated on literacy and mathematics supplemented

with child led projects. The length of time allocated to structured activities grew with the age of the child as did the choice of topic. In some cases responsibility was given for the participant to complete projects and assignments during times chosen by them.

Generally afternoons were used for visits to libraries, museums, parks and historical sites interspersed with domestic, sport and social activities.

All seven of the participants who were home educated from a young age acknowledged how self organisation, research, presentational, budgeting and domestic skills were developed during structured sessions and wider life including managing their own time.

Learning in groups outside the family unit was not explicitly discussed however a clear sense of this is apparent, with French lessons being mentioned by four participants from an early age.

Some teaching of curriculum areas took place within the wider family and the use of subject specialists within the family is apparent, with Oakley describing his Mother covering the majority of subjects, her Boyfriend teaching Sociology and his Grandparents doing Maths and History with him.

Maple describes attending night school studying astronomy alongside her Father, and commented:

“They were great because usually you’re not supposed to go to an adult evening school until your 16, I was obviously younger than that and obviously enthusiastic. So they were keen to have someone enthusiastic and the other adults did not seem to mind; although a lot probably went over my head, but I’ve never forgotten the experiences with the telescopes and actually seeing what’s there.”

All the participants reported appreciating the structured approach adopted by their families. Several attribute this, at least to some extent, to their successful transition into FE and were somewhat sceptical about the more autonomous approach advocated by Thomas and Pattison (2007). It could be argued, they would naturally advocate structure as this was their experience; their opinions however appeared to be based upon contact with other home educated friends and perhaps should be considered carefully.

Type of education you would choose for you own children.

The general reluctance of the participants in Webb's study (1999), to home educate their own children appeared significant in gaining an overview of the participants' real perceptions of home education. So although not directly relevant to the research question was discussed.

None of the participants are planning a family in the short term. Although all are younger than the national average first time mothers with a Higher Qualification (Rendall and Smallwood 2003), I was surprised by the general lack of any longer term family plans. Those who were home educated from a young age actively acknowledged the time, commitment and patience their parents invested. They predicted home educating would interfere with their own careers or they might lack confidence, however did not exclude the option if school was not proving a positive experience for their future children.

Those who were withdrawn from school later, were equally pragmatic in their response suggesting school should be tried first, with Olive stating:

"I think they should try school because some people enjoy school others don't"

This balanced and moderate attitude towards school vs. home education is reassuring, with participants suggesting if one was not working they would try the other. This is in stark contrast with the polarised views reported researchers and educational professionals including Koonce (2007), OfSTED (2010a), McIntyre-Bhatty (2007), Ivatts (2006), Lines (2000) and Kendall and Atkinson (2006).

The refreshingly open minded attitude of these people, who were actually home educated towards school could be attributed to their parents own openness. However it must be remembered, all bar one participant has experienced both options during some time of their childhood, so perhaps they deserve greater credence than other commentators.

Reasons for attending Further Education and type attended.

Five of the sample attended a sixth form centre associated with a school, where all had pursued A level subjects with both science and humanities equally represented.

The remaining five participants, Holly, Rose, Ashley, Rowan and Olive attended College, undertaking vocationally related practical courses with the exemption of Rose, who was taking GCSEs to facilitate A levels entry. Seven were currently enrolled, with three having completed a few years previously and now in employment.

The reasons for attending their chosen institution varied. Some undertook a vocational course offered solely at college. For those pursuing A levels the choice of sixth form varied from convenience to reputation and selection process. Half of the participants had not taken GCSEs and this affected their choice of institution for both vocational and A level subjects. The impact of entering FE without prior GCSEs is discussed again later.

Generally A levels appeared to be pursued in order to gain access to university in the traditional way, whilst vocational courses were attended to facilitate future employment. Ewan also cited reaching the limit of his parents subject knowledge and needing specialists and their equipment to progress. Social aspects of FE and independence were additional reasons participants gave.

From personal lecturing experience, the motivations for attending FE appear representative of the wider student population. Although it is refreshing, none mentioned a compulsion either due to parental pressure or to avoid employment and gain Educational Maintenance Allowance, which some students anecdotally cite as their attending motivation. It should be acknowledged that all the participants attended FE, this research makes no claims for those who elected not to attend or withdrew.

Specific aspects of FE participants looked forward to

Seven participants explicitly discussed what they looked forward to. Willow, Rose, Ashley, Ewan, Olive and Maple all gave a similar answers; having the time to study their chosen subject at a higher level and the challenge this would bring, together with meeting new people of a similar age. Again these aspirations appear broadly representative of the wider FE student population.

Specific aspects of attending that caused concern before starting

Of those who expressed concerns about starting FE, two who had been withdrawn from school due to bullying and were naturally concerned about meeting the perpetrators again. While Hazel and Rose, who had been home educated from an

early age, voiced concerns about keeping up academically with their peer group. Some general concerns about fitting in were voiced by participants too. Holly, a residential student, was naturally concerned about this additional aspect of starting college at just 16 years old.

Concerns regarding bullying or living away from home seem quite understandable and probably not related to home education specifically. Academic concerns could be attributed to the participants inexperience of their peers at school.

The interview and entry qualifications

One of the most interesting parts of this research revolves around disparity of entry qualifications necessary for FE, a situation mirrored in America too and described by Callaway (2004). Only three participants had GCSE certificates, and they had attended school at 14 to complete them (Willow, Oakley, Hazel). The remaining seven were still engaged in home education, yet unable to access GCSE exam centres. This problem is acknowledged by Atkinson et al (2007) and OfSTED (2010a), and probably attributes towards the disproportionately high NEETS figure reported by Ward (2009).

Ewan, Maple and Holly, all without GCSEs were accepted onto level three courses (*A level or equivalent*) on the strength of a portfolio of work and interview with senior staff. Whilst Olive, Ashley and Rose embarked on level two courses with Rowan taking foundation studies.

The ability of those able to enter at level three with no prior GCSEs must indicate a high quality portfolio and confidence at interview, however Maple did concede:

“Slight annoyance from the guys who had slogged through their exams that I had done none of the exams; but they were very nice about it.”

Rose resented having to do a GCSE course as the college she attended refused direct A level access. Ashley and Olive entering vocational courses at level two appreciated their place, studied hard and subsequently progressed to level three.

The inconsistency of entry qualifications between institutions is unsurprising as independently set, however greater uniformity would aid planning for home educating families, including my own.

Formation of Expectations

The research question central to this study pertains to expectations and realities of FE. Before this is further explored it is useful to ascertain influencing factors that formed expectations.

All those who had attended secondary school for some time, Willow, Ashley, Olive, Rose and Oakley, based their expectations of FE on school. Those who had not attended school formed their expectations from friends, siblings and films. Only Holly mentioned reading the prospectus and other documents before starting.

Prior expectations of other students

Some discussion regarding their prospective peers was instigated although Maple simply answered:

“I presumed they would be something like me . . . although more led by trends.”

The truism, that home educated children socialise freely with schooled friends was illustrated by Holly’s remark:

“Pretty much the same as my friends at home, because I was never in an environment where I only had friends that were taught at home. My two best friends at home were in the school system so I thought they would be pretty much the same as all those guys.”

Those who had attended school voiced some preconceptions regarding bullying, cliques or disruptive classroom behaviour, presumably grounded in their prior experiences.

The academic expectations of the course before commencement

Participants were encouraged to recall academic preconceptions held before they started. This revealed unanimous agreement that they thought it would be academically challenging with didactic lectures and an onus on independent study.

This concurs with the small scale study undertaken by Jackson (2007) whose participants’ major concern was they would not be able to keep up with their schooled peers. Like Jackson’s sample the participants soon fitted in and discovered academically they were comparable to their schooled counterparts.

Expectations of the Further Education Environment

Both Rose and Maple who had not attended school for any significant time expected the FE environment to be formal, regimented and strict. With Olive commenting:

“I thought it was going to be like, all calling them Miss.”

The next section of this data presentation and analysis concentrates on the participants actual experiences when attending FE.

First impressions of the FE Establishment

First impressions were discussed in a non directive manner, and various aspects were mentioned.

Ewan and Rose, who had never attended school, said their first impression was the large number of people, with Ewan commenting on his sixth form which was attached to a school:

“It reminds me of an ant hill, the bell rings and suddenly all of these people, in these jumpers appear from nowhere, its really odd.”

With Maple’s first impression being of the bus journey to sixth form.

“I remember the first day at college really, really clearly. I went in on the bus from the village . . . and that intrigued me, the kind of politics of who sits where on the bus, that was all new.”

And the bemusement continued when she arrived:

“I had no idea what a form was . . . my form tutor was a physics teacher so I was going to the physics building and all I can remember thinking was. Why I am going to the physics building? I am not studying physics.” (Maple)

Maple’s comments, regarding form groups, illustrate how despite a comprehensive education, her lack of knowledge regarding educational organisation caused initial confusion and (although not stated) probably alarm too.

In contrast two participants who had attended school, being home educated during their teenage years only, commented that the FE building was not as large or populated as they expected when observed from outside. With Oakley voicing initial apprehension at:

“A load of [older] people that would go round in gangs, it was kinda rough college.”

Reality of FE atmosphere and inclusion.

Three participants who had not attended school notes the friendly and relaxed atmosphere with Maple stating:

“My impression was that it would be far more formal and regimented than it actually turned out to be . . . I had expected it to be much more um . . . I guess when you watch it on TV everyone sits down and its quiet and organised and it really, really wasn't.”

The results of the NSS appear to concur with Maples comments with course organisation receiving the lowest satisfaction rating of any question with just 60% of students agreeing (HEFCE 2010).

Maple also describes frustration at peers ambling to class then having to wait a further 10 minutes for the teacher. Once in the classroom other preliminaries (*registers and finding books*) appear to cause further delay.

Those participants who previously attended school for a significant period do not mention time wasting, but were surprised at the friendly atmosphere.

“I was surprised no one basically started on you and no one judged you there.”
(Ashley)

A couple of the participants focused on the learning environment, with Ewan who had not attended school, finding it initially difficult to concentrate, and Ashley being impressed with the mature attitude of peers towards their work.

Both first impressions and the atmosphere of FE vary between participants and appear to be largely informed by their educational history, and perhaps, primary motive for being home educated too.

The Reality of the Academic Work

The experience and perceptions of the actual academic work were also discussed with most participants naturally comparing expectations to reality without prompting.

Rose who was studying for GCSEs and Ashley, Olive and Holly who studied towards vocational qualifications were surprised at how easy they found the academic work, The practical elements of the vocational courses were most popular. This was echoed by Rowan who stated he was progressing reasonably well with a little support from the tutors.

Both the enthusiasm towards practical learning, and the ease with which written work is completed is mirrored by my own able and traditionally educated students. Unsurprisingly setting more challenging work is cited by Ofsted (2010b) as best practice.

Oakley and Hazel who had studied for A levels having previously taken GCSEs at school commented on the considerable increase in level of difficulty from GCSEs, with Ewan attributing this to:

“On reflection what most people were struggling with, was all of a sudden it wasn't being spoon fed, suddenly people were having to manage their own time, manage their own research. This was something I had been doing for a long time.”

Ironically, he had not taken GCSEs and found A level studies easy which he attributed to self directed study skills gained during home education. Willow was also finding A levels unchallenging and becoming generally disillusioned with the course.

“Not challenging, not interesting, not inspiring.” (Willow)

In this section some disparity appears evident between those with GCSEs and those without. Regarding level of difficulty, the gap between expectation and reality is larger for those with GCSEs than those without. The NSS data suggests that 78% of those surveyed found their course intellectually stimulating (HEFCE 2010), although this clearly does not differentiate between interest and difficulty, so claims of comparison would be unreliable.

Pace of delivery for academic work and college experience

The pace of delivery was another substantial difference for the participants who had never attended school and described their home education as structured. They describe their surprise at how little was actually achieved and the amount of time wasted, in comparison to home education.

Maple describes how during her home education she would work hard in the morning and have free time in the afternoon, this was in contrast to college:

“I was home educated. I had the afternoons free and then all of a sudden you’re all day spending a lot of time doing nothing and you can’t spend the time your doing nothing doing something you want to do.”

With Hazel suggesting:

“You would spend half an hour at maths [at home] and get as much done as you would in a week [at school].”

Ewan’s estimations were less extreme stating:

“The classes at [name removed] are an hour, there are five hour long lessons in a day. I knew that I could comfortably get the same volume of work done in probably three hours if I was just left to do it.”

Although the participants initially regarded less productive times at FE as frustrating, they soon accepted and embraced the opportunity to socialise and relax with friends. This was particularly true of those who had previously expressed looking forward to FE to spend time with people their own age.

Hazel suggested an alternative to traditional FE, structure where:

“If they told us at the beginning of the week this is what you have to get done by the end of the week and these are the lessons that are available for you to do it in, go. I am here available if you’ve got problems, it could get done so much faster because the people who know what they were doing could be done, and the people who need a bit more help would be able to get more help because the teacher would not be busy explaining it for the third time to those who know what they are doing. It’s a strange system really.” (Hazel)

Hazel’s suggested model is more akin to Higher Education than FE, and does demonstrate both reflective skills and a willingness to challenge the status quo. It is

not possible to reliably attribute these skills solely to her educational history, although other participants freely offer educational critique too and these are reported later in this analysis.

The participants' frustrations at the pace of delivery is perhaps unsurprising, having been used to working at their own pace and managing their own time. The comments by the participants concur with those of Meighan who states:

“When I have interviewed children who have come out of school into home-based education I have asked them to compare the two experiences. Usually the first response is the comment on efficiency of learning. They say that they have frequently learnt more by coffee-time at home than in a whole day at school, so that the rest of the day is 'additional learning'” Meighan (1995:11)

Reality of academic support and resources in Further Education

All the participants were generally enthusiastic and impressed with the library facilities offered. Both Ashley and Ewan noted that they used the library more than other students and Holly and Olive commented how much they enjoyed having lots of books focused on their vocational area. Other participants expressed a preference to using books over virtual resources. In contrast the participants were considerably less complementary about the Virtual Learning Environment, with it being described as temperamental and slow.

The participants perception of library resources were markedly better than indicated by the NSS where only two thirds of respondents agreed they were good enough (HEFCE 2010), one of the lowest scores in the survey. This discrepancy could be tentatively attributed to the tendency of home educating families to using local libraries more frequently than the larger population, although this is only anecdotal evidence based on personal experience. Questions about practical resources were not specifically discussed but comments regarding these were all very positive.

Reality of the teachers, learning support and questioning

The transition from 1:1 support offered by home education to a whole class setting, was of particular interest. This section concentrates initially the participants experience of teaching staff then progresses to in-class questioning and 1:1 support.

Rose and Holly, who had not attended school, commented of the personable nature of their lecturers whilst Olive, specified enjoying the informality of addressing her college lecturer by given name. This contrasted with Maple's experience at sixth form, who was required to address lecturers more formally:

“The other thing I hadn't been used to was referring to adults as Mister and that caught me out a couple of times.”

The vocational and academic knowledge of lecturers was specifically praised by Rose, Ashley, Ewan and Olive, with none of the participants criticising their knowledge or ability.

Their satisfaction regarding teaching concurs with the NSS where this category higher than any other with more than 80% of respondents agreeing staff are enthusiastic and able to explain the subject in an interesting manner (HEFCE 2010).

This high regard, could possibly be attributed to students studying subjects of their choice or perhaps, more candidly, a testimony to the hard work and professionalism of those working in this sector.

Whilst the benefit of subject expert tutors may be an apparent positive, the teacher student ratio must be far higher in institutionalised education. Thus the topic of one to one support was discussed.

The majority of the participants (Willow, Ashley, Rowan, Ewan, Holly, Olive and Hazel) were satisfied with the one to one support offered at FE and found it a useful element of their learning, however, Rose found a considerable difference being:

“.....not having the teachers full attention, because obviously when Mum was teaching it if I asked her something she would come straight over and help. Whereas, with the teacher it was quite hard to get their attention whilst they are trying to sort out someone who is not doing any work.”

Rose's experience concur with Jackson (2007) whose study reports one participant finding it difficult to access the teacher, with the researchers Meighan (1995), Thomas and Pattison (2007) all noting question asking as a significant learning technique during home education.

Three of the participants received additional support from teaching assistants (TA), and although this was appreciated when necessary, it was sometimes perceived as overbearing and unsolicited. With Rose describing it as “quite patronising really”, as:

“They seem to expect me to need a lot more help than I do, and all the teaching assistance in one class hover and ask. Do you understand this? They seem to think I’ve had no education at all.”

Access to help from teachers also scored very highly in the NSS with 80% of students agreeing that “I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.” (HEFCE 2010:1)

Teaching professionals reaction to being home educated

One of the critical incidents that precipitated the research question was the negative inference from two FE colleagues towards Home Education, thus the perception of participants was sought on this matter.

Only Willow discussed teachers having a negative reaction, when she attended school at 11 years old recalling her perception as, them thinking.

“Ah is she clever, isn’t she clever. Why didn’t she go to school? Has she got some sort of mental condition or is she just not on the SEN register? And then once they realised I was quite bright they just left me to it.”

Interestingly, Holly describes, the teacher asking her to befriend another student, she attributes this request, to her unusual education history. While Ewan acknowledges his appetite for additional work as being difficult for lecturers to manage, stating:

“If you gave me more work I would just do it.”

The negativity and hostility towards home educated students by teachers reported by Rothermel (2003) and Webb (1999) was notable in its complete absence. This could be attributed to professional segregation of personal views from the classroom or the progressive normalisation of home education as described by Stevens (2003), with Webb’s research being published more than a decade ago.

The teaching professionals’ disproportionate importance towards passing examinations, in comparison to an enthusiasm for learning, was criticised by both Ewan and Willow with Willow repeatedly reporting the practice of teaching for assessment stifling her “love of learning”, and Ewan identifying that the assessment focus is the primary problem in contemporary education:

“Exams are a really nasty way to test somebody . . . and you have to know what to write to get the marks, you’re not writing about your understanding - you have to get those four words in order to get the four ticks and the four marks and that seems mad, if you get it you get it.”

Hazel also concurs that although she achieved good GCSE grades the education system was far from inspiring.

Assessment was one of the weaker categories in the NSS too, however the wider population appeared more critical of the feedback received than the general philosophy of assessment (HEFCE 2010). This could be attributed to the familiarity of assessment for traditional students that encourages its unchallenged acceptance. Whereas, the home educated appeared genuinely interested in critiquing the whole educational system, as mentioned previously, with Maple stating:

“I think that the other people that were in the class had good and bad lessons in so much as they would enjoy going to some and they wouldn’t enjoy going to others, but I don’t think they were as critical as I was of the different standards of teaching.”

Self reflection of Preferred Learning Style

Whilst much criticism has been written about students identifying their preferred learning styles (Petty, 2004, Coffield 2008), after the participants candid critique of education it was decided to also enquire about their learning styles.

Discursive learning appears the most popular activity utilising group discussion and seminars with Ashley, Rose, Willow, Ewan, Hazel and Maple, all finding it particularly useful.

Questioning teachers was also deemed very useful by Holly, Oakley, Ewan, with Maple stating :

“The vast majority of them [the teachers] really enjoyed anyone that would ask questions and having just a bit of interest in what they were doing.”

She also acknowledges a careful social balance must be found:

“You’re very aware of that in the college environment that there’s a fine balance between being interested in the lesson and wanting to ask questions and not wanting everybody else in the class to know you’re interested in the lesson. It’s kind of a social thing where you don’t want to always be the one whose got their hand up.” (Maple)

Surprisingly only Rowan and Olive of the four on a vocational course expressed a preference for the practical classes. However this could be attributed to the association of learning styles with academic work leading the responses.

Holley, Oakley and Ashley all noted their confidence in giving presentations in comparison to their peers and attributed home education as a contributing factor. The recurrent theme regarding how they learned best was that it should be challenging in order to remain interesting.

“They make you think really hard, they don’t expect you to be able to do it all off the top of your head . . . I like it when I can keep my head above water.” (Hazel)

Hazel and Willow, both A level students were vocally dismissive of the learning activities they did not value:

“The teacher tells you all the things and you make all the notes, then you go and write the essay, there doesn’t feel there is a whole lot of point in doing that really, that’s all stuff I could find out for myself if I had a book, I don’t need a teacher for that.” (Hazel)

With Willow describing some learning activities as “circus type” and “patronising” .

Whilst the preference towards discursive learning can be easily attributed to home education, the preference of more formal or traditional activities gives an interesting insight and perhaps parity between their expectations and actual experiences of institutionalised learning for the participants.

Self study and Homework

The participants were asked how they found completing assignments, self study and homework. Perhaps unsurprisingly due to their often self directed educational background none of the participants reported struggling with homework. More

surprisingly both Ewan and Oakley, tended to complete this homework at the FE establishment or another library, either during breaks, study periods or evenings, but not at home.

“I can’t do work at home, its weird when I’m trying to do home work my mind goes blank, it might be because of getting home educated, I work better when I’m at school or at the central library” (Oakley)

The explanation of this can only be guessed at, perhaps having left home education behind they do not wish to return to studying at home, or maybe younger siblings cause distraction.

Social aspects of Further Education

Whilst none of the literature reviewed, raised concerns regarding the social skills of home educated people. The question of socialisation is enduring amongst interested parties. For this reason, I asked about experiences of group learning and the wider social aspects of FE.

The participants were asked about peer attitudes to learning and the resultant impact. Rose, Ewan and Holly , who had not attended school, expressed some irritation at disruptions in class especially when it impacted on their own progression. This irritation was only experienced during their first year and then only when it impacted on their own learning.

“In the first year it [disruptive behaviour of others] really irritated me because in maths their were loads of people who took maths because [they] thought it sounded good. . . . people who didn’t do their homework irritated me, because of the constant lectures from teachers.” (Ewan)

Disrespectful behaviour towards the teachers from fellow students caused sympathetic amusement from the other two participants, who described how they “felt a little sorry” (Holly) for teachers who were teased and gossiped about.

Two of the participants who had withdrawn from school later did experience name calling whilst at college, however reported initiating conversation with their peers and resolving bullying before it became a problem.

“I went outside and stood speaking to them and they were. Oh your not as bad as we thought you were going to be.” (Olive)

Rowan was the only participant who reported his fellow students behaviour impacted negatively on his experience, however once he changed college and embarked on a more vocationally related course this seemed not to be a problem.

Telling other students about your Home Education History

Continuing the theme of interaction and socialisation with peers, the participants were asked to describe their peers reaction to home education.

All were open about their educational history and appeared to enjoy the interest it stimulated. Most reported a genuine interest, envy or even excitement from FE friends.

Some stereotyping was evident. Two participants commented how their peers thought they must “either be super intelligent or really stupid” (Hazel) and Willow, commenting on the paradox of her friends’ thinking:

“I should be socially retarded, and sort of say, have you got any friends, even now when they know they’re my friends.” and
“They all definitely think we all just live in a cave and don’t ever talk to anyone.” (Willow)

This paradox between stereotype and first hand experience from peers is also described by Koonce (2007), and Bolle et al (2007).

The non judgmental attitude of college friends surprised Ashley, who had been previously bullied commenting:

“I was surprised no one basically started on you, no one judged you there.”

Both Hazel and Maple, who were home educated for the majority of their compulsory education pragmatically observed that although initially interested peers quickly forgot they had been home educated. No participant mentioned experiencing any negative or substantially detrimental preconceptions from their peer group.

Two describe listening and learning about school as a strategy to help them fit in:

“It takes a little while of just sitting and listening and working out what they’re all on about. But I think you slot in very quickly or at least it felt like I did.”
(Hazel)

With Maple describing that she quickly realised the social aspects of college were very rewarding too.

None of the participants experienced any form of discrimination from either staff or fellow students, generally the students were interested for a while but soon accepted them as part of the learning community taking them as they were. This appears to be a testimony to both the home educated participants' ability to fit in and the welcoming acceptance of the FE environment.

Interestingly it seems the home educated stereotype was enduring whilst acknowledged not applicable to their new friend. Webb (1999) comments the prevailing reaction to home education from peers is jealousy and interest that they did not have to attend school, and nothing more malignant.

Making friends and friendship groups

Friendship groups were initiated through subjects and who they sat next to. Ewan described how working groups evolved into friendship groups while Rose and Olive noted how peers separated into friendship groups. They were friendly with most students and a sense of loose affiliation is apparent, in contrast to the cliques formed by schooled peers.

Ewan and Maple describe the enduring nature of friendships made during FE, with both finding partners there.

The social ability of the participants is unsurprisingly and concurs with the plethora of literature (Webb 1999 and Bolle et al 2007, Thomas and Pattison 2007) who all predict their seamless social integration.

Sports and social aspects of college

The social and sports aspects of FE are important for many students. Both Maple and Holly, who had previously never attended school, appeared to immerse themselves in the sports and social aspects of FE life especially during their second year. This is perhaps unsurprising for Holly, who was a residential student:

“It was only the sports that I was active in the clubs side of things but if there was anything going on. Pretty much all of my group of friends went.”

Ashley enjoyed playing football for his College, commenting on the inclusive and supportive team spirit.

Although the other participants did not appear to be involved in the FE sports, this was clearly not the case at home. Two participants were Scout leaders and the others were involved in sport activities with friends.

Rowan describes having two voluntary jobs alongside college and reflects on how they are improving his communication skills, whilst Hazel describes her disappointment regarding how many of her younger Scouts leave the group due to the pressure at school.

Best and Worst things about FE

The participants were asked to comment on the best and worst features of attending FE and the majority of comments have been previously reported. Rose and Olive specifically mentioned being pleased with college and Olive:

“wished there was more days in the week to come here.”

The general satisfaction with FE concurs with the wider students population with 76% of NSS students being satisfied with the quality of the course (HEFCE 2010).

Hazel discussed particularly enjoying the social aspects of learning with peers and friends, although did concede that she found the quantity of A level work overwhelming at times. The length of the day was mentioned by Ashley who had a long bus journey, with examinations being the worst feature for Ewan.

These positive experiences augment the research findings of Atkinson et al (2007) who report previously home educated students' experiences were positive and teachers reported they do well in an FE environment.

Predicted and achieved grades

In a society where grades are so important (Coffield 2008), it appeared appropriate that expected grades should be discussed. Some participants responded candidly, whilst others remained somewhat vague.

The A level participants reported doing three A levels, and with only one exception all the grades were passes. Out of the four participants who stated A level grades, three were A, six were B, two C and one unclassified.

Of those taking vocational qualifications at college all reported either achieving or being predicated a good pass, due to the nature of vocational qualifications the actual award is more difficult to calculate and appeared less significant to the participants than those undertaking A levels.

If those participants who are still to take their examinations indeed achieve their predicted grades, the sample A level group will have achieved 25% A grade and 91% pass grade. This can be crudely compared with the national 2010 results published by the BBC's educational correspondent, with 97.6% passing and 27% achieving an A grade at A level (Harrison 2010).

Whilst it is accepted that a quantitative direct comparison between national statistics and this sample group is somewhat unreliable, these lower than bench mark grades might challenge the American admissions officers assumption that home educated students will be more successful than their schooled counterparts (Jones and Gloeckner 2004), although this transatlantic comparison is very problematic.

Reflective comments

The penultimate part of the interview required participants to reflect on their expectations and their actual experiences formulating differences and similarities. The comparison of expectation and reality is central to the research question so although considerable repetition was noted these reflections gave both participant and interviewer the opportunity to summarise our discussions. The concept of reflecting back on an interview is described and advocated by Seidman (1998).

Similarities between expectations and experience

The participants were asked. What are the things that are, as you expected?

Ashley who was attending college on a vocational course suggested the progression of difficulty from the first to second year at college was as he had expected. Another participant who previously completed a vocational course cited the practical work was as she had expected after working at other stables.

Two participants who had not attended significant time at school made comparisons regarding their home education, with Hazel suggesting the level of difficulty was similar to what she was used to, and Ewan stating an expected frustration of the timetable:

“I expected to loath the bell and I did loath the bell . . . there’s this really good vibe about the class, then the bell goes and everyone disappears and that seems such a shame to me. . . . to kill that off because the bell rings.”

Other comments under this section tended to be somewhat vague. Examples ranged from two, who said that nothing was as I expected and another who said the people were as I expected.

Rowan expected the staff to be “really dedicated and into the job” and was pleased to find they were.

Differences between the participants expectations and their experiences

The friendly environment was the most prominent factor mentioned by Rose and Ewan, who had never been to school and Ashley who was withdrawn. They found their peers to be more open and friendly than they had expected, with two commenting they would stay in touch with FE friends after they had completed their course.

“How well I would get on with the people and what a fantastic bunch they turned out to be . . . I am still fantastic friends with them now.” (Ewan)

“It’s a lot more relaxed than I was expecting and people are a lot more open and friendly with you and make you feel a lot more welcome than I was expecting.” (Rose)

The general tendency for enduring friendships to be formed in late teens is acknowledged, yet interestingly Ewan, describes his FE friends as more significant than those formed previously at home education groups. This might be attributed to the FE environment or simply the prolonged time spent studying together.

Hazel and Holly were surprised at the extended periods of time their peers spent sitting, and talking about popular culture, with one conceding she was never

previously interested in the reality TV programme “Big Brother”, but started following it to join in the conversation.

The other substantial difference, mentioned again by Holly and Maple, was the inefficiency of time at FE describing extensive “free and down time” and “time wasting” respectively.

Hazel, previously withdrawn from school, was naturally apprehensive of starting college, but stated:

“It’s the total opposite of what I thought it would be . . . I expected it to be hard to come back to college and its been easy.”

Advice for another home educated person

The participants were also asked what advice they might have for another previously home educated person who was about to attend college. Whilst this was not part of the main research question it stimulated an interesting discussion.

Four participants recommended potential students should not have cause for concern about this transition and to keep an open mind.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s a lot easier and more friendlier than you expect.”

(Rose)

Two participants who had not attended school and one that only attended for GCSEs reiterated the importance of making a social effort:

“I would recommend go to Sixth Form, not with the, I must get good grades mentality, go with the mentality of having a good time . . . if you really enjoyed it and made some really good friends it was worth while.” (Ewan)

However both Rowan and Willow make cautionary comments, with Rowan recommending:

“Don’t go sticking your nose into trouble even if someone’s being silly just ignore them and be as polite as you can and enjoy yourself.”

And Willow, perhaps cynically, suggests, be prepared to:

“Not be challenged, feel institutionalised, no voice, one of the crowd, not enthused and be prepared for your class mates - they all act like sheep.”

Advice for a home educating parent

The participants were also asked for their advice, for a home educating parent to help the transition into FE.

Ashley, Rowan and Hazel all suggested it was important that children have a good general knowledge of the subjects they are to study at college

Make sure they are easily up to date with everything they will be doing.”
(Hazel)

Ewan, Hazel, Rowan and Holly, all who received a structured home education, appreciated this when progressing to FE, and suggested study skills, self motivation and some formal lessons are important preparation. Ewan also mentions reflective and metacognitive skills:

“Answer their questions to the best of your ability because if the answer is because it is or because it does, that kills off curiosity and curiosity is the biggest most important thing.”

Both self confidence and confidence in a social group was mentioned as an important skill by one participant, while both Rose and Olive suggest encouraging and support them in their decision to attend and “just let them get on with it” (Rose).

Perhaps surprisingly, these participants tended to agree with both Koonce (2007) and Jackson (2007) that both clear records and a structured and disciplined approach facilitated their transition into further education. This might conflict with Thomas and Pattison (2007) who advocate an informal curriculum yet the participants clearly suggest a structured content whilst self disciplined approach to home education aided their transition into FE.

Life after Further Education

The participants were asked about further aspirations, or for some about their experiences since leaving FE.

Those undertaking a vocational course wished to progress into that vocation, while Maple attended university and Ashley hopes to next year.

In contrast two of the more vocal A level participants, Ewan and Willow, appeared disillusioned with academic study and despite originally planning to attend university have since changed their mind.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In this chapter I will provide a short evaluative conclusion of the aims, literature reviewed, method employed, and findings of this research to demonstrate recognition of the methodological issues raised. This research generally confirms both the literature review and my aspirations for our children, by reporting a reassuringly positive view of previously home educated people and their experiences.

The final research question was:

“What are the expectations and the reality of post compulsory further education for previously home educated students and what are their experiences of this transition?”

The research has comprehensively answered this question, yet I have raised important comments regarding both validity and reliability of the findings.

The research has sought and reported both the prior expectations and the experiences of the participants, however these have been based on the discursive recollection of events that happened some time ago. It should also be acknowledged both participant and interviewer bias are evident and the length of time between event and its recollection may increase bias further.

The practice of structuring the interview around expectations, experiences followed by reflective comparison appeared to work well and gave the participants an opportunity to contextualise their reflections.

The participants gave some interesting insights regarding FE themselves, opposed to rhetoric from educational professionals and politicians found repeatedly in the literature review.

During the literature review, sceptical and negative literature was actively sought to help balance my position as a home educator, however credible negative literature was surprisingly scarce.

A polarisation and even hostility between those in favour and against home education was apparent in the literature, although interestingly not reflected by participants or their experiences.

A large body of research was discovered focusing on the phenomenon of home education, however UK based research focusing on the transition in to FE was scarce. The literature reports no significant effect on integration into FE, and this research concurs. In-fact home education appears to have a positive effect on self organisation and study skills comprehensively preparing these people for both FE and Higher Education.

Much of the published literature on home education was North American where it is more prevalent, probably, due to isolated geographical areas and fundamental religious sects. Rothermel (2003) does not acknowledge religion as a primary reason in the UK and this has been my findings too. Ideology might contribute to the polarisation mentioned above.

When searching for negative literature, I was disappointed in the quality of reporting from the Times Educational Supplement, yet more impressed with the work of Paula Rothermel, and surprised with the lack of synchronicity between Alan Thomas's book and the views of participants regarding structured learning.

The research discovered all the participants found their time in FE enjoyable and rewarding, especially the social aspects of FE. They appeared self confident, with excellent study and social skills. The participants found the FE environment friendly, accepting and non judgmental and were welcomed by both peers and lecturers alike. The majority enjoyed discursive learning whilst appearing to be adept at both self directed research and more formal learning activities. The academic work was not as challenging as they had expected, neither was the course organised as well as they had hoped.

The participants reflective and critical skills were well developed, and they appeared enthusiastic to evaluate the FE sector. The main criticism levelled at institutionalised learning by the participants, was its inefficiency and unreliability of assessment methods.

As the project evolved a subtle change of focus, from pure exploration to recommendation, was experienced as participants made recommendations regarding practice. It transpires the participants managed the transition into FE excellently so any recommendations for practice should not be exaggerated.

The main findings of this research are the ease at which the participants in this study have integrated into institutionalised study at FE. They have proved adept at both academic and social skills, demonstrating a flexible and adaptable approach to their new learning environment.

The participants appear noticeably more moderate concerning the home education versus school debate in comparison to professional, political, and parent commentators. This could be attributed to their successful integration into FE or simply because it is normal for them. This is particularly noteworthy when reflecting on the extensive policy review sought by the previous government regarding home education.

Whilst the main research aim is purely exploratory, it is hoped good practice might be disseminated to both young people and their parents currently engaged in home education to aid the transition into FE. Again the limitations of this research must be considered before a firm change in practice could be recommended.

The overriding advice from participants for potential students is not to worry about this transition and enjoy the experience. With a more serious note for parents to ensure home educated children have a comprehensive subject grounding, especially for A levels. Study skills should also be developed including the ability to concentrate for formal lessons. The use of portfolios greatly helped some participants access FE and Koonce (2007) advises comprehensive record keeping. Advice for FE lecturers includes clear joining instructions and the confidence to timetable self directed study.

Challenges to both the validity and reliability due to the methodology employed, will now be discussed with possible improvements, should the study be repeated.

The most salient issue regarding methodology chosen for the research question is:

Are the findings directly related to the participants home education? It is my suspicion that if traditionally schooled FE students were interviewed, considerable correlation of

results would become apparent. Having acknowledged this threat to validity, a comparative study was purposefully not stated as an intention.

The use of the NSS as a triangulation tool to increase validity in this respect was an afterthought and on reflection, this is probably apparent. Greater research regarding the usefulness of this Survey and its limitations regarding minority students as identified O'Leary (2007).

The comparison between A level grades of traditional students and the sample group, is also problematic due to the size of sample group.

Threats to the reliability of findings have also been identified and central to these are sample selection bias with four participants being from the same family. Whilst a more reliable sample selection would cause significant practical difficulties, the effect of retrospective interviews could be tackled.

All the participants were progressing well with their course with three having completed successfully. If the study was to be repeated a longitudinal methodology could be applied with interviews before during and after their course leading to increased reliability, this design might also include students who withdrew and presumably had a less positive FE experience.

It is recognised that the generalizability of findings is questionable due to limitations discussed above, however the relatability of the research is more appropriate, with the possibility of translation into other minority educational options, for example flexi-schooling, Montessori, single faith or special needs schooling.

This research and its findings offer an interesting and useful insight into the expectations and experiences of previously home educated people. Having had the privilege to meet and discuss at length their educational experiences, I have no doubt that previously home educated people are able to successfully adapt and integrate into institutionalised learning. Indeed their insightful comments regarding the FE culture demonstrates considerable maturity and reflectivity, and they offer a unique opportunity to view and critique a system as an outsider.

The participants ability to seamlessly integrate with their new peers demonstrates significant social capital gained from the socialisation across a wide age range in

different contexts. Those participants who previously experienced bullying at school, have returned to education with an evident self confidence and optimism, that they attribute to their time being home educated. While I would not advocate withdrawing a child from school in the first instance, this research indicates home education can be a positive option for those who are prevented from learning at school because of bullying.

The participants openness to the diversity of both peers and the wider population also impressed me, they appeared slow to judge and quick to defend both friends and educational professionals, again contrary to the stereotype. Their excellent communication, reflective and analytical skills are also evident and clearly contribute to their employability and civil activity.

There are many opportunities for further research into this area, especially a longitudinal approach with elements of comparison to traditionally educated students. This would illuminate why some quickly withdraw from FE and if their experiences are less positive than my participants.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this dissertation, as much as I have enjoyed my first interpretivist research project.

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WESTMINSTER INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

MA in Education: Research Proposals

Application for ethics approval for a research project involving human participants

Before completing this form, please refer to the ethics section of the Education Research VLE. You can also wish to look at the BERA guidelines at <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica1.pdf> and the University code of practice on ethical standards for research involving human participants at http://www.brookes.ac.uk/res/policy/ethics_codeofpractice.pdf

Please submit this form with your ER assignment, keep a copy for your supervisor to sign and include this in your dissertation. If you have any queries, please contact the Institute's Research Ethics Officer, Maggie Wilson, mvwilson@brookes.ac.uk

Name of Researcher: Ross White

Researcher's e-mail address *****

Name of Supervisor: Robert Waugh

Supervisor's e-mail address *****

Working Project Title:

Transitional Experiences from Home Education to Further Education

Summary of proposed research (including a brief account of research methods)

The increasing trend to home education in the UK will surely result in increased numbers of these students applying and attending colleges. The integration of this new cohort may bring opportunities to celebrate diversity and new challenges in promoting inclusion. I hope to explore some of the perceptions and experiences of previously home educated students. It is also worth considering what helps form these perceptions and what political or ideological motivations underpin them. (research methods are stated below)

Participants involved in the research (including number, source and method of recruitment)

Students (approximately 10), will be invited to participate through their personal tutor to whom they have previously disclosed their education to. The students will be invited to contact me, I will not directly contact them.

8. Main research methods

Qualitative case study, using semi-structured interviews complemented by an interrogation of contemporary literature.

9. Does your proposed research include any of the following:

- Deception of participants? no
- Financial inducements? no
- Possible psychological stress? no
- Access to confidential information? no
- Dependency relationships? no
- Involvement of vulnerable participants no

If you have answered yes to any of the above, please explain how you will safeguard the interests of participants in your research:

10. Potential benefits of the proposed research:

I hope to create a useful and interesting exploration of the perceptions and experiences of both Lectures and students regarding home education that will be interesting to both home and college educators, benefiting both them and wider society, through reflection. Consequently it might be possible to make recommendations to facilitate the seamless integration of these students into further education, although not a stated objective.

11. Potential risks involved in the proposed research

Potential risks could include participants being identified or challenged regarding comments made or emotional disturbance at recalling difficult events. Data analysis and presentation methods will minimise the risk of participant identification while emotional disturbance will be minimised by providing the interview questions prior to the interviews.

12. Support to be given to participants (as appropriate)

Participant information sheet including:

- the research question
- the expected benefits of the research
- possible harm, information about confidentiality
- data presentation and storage and publishing of the research

I intend to use Audacity © to record responses directly to computer, therefore it is feasible to email the participant with the recording after a suitable “cooling off” period for participant validation.

13. Plan for obtaining informed consent. Please ensure that you give a copy of your participant information sheet and consent form to your supervisor. (Consent forms are not needed for questionnaires)

See above

14. Steps to be taken to ensure confidentiality of data

- Interviews to be recorded directly onto my laptop computer
- Respondents emailed to enable participant validation
- Pseudonyms to be allocated to each participant during transcription of interviews

15. Steps to be taken to ensure anonymity of data:

See above, and only participants subject area and length of experience area directly relevant, thus will be recorded. A constant comparative data analysis method will be adopted and categories will be reported sequentially to further promotes anonymity.

16. Steps to be taken to ensure secure storage of data:

Data will be stored on my personal laptop computer and backed up using an external hard drive. Both data storage devices will be securely locked up.

17. I have read and understood the University's Code of Practice on research involving human participants (<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/res/ethics/>)

Signed:.....Researcher Date.....

Signed: Supervisor Date:

Signed: IREO Date:

Appendix ii

Date: Wednesday - October 13, 2010 10:57 AM
To: All Staff
Subject: Tutor Request for information

Dear Course Tutors,

I need to know if you have any students who have been previously Home Educated.

I am currently undertaking research on the integration of home educated children into Further and Higher education for my MA dissertation. The College does not request this information as part of our enrolment process, thus I am relying on your help.

If you have previously home educated students in your current tutor group, please do contact me. I would also be very interested to hear your comments on their integration, and progression through the course.

Thanks for your help,

Ross White

Appendix iii

Dear

Thank you so much for your response to my Broadcast message about Home Educated college students.

Please pass on this invitation to your previously Home Educated student(s). It asks for permission for me to contact them directly, **its certainly not an agreement to participate at this time.**

Good research practice suggests I should meet with your student(s) and explain the project fully, then later on ask if they are willing to participate.

Their anonymity will naturally be protected and other ethical considerations have been approved by the University.

Please do encourage, you student to complete it and return to me.

All the best Ross

rosswrites.org

Appendix iv

20th Oct 2010

Dear Student,

As a Home Educating parent and college lecturer, I am very interested in your experiences within the Further Education system.



For my dissertation I am planning to consider the current accessibility of Further Education for Home Educated individuals and the transition from an informal curriculum to more formal education.

If you have been Home Educated throughout your childhood or for a part of it, and might be willing to contribute towards this research please complete the form below and return it to your tutor.

If you have any queries regarding this research please don't hesitate to contact me by email – rwhite@warkscol.ac.uk

Thank you so much for your support.

Ross White RVN AdvN (Surg) PGCE FE & HE

I am willing to be contacted by Ross White in connection with his research.

Name

Address

.....

.....

.....

Age

Phone Number

Email address

Appendix v

Ross White
Home address
Home phone number

Dear Student,

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. Your tutor has suggested you might be willing to help me with my Masters qualification and I would really appreciate it.

My project hopes to discover any differences in, what you thought college would be like and how it actually is. I hope this will be interesting to both you and other home educated people. My children are both home educated whilst I am a college lecturer, so I think its important to continue promoting these educational options.

As long as its OK with you, I will ask you a few questions about your expectations of what college would be like and the reality, if you want a friend / parent to come along too that's fine. It should take less than an hour.

The discussion will be recorded, but all your details will be changed, so no one else is ever likely to know who said what. Also if you decide you want to delete things you have said we can do this too, you are the central person in the process here. Once I have completed the dissertation, its marked and stored at Brookes Uni in Oxford where I am a student. Warwickshire college staff are unlikely to read my report, unless they travel to Oxford and sit in the library.

I live in Banbury, so we need to agree a time convenient for me to come over to your centre or another place you might prefer.

It would be helpful if I could have a land line phone number, email and postal address to make it easier to arrange the time.

If you are willing please either let me or your tutor know and I will phone and email in a week or two to answer any questions you might have.

All the best, again thank you for supporting this project.

Yours sincerely,
Ross

Appendix vi

Ross White
Home address
Home phone number

Dear Student,

Thank you so much for agreeing to help me with my Masters qualification I really appreciate it.

I have attached an information sheet, this explains in detail what I am planning, please do discuss this with your parent / guardian too.

As long as its OK with you, I will ask you a few questions about your expectations of what college would be like and the reality, if you want a friend / parent to come along too that's fine. It should take less than an hour.

Before we meet and we discuss you college experiences, I will need permission from a parent / guardian, please see the attached consent form.

The discussion will be recorded, but all your details will be changed so no one is ever likely to know who said what. Also if you decide you want to delete things you have said we can do this too, you are the central person in the process here.

Once I have completed the dissertation, its marked and stored at Brookes Uni in Oxford where I am a student. Warwickshire college staff are unlikely to read my report, unless they travel to Oxford and sit in the library.

I live in Banbury, so we need to agree a time convenient for me to come over to Rugby centre or another place you might prefer.

It would be helpful if I could have a land line phone number to make it easier to arrange the time, but this is up to you.

I will phone and email in a week or two to arrange a time and location convenient for you. It would be great if we could get this done before or early in the New Year.

All the best, again thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Ross White

Appendix vii

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title

Are there differences between the expectations and the reality of Further Education College, for previously Home Educated students? And what are their experiences of the transition into institutionalised learning.

I am inviting you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

Your decision to take part, or not in this study will not in any way impact on your studies, marks or assessments at Warwickshire College. The research is being undertaken as part of my studies at Oxford Brookes University, not Warwickshire College.

What will happen to me if I take part ?

The study will use semi-structured interviews in order to record your expectations and experiences of Further Education. A mutually convenient time and location will be chosen to undertake the interview, probably using a spare classroom at the college.

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes and be recorded digitally onto a laptop computer. If you wish to bring a friend along too this is fine, although they will be asked not to speak. If at any time during the interview you wish to leave, pause or withdraw consent this is absolutely fine.

A few days after the interview you will receive the digital recording and be asked to verify its accuracy and confirm you are happy to agree the use of quotes in the published dissertation. Any comments quoted will be anonymous.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no perceived or tangible risks in participating with this study, however you will be asked to answer the questions honestly and sometimes, recalling experiences can be emotional. I will travel to your college centre and meet at a convenient time, so other than the interview and data verification time, there will be no cost to yourself.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participating in this research will give you an opportunity to discuss your experiences at college in an open and non judgmental environment. The research will also further develop the understanding of expectations and experiences of our Home Educated students.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

The interview will be recorded directly onto my laptop computer, and subsequently a copy will be emailed to you to verify accuracy. Any sections

you want removing will be deleted and not analysed. While I prepare the dissertation your data will be given a pseudonym (false name). The data generated during this study will be collected, stored and analysed inline with Oxford Brookes policy on Academic Integrity, *available on request*, and as part of this it must be kept securely for five years after completion of the project.

When the report is published only the pseudonyms will be used, and only information directly relevant to the research question will be published. The data will be analysed looking for common themes and presented thematically, this method ensures identification of individuals is very unlikely.

What should I do if I want to take part?

Once you have received this information pack, I will telephone you a week or so later, to discuss any aspects of the project and answer any questions about the research. At this time I will ask if you wish to participate.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research, will form my Masters in Education Dissertation. The dissertation will be submitted in October 2011, printed, bound and securely stored in the library at Westminster Institute. These dissertations are kept in the library for reference only. The facility to request scanned electronic versions of dissertations is theoretically possible, however in reality the high cost of requesting these tends to be a disincentive.

Who is organising the research?

I, *Ross White* will be conducting this research as a student at Westminster Institute of Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

If you have **any** queries regarding this research, please contacted my by email at rwhite@warkscol.ac.uk or by text on 07864 980812.

If you have any concerns regarding the way this study has been conducted, in the first instance please contact my supervisor Robert Waugh by email at rdwaugh@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, I very much hope we can work together on this project.

Yours sincerely,

Ross White
23rd November 2010

Appendix viii

CONSENT FORM

Full title of Project:

Transitional Experiences from Home Education to Further Education

Ross White, MA in Education Student Oxford Brookes University

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 reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

Please initial box

Please tick box

Yes

No

Note for researchers:

Include the following statements if appropriate, or delete from your consent form:

4. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded
5. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded
6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher : Ross White

Date

Signature

Appendix ix

CONSENT FORM

Full title of Project:

Transitional Experiences from Home Education to Further Education

Ross White, MA in Education Student Oxford Brookes University

- 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 reason.
- 3 I agree to take part in the above study.

Please initial box

Please tick box

Yes

No

Note for researchers:

Include the following statements if appropriate, or delete from your consent form:

4. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded
5. I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded
6. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

Name of Participant :

Date

Signature

Parent / Guardian

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher : Ross White

Date

Signature

Appendix x

Are you a College student who was Home Educated?

Might you be willing to discuss your college experiences?

We are a Home Educating family, I am a college lecturer, and a student too.

I am currently studying towards a Masters Degree in Education. For my dissertation, I am investigating the differences between the expectations and the reality of Further Education College of previously home educated students.

If you are willing to discuss your experiences or want to find out more about this project I would be delighted to hear from you.

Ross White
Contact details

The discussion will take less than an hour, and all your comments will be made anonymous and can be retracted.

Please do help if you can, it would be fantastic to hear your honest opinions and views of college.

Thanks so much
Ross



Appendix xi

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title

Transitional Experiences from Home Education to Further Education

I am inviting you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

What will happen to me if I take part ?

The study will use semi-structured interviews in order to record your expectations and experiences of Further Education. A mutually convenient time and location will be chosen to undertake the interview.

The interview will last approximately 45 minutes and be recorded digitally onto a laptop computer. If you wish to bring a friend along too this is fine, although they will be asked not to speak. If at any time during the interview you wish to leave, pause or withdraw consent this is absolutely fine.

A few days after the interview you will receive the digital recording and be asked to verify its accuracy and confirm you are happy to agree the use of quotes in the published dissertation. Any comments quoted will be anonymous.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no perceived or tangible risks in participating with this study, however you will be asked to answer the questions honestly and sometimes, recalling experiences can be emotional. I will travel to you and meet at a convenient time, so other than the interview and data verification time, there will be no cost to yourself.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participating in this research will give you an opportunity to discuss your experiences at college in an open and non judgmental environment. The research will also further develop the understanding of expectations and experiences of Home Educated students.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

The interview will be recorded directly onto my laptop computer, and subsequently a copy will be emailed to you to verify accuracy. Any sections you want removing will be deleted and not analysed. While I prepare the dissertation your data will be given a pseudonym (false name). The data generated during this study will be collected, stored and analysed inline with Oxford Brookes policy on Academic Integrity, *available on request*, and as part of this it must be kept securely for five years after completion of the project.

When the report is published only the pseudonyms will be used, and only information directly relevant to the research question will be published. The data will be analysed looking for common themes and presented thematically, this method ensures identification of individuals is very unlikely.

What should I do if I want to take part?

Once you have received this information pack, I will telephone you a week or so later, to discuss any aspects of the project and answer any questions about the research. At this time I will ask if you wish to participate.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this research, will form my Masters in Education Dissertation. The dissertation will be submitted in October 2011, printed, bound and securely stored in the library at Westminster Institute. These dissertations are kept in the library for reference only. The facility to request scanned electronic versions of dissertations is theoretically possible, however in reality the high cost of requesting these tends to be a disincentive.

Who is organising the research?

I, *Ross White* will be conducting this research as a student at Westminster Institute of Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

If you have **any** queries regarding this research, please contacted my by email at ***** or by text on *****.

If you have any concerns regarding the way this study has been conducted, in the first instance please contact my supervisor *Robert Waugh* by email at rdwaugh@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, I very much hope we can work together on this project.

Yours sincerely,

Ross White
16th December 2010

Appendix xii

Ross White
Home contact details

Dear *****,

Thank you so much for agreeing to help me with my Masters qualification I really appreciate it.

I have enclosed a CD with a copy of our discussion earlier today. The file format is MP3 and I hope you are able to open it ok.

If you are happy for me to use your comments in today's discussion, please return the note below in the provided envelop. If you would like me to delete or retract any of your comments please give me the specific details and I will ensure they do not appear in the final report.

Its really important that I stick to the Universities Ethics guidelines, and thats why all these checks.

Thanks again for all your help, please sign the form and return it to me.

Its possible I might need you to check the transcription once its typed, but otherwise I won't bother your again.

I have also included the initial advert for participants, if any of your Home Educated friends have recently attended college or 6th Form and would be willing to help, it would be wonderful to hear their views too.

I hope you and your family have a wonderful Christmas and wish you all the best completing your course.

Yours sincerely,

Ross

Participants address

Dear Ross White,

I am happy that the recording you have sent me is an authentic record of our conversation on *****.

I am happy for you to use my comments when writing your report.

Please sign and date.
Kind regards, Ross

rosswhite.org