Work-life balance and well-being in a group of women adult learners in
Higher Education

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis explores women’s experiences of undertaking Higher Education (HE) study through a Foundation degree in Early Years, considering how they navigate and experience work-life balance and well-being. The overall aim is to explore the women’s experiences of managing work life balance (WLB) and well-being when HE study is added to the existing commitments of employment and family, forming a trio of spheres of commitment.

Drawing on social constructionism and feminist approaches, the study uses the qualitative methods of interviews, and a focus group, to consider subjective, personal experience and perception. The women involved represent a convenience sample of students on the Early Years Foundation Degree at a University in North West England. The main themes identified from a thematic analysis of findings are: (1) WLB tension created by the trio of spheres of commitment (2) Adaptation (3) Motivation.

As the women engaged in HE study, while continuing with other commitments, they experienced some disequilibrium in WLB which impacted on their well-being. The women underwent a transformative process, with their initial academic inexperience and lack of belonging in HE being replaced by feelings of confidence and a new student identity. The women’s transformation was made possible through personal adaptations, based upon diverse strategies, and fuelled by their motivation. One part of the strategy involved overlapping commitment spheres, as HE study took place in the home space. While this was challenging to manage initially, it contributed to an important cultural shift as HE study became a norm for the household, creating the ‘learning family’.

The findings of the study provide useful contributions to knowledge and practice with increased understanding of the complexity of WLB for HE students, outside of the dualistic framework of work and family. Greater insight was gained into the complex experiences of working class women entering HE, which created a cultural capital within households through academic role modelling and the development of the ‘learning family’. Further knowledge gain was related to the role of motivation and use of creative solutions, in the development of resilience and bolstered well-being.

Greater collaboration and understanding between Universities and employers is required to enhance support for widening participation learners and aid their transition into learning by establishing joint responsibility for learner well-being.
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## 2.3 Subjective or objective well-being measures

Subjective or objective well-being measures were discussed in this section. The measures included self-reported questionnaires, observational studies, and ecological momentary assessments. The subjective approach, where individuals report their own feelings of well-being, was contrasted with the objective approach, where well-being is measured through external indicators such as income and health status. The section also explored the role of cultural and social contexts in determining well-being.  

### 2.3.1 Subjective Measures
- Self-report questionnaires: These instruments ask individuals to rate their well-being on a scale from 1 to 10.  
- Ecological momentary assessment: This method involves measuring well-being in real-time using mobile devices.  

### 2.3.2 Objective Measures
- Income and wealth: These economic indicators are often used as proxies for overall well-being.  
- Health status: Measures such as mortality rates and life expectancy are often used to assess well-being.  

## 2.4 Capabilities, flourishing and well-being:

This section delved into the concept of capabilities, defined as the set of actions and opportunities available to individuals. The discussion highlighted the role of capabilities in determining well-being, with a focus on the idea that well-being is achieved when individuals have the capabilities to lead a flourishing life.  

### 2.4.1 Conceptual Framework
- Basic capabilities: These are the minimum capabilities needed for an individual to lead a minimally decent life.  
- Expanded capabilities: These are the capabilities that allow individuals to lead a more fulfilling and flourishing life.  

### 2.4.2 Empirical Evidence
- Cross-cultural studies: These studies have shown that the range of capabilities that individuals value varies across cultures.  
- Longitudinal studies: These studies have demonstrated that the development of capabilities is critical for achieving well-being over time.  

## 2.5 Gender and well-being

This section examined the impact of gender on well-being, with a focus on the challenges faced by women in achieving both subjective and objective measures of well-being.  

### 2.5.1 Gender and Subjective Well-being
- Gender differences in subjective well-being: Research has shown that women are more likely to report lower levels of subjective well-being than men.  
- Gender differences in emotional well-being: Women are more likely to experience negative emotions such as anxiety and depression.  

### 2.5.2 Gender and Objective Well-being
- Gender differences in economic well-being: Women are more likely to experience economic hardship and are less likely to have secure employment.  
- Gender differences in physical well-being: Women are more likely to experience poor health outcomes, such as higher rates of chronic illness.  

## 2.6 Leisure and well-being: Erosion and change

This section explored the role of leisure in determining well-being, with a focus on the ways in which leisure practices have changed over time.  

### 2.6.1 Leisure and Subjective Well-being
- Leisure as a source of well-being: Leisure activities are often viewed as a means of achieving subjective well-being.  
- Leisure and life satisfaction: Research has shown that leisure activities can contribute to increased life satisfaction.  

### 2.6.2 Leisure and Objective Well-being
- Leisure and health outcomes: Leisure activities have been associated with improved physical health outcomes.  
- Leisure and economic well-being: Leisure activities can also contribute to economic well-being through increased discretionary income.  

## 2.7 The intersection between WLB and well-being

This section examined the relationship between work-life balance and well-being, with a focus on the ways in which WLB can positively impact well-being.  

### 2.7.1 Work-life Balance and Subjective Well-being
- Work-life balance and life satisfaction: Research has shown that work-life balance is positively associated with life satisfaction.  
- Work-life balance and mental well-being: Work-life balance has been linked to improved mental well-being, particularly in reducing stress levels.  

### 2.7.2 Work-life Balance and Objective Well-being
- Work-life balance and income: Work-life balance can contribute to increased income security.  
- Work-life balance and health outcomes: Work-life balance has been associated with improved physical and mental health outcomes.  

## 2.8 Summary:

In summary, this chapter has explored the various dimensions of well-being, including subjective and objective measures, capabilities, flourishing, gender, leisure, and work-life balance. The chapter has highlighted the importance of understanding well-being in a multidimensional manner, with a focus on the ways in which different factors can impact well-being in both subjective and objective terms. The chapter has also underscored the need for further research to better understand the complex relationships between well-being and various determinants.
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Overview of the Thesis

The aim of the study was to explore women’s everyday experiences of work-life balance and well-being whilst combining employment, higher education and care of family in North West England.

This aim was underpinned by the following Research Objectives (RO).

RO1: To examine how women experience work-life balance whilst working, studying for a degree and caring for family.

RO2: To explore women’s perceptions of well-being whilst combining employment, higher education and caring.

RO3: To establish how women manage conflict with regards to work-life balance and well-being within a higher education context.

RO4: To develop a new understanding of how women manage to negotiate working, higher educational study and caring responsibilities.

This thesis is a qualitative exploration of the experiences of a group of women learners who all came into learning through a Foundation degree in Early Years (EYs). I have drawn on social constructionist approaches, to consider the work-life balance and well-being experiences of the women. Social Construction is viewed by Gergen and Gergen (2003: 15) as:

‘...the process by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world...’

This study, and indeed my professional practice, is informed by feminist approaches (Letherby, 2003). Feminist approaches are based upon redressing the power imbalance which often occurs within the research situation and places value on the private and ‘everyday’ (Ribbens and Edwards; 1997:2).

I now provide an overview of each Chapter.
Chapter One: Introduction. This is the introduction to the thesis and begins by providing a brief account of WLB and well-being. I will explore my personal and professional experiences and their influence upon my study. The latter part of this chapter identifies the theory and terminology of WLB, including some of the key aspects for discussion. I also consider well-being in terms of contextualisation and definition. I then bring together WLB and well-being to explore the links between them, including some context relating to adult learners and women. Finally, in this chapter I outline why this study might be considered significant.

Chapter Two: Setting the scene, literature review and policy context. In this chapter I draw upon existing WLB theory to consider the complexity within the definitions and to reflect upon the discourse surrounding WLB. I critically explore the policy context related to WLB during the period of my study. I then provide a critical account of WLB research, including consideration of employment, homeworking, women and familial circumstances. I will then explore well-being, reviewing the definitions to consider the diverse approaches and once more conducting a review of policy development. Following this, I consider objective and subjective approaches to well-being, and outline capabilities. As the participant group are women, I will consider well-being in relation to gender. Leisure will also be explored as it is significant in terms of learning. Finally, in this chapter I will identify the inter-connection between the areas of WLB and well-being.

Chapter Three ‘Research Paradigm and Approach’: In this chapter I will explore the methodological approaches, beginning by considering social constructionism. I will outline social constructionism in terms of the approach’s ontological view: that knowledge is created. As I have taken a realist perspective, I provide an outline of this, demonstrating the
rationale for this choice. Additionally, I will explore the value of micro and macro aspects, showing the relationship between WLB and well-being, and exploring other studies which have used this approach. I will tentatively explore how feminist approaches influence my study and research methods, to consider the significance of power and knowledge and how feminist approaches aim to create greater balance. I will consider the significance of public and private space, and identity, within feminist approaches, deliberating the significance of the women’s voices. I will explore qualitative methodology and provide an outline of the merits of using semi-structured interview and focus group approaches. Ethics will also be outlined, in relation to the significance of guidance and consent, which will be adhered to throughout my study. Additionally, in this chapter I will explore the research setting, selection and recruitment of the women in my study. Finally I will provide a brief exploration of my place within the research and its potential limitations.

Chapter Four: Research design: Practicalities, participation and review of findings. In this Chapter I begin by giving a short account of the women in my study. I will then explore the practical aspects of conducting this study, including the timing and structure of the semi-structured interviews and the focus group (FG). I will consider ways in which the interview findings will influence the questions within the FG, which will be related to authenticating findings and developing new ones. Consideration will be given to flexibility, in terms of appreciating the women's comments. In this Chapter I will also provide details of the Thematic Analysis (TA), which is my chosen framework to analyse the findings and identify significant themes. Finally, in this chapter I will provide an outline of how the TA of findings led to the formation of three themes, broad categories and the associated sub-categories.
Chapter Five: *Findings and the three themes of the trio of spheres of commitment, adaptation and personal strategy and motivation.* In this Chapter I will present the findings from my study. While emphasis will be placed upon my own findings connection between existing literatures will be included. I locate three significant themes within the findings; firstly, the trio of spheres of commitment, as HE study is added to the women’s lives, with sub-themes of: overlap, time pressure, reduced leisure and free-time, emotional responses and personal effects of the demands. The second is adaptation, which relates to the personal strategies the women use to manage the new situation, with sub-themes reflecting how participants adapt and utilise personal / household resources. The third theme motivation reflects the women’s continued commitment, with the sub-themes including motivation from working in Early Years (EYs), learning being a valued second chance, support and role models.

Chapter Six: *Discussing the trio of spheres of commitment, adaptation and motivation to succeed.* In this Chapter I will begin by considering the link between the three significant themes of the trio of spheres of commitment, with adaptation and motivation. I will relate this to WLB and well-being by considering the experience of role expansion and time based strain, so exploring the situation, personal perception and gender. I will discuss the significance of boundaries between spheres, exploring the possibilities of blurring or separating boundaries as a way of managing commitments. The distinct nature of the trio of spheres of commitment reflects additional complexity, which is not widely researched hence I compare the duality focus within WLB, to contrast with the more complex situation. I then move to discuss well-being, through a comparative approach. This features a review of objective reduction reflecting a compromise to well-being, shown through increases in
tiredness, stress and ill-health. I will contrast this with subjective measures, including raised self-esteem, linking with expansion theory and capabilities approach. In this Chapter I will consider leisure, exploring the depletion as free-time as it moves into HE study, contrasting with it becoming more productive and akin to serious leisure. Adaptation, personal strategy and motivation will be explored, considering division into the related areas of control and WLB, separation and integration, support, gender, role models and student identity. The next area I will deliberate is resilience, discussing its contested nature and importance for individuals and groups. The learning family will then be explored, considering the association with the development of cultural capital within some households. Finally, I will review WLB experiences of women, the implications for HE and how further understanding of the experiences of women starting HE study might be gained, in relation to identity, anxiety and achievement.

Chapter Seven: A study of resilience, the role of motivation and adaptation in managing the trio of spheres of commitment. In the final Chapter of my thesis, I will review the study, to demonstrate how the three main themes link with each other, with the first theme leading to the second and third. I will review my study, by outlining how I address the research aim and objectives, and consider research limitations. In this chapter, I will include a reflective section about the choice of study, research processes and my experiences. I will consider possibilities for future research and implications for policy and procedure.

The focus of this thesis is consideration of the first hand experiences of a group of women returning to education and participating in HE for the first time. The research approach is about hearing and valuing their experiences and so their story. The setting is a University in
a town in North West England, but the research in looking at WLB and well-being encompasses much more than University life.
Chapter One Introduction

1.1 Introduction

My doctoral study is an exploration of Work-Life Balance (WLB) and the well-being experiences of a group of women in North West England, employed in the Early Years sector (EYs) and studying full-time in Higher Education (HE). The women began their HE study with a Foundation degree and so would be considered widening participation students (Longhurst, 2011). Harvey, (2009) and Higgins et al. (2010) identify Foundation degrees as significant in widening access to Higher Education (HE) and placing value upon workplace activity, encouraging non-traditional learners to becoming involved in HE.

In this chapter, I will outline the background and rational for this study in terms of my personal and professional interest. I will define and contextualise WLB and explore how varied commitments influence equilibrium or disequilibrium. The significance of WLB experiences amongst women participating in Higher Education (HE) study, coming from a social group less traditionally likely to be involved, will be considered. Well-being will be explored, with a consideration of definitions, including subjective and objective viewpoints, and intersections and inter-relatedness between WLB and well-being, focusing upon the women’s experiences. The aim and objectives of my study will then be outlined so setting the research scene. The next section will begin to define and review WLB and well-being.

1.2 Work-life balance and well-being

The concept of Work-Life Balance (WLB) has been debated within the Global North since the term was first used in 1965 (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1965; 1975). Academic and policy interest in WLB was initially generated through the growing presence of women within the labour market (Christensen and Alfred, 2013; Greer, 2013), absent from a correlated
Redistribution of domestic responsibility (Hochschild, 1989; 2000; Kossek et al., 1998; Oakley, 1976; Wattis, et al., 2012). From the 1990s, WLB became increasingly popular in everyday language in the United Kingdom (UK), including increased interest amongst policy makers (see Table 1 in Chapter Two, page 37). Employers’ responses to these developing WLB policies created opportunities for employees, including flexible working, reduced hours and job share (Dex, 2003; Gables et al., 2006; Lewis and Cooper, 2005). WLB is associated with how aspects of individuals’ lives interact in terms of cross-over and required time and energy, an imbalance of which frequently creates disharmony (Taylor, 2002a). Individual and household situations influence WLB, as they represent certain demands, and can dictate the ability to cope, dependent upon family contributions. This is further influenced by social and individual factors and circumstances (Wattis, et al., 2012). WLB can be defined in terms of the dual aspects of work (employment) and life (family) (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). However, this is overly simplistic failing to take into account other areas present for example, leisure and study (Sargent, 1991). Emery et al. (2017) argue that the dualistic nature of the WBL definitions fail to account for the significance of other everyday commitments. Learning and education are often framed as being undertaken instead of employment, yet, Lowe and Gayle (2007) and Yorke and Longden (2010), in studies of work-based learning, identify it as additional to employment rather than a replacement. WLB experiences for women are often more negative than for men, as their entry into the workforce has not coincided with a proportionate change in family / domestic responsibility (Christensen and Alfred, 2013; Crompton, 2006; Dex, 2003; Greer and Peterson, 2013; Hochschild, 1989; 2000; Oakley, 1976). From a UK perspective, corresponding with much of the Global North, WLB policy and practice is linked with economic benefits and offers a business case for employing organisations (Stanworth, 1999; Taylor, 2002b). Hence,
improved WLB is associated with a happier work force, with benefits derived from reduced absenteeism and increased retention and productivity (Crompton et al., 2008; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Taylor, 2002a). When WLB is achieved, it has a positive impact upon well-being. However, when disequilibrium is present well-being will be most likely compromised.

Well-being is complex and subject to different definitions related to societal contexts. It can be defined in terms of ‘….a state of physical, mental and social well-being’ (WHO, 1948:1), which considers wider human needs beyond the physical. However, from a global perspective, the developing world struggles with the subjective element of well-being, due to being focused upon meeting physical needs to survive, creating a narrower remit (Deneuline and McGregor, 2010). From a perspective of the Global North, while economics and standards of living remain important, the definition of well-being has become increasingly subjective (Deeming, 2013; Stratton, 2010). In the United Kingdom, policy makers’ interest in the concept of well-being has grown since 2000, with further emphasis being placed on it in 2010 (Taylor, 2011). Well-being is closely linked with mental health, with stress and anxiety identified as undermining well-being opportunities. Women encounter higher risks than men in terms of anxiety, associated with increased domestic responsibility that creates a potential to compromise to well-being (Deeming, 2013). The situation is further complicated as well-being is associated with personal capabilities (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). This relates to available life opportunities and choices made, in relation to ways individuals spend their time and set priorities, including becoming involved in learning activity (Sen, 2001). Such factors add to the complexity around well-being, bound to personal characteristics and social arrangements (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). I now consider my interest in these areas and why I selected them for my study.
1.3 Personal and professional interest in WLB and well-being

My interest in WLB and well-being is based on my personal experiences as I am a woman who has always combined my many roles and demands, including education and employment, with varying levels of success. Indeed, undertaking this doctoral study has further stretched my personal understanding of WLB. As a former student from a working class family, I always combined employment and learning, with either part-time jobs and full-time education or part-time education with a full-time job. The youngest child in a family of seven, I was continually subjected to caring demands, including childcare support for siblings and contribution to the support of an older disabled brother, from a young age. Attending university, I felt out of place, with no peer or familial experience to draw from as I moved away from both my social group and family experience. While I received incredible family encouragement, they did not always understand what I was doing and why. I have been involved in education much of my life and have first-hand understanding of the intrusive nature of learning. I frequently studied into the evening and night, as I had employment commitments to earn money that were incredibly time consuming. I became interested in the impacts of time scarcity, identity tension, and the need to manage and balance multiple roles, frequently resulting in imbalance, through the invasive potential of learning.

In addition, my study was influenced by my professional life and areas of academic interest. I have been a Lecturer since 1995, working mainly with women returning to study in Further Education colleges within former industrial UK cities /towns, affected by high social deprivation/ unemployment. I have worked at the University of Bolton since 2004, during which time I have mainly taught adult learners on work-based learning programmes in
Health and Social Care. Students within the School of Health and Human Sciences are mainly female, a trend consistent across the UK, being 80% of all students from 2013 to 2014 (HESA, 2017). The discipline of Sociology frames my academic approach and I have developed a particular interest in women and work, as well as the impact of marginalisation and social exclusion upon groups in society.

Within my daily academic practice, I continue to support learners experiencing challenges within their everyday lives, motivating my aspiration to further understand how students manage these issues. From the standpoint of an involved outsider, I continue to observe female students frequently struggling with WLB. I advise them with their assessments, deadlines and managing time whilst hearing accounts of their struggles with employment and family alongside the addition of HE study. Ramazanoglu (2012) argues that research interests often stem from experiences that women have, based upon undergoing or observing inequality, reflecting my experience. Students on Foundation degrees, like other work-based learners, are involved in two separate spheres of employment and HE study. Whilst the two complement each another - with study relating to the workplace and its relevant knowledge and skills - they represent two distinct sets of demands, each requiring time and energy. As a young undergraduate I thought I had many demands but having children changed my understanding. However, for most of my teaching career, I have been a mother of two and have struggled to meet the differing requirements of my roles, which created a good degree of empathy with the women I taught. This study is the result of my considerations of how students managed their multiple commitments whilst meeting deadlines, and the impact of this on their wellbeing, I will now consider in more depth work-life balance.
1.4 Work-life balance

Work-life balance (WLB) is a well-used term within the context of the Global North, as Gambles et al. (2006: 34) argue:

‘Work-life balance’ has emerged as a widely used and popular way of talking about challenges in combining paid work with other parts of life’

These ‘part of life’ encompass the various demands which ensure the survival of individuals and households. In the Global North, lifestyles indicate WLB and those perceived to achieve balance are considered successful (Greer and Peterson, 2013; Ward, et al., 2010). WLB involves the intersection and inter-relatedness of essential requirements for daily living (both employment and domestic) and the ability of individuals / households to manage these requirements (Ammons, 2004; Jarvis, 1999; Kossek, 2016). For my study, work based learning concerns a WLB experience that includes the further dimension of HE study (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; McCoy and Smyth, 2007; Reichwein and Gow, 2013; Van Der Meer and Wieblers, 2001; Yorke and Longden, 2010). Emery et al., (2017) identify restrictions in WLB discourse that considers life from the viewpoint of duality, which is insufficient when another significant sphere of commitment is present within people’s lives.

The terminology around WLB has a number of restrictions. For example, Boyd et al. (2016) in researching Work-Family Conflict from the perspective of those with second jobs (an additional part-time role of fire-fighter alongside other varied fulltime worker roles), found greater WLB complexity. They identify narrow understanding within current WLB research as it is based upon only two areas of demand. The simplification of WLB as a concept is inconsistent with the reality of the situation, as there is much complexity not covered within the duality of the terminology and subsequent images. This creates a gap between theory
and the reality of everyday situations. For example, there is a debate surrounding the false sense of harmony provided by the word ‘balance’ (Gambles et al., 2006; Taylor, 2002a), seen to indicate positive outcomes associated with the value of being ‘well-balanced’. WLB has become aspirational, reflecting success, yet difficult to achieve in the complexity of people’s daily lives (Greer and Peterson, 2013; Toffoletti and Starr, 2016). Despite the commonality of WLB in contemporary society, and presence within employment policy in the UK, it remains elusive (Bloom, 2016). Therefore, research and theory considering WLB often finds ‘imbalance’ rather than ‘balance’. This reflects my interest, associated with observing demands placed on individuals involved in HE study and their coping abilities (Jarvis, 1999).

The dimensions of WLB associated with social situations interested me in terms of the range of personal, kin and societal resources that individuals have or can access. Whilst there have been many changes within society, including men becoming more involved in the home than previously (Dex, 2003; Taylor, 2002a), there remains imbalance which lead women to feel greater domestic pressure (Oakley, 1984, 1976, 2002; Risman, 2017; Sullivan, 2000; Williams, 2000). I am interested in the experiences of those with a lower income and fewer alternatives than their more affluent counterparts, reflecting the situation of most of the students with whom I work (Bonney, 2005; Dean and Coulter, 2006; Grant, et al., 2005; Lister, 2006; Skeggs, 1997; Ward et al., 2010). I would like to further understand how WLB can be compromised through life situations, such as being a lone parent, or caring for children who are younger or have additional needs. Again, this is related to my reflections in terms of both personal and professional experience (Mandic, 2016; Warren et al., 2009).
In researching WLB, I am interested in temporal experiences and time-use, particularly those of managing time limitations (Wajcman, 2008; Wajcman et al., 2008). In the UK, there is a culture of working long hours within the workplace associated with neo-liberalism and the need to provide for the family (Lavee, 2016). Women have experienced an increased workplace presence and a requirement to provide for the family financially without a corresponding reduction in domestic demands. A time shortage is derived from this situation, limiting their ability to achieve all that they need to or indeed want to. As a result women often experience more WLB pressure than men (Wajcman, 2008). Solutions to WLB can be achieved though overlapping different areas of demand, in relation to space and time use, for example undertaking paid work at home. However, while this can help to achieve balance, it can also create an intrusion, where paid work dominates and takes up non-work time (Amstad et al., 2011; Kossek, 2016; Van de Lippe et al., 2006; Warren et al., 2009). For adult learners, additional demands can be further increased with the pressure to study in the home space and the student role often competes with those already established (Lowe and Gayle, 2007).

I wish to understand the implication of the various demands converging on women, particularly students who are combining care, work and learning. Educational providers often expect students to manage their time and workload, without always realising the complexity of learners’ lives (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Reay et al., 2005; Reay, 2006). For women with family responsibilities, the priority of HE study competes with other commitments, such as their children, loved ones and dependents, subsequently causing a dilemma to emerge (McGivney, 2004). In this study, I will explore the ways in which women
learners manage different demands and consider the implications for their well-being, which I will look into in the following section.

1.5 Well-being

In this section, I consider the issue of well-being, provide further definitions and contextualisation, and begin to contemplate the significance of the social construction of the issue. Well-being is a contentious concept and term, existing within a societal context, dependent upon the level of wealth and inequality within society (Dean and Coulter, 2006; Ward, et al., 2010). Whilst the Global North might use subjective definitions based upon quality of life, those in the developing world often define well-being from a viewpoint of survival (Deneuline and McGregor, 2010). This study will focus on the Global North and more specifically the United Kingdom, which reflects the research setting, although within this context observable distinctions based upon social background are evident (Deeming, 2013; Haworth and Lewis, 2005; Taylor, 2011). My study is about women and will consider the impact of deeply engrained social expectations, associated with gender traditions. The disparity between male and female experience is noteworthy, as despite policies challenging inequality (such as the Equal pay Act, 1970 and Equality Act, 2010), there remain deeply embedded, structural inequalities influencing accepted societal norms (Dex, 2003; 2005; Houston and Waumsley, 2003; Moen, 2011).

Deeming (2013), in a rigorous analysis of data collected by the ‘National Well-being programme’, commissioned by the UK Office of National Statistics (2010), identified a clear disparity in well-being experiences based upon socio-economic factors. For instance, gender differences were identified, with women most likely to define their own well-being in positives terms, compared with men, while facing more stress from multiple demands
(Taylor, 2011). From a social class perspective, those with lower paid work have limited options, with the middle classes most likely to enjoy more options for consumption and leisure, therefore experiencing better well-being. However, perceptions relating to daily life influence experiences, with those from higher social classes generally being more aspirational and striving to make further progress, perpetuating their commitment to further upward mobility (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). Parallels can be drawn with the findings of Toffoletti and Starr (2016), who argue that professional women experience pressure to continually progress in their careers, impacting negatively upon well-being. This includes being given autonomy to manage their workload, but also the pressure to fulfil deadlines without the authority to determine the extent of the demands upon them. Therefore, while social position influences well-being experiences, personal perceptions create a more complex situation (Deneuline and McGregor, 2010; Moen, 2011). From working with adult learners, I have observed that they experience an array of difficulties, but the patterns of effect are not always straightforward, with evidence of disparity between demands and well-being. There are varying levels of personal strength, and positive well-being is based upon personality and experiences, subsequently I will consider well-being from a subjective standpoint.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB) concerns a global self-assessment of people’s lives through the consideration of health, job and activity (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). One example is general happiness, which forms a subjective measure of the levels of happiness individuals experience in terms of different aspects of their life (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016; Waldron, 2010). Experience measures ask respondents to explore positive and negative feelings at a particular time, featuring an overall perception through self-reporting (Dolan and Metcalf,
Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) is another measure of well-being, in which individuals are asked to provide a descriptive account of a typical day, including considering how they feel (Kahneman et al., 2004). Such measures of well-being are linked with personal perceptions and experiences, influenced by actual events, but also personality and outlook. In terms of my study, I seek to understand accounts of the day-to-day experiences and personal viewpoints of the women, including positive and negative emotions. Consequently, subjective well-being encompasses a more flexible way of considering the WLB experiences of individuals who have varied, valued activities within daily life.

Women are more likely than men to compromise their health and well-being for the good of those around them (Wajcman, 2008; Warren et al., 2009; Williams, 2000). Lowe and Gayle, (2007) argue that women involved in learning alongside employment and family responsibilities experience difficulty managing all aspects of their lives, subsequently giving personal time to learning. Reduced leisure opportunities can have negative implications for well-being, although learning can be a positive experience. Orton (2011) drew upon the notion of capabilities within individuals increasing well-being. This incorporates not only employment, but personal activities and attributes, such as reading, writing, or being part of the community. The capabilities approach explores well-being through personal characteristics and social arrangements, indicating that WLB concerns not only demands, but the formulation of strategies to cope with them, derived from personal / household resources (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). In this section I have introduced ideas surrounding well-being, and now I explore links between WLB and well-being, attempting to demonstrate the alignment between the two areas.
1.6 Synergies between WLB and well-being

There are clear links between WLB and well-being, with the most recognisable being that if there is reduced WLB due to excessive demands, there can be a lack of well-being opportunities (Deneuline and McGregor, 2010). This inter-connection between the two areas includes excessive demands and their creation of disequilibrium in WLB, resulting in negative implications upon mental and emotional well-being. Further, boundary blurring between commitments and indistinct time and space for different demands can lead to a compromise to well-being through an individual’s inability to focus upon demands (Ammons and Markham, 2004; Huffman et al., 2013; Hyland and Prottas, 2016; Hyman et al., 2005). This is a familiar situation for adult learners who mainly study in the home space to accommodate other demands that are taking place at the same time (Lowe and Gayle, 2007). Time deficit has implications for well-being, as roles and demands require time often in short supply, which is a key area of focus for WLB discussion (Wajcman, 2008). In my practice as a lecturer, I have observed time scarcity creating pressure for learners, leading to a state of WLB disequilibrium and pressures upon well-being. As Warren (2010) argues the complexity of many demands, undertaken through a short supply of time, has negative implications for well-being. The negative effects caused by time depletion includes social isolation, as although adult learners have new opportunities to meet people with student groups becoming peers, they have reduced time for socialising outside of the HE sphere. Bittman (2008) argues that time with others is depleted in the UK, through working full-time, seven days per week including Sundays. This loss of a day, so distinctly free from employment, dramatically changes the time a family can spend together. A further detrimental effect on poor WLB can be sleep deficit. This leads Hochschild (1998: 9) to
identify sleep focus in households as working long hours and undertaking domestic tasks erode rest, and individuals experience sleep deprivation:

‘These women talked about sleep the way a hungry person talked about food’.

This quote demonstrates the ways in which time demands can create disequilibrium in both WLB and well-being, experienced through physical and emotional effects of being overloaded.

Well-being is also linked with personal expectations, with perceptions and experiences influencing outlook and approach, significant in terms of Subjective Well-being (SWB) (Dolan and Metcalf, 2012; Sen, 2001). Drawing on my experiences of working with adult learners, I find those with high levels of commitments and demands upon them do not necessarily express the worst experience. This relates to the importance of personal view around WLB and other factors which influence well-being experiences. Women can face pressures associated with their traditional role, linking them with the family and domesticity, but within the Global North, women are very much present within the workforce (Christensen and Alfred, 2013; Dex, 2003; Greer and Peterson, 2013). The assumption forming the basis of this societal expectation means that from the perspective of WLB women might want to show the family they have: “all the time in the world” (Williams 2000; 30: Citing Fallows, 1985). Women often sacrifice their own well-being, whilst resisting compromises to the well-being of the family and especially their children. Women’s WLB and well-being are affected by societal position and social expectations leading to possible further well-being compromises (Warren 2010).
1.7 Why is this study significant?

Gatrell et al. (2013) find significant gaps in knowledge of working class women’s WLB experiences, as research has most often focused upon middle class professionals. This fails to take into account the influence of social position and in turn leads to assumptions about common experiences. Skeggs (1997) argues that discussions about women’s experiences often focus upon gender inequality, whilst failing to take into account experiences of working class women who are influenced by other socio-economic factors. However, in terms of daily living their WLB experience can be very distinct, being influenced by limited options. For example, some WLB problems could be resolved through purchasing services, for instance child care and cleaning, yet those with lower income often don’t have this option (Warren, 2010). As I am myself from a working class background, I felt that this was an issue that I wanted to explore. Considering WLB within this context provides additional difficulty, which has not previously been widely explored. Emery et al. (2017) argue there is restricted understanding of the complexity of WLB when a third significant demand is present, with research tending to be dualistic in focus, looking at employment and the family only.

When I began this study in 2007, Foundation degrees were relatively new, which meant there was limited research about them. The initial literature review showed a clear gap in terms of examining adult learners and WLB especially in terms of well-being. There have been some significant research developments that I will consider in my study, notably by Lowe and Gayle (2007) and Yorke and Longden (2010). However, my study is more concerned with the personal perspectives and is focused upon women. An identified knowledge gap is associated with their well-being, according to Ooms, (2011:413):
'There is little in the literature about the impact of these multiple demands on FD students and how they need to be managed'

Finally, in undertaking research based upon qualitative, in-depth interviews, a unique story can be found, associated with the personal experiences and the social construction of such. They are women, living and working in the North West of England, employed in work which is generally lower paid, yet fulfilling, so leading them into work-based HE study.

1.8 Summary

In this chapter, I have contextualised the main areas of this study. I have considered my background and how I arrive at this point, outlining my professional and personal experiences and interests. I have explored some of the concepts and ideas around WLB and well-being which I will develop through this study. I have considered ways in which the issues of interest relate to the participant group, and the intersection between WLB and well-being, through the use of a number of examples. In the next chapter, I will further explore the theory and intersection between WLB and well-being, forming a critical review of literature and overviewing policy during the research period.
Chapter Two WLB and well-being: Literature review and policy context

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter One, I provided an overview and rationale for this study in terms of my personal and professional interest of WLB and well-being. In this chapter, I continue to discuss WLB and well-being to demonstrate the complexity and social context of the two concepts through a discussion of relevant policies and literature. I commence with a brief global overview situating the concepts, turning to the Global North, then the United Kingdom, with a particular focus on North West England. I will review existing academic literature on WLB and wellbeing with a focus on women’s experiences, social class and Higher Education (HE). I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the intersections between WLB and well-being.

2.2.1 Defining WLB

Within Western society, a common understanding of ‘work-life balance’ is evident (Jones, 2003). WLB is a desirable, contemporary and populist concept, being associated with having time to pursue life (Eikhof et al., 2007). There is a myriad of guidance provided within organisations, social media and in other media on how to achieve balance, including tips on lifestyle choices and state of mind. Greer and Patterson (2013: 122), through a content analysis of WLB articles in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, identified a drive to have ‘perfect living arrangements’ for the family, with a range of WLB strategies recounted. Achieving WLB is a desirable state within the Global North realised by the successful management of all of an individual’s roles and time (Gambles et al., 2006). Balance suggests control and autonomy, whereby employees own their time and have choices (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016). Control, personal autonomy and choice within a system are central to WLB, with adequate time for competing commitments decreasing negatives associated with conflicting priorities (Kossek, 2016; Visser and Williams, 2006). The discourse on WLB can be
framed around frustration and limited options, making the term ‘balance’ frequently inappropriate. This led Lewis et al. (2005: 8) to dispute the suitability of the term:

’...work-life balance suggests the possibility of a quick fix- just tip the scales a bit’.

Taylor (2002) argues that the term balance is stylistic rather than practical, frequently failing to reflect the complexity of the situation. Balance suggests a satisfactory outcome in terms of being well-balanced and is associated with positive well-being (Cassidy, 2005). Indeed, balance proves less useful when exploring the complexity of life, with most WLB research considering imbalance (Hochschild, 2000; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Taylor, 2000; Wattis et al., 2012). Therefore, whilst WLB is a popular and accepted way of considering life experiences, there remains dissatisfaction with the terminology, reflecting the complexity within the concept, which I will now explore.

There are different features of WLB, and I will now consider integration / segregation of commitments areas, family conflict and reconciliation, and shifts. Lewis and Cooper (2005) argue that integration or separation prove problematic when conducting a case study considering the operationalisation of WLB policy within employing organisations. They identify difficulties in separating ‘work’ from ‘life’, due to the significance of employment within people’s lives. People can spend lots of time at work and it is frequently influential in determining our own identity and sense of self (Lewis and Cooper, 2005: Visser and Williams, 2006). Taylor (2002), via a survey approach, examined satisfaction with employment, subsequently observing a false dichotomy of separation with interconnection between roles and identity of professional / worker and personal / domestic. Further, WLB theory frequently identifies conflicts based upon overlaps which further challenges the
separation of spheres (Boyd, et al., 2016; Gambles et al., 2006; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Troup and Rose, 2012; Wattis et al., 2012).

The dissatisfaction with the terminology creates a discussion about a search for an alternative term. For example, Lewis and Cooper, (2005:8) highlight a preference for ‘integration or harmonisation’, reflecting the difficulties of separation. Kossek (2016), in reviewing WLB research, found that social changes reflected increases in the integration of different spheres with the use of technology and integration of employment and personal roles. Gambles et al. (2006: 34), through a cultural comparison, based upon qualitative methods, found complexity in WLB in relation to the interaction between parts of life, leading them to conclude that terminology was over simplified. Social change shows increased integration, with interplay between spheres that overlap (Greer and Paterson, 2013; Kossek, 2016; Ward et al., 2010). This makes separation within WLB contentious as peoples’ lives reflect greater complexities, with merging of sections often evident.

The overlap that exists between different aspects of WLB reflects diversity, depicting individual circumstances and work roles. Hyman et al. (2005) in researching the varying experiences of WLB amongst two distinct employee groups, for example call centres workers and software engineers, found tangible and intangible overlap. Tangible overlap included changes to shift patterns or being asked to undertake overtime at short notice. Whereas intangible overlap was associated with worrying about work at home, equally intrusive to tangible overlap but significantly more difficult to measure. Ruppanner and Hufferman (2014) consider data from 31 countries and found overlap due to ‘porous’ boundaries between work and non-work, creating tension. Jarvis and Pratt (2006) argue employment infringes upon social space and, for San Francisco’s media industry employees,
being part of the city centre hub influences success, leading to leisure and employment overlap. Greer and Paterson (2013) assert that all aspects of work and life have merged to exist in parallel, reflecting integration and a potential cultural shift amongst professionals. However, while professionals gain intrinsic values from employment, lower paid / non-professional workers are more likely to view employment as a means to an end, consequently wanting separation in their life (Dean and Coulter, 2006). Gambles et al. (2006) utilised ‘integration’ to describe WLB, as a way of showing the ways in which areas of life influenced each other, but later identified this as an oversimplification, which failed to account for the blurring of boundaries. In relation to women involved in learning, integration or segregation proves significant, as employment, education and the needs of the family often create WLB conflict (Lowe and Gayle, 2007).

The family is significant within WLB, representing an important commitment area, which parents, and more particularly mothers, will dedicate personal and household resources to. Gables et al. (2006:3) refer to WLB in terms of ‘work-family reconciliation’ and ‘work-family conflict’. Huffman et al. (2012) argue role conflict becomes evident when there are numerous demands upon individuals, which can be either compatible with each other or intrusive, so potentially creating time based strain. Boyd et al. (2016) in researching those with second jobs, through a Conservation of Resources approach, found evidence of multiple-life roles creating family tension due to time and energy depletion. Within a Conservation of Resources approach, conflict is directional, being either Work Interference with Family (WIF) or Family Interference with Work (FIW). Amsted (2011), in a meta-analysis of 98 quantitative research articles, identifies both directions of strain: The strain included negative workforce experiences which included absenteeism, the intention to quit and
burnout. Also, personal experiences which included marital dissatisfaction and negative mental well-being affecting the family. When WLB tensions focus upon the experiences of the family, there can be an assumption that the issue is only for families with dependent children, which both marginalises and creates potential exclusion of others without children or indeed with older relatives (Gables et al., 2006; Kossek, 1998). In my study I am, interested in WLB issues amongst women undertaking HE study, alongside employment, only some of which have dependent children, so reflecting a range of family circumstances.

I will now explore WLB theory through consideration of ‘shifts’, a concept brought to the attention through the research of Hochschild (1983, 1989) in her book ‘The Manager Heart’. Here, she observed various sections of the labour market to find women who undertook three shifts of work. Shift one is work and employment, shift two is about domestic and family needs, and shift three is the emotional work or labour that is required when giving consideration to others, within these shifts and outside of work and domestic and caring demands. This shift approach reflects the pressures and demands created through tasks, equitable in terms of burden with distinct features of employment and labour. A further definition of the third shift is associated with working ‘out-of-hours’ or night shifts, generally eight hours starting between 10pm and midnight, as opposed to the 9 to 5 type work pattern. Late night and night working has been linked with potential negative impact upon wellbeing, through sleep disruption (Institute for Work and Health, 2010). Venn et al. (2008) draw upon shift patterns to explore sleep amongst new parents, finding complex reasons for sleep disruption, including practical and physical alongside psychological and emotional features. Venn et al. (2008) utilise Hochschild’s (1983) shift theory to consider a fourth shift associated with sleeplessness and sleep disruption, due to worry about how children are or
attending to children at night. Additionally, Kramarae (2001), researching patterns of
behaviour amongst women undertaking distance learning courses, found characteristics
similar to night shift workers, studying late at night to encounter fewer distraction.
Therefore, there is a complexity within the WLB discourse that reflects varied viewpoints
and its importance is widely accepted within UK policy, which I consider next.

2.2.2 WLB Policy
The importance of WLB is accepted by policy makers and has led to a range of policy
developments and implementations that attempt to try and resolve some of the issues
surrounding it. WLB policy aims to meet the expectations of different interest groups,
primarily employers, employees, and policy makers. This means that the opinions and
experiences of different interest groups are evident within the discussion, as Lewis and
Cooper (2005: 11-2) reflect within comments concerning employers:

‘Why is it assumed that people who neglect their families make better workers, that
being a good worker and having other commitments are incompatible, or that skills
learnt in, for example, parenting is of no value in the workplace?

There are some difficulties in enacting policy, as some employers may have negative
perceptions of WLB. The policy context of this doctoral study that began in 2007 will include
the policy developed during the period of the UK New Labour Government (1997-2010) and
the Conservative led coalition (2010-2015). Key WLB policy objectives and evaluation are
summarised in Table 1:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Outcome / evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working Time Directive (1998);</td>
<td>European directive: Created a maximum of 48 hours per week / confirmed the right to three weeks paid annual leave, (raised to four in November 1999) / also minimum weekly rest periods</td>
<td>Prior to this there was a home Office Consultation ‘Supporting Families’ which stressed the need to support families; seen to be good for families but also for business (Lewis, 2007: 367)</td>
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<td>National Child Care Strategy (1998);</td>
<td>Extending childcare provision</td>
<td>As the cost of child care is a barrier to participation, which means women often work part-time: Increases their options</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Offering subsidized child care / focus upon 4/5 year olds</td>
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<td>The Part-Time Work Directive (2000);</td>
<td>Providing support to part-time workers to ensure they have the same rights as full-time workers: The directive covers pay, holiday entitlement, and rights to occupational pension, sick pay, maternity/parental leave also training opportunities</td>
<td>Part-time work has been seen to be flexible but has a long history of providing fewer rights. Remains difficult for some lower paid workers who do not have this option</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Strategy for Carers (1999); (Department of Health ,1999)</td>
<td>A framework and consultation regarding the provisions for carers of older adults</td>
<td>Including consideration of flexible working options for carers/ responding to aging population</td>
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<td>Parental Leave Directive (1999);</td>
<td>Utilises the Employment Relations Act 1999: Provides working parents with the rights to unpaid leave of 13 weeks for each child born after 15 December 1999, can be used whilst the child</td>
<td>Extended options recognise the importance of fathers in child care, but practicalities can mean limited up take</td>
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<td><strong>Time-off for dependants (1999)</strong></td>
<td>Also within the Employment Relations Act 1999; Provides working parents with the right to take a reasonable amount of time off work, due to uncertain, unexpected or sudden emergencies involving dependents / can be formed into long-term arrangements if needed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Work–life Balance: Changing Patterns in a Changing World (DfEE, 2000)</strong></td>
<td>An initiative to extend flexible working arrangements in UK. This includes the Work–Life Balance Challenge Fund, aimed at supporting employers to introduce flexible working arrangements. Based upon three dimensions and promoted as good for everyone: business, the wider community, and families (Lewis and Campbell, 2007)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Act (2001);</strong></td>
<td>Included the extension of maternity leave – from 18 to 26 weeks from April 2003. Increases in maternity pay. Paid adoption leave from 2003 and the right to two weeks paid paternity leave from 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>‘Work-Life Balance Campaign’ (March 2000);</strong></td>
<td>Flexible working include: Job share, home working, part time, compressed hours, flexi time and annualised hours. The approach is based upon employees. Seen to enable choices for parents /including the facilitation of paid work and unpaid work, which was seen to be critical to</td>
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<td><strong>Employment Act 2002</strong>;</td>
<td>‘making a statutory application’ with employers reacting in a ‘reasonable manner’.</td>
<td>overcoming the problem of child poverty</td>
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<td>Extended paternity and leave around adoption, with flexible working for those with disabled children.</td>
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<td><strong>April 2004 parents with school age children had the right to flexible working conditions</strong>;</td>
<td>This coincided with increased focus upon provision of childcare.</td>
<td>More focused upon family welfare, in terms of focusing upon children / enabling choices to reduce poverty / also seeing this as an investment in future citizens (Lewis and Campbell, 2007).</td>
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<td>was extended to carers of adults in 2007;</td>
<td>Encouraging mothers to work through facilitating of a supporting infrastructure.</td>
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<td><strong>The Flexible Working (Eligibility, Complaints and Remedies) (Amendment) Regulations 2010</strong>;</td>
<td>This was set to extend current flexible legislation to encompass those with dependents up to 18</td>
<td>Was repealed before enacted into law</td>
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<td><strong>The Coalition in the Green Paper 21st Century Welfare and white paper ‘Welfare that Works’ / enacted in the Welfare Reform Bill 2011</strong>;</td>
<td>Focus upon tackling worklessness to eradicate poverty: Including the use of Universal Credit: This provides a basic income which is added to in terms of additional needs or dependents</td>
<td>Reflects a focus shift, including the importance of ‘labour flexibility’. Consequently for those with low income and fewer employment options flexibility might be seen to have reduced (Wiggan, 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Children and Families Bill (2014)</strong>;</td>
<td>Flexibility to be available to workforce through consultation with individual organisations. This aimed to allow not only parents but others who offer support the right to flexibility / also aimed at encouraging people back into work</td>
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The 1997 New Labour Government pledged to eradicate child poverty through workforce support, for example the New Deal for Lone Parents, encouraged employment through supplementing income and affordable child care (Daly, 2010; Gambles et al., 2006; Lewis, 2010). New Labour positioned the family as central to policy via ‘work/family reconciliation’ (Daly, 2010), and increased WLB policy to facilitate flexible working (Lewis, 2010). In contrast, the Conservative-led Coalition Government’s (2010-2015) welfare approach, influenced by economic austerity, aligned with neo-liberalism and individual responsibility that stigmatised ‘worklessness’ and welfare ‘dependency’ (Wiggan, 2012). In terms of flexibility, there was an extension of rights, but these required employer approval. Gatrell et al. (2013), through a review of policies, argue that such initiatives were more often utilised by employers to achieve their goals, associated with the 24/7 service economy, rather than the workforce. This review of policy shows the influence of government approach and priorities over time, with further restriction around a lack of actual enactment.

Kossek (2016), through a consideration of extensive WLB research, found five common gaps in policy enactment:

1: Organisational, cultural and structural integration: The extent to which policy is utilised and made a part of the organisation

2: Prevention and inclusion: Use of occupational health to prevent work-life conflict and stress

3: Organizational support Vs control: Individual control over hours and boundaries

4: Multi-level comprehensiveness: Attempts to bring policy for all not just those who are younger
5: Unintended consequences: Positive and negatives effects upon relationships and workplace approaches including positives of part time and job sharing, which creates a more diverse set of employees.

Policies will only be effective if they are embedded within practice. If they are not fully understood by both employers and employees they will remain under-utilised. This will also be the case if they are associated with favoring one group over another or leading to prejudice towards different people, such as mothers. However, WLB benefits which influenced policy development have mutual advantages for both employer and employee when they are used (Jones, 2003; Lewis and Cooper, 2005).

WLB policy during the 1990s focused upon flexibility associated with a business case. This gave recognition of excellent benefits amongst government and employers in relation to increased productivity, improving workforce recruitment and retention (Dex, 2003; Dex and Bond, 2005; Jones, 2003; Kelly et al., 2014; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Moen, 2011).

Stanworth (1999) in a case study approach of a UK Local Authority reviewed the use of Part-Time (PT) and job share roles, finding mutually positive outcomes in managing demands and accommodating work / family roles. While this research was small scale the authors highlighted significant negative impacts, including frequent commitment of additional hours, ‘cramming in’ work, having fewer breaks, schedules reducing interaction between colleagues and the creation of adverse attitudes towards each other amongst colleagues.

Gambles et al. (2006: 20) observe differing attitudes towards WLB initiatives that are related to who most often benefits from policies:

‘...policies directed at women or families are often marginalized while those perceived to be productivity measures are more likely to be brought into the mainstream’
The challenges associated with WLB for women include them sacrificing earning potential and career prospects, in terms of promotion opportunities when undertaking part-time work (Jarvis, 2005; Wattis et al., 2012; Williams, 2000). Additionally policies can be subject to changing employer priorities, for instance Stanworth (1999) recounts attitudinal changes amongst HR as pressure was derived from efficiency savings and demands for increased productivity.

While a focus on and implementation of WLB policies indicate that it is a priority for government and organisations, policy is not the only factor which influences decision making amongst employees. Singley and Hynes (2005) through in-depth interviews with new parents found policy less influential than other practicalities, including who earned more and breast feeding, with decisions also connected with gender expectations. The levels of understanding around policy can also be influential in determining the extent of use. Ollier-Malaterre and Andrada (2015) in conducting in-depth interviews with employees, across three countries, identify confusion surrounding Government legislation, hence limiting utilisation of policy, with the worst understanding amongst UK employees.

An important enabler of WLB is child-care which can influence working patterns in families. Gatrell et al. (2013) through an extensive literature review found that childcare provision is linked favourably with WLB, in removing pressure from parents so they can focus upon their other roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, Ward et al. (2010) in a Manchester based research study identify the availability and cost of child care to be significant in employment decisions and working patterns. However, Schober and Scott (2012: 517) found British attitudes resistant to ‘institutional’ childcare, with care through the family, firstly the mother, closely followed by the grandmother preferred. Additionally Dean and Coulter’s
(2006) study of WLB amongst lower income families identified restricted use of formal childcare due to cost and priority, related to parental and more often a maternal sense of responsibility for not wishing to place their children in childcare. Warren et al. (2009) found that whilst UK policy reflected expectations that women would be in employment, child care remained inaccessible for lower income families, exacerbated through piecemeal and unstructured provision. Therefore, childcare barriers including social attitudes and practicalities reflect a gap between policy and reality, with potentially negative implications for WLB.

The ability of policy and practice to support WLB does not cover the diversity within people’s everyday lives. My study concerns women combining employment, HE study and family commitments and therefore such omissions within WLB policy and support to families, may mean that their situation might not easily be accounted for. For example, an important part of WLB and employment law is associated with restricting hours of employment (Dex, 2003). However, Lowe and Gayle (2007) found some adult learners working 59-71 hours per week through combining study, employment and domestic demands, making them a hidden part of the ‘long hours’ culture. While policy is an important guide and indicator for our lives its effectiveness is also restricted. In the following section I consider WLB from different perspectives.

2.2.3 Work-life balance from differing perspectives
Within this section I critically consider the WLB situation, drawing from the Global North perspective, before becoming United Kingdom focused and then more locally focused where possible. Sanders et al. (2011) found WLB widely researched across Western Developed countries and similar patterns in Australia, USA, Canada and the United Kingdom.
Employment is significant within society, linking with income and the means of providing for individuals and their families. Additionally, work and employment form the basis of modern society and organisational structures, influencing individual identity, self-image and ambition (Edgell, 2006; Grint, 1994; Hochschild, 2000; Toffoletti and Starr, 2016). Neo-liberalism increasingly influences thinking in the Global North, creating a greater focus upon the need to work and placing responsibility upon individuals (Reichwein and Gow, 2013). This has influenced a UK approach meaning many individuals can be increasingly employment focused, with the extension of time dedicated to employment noted amongst professionals. Additionally a growth in consumerism increases pressure to earn as possessions are seen to reflect identity and status, which includes conspicuous consumption of goods and life styles (Drew et al., 2000; Eikhof, et al., 2007; Ransome, 2005). As a result, employment may define individuals and influences consumption patterns which can symbolise success. The accumulation of these circumstances reduces choices around restricting working hours and further increases the complexity surrounding WLB.

WLB discussions often tend to orientate towards conflict between work and the family needs (Gambles et al., 2006; Taylor, 2002: Wattis et al., 2012). However, Hall et al. (2013) through a factor analysis utilising a cumulative mixed method / longitudinal study across US and Canada, present a convincing argument that the focus on these two elements insufficiently covers role diversity. This research examined non-orientation roles which included: family, community service and personal life. The importance of non-work identity is well established but employment patterns failed to accommodate these factors, creating dissatisfaction. Hall et al. (2013) found a lack of understanding of other elements within existing WLB theory limiting the discussion base, including the significance of consumption
patterns. Emery et al.’s (2017) qualitative study of coping behaviour amongst Flemish politicians reflects how adding a third role is little understood, as most WLB discourse concerns dual roles of employment and home. Consequently, they also found a limited understanding about the potential complexity of life and priorities, such as learning, leisure, community involvement and consumption.

Ward et al. (2010) explored WLB in a district of Manchester, UK, examining the choices mothers and parents made in relation to employment working and the care of the family. They considered how consumption influences WLB decisions, whereby conspicuous consumption and the wish to increase in social capital for children had diverse effects. This included women undertaking part-time work, but not working too much to focus upon ‘motherhood’. Hence, high value was attached to the mother role even when it would ‘certainly harm their career’ (Ward et al., 2010: 2272). Conversely, there was pressure to earn, to provide children with social capital and opportunity of partaking in activities which would increase their skills and social circle. Again, this example shows the complexity in terms of choices made which influences WLB experiences. The next section will consider home working which once more links with overlap and is important for adult learners who predominantly study in the home space.

2.2.4 Employment in the home and WLB

Home working is employment within the home environment and traditionally associated with women in low paid roles (Ammons and Markham, 2004). However, it has become increasingly prominent amongst professions, facilitated through technological developments that facilitate remote working. Jarvis and Pratt (2006) argue merging work spaces can facilitate flexibility but has the potential to increase working hours through the
blurring of boundaries. Ammons and Markham (2004) considered homeworking amongst white-collar workers through a comprehensive literature review and semi-structured interviews. They identified positives included focused, quiet time, and reduced time commuting and preparing for work. However, boundary maintenance emerged as an issue as home workers negotiate two sets of demands and roles within the same place (Jarvis and Pratt, 2006; Pettinger et al., 2005; Wajcman, 2008). Jarvis and Pratt (2006) find evidence that home workers were physically ‘there’ but emotionally removed, through being highly work focused. Ammons and Markham (2004) argue strategies involve either separation or integration however, this proves challenging with some workers struggling to ignore household needs. Hence, there are a number of benefits to home working, with flexibility increasing WLB potential, while there is the possibility that employment will dominate within the home environment.

Homeworking can increase employment hours due to the absence of the distinct rituals of going to and from work, which creates traits of ‘workaholism’, although family commitments control this dedication to the employment role (Ammons and Markham, 2004: 202). In terms of the boundaries between employment and the home, Ammons and Markham (2004) find it harder for women to protect boundaries, as domestic demands can dominate, due to societal expectations. A positive interpretation is that homeworking allows for increased flexibility through parallel involvement in employment and the family and being at hand:

’...interviewees said that working at home allowed a better balance of family and work responsibilities...’ (Ammons and Markham, 2004; 210)
Therefore, homeworking creates potential to achieve WLB through merged spaces and increased fluidity between activities.

2.2.5 Women and WLB: Patterns, diversity and strategy

My study is concerned with women and WLB an issue that emerges with the widespread presence of women in employment (Edgell, 2006; Hochschild, 2000). Despite variation across the Global North women are well accepted within the labour market, with the Second World War representing a watershed for their workforce participation (Edgell, 2006; Rowbotham, 1999). Consequently the ‘normalisation’ of working mothers is evident (Greer and Peterson, 2013), with the 21st century seeing the dual-centric family as the norm, creating joint responsibility amongst earners to provide economically and care for the family (Christensen and Alfred, 2013). Nonetheless, women’s employment remains on average, less well paid in comparison with men, due to its frequent part-time nature and breaks in employment to accommodate family needs. Schober and Scott (2012: 528) argue:

‘Gender role egalitarianism...is at best lop-sided. Advances in gender equality will only occur when the roles of mothers and fathers in parenting and employment become more symmetrical’

This reflects the structural distinctions between men and women that are deeply embedded within society and leave them doing much more in the household, with further negatives in the workplace (Oakley, 1984; Hochschild, 2000). The two features are linked together and create expectations that women will be family focused leading female sections of labour market to remain undervalued and marginalised.

Women experience many challenges as a result of societal norms and stereotypes, associated with individual roles, responsibilities and identities across the life-course. Singley
and Hynes (2005: 380) through in-depth interviews with couples considered how gender roles evolved, to find transitions in early parenthood to be part of an ‘interactional’ process. This meant behaviour was matched with social expectations and altered to fit with gendered roles, such as mother. In WLB terms Ruppanner and Hufferman (2014) in an international comparative study found greater acceptance amongst women of non-work to work interference, as their familial demands influence the workplace. Accordingly, women are often more willing to accept compromise along their employment to accommodate the family.

When exploring the experiences of women it is important to consider diversity, as there are other social factors which influence women’s lives. The second wave of feminism focuses upon women as a homogenous group and often fails to see the distinctions between their separate realities (Letherby, 2003; Mann, 2005; Moen, 2011). Gatrell, et al. (2012: 305) found organisational psychology research concerning WLB in the 1970s and 1980s to be motivated through the emergence of the two career couples and related conflict. They identify a narrow perspective of interest and no acknowledgement of the significance of social class, as research focuses upon ‘highly educated women’, heterosexuals and ‘work-rich ‘career’ parents. Additionally, when Gatrell et al. (2013) examine sociological literature, a similar pattern of professionals in the foreground emerges, with few exceptions. Skeggs (1997) argues that during the development of feminist ideology there has been a movement away from social class, which fails to engage with the more distinct experiences of working-class women. Partly this links with the second wave of feminism focusing upon women’s lack of power generally, but also aspects associated with the difficulty of defining social
class. Social position is significant within my study as influential in experiences, expectations and options available.

WLB will be a different experience for low paid workers as less hourly income requires more hours of employment or partial benefit dependency, with further restrictions around purchasing supporting services (Warren et al., 2009). Dean and Coulter (2006) researched low-income family and individual experiences of WLB through in-depth interviews, to evaluate policy effectiveness. They found flexibility and fewer hours unrealistic for many low paid hourly earners, with many parents working long hours, including weekends to achieve sufficient income for their family. Further variation is seen in the research of Ward et al. (2010), who identify greatest choice to work fewer hours to accommodate children amongst qualified professional women with higher earning partners. By contrast lower earning, unskilled mothers have to work more hours and frequently used grandparents or informal networks for childcare. This study of a locality demonstrates that WLB options are restricted through earnings and family situation. Warren et al. (2009) identify difficulty due to fewer opportunities amongst the least well-qualified women, which is increased where they are disconnected from family support. Once more, this reflects the significance of informal childcare for those with lower income.

WLB opportunity is influenced by the circumstances of the family or household, which will either represent greater demands or support. Minnotte (2011) considers WLB conflict amongst single parents through a survey approach. Despite limited coverage interesting points around dual responsibility and consequential stress and anxiety are identified, with only informal networks often available to support. This reflects similar patterns seen throughout the UK, whereby lone parents as sole providers for their family are more prone
to poverty and WLB compromise (Dex and Smith, 2002; Gables et al., 2007; Lewis, 2005). Mandic et al. (2016) through cross sectional, self-reporting, WLB survey, of parents caring for children with complex needs, found substantial personal and financial costs. This relates to less ability to commit to employment, which reduces their income and career opportunities. There is also indication of further compromises due to demands at home and sleep loss.

So far this chapter has focused upon the practicalities of attempting to achieve or maintain WLB. However, in terms of working class women it is useful to consider attitudes. Skeggs (1997) utilised an ethnographic approach to research experiences of working class women in Further Education studying community care courses, in a North Western industrial town in England. The research considered the efforts of working class women to participate in education, while not appearing ‘too big for your boots’ (Skeggs, 1997: 11). The demarcations of respectability were found in how women looked and present themselves which contributes to their struggle if they were seen to stand out from their own community. Skeggs (1997) identified positive attitudes towards participation in care associated with contribution to the community, with barriers associated with low self-esteem and sense of worth deeply embedded within the women. Skeggs (1997: 163) articulates:

‘The women’s ontological security was found precisely not in being an individual but ‘fitting-in’”

This reflects the significance of community, depicting their motivation not in aspiring to become middle class but offering care. An important part of identity relates to how women are seen to manage different aspects of their lives and subsequently WLB.
Whilst women can struggle with achieving WLB they form strategies to cope, which Hyman et al. (2005: 715) through researching professional and non-professional workers describe as ‘either work or domestically initiated’. Jarvis (1999: 232) explores households strategies which include control over income and household standard’s, demonstrating individuals as not ‘helpless victims’ or ‘social flotsam’ but in control of their lives. In terms of how women cope some define themselves via their ability to meet both employee and mother roles, leading Hochschild, (2000) and Shaevitz, (1985) to identify the ‘Supermom’. Ammons and Markham (2004: 205) argue homeworking women are prone to ‘superwoman syndrome’ as they attempt to fulfil their work role and be a ‘full-time homemaker’. Attitudinal changes are evident as the second wave of feminism focused upon WLB disharmony. In the 1980s in the UK there was an increase in women who wanted a profession alongside being a successful wife and mother (Moen, 2011). Gatrell et al. (2013: 310) identify gaps within WLB due to the failure to encompass the ‘desire’ to be an involved parent, whereby childcare is viewed as ‘work-life balance enriching’. Consequently, WLB is affected by personal and household strategies, underpinned by attitudes and approaches.

In Table 2, I provide an example of personal strategies used by adult learners as identified by Lowe and Gayle (2007) when examining ‘work/life/balance’ amongst adults undertaking HE programmes in FE.
Table 2: Personal strategies used by adult learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Strategy Type</th>
<th>Associated approach managing demands and including learning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Good balance:</td>
<td>Indicated through ‘separation and compartmentalization’, with study being distinct and not overlapping with other activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Integration:</td>
<td>Where study is negotiated within a busy schedule, via ‘co-operation and support’ from key people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Difficulty with Balance:</td>
<td>Competing demands overlapped and they only partially achieved ‘integration’, with disruption at times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Stressed:</td>
<td>Had not ‘negotiated a place for study within their lives’, so susceptible to discontinuing study.</td>
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Table 2 highlights the diverse ways of managing demands which reflect personal choices and link with both attitude and personal / household circumstances, which determine both demands and support. This section has considered WLB and tension within aspects of life, which reflects how demands and commitments interact and creates the need for policy and adjustment through strategies. However, WLB conflict remains difficult to manage which means WLB is often concerned with disequilibrium, creating implications for well-being explored in the following section.

2.3 Well-being

2.3.1 Defining well-being

Here I develop the consideration of well-being from the previous chapter and consider well-being discourse and the many ways it is conceptualised. There is a social construction around well-being in that it is influenced by societal expectations, which creates some complexity around definitions (Deeming, 2013). Consequently, it should be noted that defining well-being in common with most social phenomenon is ambiguous (Alatartseva and
Barysheva, 2016). Alatartseva and Barysheva, (2016: 3) provide a definition based upon the aspirations of individuals:

‘The United Nations Development Program defines ‘human wellbeing’ as ‘the opportunity of people to realise their potential as human beings’

Well-being has grown in significance within political and societal discourse, becoming an important goal which informs policy development in the West and Global North (Alatartseva and Barysheva, 2016; Orton, 2011). The complexity around suitable definitions relates to whether an economic or more subjective measure is utilised. Torras (2008: 476) through policy review disputes linking GDP increase and well-being, differentiating needs, defining some as ‘paramount (for example, food, shelter, and security)’, others ‘superfluous wants (for example, a second cell phone or a third car)’. The second category was explored in terms of priority for leisure and family time, which linked with individual priorities.

The holistic definition of well-being considers individuals, families and communities, in terms of not only physical health, but also mental and emotional experiences (Stratton, 2010). Definitions of well-being previously utilised the language of ‘economic’ indication or standard of living, concerned with material needs (Haworth and Lewis, 2005). However, such dialect is increasingly disputed, because while these provide ‘objective measures’, they do not consider the importance of the subjective, reflecting individual priority and human emotion (Deeming, 2013; Stratton, 2010). Subjective wellbeing (SWB) has gained increased attention in recent years, influencing UK government policy and seen to reflect changes in modern society. SWB seeks a global self-assessment of people’s lives in terms of health, job and activities (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). Different measures utilised include ‘general happiness’ (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016; Waldron, 2010) which seeks to assess levels of
happiness in relation to various aspects of life. Conversely, Deneulin and McGregor (2010) explore policy in conjunction with Sen’s (2001) capabilities approach, to argue the term ‘happiness’ fails to account for variations in expectation, arguing Western ideas differ from those of Buddhists. Hence dispute surrounding this definition is seen. An ‘experience measure’ of well-being explores the overall individual perceptions, again via self-reporting, with consideration of positive and negative feelings (Dolan and Metcalf, 2016; Waldron, 2010). There are also a variety of other measures of well-being, including the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), which reviews perceptions of a typical daily experiences (Kahneman et al., 2004, cited in Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). The variation in measures and thereby definitions makes personal perceptions and social expectations important within the discourse.

Complexity within the well-being measures is societal and individual. A truly holistic consideration of well-being, cannot justify removing the social experience and socio-economic factors (Deeming, 2013; Haworth and Lewis, 2005; Taylor, 2011). Consequently, whilst well-being might reflect movement away from the economic measures they remain critical. Deneuline and McGregor (2010: 513) in searching for an objective view of well-being argue societal / cultural differences and global inequality were ignored within some definitions. Subsequently, concluding the ‘Wellbeing of Developing Countries (WeD)’ is sacrificed in comparison with: ‘other more powerful actors’. While here I focus upon the Global North / UK experiences, it remains important to recognise diversity globally and societally. As well-being has grown in significance within discourse it is has become increasingly embedded in key UK policies which will be considered next.
2.3.2 Well-being policy

Well-being has become increasingly the focus of contemporary UK governments, recognising the importance of viewing individual lives more holistically, with debate surrounding the restrictive nature of economic measures (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). The popularity of ‘well-being’ for UK governments has risen since 2000 initially from the New Labour Government (1997-2010), and later the Conservative led Coalition Government (2010-2015). Table 3 below outlines policy developments in terms of individual policy measures, their objectives and outcomes.

Table 3 Summary of UK well-being and associated policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Labour Policy: ‘Well-being Power’ (Local Government Act 2000)</td>
<td>Local Authorities received responsibility to promote well-being from an ‘economic’, ‘social’, and ‘environmental’ perspective.</td>
<td>The focus was across public health in terms of encouraging activity and healthier life styles. More holistic in terms of considering the individual, family and community from a number of perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five ways to well-being: (2008)</td>
<td>Connect: Referring to the people we spend time with in daily life, including not only family but colleagues and community</td>
<td>This approach considered the long term implications of a lack of well-being in terms of poor mental health and economic costs / but also in terms of wider societal effect. Showed that poor mental health will have profound and wide reaching effects. Also there is examination of well-being across the lifecycle, with emphasis placed upon economic necessity in terms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Keep learning: Referring to learning opportunities in everyday situations.

Give: more formally in terms of giving time, but also in general attitude to others (Aked and Thompson, 2011).

Linked with the ‘big society’ / viewing the community as key players and described in terms of empowerment.

‘National Well-being Project ‘ launched in 2010

Utilised a subjective measure of well-being which was seen to reflect a distinct shift away from a more economic approach (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). The focus was therefore seen to be not only based upon ‘standards of living’ but ‘quality of life’ (Sage, 2015).

This reflects a change in focus which includes quality of life and environment as a way of assessing life experiences (Deeming, 2013).

‘Our Health and Wellbeing’ (2010, DOH)

Described wellbeing in terms of: ‘a positive physical, social and mental state’; associated with ‘absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity’. Also focused upon belonging within society in terms of relationships, community and environment included a referral to ‘financial and personal security, rewarding employment’.

More holistic definition, not only the absence of disease.

Covered a range is experiences, with recognition of the importance of mental well-being and social networks.

At its most simple subjective well-being can be measured through asking people to measure their level of ‘happiness’. (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016; Sage, 2015).

No Health without Mental Health (2011)

Coalitions Mental Health Outcome strategy (DOH) put forward the clear link of the important role of employment in achieving well-being which was not only related to providing materially but also self-esteem.
between the wellbeing and mental health. Making mental wellbeing an important goal for economic success on a national / strategic and local level.

Taylor (2011) argues that if the policy language of well-being is reviewed, there is an indication of a more holistic and rounded overview of human life. Additionally, Appleby (2016) found in measuring wellbeing and happiness a strong correlation with health is evident. Yet debate exists concerning relativism within the calculation. For example, those who are upwardly mobile should experience positive well-being yet always strive for more, undermining their life satisfaction (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). There are also issues related to happiness measures as potential flaws exist within the methodology, including the order questions appear in and their inter-relatedness (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). Additionally the respondent group may influence the findings as those with less favourable life experiences might not participate. Taylor (2011) argues the policy assumptions within this agenda identify employment as the best way of ensuring well-being, promoting employment, while ignoring wider social responsibility to those unable to work. Furthermore, Deeming (2013) identifies limited acknowledgement of problems derived from a lack of employment opportunities or support. Measurements of well-being tend to indicate maldistribution of positive or negative experiences based upon socio-economic factors such as age, gender, race, employment (Taylor, 2011).

There are many positives around the promotion of individual autonomy, which acknowledges the significance of personal circumstances and control (Deeming, 2013). Well-being policies in recognising individuality reflect understanding of the physical and
emotional needs of people. However, as well-being policies often focus upon autonomy and individual responsibility experiences of personal failure emerge, while facilitating the development of consumerism within supporting services, benefitting some more than others (Deeming, 2013). The focus on individuals within society ignores ‘collective welfare’ and ‘social provision’ related to the community basis of well-being (Deeming, 2013). There are clear links between well-being and welfare that can also be overlooked (Taylor, 2011). A truly holistic consideration of well-being cannot ignore social experience, meaning socio-economic factors remain important (Deeming, 2013; Haworth and Lewis, 2005; Taylor, 2011). Within contemporary society, parents attempt to meet the needs of the family both economically and ‘care of’, against a background of insecurity in terms of meeting the ever changing and increasing demands of employment (Moen, 2011). There are many positives in recognition of well-being within policy, although debate remains about the potential for it to be divisive, through placing responsibility upon individuals, with less attention upon inequality. The next section will consider further the measures of well-being in terms of the objective and subjective aspects of definition and the influence upon debate and approach.

2.3.3 Subjective or objective well-being measures

Well-being in a similar way to WLB is influenced by autonomy, with a greater sense of control reducing negative emotional experiences. Hilbrecht et al. (2015; 14) considers the importance of coping ability within well-being:

‘Stress occurs when there is a mismatch between the person’s feelings of control and perceived ability to cope with external demands, leading to diminished well-being’.
Here a link can be established between being in control and coping, consequently when individuals feel overwhelmed by demand their well-being can be compromised due to feeling unable to manage and exhausted. For most people demands create the need to provide for themselves and their family through both income and care provision. Torras (2008) cites the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), considering the importance of income, finding it only accounts for a third of the measure, with education and health important defining factors. Haworth and Lewis (2005: 68) argue shifting working patterns including increases in technology create an ‘intensification’ of work, so increasing stress levels and depleting well-being experiences. Conversely, they find evidence of employment increasing well-being in the UK, with disparity in health and well-being based upon social position. Well-being on an individual basis is associated with ‘character strengths’, including interpersonal skills and ‘future-mindedness’ (Haworth and Lewis, 2005: 70). The inclusion of self-development within well-being links with education and learning, which is associated with confidence and self-esteem.

‘Wellbeing, therefore, is the product of the social conditions which enable a positive experience of self’ (Taylor, 2011:780)

The focus upon personal experience connects well-being with individual perception and subsequently there is a significant subjective strand.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is related to areas of life satisfaction that are not necessarily based upon the economic, although this remains important. Dolan and Metcalfe (2012) through a methodological review of measures of SWB, considering their theoretical rigor,
relevance to policy development and empirical robustness identified three main theoretical strands to measure SWB:

‘Evaluative’: Whereby individuals reflect on all aspects of their life and make a ‘cognitive assessment of how their life is going overall’ (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012: 114)

‘Hedonic’: This seeks to measure individual’s feelings and emotions / ‘pure mental state’ in terms of ‘happiness’ or ‘anxiety’: This is associated with the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM) amongst others (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012: 115)

‘Eudemonic’: Which refers to psychological functioning or flourishing and draws from ‘self-determination theory’, considering personal perception associated with the ‘meaning in life’, ‘meaning, autonomy, control and connectedness’ (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012: 117)

An essential element within all the indicators relates to individual perception and qualities, which is based upon personal experiences, so whilst income is important it reaches beyond. For example, Deeming (2013) when measuring happiness argues that a strong correlation between learning and happiness existed, meaning those with lower qualifications are more likely to describe themselves as unhappy. However, ‘life satisfaction’ may not be higher for graduates who may be aspirational and so always striving for more, which can lead to experiencing dissatisfaction. From a gender perspective, women more often describe experiencing fulfilment in comparison with men, while conversely more often encounter anxiety, associated with WLB pressure through combining work and family commitments (Deeming, 2013). Consequently, in a similar way to which flexible working for professional employees creates illusions of choice, which is actually personalised pressure to perform (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016); choice and autonomy within well-being can be a burden to those marginalised in society. Therefore, the application of the measures of subjective well-being must consider individual personality, including capabilities, which I will consider next.
2.3.4 Capabilities, flourishing and well-being

There are a number of attributes of well-being which link with learning, which motivate learners to compromise WLB for success. Deneulin and McGregor (2010: 502) consider the importance of Sen in the development of this approach:

‘The economist Amartya Sen introduced the concept of ‘capabilities’ in the 1980s as a way of thinking about human wellbeing that departed from the utilitarian approach which dominates modern economics’

Therefore, this approach proves significant in the development of a subjective approach to well-being, less focused upon economic attributes. Orton (2011: 353) explores well-being from this perspective considering not people’s employment but what they are able to do, the ‘choices’ they make and the freedom to do so, including: ‘...being healthy, reading or writing, or taking part in... the community...’ Consequently, capabilities can be related to individual achievement and valued acts, increasing well-being (Sen, 2001). Table 4 provides an outline of the three defining concepts of capabilities.

Table 4 Capability can be defined by three main concepts

| ‘Functioning’ | Valued activity to achieve well-being: Being healthy, being safe, having education, work and a social network |
| Capabilities | Freedom to undertake activities and reach valued positions (Including choices to do or not) |
| Agency | The social arrangements which accommodate this development |

(Deneulin and McGregor, 2010)
Deneulin and McGregor (2010) consider the importance of the objective manifestations of well-being, which include health, political involvement and education. This definition relates well to participation in HE study, which creates positive implications as qualifications and experiences generate transformative effects, increasing opportunities and choices. In terms of WLB and Capabilities, there is a definite connection between personal characteristics and social arrangements (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). This links well with ideas around personal / household resources and coping. Deneulin and McGregor (2010: 502) evaluate the capabilities approach against the backdrop of financial crisis in 2008/2009 and ‘global poverty’. Finding a differentiation between the concept of ‘living well’ and ‘living well together’, they acknowledge the importance of social structures, community and support from others (Deneulin and McGregor; 2010: 502). This shows that although SWB looks beyond the economic these remain important within experiences, although there are other influences at work, including flourishing.

The concept of flourishing has become increasingly influential in well-being measures. Huppert and Timothy (2013) find an association with positive mental health and the sense that life is going well, leading individuals to feel good and function more effectively. Flourishing is associated with quality of life indication, and determined through purpose and positive relationships, being active, having raised self-esteem and contributing to the well-being of others. Akin and Akin (2015), in a quantitative study, measure self-compassion and flourishing amongst University students, finding positive effects derived from self-kindness, mindfulness and optimism, while isolation creates the negative of self-judgement. Diener et al. (2010) conducted a cross-cultural study of flourishing, finding a strong association between flourishing and competency development which they linked with learning. Howell
and Buro (2015) explore the experiences of students through the application of a Flourishing scale. This identified women to have higher indications of wellness, connected to feeling involved through better support networks. Whilst these studies are quantitative unlike my qualitative study, some valuable points are made through connecting with learning itself and the support opportunities within the setting. Orton (2011:358) reviews policy and considers the issue of flourishing, linking it directly with socio-economic factors:

‘Tackling the UK’s current gross inequality and declining social mobility becomes a key priority in creating a level playing field for opportunity’.

Therefore, whilst flourishing provides a broader remit and potential for SWB the effects of social inequality determine the lived experiences of people in society (Taylor, 2011). Hence, although capabilities and flourishing relates to options around lifestyle and activity, those who lack the basics for existence struggle to have choices, creating detrimental effects upon their well-being.

WLB and well-being generally focus upon too many demands and limited time for wider activities, hence, fewer demands should equate with an improved situation, yet the expansion theory offers an alternate view (Barnett and Baruch, 1987 cited in Roxburgh 1999). The expansion hypothesis (Barnett and Baruch, 1987, cited in Roxburgh 1999) reflects the idea that multiple and expanding roles, have positive direct and indirect implications for the well-being, of the individuals undertaking them. Benefits include confidence building for example an employment role influencing contributions individuals can make to household and community, and growing fulfilment though competence and network development. Therefore, complexity exists, with no simple division of good and
bad terms of well-being, as societal aspects are influential, one being gender which I will consider in the following section.

2.3.5 Gender and well-being

There are different patterns and implications for women’s well-being and WLB compared with men. Dugan et al. (2016) in research concerning employees combining the care of older relatives, employment and other responsibilities, identified patterns of depletion of resources which created stress and negative well-being implications. This pattern was most prominent amongst women, which they argue reflects gender based stereotypes placing greatest care responsibility upon them. Hilbrecht et al. (2015) in a Canadian study of caregivers utilise secondary community data to identify disproportionate demands upon women, especially in caring for older relatives and their own children. They refer to their participants as representing the sandwich generation, reflecting women with two substantial sets of demands. This culminated in depleted resources and compromised well-being, indicated through stress and fatigue. Conversely, improved outcomes can be gained through community based support networks, which they identified as more beneficial to women in comparison with men.

Barak and Levin (2002) consider job satisfaction, belonging and well-being amongst women and minority groups through quantitative, self-reporting measures assessing 3,400 respondents. They found women most likely to experience stress associated with role expectations conflicting with each other and a lack of belonging, indicating social isolation. Warren et al. (2009) argue that women’s employment patterns are often influenced by the combination of responsibilities and a lack of support, hence making part-time and often marginalised work their only option. Despite the commonality of dual earning families,
women maintain responsibility for the domestic and childcare, stretching their personal resources and reducing opportunities for well-being (Emslie and Hunt, 2009). Hayworth and Lewis (2005) find women more likely to sacrifice elements of their well-being for their family, with personal loss including leisure and personal time. Patterns of reducing leisure are common amongst those with many demands and have implications for well-being, which I will next consider.

2.3.6 Leisure and well-being: Erosion and change

Leisure is often culturally defined in terms of the absence of work, and side-lined in favour of employment and other needs (Gambles et al., 2006; Wattis et al., 2012). Cassidy (2005) argues leisure forms a buffer from stress, offering a counter force against the pressures of work and so linking with well-being. Warren (2010) identifies leisure as representing a mechanism to improve emotional well-being. Leisure proves to be significant when considering adult learners as this time is often eroded or changed, as no other time is available.

The growth of leisure links with consumerism and productive activities, such as sport, health, beauty and craft base pursuits (Ward et al., 2010). Additionally, parents are increasingly obliged to structure leisure time for children, which can be seen to represent as a new demand (Ward et al., 2010). Leisure can be with or without the family. Hochschild (2000) found household demands lead some parents to seek refuge separate from family leisure, although women were generally found to have less leisure. Warren, (2010: 5), argues that leisure time is: ‘unevenly distributed in society’, with women having less ‘pure leisure’, due to family commitments. This indicates a misdistribution of leisure based upon
gender, with women having a more negative experience (Houston and Waumsley, 2003; Wajcman, 2008).

Learning can potentially erode leisure for example, Reichwein and Gow (2013: 18) find the ‘24/7 fast lane’ culture to focus upon productivity, leading students to be very assessment and achievement driven. They identify a lack of time off and found that ‘...many university students find it unusual to enjoy healthy food and a day of rest’. Conversely, Reichwein and Gow (2013) argue that time away from learning is beneficial in creating space for contemplation. As students combine learning with employment less free time and complex patterns emerge, not only for them but also for friends, reducing opportunities to socialise (Reichwein and Gow, 2013; Van Der Meer and Wieblers, 2001; Yorke and Longden, 2010). Reichwein and Gow (2013: 28) argue students experience restriction in leisure time and little evidence of ‘having 2 days off’, with negative implications for well-being, through lost rest and opportunities to socialise and contemplate.

Nevertheless, there are further complexities with Sargent and Aldridge (2002: 2) identifying that although learning erodes free time, leisure activity often forms ‘[a]bridge into active learning’. Additionally, in relation to women’s experiences, they are most likely to learn for self-development purposes, so creating greater acceptance of its intrusive nature and having potential to positively affect well-being (McGivney, 2004; Sargent and Aldridge, 2002). Stebbins (1992) considers the changing view of leisure arguing that it can become ‘serious leisure’, which is productive, worthwhile, motivated by self-development and fulfilment. Stebbins (1992: 7) identifies ‘8 durable benefits’ to serious leisure, which are ‘self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness and
lasting physical products of the activity’. Stebbins (1992) argues self–actualization and belonging are favorable for SWB in terms of capabilities linking leisure and well-being. Consequently, while leisure time is depleted through learning it creates growth and development. Nevertheless, the depreciation of pure leisure, due to time pressure is an example of the way WLB and well-being are connected. I will explore the intersection between WLB and well-being in the next section, alongside the influence of social structure and diversity.

2.4 The intersection between WLB and well-being

WLB and well-being are the main foci of my study. The link between the two areas is well-established, as can be seen through the following comment from Amstad et al. (2011: 152):

‘Work–family conflict is often considered to be a potential source of stress that has negative effects on well-being and behaviour (e.g., Geurts, Kompier, Roxburgh and Houtman, 2003)’.

Hence, WLB conflict as a result of combining commitments can lead to an excess of demands and may adversely impact on well-being. Cinamon (2006: 205) conducted research with University students in Israel and drew from different aspects of Westerns literature to consider how well-being is influenced by role conflict. The findings depict how the role of ‘personal disposition’ and ‘self-efficacy’ form a link between predicted ability of individuals to manage WFC. This is found to reflect the influence of primary socialisation and roles within a dual career family, with gender seen as important with women most likely believe they must manage diverse roles (Gerson, 2009).

Another significant intersection related to WLB and well-being relates to lack of sleep. Crain et al. (2014) examine the importance of sleep and WLB utilising methods associated with
the conservation of resources theory, connecting the loss of the resources with increase in stress. Boyd et al. (2016: 471) consider those undertaking second jobs due to financial needs and find limitations in the demands individuals are able to manage, without strain upon well-being. The consequences identified include a rise in ‘emotional exhaustion’ linked with the presence of the second job, with physical symptoms and reduced life satisfaction. Boyd et al. (2016: 473-4) describe this pattern as:

‘…conflict from each of the jobs an individual holds appears to represent an independent stressor that interacts with other sources of conflict to influence well-being’

This demonstrates how demands upon individuals lead to a depletion of their time and energy, which influences well-being opportunities. Crain et al. (2014) adapt Frone’s (2003) theory of strain and the impacts upon WFC. They identified: time based strain (associated with long working hours); strain based (for example stressful conditions, such as working with a challenging team member); and behaviour based conflict (In terms of conflicting roles, such as a work role and a home role). Boyd et al. (2016: 464) identify conflicting roles as ‘counter-productive’ to one another with WFC viewed negatively in terms of a less committed work force, stressed workers and negative well-being experiences. Arguably when considering the role of the women undertaking work-based learning and having to meet the needs of their family they will potentially experience all of these strains.

Parenting, WLB and well-being are inter-connected and represent a complexity that is frequently discussed but rarely solved. Therefore, parents persistently experience struggling with WLB disequilibrium as a result of commitments to workplace and family, with the potential for negative well-being implications. There are tangible and less visible emotional
signs, for example, Jarvis and Pratt (2006) evidenced ‘parental guilt’ amongst dual career families, who wanted to provide ‘quality’ parenting, but experiencing constant time pressure. Wattis et al. (2012) argue that when parents manage practically they can be emotionally strained at feeling they might not be offering enough, potentially compromising their well-being.

Both WLB and well-being relate to the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory (Huffman et al., 2013). Huffman et al. (2012) considered how individuals work to provide objects, in terms of meeting needs and maintaining personal circumstances. However, behind the focus on survival needs, lies a complex pattern, associated with emotional needs. Many individuals equate employment with status, identity and purpose, also associated with happiness and emotional well-being. Huffman et al. (2013: 776) identify time shortage as fundamental to WLB and well-being, with time based work-family conflict derived from ‘excessive amounts of time in one role’. Van Der Lippe et al. (2006:305) in comparing the experiences of men and women, identify the workplace to be the source of pressure, stress and potential burn out, creating less time for ‘family obligations’. Jarvis (2005) considers non-financial variables and wellbeing, finding time taken from individuals creating pressured routines with adverse effects, including difficulties in co-ordination of domestic demands. Current trends towards the “24/7” service economy create widespread depletion of shared ‘time off’ (Reichwein and Gow, 2013). Bittman (2005: 16) found Sunday working to deplete ‘catch-up’ and ‘family time’ reducing the potential to undertake distinct family based, leisure activity, while eroding opportunity for both rest and time together. For adult learners’ independent study often takes place opportunistically including weekends, so reducing distinct free time and leading to potential reductions in WLB and well-being.
2.5: Summary:

In this chapter, I have outlined the key concepts that will form the basis for my study. I have examined WLB definitions and surrounding debate and policy, including some evaluation of effectiveness. I have also considered key areas including overlap, overspill and time, exploring the importance of gender distinction, as women form the focus of my study. I have also examined well-being once more in relation to variation in definitions and social construction, also the influence of policy. The review has included a wide range of sources, although the research has mainly focused upon a Global North perspective, with a UK focus in many examples and where possible local studies included. I have considered the intersection between WLB and well-being, in terms of their impact upon each other. As the research will focus upon women learners, I have also drawn from literature in this field. In the following Chapter I will consider research methodology and theoretical approach, the research aims and objectives, which are derived from reviewing existing studies of both WLB and well-being.
Chapter Three Research paradigm and approach

3.1 Introduction:

In Chapters One and Two, I outlined the context and rationale for this study, and considered relevant literature that informs this thesis. In this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework that informed this study and the methodological approach, (social constructionism, from a realist perspective), and explore the micro and macro aspects to the approach. I will consider the influence of feminist approaches on the development of this study, exploring knowledge and power, and public and private spheres in relation to space and identity. The participants’ views are critical and so the importance of their voices will be included throughout the research process and representation of findings. Given this theoretical approach, qualitative methodology will be engaged with, including a review of the merits of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In this chapter, I will also consider ethical issues I faced, the research location, including the choice and recruitment of participants and an overview of those involved. Finally, there will be a brief account of limitations, which will be considered more fully in Chapter Seven. I begin with the research aim and objectives.

3.2: Aim and Research Objectives (RO)

The aim of this research was developed through an extensive review of literature around WLB and well-being, and is to explore women’s everyday experiences of work-life balance and well-being whilst combining, higher education and care for kin in a town in North West England.

The aim is underpinned by the following research objectives (RO).
RO1: To examine how women experience work-life balance whilst working, studying for a degree and caring for family

RO2: To explore women’s perceptions of well-being whilst combining employment, higher education and caring

RO3: To establish how women manage conflict with regards to work-life balance and well-being within a higher education context

RO4: To develop a new understanding of how women manage to negotiate working, higher educational study and caring responsibilities.

3.3 Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism draws from a number of disciplines including philosophy, sociology, psychology and linguistics (Burr, 2015) and was an appropriate theoretical frame for this study. It is based upon the concept of being critical towards taken-for-granted knowledge, seen to be based upon assumed and inherited facts (Gergen and Gergen, 2003). Social constructionists considered ways individuals seek to make subjective meaning based upon their experiences and understanding (Burr, 2015; Gergen and Gergen, 2003). Smith (2007: 348) considered the benefit of this approach to research:

‘Because social constructionism is orientated to people’s actual activities, it has created a rich and important body of research’

Research that engages with this paradigm needs to be flexible to accommodate respondents’ points of view (Cresswell, 2009). Burr (2015: 171) identified that Social Constructionism to be: ‘a loose collection of theoretical perspectives and discourse analysis’, and the approach suited qualitative methods. Accordingly, social constructionism was used when attempting to look from participants’ perspective or viewpoint, as Gergen and Gergen (2003:15) consider here:
‘Social Constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain and otherwise account for their world (including themselves) in which they live.’

Social constructionism is focused on the ways people view and feel about the world, so distinct from ‘positivism’ and ‘empiricism’, which focus upon the world in terms of what is measurable. Burr (2015: 2) argued that Social Constructionism provided a means of questioning assumptions often taken for granted related to social structures which were considered normal. Gergen and Gergen (2003: 60) found that this represents a ‘major challenge’ to research approaches formulated through positivism. Social Constructionism represents ‘anti-essentialism’, dismissing the idea that people are comprised of biologically determined facts, but rather are a result of ‘social processes’ (Burr 2015: 6). The focus was upon gaining understanding of particular social groups and individuals, through their own words and understandings of their experiences (Burr, 2015; Cruickshank, 2003). Much of the basis of this discourse related to questioning knowledge, in terms of its basis and representation, which I will consider in the following section.

3.4 Knowledge as socially constructed

There are many assumptions about society and social processes, yet knowledge can be based upon a particular context and set of circumstances that are open to questioning. Social Constructionism shifts research ontology towards a deeper understanding of individual realities, through exploring the context and perspective taken (Cresswell, 2009). Burr (2015: 5) explained how, according to a Social Construction type approach, knowledge is not about what is natural, but rather the “….daily interactions between people in the course of social life...” However, this knowing is deeply engrained within ways of life and
relates to the way people live and interact without questioning events, as they are part of
day to day experiences. This activity and interaction is often undertaken without
questioning its basis. Social Constructionism is based upon an ethos of questioning the
taken for granted, as the everyday forms the basis of what research seeks to understand
(Cruickshank, 2003; Gergen and Gergen, 2003).

Knowledge and its sources are associated with power, informing accepted ways of acting
and behaving, as such representing a form of control. A power relationship between
different sources of knowledge exists, consequently what is known and accepted as the
truth reflects a cultural and historical context (Burr, 2015: Gergen and Gergen, 2003).

Gergen and Gergen (2003: 151) argue that all knowledge can be perceived as existing within
a ‘historical and cultural specificity’, reflecting social norms and culture of that time. By
considering gender as an example this phenomenon can be seen as the use of ‘male’ and
‘female’ categorisations and expectations alters over time and across cultural norms. Lorber
and Farrell (1991: 114) further explore how gender is constructed within everyday activity
and by role participation:

‘Every day gendered interactions build gender into family, the work process, and
other organisations and institutions, which in truth reinforce gender expectation for
individuals’

While the assumption is that some of this is natural, it is more often based upon the
conditioning and socialisation / laws and legitimisation of roles (Burr, 2015). Lorber and
Farrell (1991) argue that gender norms have altered over time, exploring men caring for
babies and young children within social spaces, suggesting fluidity and change in social
expectations and boundaries. Lorber and Farrell (1991) identify gender as part of a social
process, influenced by social stratification and gender inequality, which enforces expectations around roles. The way in which knowledge is constructed is based upon the perspective it is viewed from, including socially constructed values and norms (Gergen and Gergen, 2003).

Whilst a positivist view claims impartiality in terms of seeking the truth, Social Constructionism views objectivity as impossible. As Social Constructionism is based upon questioning and critical thinking, which Wilson and Tagg (2010:69) argue: ‘...invites us to be critical of conventional knowledge’. Therefore, each individual and so each individual researcher holds a perspective that is based upon their experiences of reality. Burr, (2015:172) argues that personal experiences affect the stance taken:

‘No human being can step outside of their humanity and view the world from no position at all, which is what the idea of objectivity suggests...’

Therefore, rather than seeking objectivity the researcher should be aware of the role they play and acknowledge their involvement. In this way the research process is a ‘co-production’ between researcher and participants, created within a specific research scene (Burr, 2015, 172).

3.5 Realist perspective

Social Constructionism takes a realist or relativist perspective. Burr (2015) compared realism with relativism within Social Constructionism, arguing that relativists focus upon representations of reality, whilst realists seek to view the world through independent observation. Social Constructionism often incorporates a realist perspective, to consider the way in which the world exists independently of how theory might represent it. I have chosen
to draw from a realist perspective in my study. Brown et al. (1998: 77) assert that knowledge of ‘the real’ within social context requires the researcher to carefully consider the background of participants, so gaining better understanding. For Social Realism identity includes ‘the natural’, ‘the practical’ and ‘the social’, which individuals negotiate dependent upon situations and is influential to their decision making (Archer, 2003: 20). Accordingly, roles are socially determined and require priority at different times which is often accomplished through negotiation. In my study, I am interested in the women’s social roles and the interaction between them and the significance to their WLB.

A realist approach assumes the existence of the subject matter as tangible and observable, making it possible to discuss (Gergen and Gergen, 2003: 183). Additionally, Social Constructionism through realism has the ability to move with discourse, meaning that the research findings can lead to the development of new ideas through the dialogue (Gergen and Gergen, 2003). Embree (2009) considers the reality and complexity of life, with knowledge created through real, daily interactions with people within different social contexts. Realism provides a way of understanding the implications of differences and the effect of relationships upon individuals. Therefore, a realist approach was appropriate for my study as I sought understanding of women’s daily experiences and perspectives. In the next section, I will consider the significance of the research setting from the viewpoints of macro and micro approaches.

3.6: Research setting and macro and micro approaches

The setting for research is significant within a Social Constructionist approach, and should be viewed in relation to how this reflects: ‘...the specific context in which people live and work...’ (Cresswell, 2009: 8). O’Leary (1995: 250) argues that Social Constructivism is based
upon the idea that what we take for granted is frequently ‘cultural’ or defined through ‘social interaction’. Consequently, consideration of the research setting in relation to the place, culture and the interaction between participants is important. Significance is placed upon the social context and situational nature of the researcher and participants. This will also be influenced by timing and events surrounding the research. In my study I explored the interaction between the educational setting, workplace and home / wider community. This enabled me to understand the significance of the settings and the roles of participants within them.

Two key elements related to Social Constructionism concern the macro and micro aspects of society. The macro focuses upon social structures which influence social inequality, such as gender and social class experiences from the viewpoint of social stratification (Burr, 2015; Lorber and Farrell, 1991). Social Constructionism from a micro viewpoint focuses upon the ‘everyday discourse’ in terms of daily interaction, activity and relationships (Burr, 2015: 25).

Flick, (2009:77) finds:

‘According to Goodman (and Schut) social research is an analysis of such ways of world making and the constructive efforts of the participants in their everyday lives’

This shows that everyday interactions are important to understand within a micro approach to a social issue. Within my study, everyday experiences were fundamentally important, in relation to individual accounts of WLB and well-being experiences. However, there was also an attempt to understand the bigger social perspective in relation to gender and social class, which was reflective of the participant group.
3.7 Links between Social Constructionism, WLB and well-being

Work-Life Balance (WLB) and well-being can be viewed as social constructs, as much of what exists within society is perceived and interpreted, based upon viewpoint and personality features (Loscocco and Bird, 2012). Social Construction can be identified through separating work from life, identified as false, whilst ‘balance’ is seen to be allusive making WLB terminology subjective and located in personal perception. In the introduction to ‘Time Bind’ Hochschild (2000: xvii) refers to her study which is centrally concerned with WLB as follows:

‘During the first week of fieldwork for this book, a moment arrived when it occurred to me that the topic I came to research might not exist’

Therefore, whilst there are structures in place within organisations aimed at facilitating flexible approaches, the reality of people’s lives and fear of reprisal means they were underutilised, making WLB difficult to achieve. Gambles et al. (2006) use the title ‘The Myth of Work Life Balance’, with ‘myth’ indicating further the tenuous nature of WLB. Additionally, Alatartseva and Barysheve (2016) define well-being in terms of ambiguity demonstrating social construction surrounding this phenomenon. Outlining existing literature concerning well-being shows an important distinction between the objective and subjective definition, which reflects it is socially constructed (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). There is also an important distinction of the measure of well-being within a social context which reflects the wealth or hardship of the society (Deeming, 2013; Deneuline and McGregor, 2010).

Existing research on WLB utilising Social Constructionism includes Loscocco and Bird (2012) who use this perspective to research different WLB experiences of men and women as owners of small businesses. They do so to explore the influence of differentiation in
‘expectations... tightly woven into the social fabric of life...’ (Loscocco and Bird, 2012:185).

Here, whilst I did not compare men and women, I did consider how gender expectations affect the women participants, in relation to their views on role expectations and differences. Consequently, a Social Constructionism paradigm was used to support the research aim. Well-being can also be similarly viewed as a social construct, reflected through disparity within the definition and its cultural location. In terms of well-being and gender, Courtenay (2000) utilises social constructionist and feminist approaches to consider well-being amongst males, through consideration of daily interactions and masculinity, within a USA context.

Finally, the use of a social constructionist approach can accommodate flexibility to question everyday knowledge (Burr, 2015). Therefore, in conducting research within the University and considering the impact of participation in HE study for a group of women, I aimed to question existing policy and practice. The potential of a study of this kind was to raise awareness around the implications of undertaking HE study when significant other commitments were in situ and there was limited familiarity with academia. Raising awareness was not only to gain knowledge, but to implement change through that knowledge. Hence, Burr (2015) argues that research from a Social Constructionist perspective has potential for political effect through knowledge development initiating change. In the next section, I will consider how Feminist approaches influenced my study.

3.8 Use of Feminist research approaches

Whilst I am aware of the complexity and controversy in claiming a feminist standpoint within this research (Fonow and Cook, 1991; Letherby, 2003), I nevertheless cautiously state that feminist approaches have influenced my study. The rationale for this assertion is based
upon a number of guiding principles that will underpin the research process and interaction with participants. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of Feminist methodology born from a number of different standpoints (Harding, 2004; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Letherby, 2003). However, a common feature throughout its epistemological development is the assumption that power is based upon Western knowledge, which reflects gender inequality. Hence, there is a focal point of inequality and patriarchy based upon the masculinisation of power and control which unifies this diverse discourse (Harding, 2004; Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu, 2002; Ribben and Edwards, 1998). Ramazanoglu (2012: 21-23) argues that while there are a number of divisions within Feminist theory, commonality is based upon:

- Subordination of women;
- Challenging the taken for granted;
- Questioning historical claims on knowledge formation;
- Feminist being about change not only rhetoric;
- Variation in terms of political background and persuasion;
- The persistent resistance to change;
- A common critical view of the positivist approach in wanting to engage with real lived experiences.

In this study, I focused upon women and considered the impact of gender assumptions, with feminist approaches providing guidance. Feminist approaches and research attempt to shift the knowledge base, which enables women’s experiences to be shared, which this research strived to achieve (Mason, 1996; Ramazanoglu, 2002; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998).

There are some parallels between the attributes of Feminism and Social Constructionism, as both question knowledge formation in reflecting historical and cultural dominance within
society (Burr, 2015; Lorber, 1991). In this way an important strand of Feminist research rejects the assertions of positivism as associated with science and masculine constraints, which ‘omits or distorts women’s experiences’ (Blaikie, 2007: 164). Feminist discourse is based upon flexibility around ‘reflexivity’, whereby the direction of research is not predetermined, but rather created through the interaction and messages within responses. Hence feminism challenges knowledge and research traditions, consequently utilising and adapting qualitative approaches. Skeggs (1997:30) depicts the advancements made possible by the disclosure from women participants:

‘Their knowledge enabled my knowledge’

This reflects that knowledge comes from the participants’ experiences and stories, an ethos I embraced within my study. Being influenced by Feminist approaches and being guided by these principles required careful consideration of power within research and this will be explored next section.

3.9 Knowledge and power

There is often a power divide within research, based upon the role of the researcher as the expert (Letherby, 2003). Hence the researcher controls the agenda, asks the questions, has the equipment, and tends to be an academic and professional. Consequently from a Feminist perspective, the research process could become part of the oppression experienced by women (Ramazanoglu 2002, 2012; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Letherby (2003) argues that research approach should engage women to feel a sense of value and control. This means using methods to create flexibility and move forward with participants’ commentary, giving value through engagement. Kelly et al. (1994,) explores how
methodology could evolve so that methods grow and encompass new ideas without causing harm, thereby encouraging new knowledge and possible policy development. Feminist informed approaches favour qualitative methods that can be flexible and manoeuver with the participant, facilitating reflexivity and potential empowerment within research (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu 2002).

While there is much consideration of power within the research process, Hammersley (1992) is critical of the way Feminists attempt to categorize ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’; commenting that there is greater complexity within society especially if social class and race are contemplated. Skeggs (1997) examines the importance of the social position of research participants, finding theory developed frequently reflects the dominance of white middle class women. This reflects the influences of an academic tradition, whereby early Feminist research involved middle class women as researchers and participants, hence, Skeggs (1997) argues this approach fails to encompass all women. She used qualitative methods to researched marginalised women, considering the conflict they experience, building relationships to foster an open and positive exchange and create a realistic story. In undertaking my study, I followed a similar ethos, utilising a flexible structure, which included the women’s experiences more fully. Additionally, I disclosed my background and experiences of my own education and as a mum, in an attempt to build rapport and shift perceptions that the researcher is the expert. This I recognized as an important challenge within Feminist approaches and wanted to achieve this redistribution of positional power.

Feminist theory and research approaches represent a shift in terms of both knowledge development and its source. Letherby (2003: 215) argues that the development of Feminist ideology and the associated research paradigms, coincided with a ‘crisis’ in what was
considered concrete and accepted knowledge. There is a link between Feminism and post-modernism, in that both challenge the conventions surrounding idea formation, questioning the authority afforded to scientific knowledge (Blaike, 2007). Therefore, Feminist methodology is part of the deconstruction of previous assumptions, including placing significance upon realms of identity and associated space, which I will consider next.

3.10 Public and private space and identity

An important part of Feminist discourse relates to the position of public, private space and associated identity, conventionally research is seen to priorities public roles, for example the worker, while it ignores private roles like mother (Miller, 1998,). Ribbens and Edwards (1998) assert that there is a dilemma for feminist researchers, based upon the positional importance of the public/academic and private/personal. Hence, a distinct feature of Feminism is based upon studying previously unexplored areas, traditionally significant to women, such as the domestic / housework and family / household. This highlights the limited scope of conventional research in the private realms, seen to be significant in changing the power base of research, through gaining understanding of women’s everyday lives. For feminism to engage with women’s lives and issues new research methods and qualitative approaches needed to be developed, able to create real accounts of people’s lives (Letherby, 2003; Mauthner, 1989; Ramazanoglu, 2002). The feminist ideal is motivated to research areas long associated with women and gains credibility for the private sphere, often undervalued and overlooked, subsequently raising awareness of inequality (Letherby, 2003; Olesen, 2011; Ramazanoglu, 2002).

Dilemmas emerge when moving private and personal experiences into a public knowledge, in relation to sensitivity around morphing findings to fit accepted academic conventions.
Also there is tension when the need for confidentiality depersonalizes the personal. Ribbens and Edwards (1998:2) find difficulty in ‘remaining faithful’ to the personal and ‘intimate setting’ when converting the story shared with the respondent into permissible data. This can only be achieved through sensitivity, respect and authenticity. Letherby (2003: 30-1) explores the positional power in language development and use, labelling it as ‘man-made’, in its reflection of male power which dominates to make language appear biased. At times Feminists find limited language and terms for female expression and women’s issues, as language reflects dominant male culture and knowledge, meaning research concerning women’s lives can sometimes find restricted terminology. Miller (1998: 61) identifies this dilemma when researching the experiences of sisters, leading her to comment:

‘The public concept of research, as ordered, academic and rationale, does not fit with the disorder of private and/or personal experiences’

This awareness of a power imbalance and the legacy of restricted expression for women meant feminist research is associated with developing different approaches, through innovative and flexible outlooks. Part of this redistribution is through appreciation of the participants’ own voices within the research process, which I will consider next.

3.11 Voice

An important part of Feminist discourse relates to valuing the ‘voice’, a term frequently utilized and having various associated meanings. For example, Hochschild (1998) associates the voice with the expression of emotion amongst participants. Others use the term to encapsulate experiences and attempting to empower women through their story being expressed in their own words. The legacy of Feminist research methodology views the
‘voice’ as not being previously heard, as knowledge, culture and history values the masculine (Letherby, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 1989). Therefore, Feminist approaches work to make the research findings reflect women’s voices, which symbolizes the importance of engaging with and recounting shared experiences and knowledge. Hence, the voice is considered within the research method in relation to how the researcher might hear and react to the voice (Miller, 1998; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Ribbens (1998: 60) questioned her research approach and position to enable her to locate research methods which would ‘….enable the women’s voices to be distinct and discernible’. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) highlight the difficulty of interpretation and displaying findings sensitively especially when considering private spheres such as domestic life, whilst remaining voice focused. Allred (1998) argues that the voice is a persuasive tool that can enhance engagement with issues, and ‘voice’ is seen to have power, giving a clear message which people are able to relate to. In this way the voice is seen to provide enhanced insights and understanding about women’s lives.

To facilitate voice fully, the whole research process should be scrutinised, in relation to methods, relational power and perception, but also with regards to the treatment of findings. There is an issue of power associated with interpreting the voice, as what the participants share, becomes the researcher’s findings, and here there is the potential for power to move towards the researcher. Skeggs, (1997) argues that while the research might aim to reflect the voice authentically, the writing up process and presenting information is a place where power can be eroded. Yet this is necessary in terms of fulfilment of academic conventions and other agendas. In my study, I used a flexible approach so participants could express themselves in their own terms. I also took time and care when listening and
transcribing, aiming to maintain the association between participants and findings (Mason, 1996).

3.12: Qualitative approach

The use of a qualitative approach provided a means to exploring women’s experiences and views about WLB and well-being, reflecting the theoretical approaches I have previously considered in this chapter. Flick (2006) describes qualitative findings as concrete cases examined temporally and locally, which have the ability to reflect the significance of respondents’ personal attributes and environment. Qualitative approaches accommodate the views of participants in a fluid way, as they are based upon a premise associated with interpersonal exchange (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Henn et al. (2006: 36) linked qualitative methodology with Feminism, in that the approach values the participant as a whole person, rather than a ‘disembodied source of data’. This is critical in the generation of in-depth findings, which are able to show richness, associated with the experiences and personal perception of individuals. There are many methods within the range of qualitative approaches and I have chosen to use focus group and semi-structured interviews, which I will consider next.

3.13 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research, denoted by a guide of ‘issues and questions’, with flexibility around order, some not asked and others added in response to the interaction (Gray, 2009: 373). A semi-structured interview should be purposefully imbalanced, with respondents talking most, enabling them to express views and opinions. Henn (2006: 35) comments:
‘Feminist researchers argue that, as researchers, we ought to learn to listen more and talk less’

The emphasis upon listening to the participants was significant in understanding their perspectives and facilitating their voices to be heard and understood. Mason (1996: 36) refers to interviewing as the ‘generation’ rather than ‘collection’ of data, reflecting an exchange and development of ideas and understanding within a given social space. Additionally, O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2015: 80) describe interviews in terms of ‘active interactions’, whereby findings are created through exchanges. Furthermore, DeMarrais (2004) examines how interviews obtain ‘in-depth’ knowledge and recount of ‘experiences’, forming a more complete picture, through an ‘informal conversational style’ with less restraint, encouraging idea development. DeMarrais, (2004: 53) argues for a ‘non-directive approach’ whereby the interviewer takes a more ‘passive role’ to create a situation where participants have greater control. Although DeMarrais (2004) also considers follow-up questions constructive in building a detailed impressions of experiences, which will forge a stronger link with the research aim. Qualitative interview technique enables in-depth knowledge of lived experiences, including personal and emotional characteristics, with flexibility creating new findings whilst showing appreciation (Henn et al. 2006). However, the requirement to progress the interview and ensure topic focus remained important, which made the interview guide significant. Flick (2006:189) argues that the interview guide ‘increases the comparability of data’, which adds to the credibility of the findings.

Interpersonal skills are essential for interviewing, with the creation of rapport and trust between the researcher and participant essential for positive outcomes, especially where the focus is upon personal experiences. Charmaz (2006) explores the importance of being
open and non-judgmental, which encourages the development of the interview, as control is moved towards the participant. DeMarrais (2004) argues that once there is clarity and shared meanings, related to the viewpoints of both participant and interviewer, the interview will be most productive. Verbal exchange was only part of what occurred, as there is also meaning attached to interaction, which can be productively explored, for example emotion around WLB. Social make-up including experience, culture and gender are all seen to be key features, which influence the way the interview progresses and the information generated (DeMarrais, 2004). The interviews were followed by a focus group, which I will consider in the following section.

3.14 Focus groups

Focus Groups (FG) can be defined in terms of a group interview or discussion (Gill et al., 2008). Parker and Tritter (2006) argue they have grown in popularity, as rich qualitative findings are gained through participants’ conversations, requiring less researcher input and time. Hence, focus groups are based upon interaction which creates findings, with less time focus groups represent a widely used research method, which aim at creating rich qualitative data, developed by researchers in social sciences and marketing. Kleiber (2004) explores focus groups as an inquiry method which can extend and initiate new understanding. Feminist approaches advocate giving value and empowerment through feedback to participants, which further authenticates findings and develops new insights (Charmez, 2006; Letherby, 2003). The questions and comments which formed the basis of the FG came from the participants’ interview feedback, which formed the basis of the statements and questions, to be agreed or debated. Gill et al. (2008) examines debate surrounding the optimal number of participants in a focus group, and suggest that between
six and eight are standard practice, although there is evidence of success with up to fourteen and under three. Hence, there are different views of the number of respondents. For example, Turner et al. (2009) made use of very small numbers, with two on occasion, due to limited access to participants, yet found that in-depth discussion came from a small group interaction. This might be seen to be similar to the focus group within my research which included four of the women.

The success of focus groups requires interactions between members and can be more successful if individuals have a pre-existing relationship, as in the case of the group in my study. Gill et al. (2008: 293) find pre-existing groups beneficial due to ‘shared’ experiences, ‘comfort’ and ‘familiarity’ encouraging dialogue, although there are examples of success based upon bringing strangers together without preconceptions and role definition. The researcher has the task of mediating and leading the focus group, hence maintaining focus in the discussion (Creswell, 2009; Gray, 2009; Henn, 2005). Flick (2009:195) describes the need to encourage involvement, so group members do not dominate whilst those who are ‘reserved’ are encouraged to contribute, which requires a skilled researcher. Gill et al. (2008) argue a pre-existing group is likely to have a group dynamic, influencing confidence, with members feeling more relaxed and less inhibited, with trust and common understanding likely to increase interaction. There is potential for egalitarianism within focus groups, in that they facilitate the participant’s voice, making them feel valued, as their expert view on their experience is appreciated (Gill et al., 2008; Kleiber, 2004).

There are a number of approaches to facilitate focus groups, with commercial FG tending to have dual facilitation and two researchers present (Gill et al., 2008). However, Parker and Tritter, (2007:26) assert that there is increased evidence of successful ‘single handed’ focus
group facilitation within academic settings, which means just be one researcher. Hence whilst there will be a recording of the interaction and dialogue the presence of one researcher is viewed as less intrusive, which led me to use this approach.

Kleiber (2004) posits that whilst focus groups seem simplistic, they allow for the exploration of the ways in which social constructionism underpins key social issues. This relates to social interaction and dialogue around issues, which can evoke strong reactions. The aim is not consensus but discourse, generating ideas, by exploring participants’ thoughts and feelings. Kleiber (2004: 91) argues that focus group discussion can become a forum for social and organisational change, with richness in the information generated through reduced structure, facilitating ‘discoveries’ to be made. While this qualitative approach provides an in-depth picture, offering greater insight, there is less repeatability, as interaction reflects a particular time, place and mood. Yet credibility is derived from the group providing findings greater than the sum of the individuals, as the dialogue and interaction between the different participants enriches the experience (Creswell, 2009; Parker and Titter, 2007).

Focus groups are useful for discussing the everyday (Gill et al., 2015). They are widely used in WLB research, for example by O’Neil (2012) researches WLB within hospitality, and Turner et al. (2009) explores WLB in relation to policy development and uptake. Focus groups are used to research public and mental health, so exploring well-being, including Pescud et al. (2015) and Forsman et al. (2013). Simmons et al. (2015), used focus groups to consider well-being within an educational setting, with other research examples evident. This method is used in relation to WLB experiences of women and reviewing the benefits of workforce participation (Haslam et al., 2015). Focus groups represent a good way of confirming data, as was evident in my study, as it formed a feedback loop for the semi-
structure interviews. Aanand (2013) argues focus groups are viewed favorably in Feminist approach as they validate the interview stage, while making the relationship between participants and the researcher more equal.

3.15 Combining Research Methods

Combining methods of data collection can increase completeness within research (Flick, 2006; O’Reilly and Kiyimba, 2015). In my study, I wanted to engage with the women in a way that facilitated their voice and provided a space for them to talk individually about their experiences (Letherby, 2003). I also wanted to bring the participants together in a focus group so that they could find out about the findings from the interviews, discussing these in a group provided potential for further findings based upon a group discussion rather than individual interviews. This rationale was informed by my use of social constructionism (Burr, 2015). The semi-structured interviews allowed for a focus on and space for individual experiences. The one to one nature of semi-structured interviews provided the ability to appreciate the personal. Skeggs (1997) identifies the importance of offering a safe space to working class women as they are more likely to feel constrained. I encouraged the women to speak about themselves and let them know that I valued their individual experiences of WLB and HE study. This was important in terms of the relationship between the women and me as the researcher, as there can be a perceived power imbalance which can have a negative impact upon trust. To overcome this potential barrier I pursued active positive feedback to their commentary and shared my own experiences (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu, 2012).

In contrast with the individual approach of the interviews, the focus group was based upon interactions and exchanges between a group of women who knew and trusted each other (Parker and Tritter, 2007). In this way a social construction around shared identity and understanding was evident as they had studied together and felt able to share their experiences. The FG had its own dynamic and was a social construct based upon shared experience and knowledge, whilst each individual had their own identity. Parker and Tritter (2007) consider the importance of freedom within focus groups and the connections between those involved based upon their common experience that leads to trust and
understanding within the environment. The links between the women created through studying together represented a dynamic relationship, which during the FG encouraged the flow of information amongst them. In relation to the FG in my research my role was predominantly that of facilitator, who relayed the outcomes from the interviews to seek confirmation and elicit further experiences. This included transformation and new observations derived from the group’s discussion. During the FG the facilitator can be seen as an outsider or observer, as members generated their own interactions (Kleiber, 2004). Focus groups are dynamic interactions and in this case was evidently based upon a supportive construct between the women, formed as they studied together, which had created an openness. Four participants in a focus group is identified by Toner (2009) as potentially empowering, evident for women in my study as they were able to have their voices heard more effectively, and less likely to experience exclusion. In contrast to the individual and personal space created within the exchange during the semi-structured interview, the FG created a shared and dynamic experience. Olsen (2011) identifies the potential created through relationships and the mutual understanding which members of a group might experience, a feature highly evident in the FG interaction. In keeping with the ethos of a feminist approach, power might be seen to be with the women as they discussed their experiences of WLB and well-being. From a social constructionist perspective this interaction represented their version of knowledge development and transformation (Burr, 2015).

### 3.16 Ethical consideration

In undertaking research that involves people, it is essential to consider ethical issues. O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) argue that ethical guidance is less suited to qualitative research, being heavily influenced by quantitative approach, with discourse including views that it is less important for qualitative. Mason (1996: 59) explains how from an ethical viewpoint qualitative interviewing should never be taken ‘lightly’, with approaches always receiving full consideration and linking with both the research methodology and questions. Ethics in
research concerns the rights of people and is embedded within the law (Henn et al., 2006) and the moral and professional responsibility of the researcher to do no harm.

The British Sociological Association (2002) offers guidance for sociologists undertaking research, aiming to ensure best practice. Professional integrity is identified as critical, reflecting the responsibility of the researcher to follow laws associated with Data Protection Act (1998) and Human Rights Act (1998). This intends to safeguard participants through adherence to guidance of conduct during research and later dissemination, storage and publication of research findings. The Statement of Ethics incorporates safety for participants and researchers, with the sociologists seen to enter a professional relationship, reflecting moral responsibility and awareness of potential conflict (BSA, 2002). Informed consent must be adhered to including clarity of right to withdraw for the research, being relayed by both researchers and gatekeepers. Anonymity and confidentiality in relation to personal information, security of data and use of pseudonyms, to break possible links with participants, must be respected (BSA, 2002). However, participants should also be made aware of the potential compromise to confidentiality, for example during group-based research. The British Sociological Association (2002) state the lack of adherence to these ethical principles undermines the discipline of sociology. The researcher / respondent relationship includes a responsibility for the physical, social and psychological well-being of the participant, with awareness of the issue of power within the setting (BSA, 2002).

The significance of power within the research process and potential positive experiences has previously been identified in section 3.9. Olesen, (2011) argued that from an ethical viewpoint Feminist researchers should attempt to build mutually beneficial experiences and demonstrate a caring approach. Sensitivity in terms of lines of questioning and the use of
information is important, so those involved in research feel valued and are provided with insight from the researcher. This formed a guiding principle throughout my study, so that when participants displayed emotion and concern I provided reassurance, guidance and direction to further support. The interviews involved University students who could access support from the institution, so if help was required it could be provided, fulfilling the researcher’s commitment to prevent harm (Humphrey, 2012).

Arksey and Knight (1999) identify informed consent as a critical ethical issue, allowing participants to understand choices and levels of involvement. O’Brien and Kiyimba (2015:53) assert that this forms a way to ‘empower’ participants throughout the research, being based upon their best interest, upholding the right to withdraw and making their rights paramount. Olesen (2011: 136) in considering consent from a feminist standpoint, differentiated between ‘informed’ and ‘process’ consent, which involved checking at stages throughout the process rather than initially being granted this. The interviews and focus group followed this approach with regular confirmation from the women ensuring they wished to continue. O’Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) describe the qualitative research as non-linear, which creates changing boundaries related to those involved and the development of questions, as participants comments influence the interaction and discussion. The flexibility within the approach facilitated reflexive methods as during interaction in both semi-structured interviews and the focus group, participants’ comments generated new questions. Consequently, the questions schedule represented a loose structure / guide, only partially confirmed beforehand. This meant that I had to use my professional judgement to ensure that questions that developed were not overly intrusive, reading non-verbal cues to maintain sensitivity. Parker and Titter (2006) identify an ethical dilemma for researchers
who must follow codes and guidance, including the right to confidentiality whilst, focus groups are based upon sharing and self-disclosure consequently compromising confidentiality. Therefore, facilitation must be based upon the boundaries of research and professional role, codes and control which help maintain a safe research environment.

When I initially proposed this study and considered the participants, I decided against recruiting students that I teach for ethical reasons. Mercer (2007) identified a similar ethical dilemma when researching his colleagues, based upon the potential for confidentiality to be compromised, associated with the closeness of relationships. Furthermore, Humphrey (2012: 577) identified ‘several conundrums’ based upon researching her own students, with conflict involving the roles of tutor and researcher colliding. In this study I hoped to avoid the dilemma in how to respond to disclosures and information gained. If the participants had been from my programme, their experiences might have created a dilemma in terms of needing to respond, compromising my researcher role and creating pressure to break confidentiality (Mercer, 2007). Therefore, whilst the participants were from the University, they were not directly linked with me. In relation to role perception, they were more likely to see me as a researcher (PhD student) rather than a lecturer, so reducing the perceived power gap in the research process (Letherby, 2003).

In terms of ethical approval, this doctoral study was compliant with the University policy and approved by the ethics committee. The ethics form RE1 is in Appendix 3 (page 281). During the application process a number of ethical issues were identified. Firstly, programme leaders acting as gate keepers to participants, proved potentially ethically challenging, depending upon trust and creating possible dilemmas at disclosing information which related to experiences at the University. Miller and Bell (2001) identify an ethical
dilemma in using gatekeepers partly related to the power they are perceived to have, however, benefits associated with reassurance and participant choice exist. Therefore, informed / process consent were used throughout, with reassurance offered relating to voluntary involvement, the right not to answer and withdraw at any time. Programme leaders who acted as gatekeepers were briefed around the rights of students to participate or not. The question schedules were reviewed by the PhD supervisors, who represent experienced guides through the process, able to ensure compliance with ethical codes. Written guidance was given at each stage of the research process and anonymity assured, as names were changed; so whilst participant may have recognised themselves others should not have done so (O’Reilly and Kiyimba, 2015). Importantly, disclosures were treated respectfully, with reassurance that this would be the case, including assurance that specifics of the information would not be shared with gatekeepers so avoiding compromise. McAreavey and Das (2013) argue whilst gatekeepers are important consent should be checked regularly, with the right to withdraw maintained throughout, with further reassurance around protection of information.

A second area for ethical consideration related to the possibility that reflecting upon WLB and well-being could cause potential stress for participants, through the contemplation of personal circumstances. Additionally, the unstructured format of the interviews might have led to the disclosure of sensitive information. O’Reilly and Kiyima (2015) identify consent as significant for sensitivity with information shared at the participants’ discretion. This made the right to not respond and withdraw at any time crucial to my study. A debriefing option was provided and the opportunity to access support, as the research setting was within HE, counselling and student services could be provided supporting participants if required
(Olesen, 2011). The positive aspects of being involved in my study included the potential to feel listened to and empowered, through the appreciation of experiences, and potentially gaining insights into WLB, helping participants adapt (Henn et al. 2006; Mason, 1996). Therefore, ethics were given full consideration and guidance was adhered to throughout. The next section will consider the research setting and the participant group.

3.17: Research setting and the selection and recruitment of participants

The choice of research setting and sampling strategy is critically important to the research process (Mason, 1996). The research setting was a modern post-1992 University in an industrial town in North West England, with a high proportion of students from a widening access background. The participants were Early Years students, linking with the established research aim to consider the experiences of women studying in HE, while employed and with varying family responsibilities (Lowe and Gayle, 2007). All of the participants were initially members of the Foundation degree, although by the focus group stage had progressed to the BA top up programme reflecting their academic trajectory. The Programme Leader was a gate-keeper, facilitating the participants to become involved in my study, providing basic participant background details to initiate an introductory email to establish contact. In this way the sample was one of convenience or opportunity, with an element of self-selection and volunteerism. Gray (2009: 575) defines such a pattern as a ‘non-probability sample strategy’ linked with locating a respondent group who are available and willing to participate. The ten interviewees, being randomly selected, covered a range of circumstances, including those with and without children, single / married / co-habiting and lone parent household, with a range of dependents. The focus group consisted of four participants previously interviewed who were re-engaged with, by agreement at the end of
the interview. This approach was associated with looking both at those the researcher has access to and who would also reflect a range of circumstances (Creswell, 2009; Flick, 2009; Gray, 2009; Henn, 2006). Although respondent numbers were relatively small the depth and rigour of the qualitative process offered a unique insight into a group of students with common and distinct experiences. In the next section, I will consider the setting in terms of some detail of the University and the way in which the participants accessed the programme.

3.18 The setting

As previously described, the setting was a University situated in a large former industrial town in North West England. The University was a relatively new modern post-1992 institution, with a learner profile that included a significant proportion of students classed as Widening Access. Many were adults returning into education and increasingly some were younger students from the town, who wished to remain local to reduce expenses (Higgins et al. 2010; Sargent, 1991). The University had expanded its Foundation degree provision under the widening participation incentives and to meet local workforce development needs (Harvey, 2009; Higgins et al., 2010). The students were local, in that they came from the town or nearby surrounding area, which enabled them to learn whilst managing other demands.

The Early Years Foundation degree was developed by the University in response to the Post-1997 UK New Labour Government’s focus upon widening participating, alongside the skills and knowledge development required for the Early Years workforce (Harvey, 2009; Guile and Evans, 2010). This focus related to achieving minimum standard of qualification and skills, aimed to improve services within EYs provision (Yorke and Longen., 2010). There were
various incentives for employer support with some local authority funding accessible for fees. The Foundation degree was classed as full-time as the time in the workplace contributed to learning, whilst students had one afternoon and evening in University. The women were employed across a variety of organisations and settings including private / public nurseries, play-groups in churches and community buildings, charities, schools, and children and family centres. The diverse nature of organisations meant variation in budgets and infrastructure and often influenced the support for learners, although all students were released from work or facilitated to attend University. There was some funding through Local Authorities during the period of my study (2007–2017), but this was once again variable in terms of accessibility. Having outlined the research approach, influence of social constructionism and feminism, the choices of research methods, ethics, participant group and the setting, I will explore my place in the research.

3.19 The role of self in research

In this section, I will consider my position within the research process, which is clearly important within both Social Constructionist and Feminist approaches (Burr, 2015; Letherby, 2003). Qualitative research of this kind is distinct from positivist methodology, being based upon rapport and requiring emotional involvement from researchers (Beale et al., 2004). During the research process I shared personal experiences, for example of being a mother, as a way of breaking barriers and enhancing the interpersonal exchange. Beale et al. (2004, 146) argue empathy, rapport and divulging personal experiences, during qualitative research, creates emotional responses likened to a ‘roller-coaster ride of emotional reaction during the interviewing trajectory’. Reflection was important and included considering the emotional reactions amongst participants and myself. Flexibility within semi-structured
interview and focus group were used to ensure that there was a positive exchange and development within this interaction.

I had an existing relationship with the University and therefore might be considered to have held an insider position, which Humphrey (2012: 572) defines as follows:

‘Insider research may be defined as research conducted by people who are already members of the organisation or community...’

There are a number of advantages for an insider, with connection and trust helping form rapport, as familiarity makes the researcher less intrusive and fosters potential for greater understanding (Hanson, 2013; Mercer, 2007). Conversely, disadvantages include preconceptions about the setting, assumption about behaviour, potential role conflict and power imbalance (Hanson, 2013; Humphrey, 2012; Mercer, 2007). Mason (1996) explores the issue of identity within the research relationship and ways it can adversely influence research. Additionally, Letherby (2003) outlines the importance of overcoming the power gap in feminist discourse, which could be more apparent as an insider, as the position of power maybe known. As a lecturer I was aware of positional power, which could have led participating students to experience a barrier, limiting their honesty and potentially making them feel obliged to be involved in the research.

Mason (1996) considers how personal identity can be used to construct interaction, which I aimed to achieve through focusing upon my experiences as a woman combining a family and employment. I did this through expressing empathy and some mirroring of participants experiences as appropriate. I also considered the place of the research in terms of being in student space and considered how I dress so as not to appear ‘official’ (Mauthner et al., 1989: Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Before, during and after the interviews I expressed
gratitude, thanking the participants for their time and emphasising how the research depended upon them. I believe, based upon student and colleague feedback, that I have excellent interpersonal skills and have the ability to communicate to achieve common ground, which proved significant for success. My study was motivated through genuine professional and personal experiences and interest, as outlined in Chapter One, and I aimed to use my study to inform and improve HE practice. Consideration of my position as a researcher is important, as is understanding of potential limitations, which will be explored next.

3.20 Limitations of the study

When engaging with qualitative research there are perceived limitations associated with repeatability, which causes positivists to be critical through contrasting viewpoints around a lack of scientific rigor and reliability (Gray, 2009). Limitations are associated with the unique nature of the research in terms of examining a group of participants in a specific place, at a particular time making repeatability difficult. Notwithstanding, validity and reliability are derived from sharing the question schedule, clear adherence to ethics, thematic review based upon the findings presented and cross referenced to other research. My study approach aimed to achieve holistic, in-depth understanding, with focus upon discussing issues from individual perspectives (Noor, 2008; Meyer, 2001). The study was small scale, representing the experiences of only ten women learners, within a particular set of circumstances, however the depth of findings provided insights which made this research valuable. A further potential limitation was associated with the process by which the findings were represented which can be influenced by selectivity, but can also be impacted by practical issues. There are some practical issues associated with transcribing focus group
discussion, for example, Parker and Titter (2007) argue differentiation of participants due to cross-over of speakers is challenging.

In addressing these limitations, transparency is critical, hence the tools used are provided for scrutiny, although the uniqueness of each individual interaction makes a different story possible (Gray, 2009). The feedback mechanism used might be seen to test the solidity of the findings, in terms of linking one set of techniques and findings with another. Letherby (2003: 53) argues that qualitative findings should provide insight, which links with a ‘…wider body of theory, knowledge or existence…’ making reviewing literature around WLB and well-being critical to show knowledge. Furthermore, Letherby (2003) considers how research findings can impact upon knowledge, but also highlight the need for further research, which will be considered more fully in the concluding chapter. The next section will provide a summary of this chapter and link with the next.

3.21 Summary

This chapter represents the first of two focused upon the research methodology and approach and it began by stating the research aims and objectives. Here I have considered the Social Constructionist paradigm and Feminist approaches which informed the research. There has also been justification for the use of a qualitative approach, including exploration of the merits of the methods of semi-structured interviews and focus group. Ethics and the importance of consent in informing decisions around the research have also been outlined. In this chapter I have also outlined the research setting, selection and recruitment of participants. Finally there was a brief review of the limitations within the approach which will be explored more fully in the concluding chapter. The next chapter will focus upon the
research design, outlining the participants, the practicalities of conducting the interviews and focus group, including the development of themes and the thematic review.
Chapter Four Research design: Practicalities, participation and review of findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I consider the research design and the practicalities of carrying out this study. In Chapter Three, I explored the theoretical framework, the methodology, ethical issues, the research setting, how the women were recruited, my role as researcher and some research limitations. Here I focus on operationalising the study and cover timing of the semi-structured interviews; the interview schedule; the focus group; and the analytical framework used. I will then provide an overview of Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006) my chosen analytical approach, and give a brief account of the two phases of the study. I will explore how the interview findings influenced the focus group, to develop the discussion and authenticate these findings. I will provide an overview of how the key findings, lead to the identification of three key themes and related subthemes, hence, outlining the results of the TA. Firstly, there will be an overview of the research design with exploration of the two main phases.

4.2 Research design

As stated in Chapter Three, my study was influenced by a Social Constructionist paradigm, realism and Feminist approaches and my academic interest in women’s experiences. I used qualitative methods, employing semi-structured interviews at phase one and focus group (FG) at two. Table 5 shows the two phases of the research process, with consideration of the aim and outcomes:
Table 5 Phases of research process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>When, who / where</th>
<th>Key aims</th>
<th>Influence upon questions</th>
<th>Outcome:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss themes WLB and well-being</td>
<td>In-depth literature search and reflexive approach which responds to comments</td>
<td>45-60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 participants</td>
<td>May to July 2010</td>
<td>Flexibility to facilitate emerging ideas / views</td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing rich, in-depth data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-depth information is cultivated through an openness and flexibility within the research approach (Letherby, 2003; Mason, 1996).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups (FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss themes WLB and well-being</td>
<td>The questions derived from the interview transcripts. There will be a dual aim of and showing appreciation for the information provided at stage one.</td>
<td>60 minutes approx.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 group with 4 members</td>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Flexibility to facilitate emerging themes expanding the findings, whilst authenticating previous results, hence increasing the depth of discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing rich, in-depth data &amp; confirming themes from interview / developing others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interviewed at stage 1:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Furthermore, joining research methods build upon finding to create a more complete picture so increasing validity (Henn, et al, 2006).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 illustrated the research process in terms of the two distinct, yet inter-related, phases used. The use of more than one phase, was identified by Creswell, (2009); Henn, et al. (2006) as positive in terms of widening the approach and facilitating new findings to be
found. The collected findings were reviewed through thematic analysis (TA) which I used to locate themes, related to the research aim and objectives. An overview of the ten women involved in the research will be considered next.

4.3 The Participants (Women)

All the participants in the study were women, undertaking a Foundation degree in Early Years during the initial phase of the study. The four women who were involved in the FG were undertaking a final year to complete an under-graduate degree programme. The women in the research were all white British, with the exception of Pearl who was Black African. Table 6 provides demographic details / hours of employment and family situation, collected during the interview and relevant in considering WLB experiences, which I will consider further in Chapter Five. There is also an indication of the stage of study and whether the women were involved in the focus group.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The women</th>
<th>Participated in FG Workplace</th>
<th>Hours of Employment</th>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>Family situation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>/ Private nursery owner</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lone parent with 3 children: 18, 17, 12</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Had worked in EY for many years and built up her own business. Very positive attitude towards learning and her own WLB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>/ After school and pre-school facility Charitable</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Married 2 children at time of interview: 9, 14</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Reduced hours in final year, combined two roles / one is managerial. Positive attitude of employer support. Very positive about education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>Play school at a church</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lone parent 4 children Daughter 18, twin boys 12, son 15</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Her son has additional medical needs, caused by serious skin complaint.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lives with partner and 2 sons who are college / university age</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>Had reduced hours to dedicate time to work / described a very supportive family. Positive in terms of WLB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lives with partner and 3 'adult children'</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>Described a supportive family / has dyslexia and a son with autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl</td>
<td>/ Primary School</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lives with husband/ has a 12 year old son not currently living with her</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>WLB was improved due to getting a car just prior to interview. Positive about professionals she worked with. Often did unpaid overtime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>/ School &amp; After school</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lives with husband and 2 sons (age at first interview: 4 and 11</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Reduced hours by the focus group stage. Has dyslexia. Younger son was diagnosed with autism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lives with partner who works away during the week and son aged 3</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Was often responsible for family and household, but very positive about WLB. With support from her parents and workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lives with partner</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>SENCO so had additional responsibilities at work. Felt study had taken over everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single lives with parents</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Positive about WLB / support from employers. Been studying since school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 The participants, demographic, employment and family background
Diversity in relation to familial households has been shown, including those with younger children, grown up family, lone parents and those without children. There is also some background information included, which the women provided during the interview. The next section will consider the semi-structured interviews and how I interviewed all of the women in the study.

4.4 Semi-structured Interviews

As I outlined in Chapter Three, semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for this study and supported me to achieve the research aim and objectives. This was reflected upon in the interview transcripts, which identified the wide use of prompts and additional questions, creating a dialogue which prioritised the women’s voices. The women’s commentary directed the interviews and I asked questions in response to what they said throughout the interviews. This was in line with a reflexive approach, moving with the flow of the interview, rather than being controlled and inflexible (Letherby, 2003). I interviewed ten Early Years Foundation students, between May to July 2010, for around 45-60 minutes in a private room at the University, recording the interviews on a dictaphone with the women’s permission. The interviews took place when the women were attending University for their study day or another mutually convenient time, to limit imposing on the women’s time. This reflected the importance of valuing the women and my ambition that a study about WLB should not create additional time pressure.

The interviews began with an initial collection of demographic/ household / employment details which built an initial rapport and orientation towards the interview setting. This enabled me to collect information about the women’s personal circumstances and helped me understand their family, employment situations and any support they could draw upon.
WLB and the impact of HE study being added to women’s lives were then explored (Please see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule, Page 271). Table 7 shows the areas of questioning for the semi-structured interviews and the rationale for the choices by making reference to some literature previously considered in Chapter Two.

**Table 7 Question areas for semi-structured interviews and rationale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question areas in the interviews:</th>
<th>Purpose / aim / influence of literature:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WLB and commentary around visuals associated with WLB</td>
<td>Creating some focus upon WLB and orientate participant towards the research (Hanson, 2013; Letherby, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of housework / domestic tasks undertaken by participants / other household members</td>
<td>To explore levels of responsibility / contributions from other household members / influence of family form (Oakley, 1984; Hochschild, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patterns of behaviour around managing commitment areas</td>
<td>To explore demands upon individuals and households To consider strategies for coping (Ammons and Markham, 2004; Jarvis, 1999; Hyman et al., 2005; Markham, 2004; Shaevitz, 1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to employment / early years sector, in terms of hours of employment / also attitude towards work</td>
<td>The effects of working within the EYs sector and the effect upon commitment (Ammons and Markham, 2004; Jarvis and Pratt, 2006; Pettinger et al., 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of the addition of HE study on daily living / attitudes / attributes</td>
<td>To consider the ways in which participants manage the new situation (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Wieblers, 2001; Yorke and Longden, 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes of participants to WLB identify influence of role models</td>
<td>Possibility of comparing experiences Social construction (Burr, 2015; Gergen and Gergen, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WLB is concerned with time and time use</td>
<td>Participants will be asked to consider working patterns and time use (Bittman, 2005; Wajcman, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing experiences with partners, by way of exploring household approach and contribution</td>
<td>Considering the implications of the trio of work, family and study (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2010; Ooms et al., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure explored in terms of reduced free time and changing approach</td>
<td>As leisure forms an important part of well-being, but is often reduced due to study (Cassidy, 2005; Sargent 2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst this schedule is in place, additional questions evolved from the interview in response to participants’ comments. This was incorporated as it is significant for those involved.
Ethical issues were considered with consent checked throughout, as outlined in Chapter Three (Olesen, 2011). I used appropriate self-disclosure related to my own WLB experiences, including my domestic and family situation to build rapport and redistribute power (Letherby, 2003; Oakley, 1984). Following the interviews, I made reflective notes including my experiences of conducting the interviews. I transcribed all the interviews to support my understanding of the findings in greater depth and facilitating the initial evaluation. Oliver (2005) and Letherby (2003) argued that the self-transcription of findings was significant for interpretation and analysis, building familiarity and understanding with the words and meanings. I made few notes during the interview process, as I wanted to focus on the women’s words and felt that note taking would form a potential distraction. It seemed inappropriate to write whilst the women disclosed personal information and experiences. Beale et al. (2004) considered the importance of an egalitarian approach, which was based upon interpersonal skills and active listening. Hence activities such as note taking can undermine the perception of focus upon the participant and can be viewed as the researcher taking control (Letherby, 2003). As the interview phase was completed, the focus group formed a follow-up part of the study with four of the women who took part in the interviews.

4.5 The Focus Group

A focus group approach is about developing rich information generated through a discussion between the participants (Flick, 2006; Henn et al., 2006). Following a similar approach to the semi-structured interviews, a flexible question schedule was used, intended to ascertain the women’s own experiences and opinions (Kleiber, 2004). This schedule was framed using the findings from the ten interviews as a way to generate further discussion
whilst also checking authenticity (See appendix 2, Page 275). The focus group lasted for one
hour and involved students who were completing the BA top-up Programme. The aim of the
focus group was to enrich the findings through further discussion, authenticating through
seeking affirmation. This was significant when following Feminist approaches aiming to
value the women’s voices (Letherby, 2003). The focus group took place within the University
setting, at a convenient time for the women, which was when they were in University to
submit their dissertation. Four of the women agreed to participate, and as Toner (2009)
argued smaller focus groups are highly effective in enabling participants to feel confident. I
was the only researcher present, a decision based upon the group being familiar with each
other, my own confidence in facilitation and avoiding another unfamiliar person potentially
creating inhibition (Parker and Tritter, 2007).

The focus group was recorded using a dictaphone with the women’s permission, and again I
made few notes during the session, allowing me to focus upon facilitating the interaction.
There was an initial discussion about ground rules for the FG including the importance of
sensitivity around disclosure. As the women were from a work-based learning programme,
such practice was usual for them, reflecting how they operated in classroom / group
discussion. The setting for the focus group was a classroom arranged to create a small
meeting space. The women were asked to respect the potential nature of any sensitive
information, with ethics, consent and confidentiality outlined prior to commencement
(Parker and Tritter, 2007). Ethics and consent within a focus group was more challenging, as
there was disclosure within the group, meaning suitable emphasis and facilitation of the
environment was needed and a reminder of confidentiality (Parker and Tritter, 2006). In the
focus group, I used a schedule based upon broad themes from the interviews, with a
summary of findings, to generate further discussion and confirmation or disagreement as appropriate. The session commenced with a group activity to relax the women, familiarising them with the environment, whilst creating focus, two further activities closed the session and brought key areas together. The activities concerned demands and support, and later consideration of how these were managed, and a further exercise explored overlapping demands.

I transcribed the focus group recording, a process Parker and Titter (2007) identified as more problematic in terms of identification and cross-over of voices. Gill et al. (2008) viewed focus groups as a way which researchers can explore meanings attached the interaction. This was important here as a group of women who knew each other were placed in a position of exploring WLB experiences revealed attitudes and feelings. Consequently, once more there was an opportunity to de-brief at the end of the focus group, with supporting University services signposted if appropriate, as discussed in section 3.16. After the collection of the findings from the interviews and focus group, a process of data analysis needed to be undertaken, which I will explore in the next section.

4.6 Analysing the findings

Upon completion of the interviews and FG a thorough analytical process was undertaken which located significant themes and represented the expressions of the women. Mason (1996) explores the way epistemological and ontological stance influences how the researchers interpret research findings. Yet the research was an ‘intellectual puzzle’ that we aim to solve and the analytical approach taken is influenced by our particular perspective and research aim. In analysing the findings, and identifying themes, I attempted
transparency, acknowledging my focus upon what was significant for WLB and well-being, which reflected the aim of my study.

Reviewing and analysing the findings allowed me to develop the themes, with the analysis of the ten interviews informing the schedule for the FG. Holliday (2016) describes thematic review as moving from considering findings chronologically into significant themes, intertwining themes from various sources, in the case of my study from the women’s interviews and FG. Sometimes themes are described as being emergent, but this is passive, in that they do not just arrive, rather being identified by the researchers in-depth consideration of them (Holliday, 2016). The identification of themes took place through different phases of interaction and listening, initial and later reflections to produce notes based upon the interviews and FG. The consideration of findings began prior to transcription, as the interviews and focus group was an interactive and reflexive process, with further reflection at the end of each (O’Reilly and Kiymiba; 2015). From my viewpoint as the researcher, it was important to show integrity and not pick themes to suit preconceived notions, which involved being open to ideas (Holliday, 2016; O’Reilly and Kiymiba; 2015; Mason, 1996).

The findings from the interviews and FG were reviewed in a systematic way, to establish the significant themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe Thematic Analysis (TA) as a systematic way of organizing and exploring themes within data sets and identified six phases within the approach, which I followed. I will now show the phases of Braun and Clarkes (2006) Thematic Analysis (TA), aligning each phase with my own study.

Phase one ‘Familiarizing yourself with the data’: This involved becoming immersed in the findings. I did not make notes during the interviews and FG, creating reflective notes
immediately afterwards, then listened and re-listened to the discussion to familiarise myself with what the women told me.

**Phase two “Generating Initial Codes”:** This concerned the terms and language used, and the attached meaning, through listening to and transcribing the recordings. In my study the discussion of WLB and wellbeing was emotional for the women, evident through disclosures during interviews and interaction between the FG members, who knew each other well as peers.

**Phase three “Searching the Themes”:** This was about finding the similarities, related to the aim and the research objectives, with patterns and overlap between codes identified to show themes. I identified quotes and information from the transcripts, to form possible themes that linked well with the research objectives.

**Phase four “Reviewing Potential Themes”:** This involved following two steps. The first checked how the themes fit the codes, with some being removed, as result of insufficient findings to support the theme. The second step involved further considering the transcripts to find new themes. In my study the reading and reviewing was influenced by the research aim and objectives, developed and refined to reflect the findings. As the methods used in my study were flexible to include the participants’ own priorities, new areas for consideration were discussed, which required an openness and acceptance of unexpected findings.

**Phase five “Defining and Naming Themes”:** This phase demonstrated what was specific about the themes. Themes should stand out within a well-conducted review, linking with the research objectives and related to one another, without overlapping with each other.
too much. The theme should be clear, but not try to cover too much. This phase can show the requirement for sub-themes, which are sometimes blurred in the final phase because here the findings start to formulate into what will be presented. There were two broad styles of TA. Firstly, descriptive, where findings are illustrative, and secondly, conceptual and interpretive, which involved a greater degree of analysis. Both were important in determining what was significant. As I analysed the findings from my study a number of themes came to the fore, which I was able to name and establish working titles for. This process will be discussed and depicted more fully in tables 8 and 9.

Phase six ‘Writing up’: This referred to presenting the findings of a research study. This will be shown in Chapter Five of my thesis, where I combined summative and analytical statements to provide a true reflection of the women’s expressed experiences, through pertinent quotes.

This TA approach was methodical and task based. From feminist perspectives, there was controversy related to the analysis of findings, with potential distant from the participants’ ‘voice’, as findings change to become owned by researchers during analysis. Skeggs (1997) asserted that this reflected power through interpretation, which expressed the researcher making sense of the findings and putting them into themes. However Braun and Clarke (2006: 7) argue:

‘We do not subscribe to a naïve realist view of qualitative research where the researcher can simply ‘give voice’ to their participants’.

Giving consideration to both of these viewpoints, in my study and analysis I sought rigor. However, I was guided by the principles of Feminist approaches and treated the women’s expressed experiences with respect attaching findings to the women as much as possible.
Having outlined the TA process the following section will consider the way in which each phase and the findings fed into the next, leading to the culmination in three main themes.

### 4.7 TA and developments between research phases

Phase one of the research involved ten semi-structured interviews exploring the women’s WLB experiences and the implications of adding HE study to their everyday lives. The women described experiences in terms of excessive demands, with time pressure prominent, due to increased commitments, exacerbated through unfamiliarity with academia. Most women described extending productive time, with longer days and working weekends, accommodating HE study, consequently decreasing free time, rest opportunities creating tiredness and depletion of well-being. This change had emotional consequences, including guilt and anxiety, through insufficient time for children; however, other emotions included motivation towards the benefits of HE study. The trio of spheres of commitment, created WLB pressure, but the women described motivation and personal attributes which were important in continuing and succeeding.

The decision to undertake interviews and a focus group was carefully considered and was based on wishing to understand individual experiences and group constructed experiences. The defined phases related to each other; whereas the initial interview schedule was based upon the literature review and research objectives, the FG reflected interview comments and emerging findings. Gergen (2003) asserts that following the influence of social constructionism from a realist perspective depends upon considering the reality of life as it is conveyed. The Focus Group was used to inform the women about the findings from the interviews to provide points for discussion from the interview findings and to generate additional data from a group discussion. Feminist approaches to research include
empowering participants to consider whether the findings conveyed from the first phase were true to their voices (Letherby, 2003; Ramazanoglu, 2012). The success of this approach depended upon the phases being represented through a true and direct link. I used Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify the key themes from the interviews and the focus group, leading to my analysis in three stages.

After the initial transcriptions of the ten semi-structured interviews, I used TA, as described in section 4.6, to identify the key sub-themes and themes evident up to this point. These were: Attitudes towards learning: experiences of HE study; study in the home space; study patterns and time taken; time management; demands and support; employment patterns; work ethic; role models; emotion; stress and guilt; compromised well-being; leisure; overlap and separation; motivation and determination (See table 8, page 119). The interview analysis was thus used to inform the FG schedule. The statements and questions had the dual purpose of reassuring the women that I had listened to their comments and provided the opportunity to discuss the comments further in the focus group. (see table 8 below)

I then analysed the focus group discussion and was aware that there were new themes: the new findings included motivation from peers; the significant change within the family; the increased indication of resilience and the changing perspective on leisure. Therefore findings were confirmed and a new perspective became evident. This included further indication of motivation, transformation (including becoming more confident in the students role) and peer support (collaboration and co-operation), being not only discussed by the group but evident within interactions. The sub-themes which were new and identified by the group included the changes to the family, the different perspectives on well-being and indication of resilience.
The final stage of analysis was about bringing together the findings from the interviews and the focus group, which was achieved through a process of examining all the mapped themes from both the interviews and FG as a whole. This meant carefully revisiting transcripts to link themes and comments and dialogue together. Hence the third and final phase of the analysis brought the findings together through a further TA conducted on both earlier phases of the findings. This enabled greater clarity in terms of the themes becoming more evident, with a more complete picture of the findings and themes emerging. The overall results of the TA can be seen in table 9, with indication of the prominence of the broad categories and subcategories sources shown through Semi-structured interviews (SSI), Focus Group (FG) and combined data source (SSI/FG).
Table 8: Summary of specific areas of questions for focus group discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards learning were recounted / feedback on the positives and negatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude towards learning / importance towards success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE study in terms of time, attitude and management of deadlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE study in the home space / considering the benefits and difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patterns of study in relation to evenings and weekends / considering the implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinct and individual patterns of managing demands / considering routines and planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for household tasks and associated pressures / multiple demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in seeking support / how the family and others supported study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and networks developed to maintain commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of employment, over-time and time pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethic and role models in relation to ways in which these motivate individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion and stress: WLB and well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure: Changed or depleted / guilt associated with me time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overlap or separation in terms of where and when activities take place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation and coping strategies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the completion of the two phases of the research, with the first influencing the second, all research findings were analysed to establish the broad categories, sub-categories and core categories. Through this process, I was able to identify the three main themes, which had sufficient evidence to show them as significant. Table 9 depicts the full review of the interviews and FG findings and the themes.
### Table 9: Themes and subthemes development from the semi-structured Interviews and Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Categories</th>
<th>Sub Categories</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
<th>Main Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manage competing demands / achieve WLB (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>Positive and negative experiences of demands and support (SSI, FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time commitment (SSI)</td>
<td>Outside of the classroom (SSI)</td>
<td>Time pressure</td>
<td>Theme 1: Trio of spheres of commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time participants felt they should give to HE Study (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelmed by demands (SSI, FG):</td>
<td>High levels of responsibility / Lack of support (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>Role demands and Well-being</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical and emotional demands creating anxiety and stress (SSI, FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inability to cope with pressures (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-neglect / fatigue (SSI, FG):</td>
<td>Effects of increased demands (SSI)</td>
<td>Demands derived from the household and family responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling tired / compromised well-being (SSI, FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure on time (SSI):</td>
<td>Frustration of being focused upon deadlines (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not understanding what is required through academic inexperience (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of free-time / “me time” (SSI, FG):</td>
<td>Study at weekends and evenings leading to reduced leisure opportunities (SSI, FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leisure as a buffer zone for stress reduction (SSI, FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Guilt (SSI, FG):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not spending enough time with children / being distracted (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not meeting the needs of partners / putting additional demands upon them (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to spend time with friends / relatives / letting people down / distracted when time is given to relatives (SSI, FG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not giving time to study (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects of competing demands upon WLB (SSI, FG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Going from one demand to another / managing more than one area together (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating stress, anxiety, exhaustion (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overlapping Demands / parallel activity (SSI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study taking place within the home environment (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-based learning connects employment and HE study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of Personal space and time (SSI, FG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HE study takes over leisure / Participants give away leisure time, as learning becomes part of serious leisure (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do I belong here (SSI, FG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education formed a challenge, many participants were the first person in their family to go to University / limitations in understanding study requirements and University life (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to perform and become accustomed to the learning process at this level was a key feature (FG).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Expectations of family /partners / husbands (SSI, FG) | Some participants felt challenged in dedicating time to study /partners felt this was taking time away from them (SSI, FG)  
Being well supported by partners (SSI) |
| --- | --- |
| Circumstances within house hold (SSI, FG) | Lone parent experienced great demands upon them in that they have a double burden (SSI)  
The presence of younger children in the household represented a demand (SSI) |
| Juggling | Managing different demands through overlapping / managing alongside (SSI)  
Priority of children / family needs (SSI) |
| Unexpected Demands (SSI): | Family events / sick child or relative (SSI)  
Created frustration due to negative effects upon planning (SSI) |
| Physical & Emotional Demands: | Physically demanding through working on a number of things in parallel (SSI, FG)  
Emotion associated with frustration of feeling unfocused (SSI, FG)  
Young / dependent children lead to particular demands / pre-school children can lead to pressure in terms of child care / those at school may have needs associated with learning or emotional needs / children with particular needs (SSI, FG)  
Older relatives / care responsibilities (SSI) |
<p>| Number of hours worked (SSI, FG) | Full-time / part-time: Variation in hours / reduced hours created greater balance (SSI, FG) |
| Need to earn (SSI); | Important of worked full-time (SSI) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complexity because it was not the main motivator (SSI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education &amp; Learning (SSI):</strong> The study day itself: Described as being long and difficult / leading the participants to feel exhausted (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High levels of personal responsibility (SSI):</strong> Dedicating time this would lead to meet additional pressures (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deadlines (SSI):</strong> Motivation because signified completion / gives focus / must be focused upon (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leisure (SSI, FG):</strong> Generally seen to be time out / sometimes a further demand / expectation, associated with giving time to family (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline and control (SSI, FG):</strong> Setting priorities, including placing priorities on study (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time use patterns (SSI, FG):</strong> Unpaid overtime reflected competing experiences (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing Time (SSI, FG):</strong> Being organised: Including having a structured day / being ready to study at any opportunity / Includes building family time in (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Demand: Employment / Work (SSI) | All participants were in employment, so adding HE study to life / work-based learning programme (SSI)  
All employed in the Early Years sector / variety of settings (SSI) | Segregation  
Personal Resources | Support from others:  
Support from the workplace: | Theme 2: Adaption and personal strategy |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Giving time to study (SSI,FG) | Including working into the night and weekends (SSI,FG) | Adaption and Transformation | Support from others:  
Support from the workplace: | |
| Reducing commitments (SSI,FG) | Including hours of employment / responsibility in their role in the workplace (SSI,FG) | | | |
| Gaining support (SSI,FG) | Demands made upon the home were offset by the contributions made by different family members / Different circumstances (SSI,FG) | | | |
| Support from others (SSI,FG) | Different types of family will offer different potential to give support, but there is also the issue of attitudes which come with the family (SSI)  
Very helpful and supportive / Good levels of support are associated with good WLB (SSI,FG)  
Some family members will give support if they are instructed (SSI,FG)  
Extended family provided support sometimes (SSI)  
Focus upon limited support / do everything (SSI,FG) | | | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support from the workplace (SSI, FG):</th>
<th>Peer support / network amongst the student group (FG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extra help / paid help / help with childcare (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shift in priorities / Highly focused upon HE learning (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>Organising a structure to help, e.g. manager in the nursery (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colleagues / Learning workplace (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally supported and encouragement (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>The demand from HE learning can be so great that it takes over other aspects and becomes the main concern, meaning that other commitment can become swamped by this demand (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal perceptions of acceptability within this area (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future focused (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>Contribute well to the EYs sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of personal achievement and satisfaction (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>Feeling Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Highly valued second chance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence of role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to learn (SSI)</td>
<td>Benefits of learning for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to improve future prospects (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase confidence / self-esteem (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 3: Motivation**

Understanding the benefits to study (SSI)
Wanting to improve future prospects (SSI)
Increase confidence / self-esteem (SSI)
| “For me” (SSI, FG) | Learning is personal/the women were often defined in terms of other roles, e.g. mother/ wife / partner. Learning is separate and gives a sense of self (FG)  
Sometimes seen as a ‘selfish choices.’ (SSI) |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Looking towards the future / the end (SSI, FG): | Dual role: Provided inspiration for learners who wanted to get to the end and get the qualification (SSI, FG)  
The end in sight seemed to allow participants to be able to continue (FG)  
Short term sacrifice for long term goal / life changing (SSI, FG) |
| Positive effects upon family (FG) | A role model to children /family / ‘learning family’ (FG) |
| Role models (SSI, FG) | Not necessarily people with a degree or academic, but may have a strong work ethic or are important in the participants life (SSI, FG)  
Making significant people proud (SSI, FG)  
Sometimes related to observation of people you don’t want to be like (SSI, FG) |
| Highly focused (SSI, FG) | Dedicated to study / find interest in learning (SSI, FG)  
Often wished they had started in education sooner (SSI)  
Employment / dedication to the children and the families they work with/ Not necessarily about earning more (SSI, FG) |
<p>| Looking towards the future (SSI, FG) | Increasing opportunities and future prospects, including promotion / better job/improvement for the family (SSI, FG) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enjoys being busy (SSI, FG)</th>
<th>Enjoying the challenges which study brings (SSI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study is important they show signed of being enthusiastic, despite challenges (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication to EYs sector (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>High levels of commitment to the children and families they worked with / also teams (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning in the workplace / about the workplace (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>‘Learning workplace’/ source of inspiration, staff engaged in study / linked / role models. Sharing the experiences of learning creates a ‘learning environment’ / referred to by one participant as a ‘buzz’ going through the workplace (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**There are a number of broad categories which intersect within the themes:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deadlines (SSI)</th>
<th>Form of demand as identified in the first section, but also overlap to provide motivation as they are seen to represent the end of study. Furthermore, they are highly influential in determining time planning (reflecting part of the personal strategy) (SSI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and control of self and others (SSI, FG)</td>
<td>Setting priories, including placing priorities on study: This shows overlap between personal motivation and determination and adaptation and personal strategy 2 3 (SSI, FG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time use patterns (SSI)</td>
<td>Unpaid overtime reflected competing experiences (SSI) Event amongst those with reduced working hours to manage demands 2 3 (SSI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Learning (SSI):</td>
<td>The study day itself: Described by participants as being long and difficult and often leaving the participants feeling exhausted 1 and 3 (SSI)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9 provides an overview of the findings from both the interviews and FG, to demonstrate how the three themes developed. The process shows broad categories, the associated sub-categories, which then lead to core categories, essentially the sub-themes within the main three themes. The first section in blue provides a summary of the expressed experiences of the women which led to the theme of the trio of spheres of commitment as HE learning created disequilibrium. The second section, colour coded purple, depicts adaptation and personal strategy, which in effect reflects the responses to the situation, including whether there was help or not, overlapping or separating demands. The third theme of motivation is colour coded red and is concerned with the ways in which the women experienced motivation, through both their circumstances at the time and their future focus.

Through considering findings a number of areas of overlap were identified, the significant ones are identified at the bottom of the table. The first in green concerns deadlines which fitted into each of the themes. The Second identified in orange reflected the overlap between the themes of motivation and personal strategy / adaptation. The final significant overlap between themes is between commitment and motivation and concerns the areas of teaching and learning.

Through the TA process, three significant themes and a number of subthemes were evident:

- The trio of spheres of commitment: the addition of HE learning alongside paid employment and family / domestic responsibilities creates, disequilibrium for the participants’ WLB with impacts on their well-being.
The sub-themes: Overlap between spheres, time pressure, reduced leisure and free-time, emotional responses and accumulation of demands

- Adaptation and personal strategy: The responses made by the women and their households to accommodate the new situation

The sub-themes: Time management, support from others, shifting strategies and individual responses

- Motivation: The driving force which is influenced by HE study being seen to have a number of short term and long term positive effects

The sub-themes: Personal motivation, HE study being a second chance, feeling supported, / role models and future focus

4.8 Summary

In this chapter, I have considered some of the practicalities of conducting this study. I began by providing an outline of conducting the semi-structured interviews in terms of when they were organised and the practicalities of operationalisation of a flexible approach. I then outlined some key demographic / employment / familial details related to the women involved in my study. There has been discussion related to the ways in which findings from the interview influenced the question schedule for the FG. I then went on to consider the ways the focus group was conducted, in terms of exploring question formulation. There has also been a review of the practicalities of the process in terms of when, where and the time frame for conducting the focus group. The choice of Thematic Analysis to review the findings has been explored and an outline of the phases and ways in which I have operationalised them within my study. Finally, in this chapter I identified the ways in which
the findings have been developed through a depiction of how the core categories lead to the three most significant themes and corresponding sub-themes. In the next chapter, I will explore the findings from the semi-structured interviews and focus group.
Chapter Five Findings and the three themes of the trio of spheres of commitment, adaptation and personal strategy and motivation

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter Four, I considered the methodological approaches, including interviews and validating FG, participants, research setting and TA process, leading to the three key themes. In this chapter I explore the findings from the ten interviews and FG together, noting the source of the women’s quotes used, and discussing some existing literature. However, this is not the discussion chapter so there will be limited use of existing work.

The first theme is ‘Trio of spheres and commitment’ reflecting the impact of adding HE study to the two existing spheres of employment and family. The sub-themes are: overlap between spheres, time pressure, reduced leisure and free-time, emotional responses and accumulation of demands.

‘Adaptation’ is the second theme which explored how the women change and used strategies to accommodate the third sphere. The sub-themes are: time management, support from others, shifting strategies and individual responses.

‘Motivation’ is the third theme and demonstrates how the women continue in HE study. The sub-themes are: feeling motivated, HE study- a second chance, feeling supported, role models, and future focus. I begin with the first theme.
5.2 The trio of spheres of commitment

The use of the terms spheres was influenced by Emery et al. (2017:1) who in their WLB study of Flemish politicians, used ‘life spheres’ to consider and denote the roles and responsibility of familial, employment and political life. They also associated the term spheres with borders, which are both concepts I use. The addition of HE study for the women created a third sphere to manage alongside their family/household sphere and employment sphere. All of the women told me that the addition of a third sphere created a shift in the balance they previously had and developed disequilibrium in their everyday lives. The women discussed the ways in which HE study changed their everyday lives. Sarah reflected upon the transition as study became part of her daily life:

‘...because it is just so intense all the time....and....I think probably the first year is the worst, just sort of getting used to everything’ (Sarah, Interview, p3: 128-129)

This is similar to the other women’s experiences as they had difficulties adjusting to HE study alongside working (full or part-time) and family needs. They told me that they began their HE study with limited academic skills and lacked confidence as illustrated by Pearl:

‘Yeah when I am studying and I am thinking I don’t have a clue what I am doing and I am completely lost’ (Pearl, Interview, p3: 144-5)

Within this theme, there are a number of sub-themes and I now consider the first of these.

5.2.1 Overlap between spheres

Overlap is identified by Ruppanner and Hufferman (2014) as reflecting the porous boundaries between the work and non-work aspects of people’s lives. Jarvis and Pratt (2006) and Greer and Paterson (2013) found an increased amount of overlap between
employment and social/familial roles and spaces. The addition of HE study as a third sphere in the women’s lives was not seamless, with overlap between the three spheres evident. For example, the women told me they often had difficult decisions to make, in terms of what to focus on and it was hard to differentiate between their roles. As a result, they ignored the imagined boundaries between the spheres. A significant amount of their HE study took place within the home space, and this led to a prioritisation of study over family as illustrated by Simone who could not give her children as much attention as before studying:

‘I miss them a bit….rather than them coming and saying “mum…can we?” It’s just… “leave me a minute, whilst I do this”, so they don’t get as much attention’ (Simone, Interview, p6: 293-5)

Angela also described the shift in her interactions with her children:

‘...they would come in and they would talk to me ....and it would be like... “I am really, really sorry but I can’t talk to you at the moment”’ (Angela, Interview, p5: 242-4)

Angela’s sons were at college and university, and as such it was possible for her to negotiate a change in boundaries. Some women got support from their husbands, although this was variable and dependent upon attitudes of both the women and their husbands.

The home space was where the women studied, which reflected convenience and lack of time to travel to the university to complete their work. However, concerns about household tasks that demanded attention were distracting and many were unable to focus on HE study when they felt that the home was untidy. For Wendy, sharing a study space with her children was difficult as she became concerned that her work not being private:
Books, notebooks and other materials took over the home and family space, such as the dining room and kitchen tables, meaning the women were continually tidying up their work before meals. A focus on studying frequently meant that other spheres were ignored or forgotten about as Jane states:

‘Oh yeah and it is flowing and then someone will say ‘Mum I am hungry’ (all laugh) and you think ‘oh no my children have got to eat’” (Jane, Focus Group, p76, 1858-1859)

As HE study took over the home space it impacted upon social interactions with others as Angela highlights:

‘...you can hear the annoyance in your voice...you are thinking you should not be calling me up because I am studying...’ (Angela, Interview, p5: 231-232)

The women did not welcome the interruptions and were unable to include their family and friends in their study. Additionally some participants had specific learning needs, with two women disclosing to me that they had dyslexia and although this was supported at the university, it was harder to manage at home. Karen described her experience:

‘...well I am dyslexic so it really does....it just.....blows my mind.....and the neighbours put music on and moving and stuff like that......and I am thinking......please be quiet...I need silence!’ (Karen, Interview p 4; 169-172)

The women often worked into the evening and night and this led to overlap between sleep and study. Jane stated:
‘I have got up at 3 in the morning and wrote stuff down on a post-it......I have been burning the mid-night oil for a month now......I have been up still at one o’clock in the morning...’ (Jane, Focus Group, p20: 468-470)

Prior to studying the women did not feel they had difficulty sleeping yet the inclusion of study led to being unable to sleep or interrupted sleep. Which reflected the difficulties the women experienced separating thoughts about HE study from their minds. This is similar to the findings by Kramarae (2001) who found sleep disruption amongst students undertaking distance learning courses also studying into the night.

5.2.2 Time pressure

Time pressure is related to the ways in which different roles and responsibilities take time in daily life, which Wajcman (2008) argues is greater as roles expand without others decreasing. In my study, I found that everyday life, family commitments and employment meant that the women had less time than they anticipated for HE study. This impacted on the time the women could spend with their children and Simone felt that she was ‘abandoning them’ / ‘[you] switch off from them’ (Simone, Interview, p 6: 291). Angela said she felt guilty as when she did allow time for her studying, she was interrupted by family members who didn’t recognise that working at home meant work. To manage their time, the women chose to spend less time with family as illustrated by Karen:

‘...Well it will be nice to see my husband again, I feel I get in bed at the end of the day and say... ‘Oh who are you?’” (Karen, Interview, p3: 140-1)

Karen used this example when describing restricted family time, as she struggled to prioritise HE study alongside her other commitments. This is similar to findings by Jarvis and Pratt (2006) and Wattis et al. (2012) as guilt is a key reaction to not being able to spend as
much time as possible with families. All three spheres demanded time and the women spoke about feeling they were working shifts. For example, a typical pattern was leaving paid work, and returning home to start more work, for example, housework and child care and /or HE study. Hochschild (1989: 7) identified the term ‘second shift’ to convey how parents who worked (mainly mothers) felt when they then undertook domestic tasks. This was the same for the women and they also spoke about a third shift, HE study. Jane illustrates this:

‘Because my little girl has been ill and I feel...I have to put...obviously she has right poorly.......so obviously I have had to put her before [study].....so then.....it is during the day, get her to bed....then my study time has gone to evenings.....later and later’ (Jane, Focus Group, p 21: 501-504)

Kramarae (2001) in researching adult learners found similar shift patterns, indicating a third shift, fitting study around the family and studying into the evening and night, after other demands were attended to. The presence of shift patterns was influenced by circumstances, including hours of employment, demands, and household support. However, many of the women managed by extending productive time into evenings, nights and weekends.

Time pressure was made worse as the women were unfamiliar with HE study and lacked academic skills. For example Simone considered the importance of effective reading with limited time:

‘...it is finding the books and finding the information in the books, because you can’t always read the book cover to cover’ (Simone, Interview, p 4: 187-8)

Restrictions in academic know-how were evident, yet time pressure was also highly evident for the women in my study. McGivney, (2001); Sargent, (2002) identify barriers amongst
widening participation students unfamiliar with University, echoing the experiences of the women in my study.

The home space often represents time away from employment, yet the presence of HE study meant the women continued working. Megan commented:

‘...it is hard coming home from working all day and then doing more work’ (Megan, Interview: Page 3: 105)

Weekends frequently represented the only non-work days, in relation to employment, but the women used this time for HE study which impacted upon free time, as Pearl commented:

‘...when you get up for the weekend and I will think ‘oh I could have a lie in’ and you think ‘oh no, I can’t afford to have a weekend”’ (Pearl, Focus Group, p74: 1820-1821)

The women described having demands upon their weekend prior to starting University, but with flexibility and choices, yet the addition of HE study reduced the chance to rest and spend time with family and friends during weekends.

Jane tried to only study on Saturdays leaving Sunday free but this didn’t happen every weekend and she said that her partner had told her: ‘we could be doing Sunday things’, (for example, days out) (Jane, Interview, page 17: 860). Bittman (2005) considered the implications of Sunday working and found this disruption to family leisure time. For many weekend equated with free time, recuperation, so health and wellbeing. Jarvis (2005) evidenced people with stressful lives who tried to do too much, cramming activity in, reducing ‘livability’, (balance between employment and other
commitments). In both cases similar experiences can be noted amongst the women in my study, as leisure was reduced which will be discussed next.

5.2.3 Reduced leisure

Reduced free time due to HE study meant limited leisure, which had implications for the women including time for relationships, for example:

Jane: ‘...I have put friends on hold.....I feel like I have given mine up ...well she keeps telling me...she is saying to me, when are you finishing, will I get my friend back? .....and my sister was on the phone.... and she was saying: Am I going to get my sister back in June?’

Pam: ‘I have not seen my sister since Christmas because I was studying...’ (Focus Group,, p 6: 128-132)

Hence reduced time for family and friends created pressure and guilt amongst the women. Family leisure time was sometimes infringed upon, with distraction caused by HE study. For example Jane planned in family leisure but became ‘really edgy’, as time went by and she knew she would have to study into the night to catch-up (Jane, Focus Group: page 68: 1672). Similarly, Wendy described being out with her family, but being preoccupied as she was expecting an email from her tutor, which created self-reproach.

Personal or me time was discussed, leading to agreement that this was limited or non-existent, for example, Pam commented:

‘What’s ‘me time’? The only me time is study time’ (Pam, Focus Group, page 73: 1801)

As no other time was available free time was given to HE study, however, Cassidy (2005) linked leisure and well-being, as it formed an important buffer against stress and its reduction representing risk.
Whilst leisure as free time and non-work was eroded, time spent on HE study was described positively making the compromise acceptable. For example, Sarah described feeling anxious and pressured towards study, but with the following positives:

‘I like stretching myself, challenging myself, I don’t like to be bored...I want to learn...’ (Sarah, Interview, p5: 225-226)

HE study reflected characteristics of ‘serious leisure’, as an activity pursued systematically and linked with personal interest (Stebbins, 1992). The women expressed experiencing increased fulfilment and satisfaction from their HE study, hence willingly giving up free time. Time use changes included, Pam describing enjoying reading rather than watching TV, now equated with wasting time. The motivation behind ‘serious leisure’ is not necessarily income but fulfilment. Hence whilst adult learners want improved employment opportunities they also desire self-development (McGivney, 2001; Sargent, 2002). HE study for the women was associated with heightening EYs knowledge, yet their commentary reflected personal growth benefits, improved confidence and enjoyment.

5.2.4 Emotional responses

Emotional effects were evident as adding HE study to women’s lives created WLB disequilibrium and compromised well-being. For example whilst Pam was very positive, describing life as ‘good’ and ‘fun’, further discussion reflected pressure:

‘...occasionally I will have a weep... sometimes it gets to me’ (Pam, Interview, page 13: 608)
Emotion associated with feeling overwhelmed, adversely affected well-being, including guilt due to less time for children. For example, Jane emotionally described her guilt at her eldest daughter offering to make a sandwich for her younger sister, who had not eaten, as Jane focused upon HE study. Rickett (2016:323) asserts working class women face criticism around their mothering, including not giving ‘time and effort’ to food preparation, reflecting how women in my study question themselves and express guilt. The impact and emotion experienced by the family was discussed, as the women identified the stress within the home space. Jane emotionally described a situation with her husband:

‘I have had to apologies to [my husband] this week, I just stood in the kitchen and I said ‘I am just so sorry’...I said ‘I am so stressed and I am talking out of turn, with you all’... ‘I can’t even reason with myself’... I said ‘you know I don’t even like myself this week.....’’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 63: 1536-1539)

The pressure from HE study flowed into other spheres of life and created conflict. The women described concerns that their employment was adversely affected by their HE study. Jane described feeling overwhelmed and crying at work, due to a sequence of events and associated pressures, comparing herself to usually being strong within her team.

Further emotional effects upon well-being were created as participants’ expressed experiencing strained relationships, for example, Jane commented:

“I am surprised we are not divorced” (Jane, Focus Group, page 33: 808)

Here Jane encapsulated the pressure related to her commitments and subsequent demands upon her family, and conflict with her husband. Pam was very positive and described life as good, but expressed emotion at extensive family demands:
‘I just say...look I give, give, give...and sometimes I feel like you just take, take, take, just take...sometimes I would just like a bit more back...’ (Pam, Interview, page 16: 780-781)

Further emotional strain related to perceived changes amongst the women due to University, with family members fearing disconnection. Both Pearl and Jane found their husbands to be threatened by the prospect of their degree, even fearing they might leave. Roberts (2011) in examining gender and social class found working class women experienced that two negatives combined when they entered HE. Furthermore, in terms of cultural capital a gap was evident, related to gender and social class, making entering University unfamiliar and challenging (Reay, 2006). Amongst the women in my study, the reactions of husbands / partners and other close family member added to their self-doubt.

Emotional reactions were often mixed amongst the women, reflecting their personal dilemmas, as different commitments lead to compromises between family care and HE study. Jane described spending time with her daughters and being a good role model, demonstrating study and its benefits, but expressed guilt associated with choosing HE study:

‘it was my choice...yeah...I do think it is a selfish choice.....but it will benefit my family’” (Jane, Interview, p6: 279-280)

The individualistic aspect of HE study was often linked with being selfish, yet the wish to improve future prospects for the whole family created a contradiction. Jarvis and Pratt (2006) and Wattis et al. (2012) found guilt, emotional strain and self-doubt amongst dual career families, as parents wanted to provide and give time, but experienced pressure from employment. Williams (2000) located tension within gender identity with masculinity tied with employment and femininity with domesticity, causing women to feel they should be
family centric. The emotion conveyed by women in my study echoed such conclusions, whereby guilt and feelings of inadequacy result from trying to meet domestic commitments alongside HE study and career progression. The emotional response linked with the effects of accumulative demands which I will consider next.

5.2.5 Accumulative effects of demands

As the trio of spheres of commitment, due to the addition of HE study, took effect there were implications for WLB and wellbeing. Reduction in time available restricted opportunities for exercise and self-care, leading to compromised well-being. For example, during the FG Jane and Pam described study taking over leaving no time for exercise and leading to some self-neglect, which Jane described in terms of: ‘no living...’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 7: 151). The women described activities being side-lined, as HE study and deadlines dominated, leading to missed events, including Wendy forgetting her holiday. The FG coincided with dissertation (final assessment) submission, hence the women reflected back upon challenges, and the physical and emotional consequences. For example, the women described putting on weight, due to limited time for exercise and poor eating habits, as HE study was prioritised.

The Foundation degree involved attending University one study day per week, usually an afternoon and evening, and included taught sessions, tutorials, seminars and library time. The women described the study day as challenging as they managed other commitments before attending, working and caring for their own children, creating a long, tiring day. For example, Pearl described the study day as follows:

’I get here for one o’clock...until half eight....it is a long day I usually end up really tired by the time I get home’ (Pearl, Interview. Page 8: 389-94)
The women described the study day as demanding, as they moved from one role / set of responsibilities to another, equated with stress, including physical symptoms, such as headaches. The time was sometimes difficult to organise, for example Wendy was let down with childcare and felt unsettled during sessions and Jane described worrying about how things would be when she returned home. However, the study day was valued, facilitating theory development and time with tutors and peers, therefore, motivating the women to continue.

The reduction in free time due to the trio of spheres of commitment meant fewer opportunities for relaxation and difficulty switching off from HE study. For example Wendy described late night study, causing difficulty unwinding and sleeping:

‘…and then you are going over things in your head…thinking I have not put that in and I need to put that in and you have weird dreams…’ (Wendy, Interview, page 11: 532-3)

Hence HE study dominated the minds of the women, impacting upon other aspects of life, including disturbed sleep and reduced rest, creating increased sleep focus:

Pam: ‘The only me time I get is in bed, head on pillow that is my time...Right now I am looking forward to going to bed tonight’

Jane: ‘... I have never appreciated my bed so much’ (Focus Group, page 74: 1805-1807)

Sleep focus becomes evident amongst those with excessive demands and reduced rest opportunities. Hochschild (2000) observed sleep obsession amongst those working long hours, which paralleled commentary within my study, as accumulative commitments reduced time and opportunity to sleep.
Additionally as the women came to be end of the degree they considered how their health had been adversely affected due to their demands:

Wendy: ‘I have had labyrinthitis as well….It kicks in when you are most stressed’ (Focus Group, page 25: 608)

Pam: ‘I think it is when you are low…’

Jane: ‘…I think we have all vulnerable…I mean we have had coughs, colds….And working with children don’t help, I have had more tummy bugs this year that I have had in my life…’

Wendy: ‘I have had colds’

Jane: ‘It is stress…the doctor has told me its stress…’ (Focus Group, page 26: 619-624)

The women equated physical implications upon their health and compromised well-being with the demands of HE study and completing their final assessments. Pam described how she felt:

‘I am just so tired .....I feel like a wrung out dish cloth...’ (Pam, Focus Group, page 21, 493)

Increased commitments impacted upon well-being as HE study was additional not substituted. Huffman et al. (2012) found well-being compromised through excessive demands adversely effecting daily coping ability, reflecting the experience of most women within my study. Adding HE study and creating a trio of spheres of commitment created WLB disequilibrium, compromising well-being. Yet participants continued with the situation through adaptation and utilising personal strategies, which forms the basis of the second theme.
5.3 Theme Two Adaptation and personal strategy

For the women to continue with the trio of spheres of commitment, they adapted through personal and household strategies, which reflected the diversity amongst households and personal attributes. Some women had fewer demands with a more independent family or reduced workload, for example Angela compared her situation with others:

‘I am aware that the other students... some of them work a lot longer than me and I know the stresses they are going through’ (Angela, Interview, page 12:585-586)

Angela was amongst the women who positively changed her situation in response to HE study. For other women positive attitudes / approaches proved significant, for example, Charlotte commented:

‘...to be honest it is not that big a problem with housework ... it is not the biggest of house...’ (Charlotte, Interview, page 6: 257-258)

Charlotte viewed herself as positive and organised, well supported by her parents, describing herself as ‘happy’ and accepting her busy life. Diversity in approaches was based upon individual standards, priorities, and levels of acceptance, including ignoring housework to prioritise HE study, for example, Wendy commented:

‘...the house is a mess at the minute but I have got to get my assignment finished...I think when I have finished my assignment I will clean up.....but it will have to wait’ (Wendy, Interview, page 3 :104-106)

This showed personal choices, however, whilst some ignored demands, others proved unable to, as Jane’s commentary reflected.
‘I like the house to be tidy... I have a problem with it... I can’t sit down on a Saturday to do my work if the house is a mess...’ (Jane, Interview, page 10: 460-1)

Some of the women were unable to focus upon HE study in an untidy house, connecting with attitudes towards domestic standards and personal acceptance. Baxter (2000) explored the high value placed upon the care of the family, which was exhibited in the attitudes of women in my study. Megan lived with her parents and offered an alternate perspective, describing the difficulty of contributing to housework because her mother did everything. Women in my study demonstrated similar patterns, doing all household tasks and reflecting ‘Super Mom’ behaviour (Shaevitz, 1985). The ‘Super Mom’ theory was associated with the growth in women’s employment without a proportional redistribution of domestic responsibility (Hochschild, 2000; Shaevitz, 1985). For example Jane commented:

‘...make it easier for everyone else, it might not be easier for me...I have to be wonder woman almost’ (Jane, Interview, page 6: 276-277)

This often meant sacrificing personal time to maintain household standards, influenced by attitudes and attributes.

Household attitudes and ability were also significant within the adaptation process. Some women were well supported, for example, Karen’s family contributed well, but she described herself as ‘a bit hard’ and expressed guilt (Karen, Interview, page 5:241). She reflected on pressure upon women to take responsibility, referring to ‘Kim and Aggie’ (‘How clean is your house?’) who host a TV programme showing peoples’ homes as unclean (Karen, Interview, page 11:536). Karen conveyed annoyance at the judgement upon women and that she might be
considered a ‘dirty bitch’ (Karen, Interview, page 11: 537). I questioned this in terms of household responsibility, her response demonstrated a conflict:

‘...people will judge me if my house is a tip.....even if I have been upstairs studying all weekend and they are supposed to have tidied up.....I think it is my ultimate responsibility.....and I don’t think it should be....but I think that it just is....there is a difference between how I feel up there (points to head) and in there (points to heart)’
(Karen, Interview, page 11:525-528)

Hence whilst Karen’s family contributed to domestic tasks, an internal conflict reflected responsibility and traditional gendered views. Many women in my study described a lack of understanding, amongst their family in relation to commitments, for example Simone described her children:

‘...when they are studying that is all they are doing....they don’t understand that you have still got the house to run, the cleaning to do, the beds to change, the shopping.....the cooking to do.....they take it for granted...it’s an accepted part of life.....were mum studying is an alien thing...’
(Simone, Interview, page 7:307-310)

Whilst, there was number of comments relating to family not understanding, there was unwillingness to seek help amongst the women, as they felt proud and conflicted:

Jane: ‘Yeah I do get help....but I feel I have to ask for it.....and I feel resentful’
Pearl: ‘I don’t ask for it, I just do it’
Jane: ‘Well...you know I would say to [my husband] can wash up, but I feel that I shouldn’t have to, because they can see what you do...’
(Focus Group, page 35: 844-7)

Personal responsibility and a lack of understanding around domestic needs created a dilemma amongst women and reflected complexity around support. Despite changes in attitudes gender conflict related to role and responsibility remains deeply embedded within social expectations (Baxter, 2000; Gerson, 2009; Hochschild, 2000; 1989; Houston and
Women in my study commented upon differences between men and women numerous times, as they felt weighed down by responsibilities, which took valuable time. One possible solution was managing time which I consider next.

5.3.1 Time management

Time shortage was evident as each of the trio of spheres of commitment requiring time, making planning essential. Time use was influenced by household care needs, available support and hours of employment. For example, those with younger children, such as Wendy, planned study when children were in bed, so requiring less care and causing fewer interruptions. Similarly lone parents, for example Simone, studied when her children no longer needed attention or formed a distraction:

‘...because other times you have the children around, the TV is on, you have got the cooking, the cleaning, you can never sit down.....if you try and get 5 minutes, somebody will start fighting and then you become a referee’ (Simone, Interview, page 5: 211-213)

Scarcity of time meant extending productive time, which then required planning. Time management was often a new practice and a personal attribute which linked with HE study.

For example, Jane described her planning:

‘...my sister thinks it is hilarious...but what I have had to do this year, is a proper time-management plan.....on a Friday evening I think I will do that, that and that and then that time is study time and I have stuck rigidly, and that is how I have got through’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 18: 420-423)

Time managements accommodated not only study, but home and social life, with women using it to adapt to their new situation.
Organising time, planning and prioritising tasks was effective, but negatively impacted upon by additional and unforeseen demands, described as challenging and often linked with family needs. Unexpected demands, naturally, could not be planned for, yet formed a priority, as Wendy described:

‘I can get my head down to get some work done and then if something happens...if they are ‘sick’ then everything else just has to go out the window...and they are the priority...’ (Wendy, Interview, page 4: 157-159)

Hence time management was disrupted by responsibilities to the family and more so children, paralleling findings by Gerson, (2009); Hochschild (2000; 1989) and Oakley (1987). Unexpected demands adjoining high level of commitment to children created conflict, reducing the effectiveness of time management.

Time could be gained through reduced employment, for example Pam and Wendy decreased working hours in preparation for starting University, whilst others made changes in response to being over-committed. Pam and Angela were very positive about working part time. Angela describing her WLB as ‘fantastic’ (Angela, Interview, page 8: 393), allowing separate time for HE study, contrasting with previous WLB tension through working full-time, and financially she had ‘got used’ to having less (Angela, Interview, page 11: 534). Orton (2011) considered the non-financial attributes of well-being through positive effects on capabilities and involvement in wider activity, reflecting Angela’s experiences. Despite the benefits of reduced employment, options were influenced by circumstances and affordability. For example, Karen’s reaction to reduced working hours reflected a different situation:

‘Oh God yes.....lottery win please...well we just couldn’t afford to.... no choice involved.....well I don’t fancy being homeless....if I want the mortgage paid I need to go to work....’ (Karen, Interview, page 9: 420-422)
Therefore, financial circumstances and family responsibility influenced decision making. Warren et al. (2009); Ward et al. (2010) found WLB solutions influenced by income and household needs, with fewer options amongst those with lower pay.

Some women managed demands through altering employment patterns, splitting different job roles so accommodating HE study and the family. For example, Wendy and Jane each had different employment roles', one in pre-school morning sessions and then after school activity, with Jane also managing a breakfast club. This accommodated commitments, but involved doubling journeys and time without pay, Jane, living relatively nearby, travelled by foot, Wendy by car, both taking time and creating further stretch on personal resources. Wattis et al. (2012) found women more often split employment, to accommodate the family, while also reflecting their predominance within the service sector which is focused upon public needs rather than the workforce. Further complexity related to attitudes towards employment, influenced by working with children and their families, which meant when reduced hours could improve WLB, loss was identified. For example, Wendy in reducing her hours expressed mixed feelings as she enjoyed and valued her employment, but was unable to manage everything. Whilst time management and altering time use patterns were significant, commitments could also be reduced through gaining support, which will be next considered.

5.3.2 Support from others

Part of the process of adaptation was gaining support from others, including help from the family / household, employers / workplace and peers. Some of the women in my study planned for support prior to the degree, for example Jane described talking with her family.
‘...I actually sat my mum and my mother-in-law down and my husband and my sister and I said I thought I wanted to do a degree and would they be able to support me...’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 80: 1951-1953)

Jane used this example to illustrate the importance of communication, found to be significant by Emery et al. (2017), who identified pre-planning with the family as a coping strategy. Variation in pre-planning amongst the women was evident and many only sought help when they were clearly unable to cope.

Variations in households influenced options around support. Those with younger children, such as Wendy and Charlotte, generally had more demands and less help, in contrast, Karen and Angela with older children received more support. Lone parent households, such as Simone and Pam experienced restricted help, without another adult’s support. For example Simone described the limitations she experienced:

‘...possibly being a single parent as well, because you have not got another adult to give support, because possibly he could do some bits and take the children.....so maybe that is restricting as well’ (Simone, Interview, page 7: 325-327)

Whilst strategies were influenced by support options and household composition, household attitudes and the willingness of members to provide help influenced both support and the willingness to seek help. Personal choice and responsibility restricted the inclination to seek help, for example Simone described her attitude:

‘I chose to come into study...I chose to have my kids and my kids are my responsibility, a lot of people they might send them to a lot of clubs and send them to the grandparents...but they are my kids, they are my responsibility.....that’s my philosophy...’ (Simone, Interview, page 9: 433-436)
Hence, role and responsibility associated with commitments influenced attitudes, showing similarity with the research findings of Gerson, (2009); Hochschild, (2000; 1989) and Oakley (1987). Personal responsibility meant the women did not expect help, for example Pam described her children being too young and inexperienced to understand her situation. Seeking help could entail compromise, for example Karen’s household shared tasks, responding to her previous debilitating back injury, yet she expressed frustration that the house was not always to her standard. Obtaining support could be complex and whilst it might be assumed husbands choose not to contribute, some of the women challenged this, with Wendy described her husband’s situation:

‘He does do housework... when he gets the time, but he works long hours and it is hard for him as well’ (Wendy, interview, page 5: 238-9)

Understanding of the commitments of others was seen, for example, Pam made similar comments regarding her daughter, who was at college and worked part-time, and so had ‘a lot on’ (Pam, interview, page 14: 673).

Restricted support and limited understanding from their family, was widespread amongst the women at different times. Pearl’s experience was noteworthy, causing her to go from one commitment to another, restricting her time for HE study. She described her husband ‘not wanting’ to understand her pressured situation, which Pearl expressed as the ‘difference between men and women’ (Pearl, interview, page 12:550-54). Williams (2000) located different attitudes amongst men and women, which lead women to take responsibility for the domestic role.
As previously outlined guilt was expressed by the women concerned with the effects of study upon the family, although a number of benefits based upon change within families were noted. For example Pam described her son’s contribution being good for them both:

‘It is teaching things...perhaps if I had not been studying [my son] wouldn’t have picked the pan up and started to cook...So because I have been studying it has encouraged him to cook’ (Pam, Focus Group, page 40: 982-984)

Positive changes in relation to skills gained were also identified by Webber (2015) who found households contributed to domestic tasks as mothers engaged in learning. However, in my study there was variation in support and attitudes which reflected complexity amongst the women and their households.

Employer / workplace support was significant to the women in my study and might have been expected as this Foundation degree was part of a government initiative. Foundation degrees were established by Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2000, responding to the Dearing Enquiry (1997) which stated UK economic competitiveness was reduced due to gaps in knowledge and skills (Harvey, 2009). Employers were directly involved in curriculum design and Foundation Degrees had a remit to develop more knowledgeable and competent workers, in this case increasing quality in EYs provision (Higgins et al., 2010; Guile and Evans, 2010). In my study some women found workplace teams offered both morale and practical support, including facilitating attendance of the study day. Jane was very positive about her team, describing feeling appreciated, and Megan and Pearl had options around additional study days. Other workplace support included child care, for example Charlotte’s son attended her nursery and Jane’s daughter attended breakfast club, facilitating commitments in parallel. Pam was unusual, amongst
the women being the nursery owner which lead to greater control and she employed a
manager helping her become HE study focused. There were a number of positives gained
for the supportive workplace, including loyalty and commitment to do a good job. While
there were examples of support, some of the women did not feel understood by employers
and colleagues experiencing limited workplace flexibility and acknowledgement. Service
needs meant restricted flexibility and even when it was permissible, in reality it proved
difficult. This was due to staff shortages which created reluctance amongst the women to
place additional pressure upon teams. Much workplace support was informal and derived
from the team and colleagues rather than employers.

Peer support through the University group was important, including a social function, having
fun together, creating a network and bonding within the groups. Pearl expressed
experiencing increased confidence due to the group, and Pam described the interaction: ‘It
lifts you up’ (Pam, Focus Group, page 12: 289). The women described a network emerging which
offered mutual encouragement and informal study skills support. For example Jane
describing herself and Wendy as ‘study buddies’, offering encouragement and studying
together (Pam, Focus Group, page 17: 400). During the FG the women connected their continuation
with HE study with fellow students:

Pam: ‘We have bonded really well’
Jane: ‘Yeah we were having a chat the other night weren’t we?’
Pam: ‘And we were egging each other on...on the phone’
Wendy: ‘I don’t think any of us would have got through it’
Jane: ‘Yes I don’t think any of us would have got through it if we have not bonded like
we have....you know...I want to come to see everybody you know........I am dreading it
ending in a way”
Pam: ‘... from that first day to now’
Jane: ‘Yeah because we know each other inside out...We do know a lot about each other...we know all the problems don’t we?...Well I think that we trust each other don’t we?’

Pearl: ‘Yeah we do’ (Focus Group, pages 42-3, 1016-1027)

The women offered encouragement, morale support and practical aspects, such as shared books and resources. This reflected a co-operative rather than a competitive approach. The support was not just in relation to study but life, enabling success within the group and adaptation amongst the women. This included evidence of shifting strategies which I consider next.

5.3.3 Shifting strategies

During my study the women were at different stages of their degree, with the follow up of four women via the FG, allowing consideration of adaptation over time. Adaptation included changing approaches to employment, altered patterns within the family and personal adjustments. Adaptation marked responses to altered circumstances, for example, Jane and Wendy further reduced hours of employment in their final year as the HE study became more demanding. Wendy gave up one job to help her cope with additional pressure from supporting her son diagnosed with autism. Changes often related to feeling unable to cope, for example Jane gave up part of her employment through being concerned with underperforming, seeking personal benefits and avoiding detrimental effects upon the workplace.

Household support changed between the interviews and FG, for example Jane noted more help from her husband through discussing her experience with him:
‘I think I have been really fortunate with home this year......well I said to [her husband] I can’t be this wonder woman thing at the moment...’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 86: 2088-2089)

Jane received more support through recognising her tendency to take over domestic tasks and, altering her behaviour. This involved her accepting help rather than doing everything, reflecting personal and family adaptation, described as re-training. Pam described changes in her son who made meals and did laundry. Hence, households changed to support the women, which enabling them better manage their HE study, with more widespread contribution to housework noted by the point of the FG. Wendy described more help from her husband with cooking and housework as she undertook her dissertation. Jane and Wendy attributed adaptation to improved communication with family member and being more open about needs. This parallels strategies used by participants in Emery and colleagues (2017) study, as the politicians managed three spheres of commitment through communicating needs to the family, planning and adapting with them. Although there was evidence of change the women still found that they were often faced with managing the demands. For example Wendy described inconsistency:

‘...at other times he will say he is tired and because he is fed up he will say...‘oh are you studying again?’” (Wendy, Focus Group, page 37: 916-917)

This represented a dilemma around inequality, with initial reluctance to seek help and some households offering initial support but struggling to continue for the duration of the degree. While support from others was significant, in managing the trio of spheres of commitment, individual adaptation amongst the women was essential and will be considered next.
5.3.4 Individual adaptation

Individual adaptation varied in accordance with support from others and personal attitudes and approaches. During the FG the women shared what helped them cope, which included communicating, planning, being motivated, seeking support, taking time out and being positive. A further coping mechanism was managing boundaries between commitments, which involved either separating or overlapping them. Some of the women in my study described creating strong boundaries between commitments, including allocating distinct time for HE study, managed through planning and personal circumstances. For example Pam described separation as important in managing her commitment, saying: ‘I definitely don’t mix things together…’ (Pam, Interview, page 8: 359). Angela reduced her hours of employment to dedicate time to study and established ground rules with her family, enabling separation.

Karen described her dyslexia making a quiet environment essential, studying in the bedroom to remove herself from the household and finding separation important for balance: ‘...I keep things in boxes really’ (Karen, Interview, page 3: 105-7). Demarcation was also about protecting the home environment and providing time for other commitments.

Independent study was predominantly in the home space, associated with convenience, making the overlap of activities within the home common amongst the women. Jane described studying alongside her children, and going to and from study. Conversely Wendy, Simone and Charlotte all undertook HE study at home when their children no longer needed them, whilst still undertake tasks in a parallel manner and optimising time use. Simone described the process of managing household tasks through overlap:
'...you can have your hands in so many baskets and keep so much going on, you know full well you can throw the washing in, throw the drying in...throw something in the pan to cook and then be doing homework with the kids, you have got 4 things going on...' (Simone, Interview, page 8: 360-362)
‘...essential....I think that it is paramount, because I think if you are not motivated you’re not going to get where you want to be, that is how I feel in my work life my home life and study life’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 10: 236-238)

Motivation was derived from a number of sources, including benefits to the family, workplace and future life, which created an essential buffer against guilt and self-doubt.

5.4.1 The EYs sector

Working in the EYs sector proved a significant motivator as the women viewed their employment as worthwhile, through the care and development of children and support to their families. The women wanted to improve practice and HE study provided greater knowledge and competence making this achievable. For example, Pam commented:

‘I feel like I am achieving something.....and I am learning a lot...and I am passing it on...’ (Pam, interview, page 11: 510-511)

This reflected a positive attitude towards workplace improvement, with Pam further recounting optimistic feelings when entering the workplace:

‘...I buzz when I walk into work...’ (Pam, Focus Group, page 12: 271)

The woman were highly committed to colleagues, for example, Jane would not reduce her working hours further, to avoid negative implications for her team. Motivation to improvement services for the children, through up-to-date techniques and knowledge of practices and policies was important.

The women experienced increased personal confidence as HE study extending their ability and self-esteem, for example, Jane expressed:

‘...I feel that I can offer so much more to work now”’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 44: 68-9)
This reflected the impact of greater understanding and positive attitude towards the workplace. A further example was reflected through Pam’s description of entering the workplace:

‘You walk in confidently. Because when I walk in I feel like I know what I am doing…’
(Pam, Focus Group, page 44: 1075)

The confidence, greater knowledge and ability increased motivation amongst the women. Whilst employment is often assumed to be income related there were often other influential features. For example, Megan stated she would not reduce her hours due to ‘income’, but her elaboration showed a more complex relationship:

‘I know it might sound weird, but I like it, I like going to work’ (Megan, Interview, page 7: 344)

Enjoying or liking employment was commonplace amongst the women, with Sarah expressing that she ‘would get bored’ if she did not work full-time (Sarah, Interview, page 9: 429) and Pearl describing enjoying being busy: ‘...the hours go quickly” (Pearl, Interview, page 10: 479).

Wendy described a demanding schedule, but enjoyed employment:

‘It’s not that I need the money, because you know my husband is working all the hours he does, he does not earn peanuts...but I don’t think I could stay at home’
(Wendy, Interview, page 10: 444-5)

Complex decisions around employment were evident and reflected motivation. Hochschild (2000) found when researching attitudes towards employment that workers felt greater appreciation at work, reflecting similar patterns to some women within my study. The women were committed to the EYs sector and expressed frustration if unfocused at work, contributing additional unpaid hours at each end of the day to maintain a good
environment. The motivation to undertake HE study linked with potential to improve the EYs sector, while from a personal perspective it represented a highly valued second chance, considered in the next section.

5.4.2 A highly valued second chance

Motivation was derived from attending University as it formed a highly valued second chance in formal education, improving personal and professional prospects. Many of the women had been unable to study sooner due to personal circumstances, so now valued their individual opportunity, for example, Pam commented:

‘...it’s my time again, and I think that is why it is important....because I am actually doing something for me... it’s my time...it’s great...’ (Pam, Interview, page 12: 559-560)

This reflected the personal nature of HE study and overcoming previous restrictions, created through pressure to earn and / or childcare responsibilities, and negative experiences and attitudes. Angela described how her mother actively tried to prevent her from attending college to study social work when she was leaving school:

‘...my mum was like education is really, really good but this is not going to be your life, your life is going to be getting married and having a family....she was very traditional...it was my mum that took me for a job interview’ (Angela, Interview, page 9: 418-420)

This was indicative of social expectations, which excluded some women from attending University. Hence as they overcame barriers and grew more confident their motivation increased. Reay (2006) argued entering University for those classed as less traditional meant overcoming practical and attitudinal barriers, including questioning
your own community. Skeggs (1997) asserted that working class women face personal issues associated with identity and a cultural clash when entering education. A gap was evident between attending University and the daily experiences of some women within my study, but this increased their motivation to succeed through valuing the change.

The women found learning and academic development improved their confidence, and individual growth, which further increased motivation. For example, Karen compared previous doubts and current confidence:

‘...the first time that I realised I had got through an assignment without saying ‘I can’t do it’...I thought oh my god! What an achievement... ’ (Karen, Interview, page 8: 342-3)

Increased academic confidence was associated with being knowledgeable in the EYs sector. For example, Jane described a meeting regarding the future of her service where she appropriately challenged a ‘council representative’ by stating Government policy, which she identified as a changed aptitude. Additionally, Pearl described how HE study increased her confidence:

‘...I can actually go somewhere and think I know what I am going to talk about’ (Pearl, Focus Group, page 13: 311-312)

Increased proficiency created significant changes and increased motivation. Wendy described her increased confidence and challenging others, including questioning her tutor

‘I never used to say anything.....well when someone is talking to me now I feel like I can answer better....I feel like I can do anything’ (Wendy, Focus Group, page 47: 1143-4)
Wider learning was evident for example, the social policy module increased, not only understanding of EYs legislation, but broader knowledge of current affairs, with Pearl describing understanding changes in taxation (Pearl, Focus Group, p 50: 1217). Robbins (2013) identified social policy as a potential area for learners to consider wider learning through the application to daily life, reflecting similar experiences to some of the women in my study. The women in my study expressed confidence related to their orientation towards University, including understanding educational requirements and analytical skills, leading Pam to describe how this: ‘trained your brain’ (Pam, Focus Group, page 31: 759). Changes were identified with increased motivation as attending University became normalised. A further source of motivation was the positive attitudes of other people which will be considered next.

5.4.3 Feeling supported

The women were motivated through the support of family, workplace and peers. Support from the family, primarily partners, older children and extended family, including siblings and parents (grandparents) helped motivate the women to continue with study. Angela expressed being very well supported by her husband and adult sons, who she described as ‘fantastic’ as they contributed to chores and gave space for study, with an older son at University providing moral support (Angela, Interview, page 6: 253). Others described being emotionally and practically supported by husbands and partners for example, Charlotte described her partner encouraging her by saying: ‘look you can do it...’ (Charlotte, Interview, page 5:224-5). Also, Charlotte’s parents cared for her son enabling her to complete assessments, which increased her motivation despite her partner working away.
Workplace support was significant with inspiration for learning and role models coming from qualified staff, which included those with a degree. Shared experiences of education amongst workplace colleagues created a positive learning environment, leading Karen to describing learning as:

‘...buzzing through work....it’s brilliant....’ (Karen, Interview, page 4: 194)

Sargent (2002) and McGivney (2003) found positive employer attitudes motivated learners. Evans et al. (2006) identified workplaces with positive attitudes to education and training as the learning workplace. However, some women in my study described limited formal workplace support or recognition of challenges faced, which they expressed as demotivating them. Although when limited formal support was offered informal collegiate backing accommodated flexibility for them and gave the women a boost as they felt supported.

The women described being motivated by peers as the University informally facilitated not only tutor support but brought learners together. Jane was positive when she described the support amongst the students:

‘We have stuck together through thick and thin....we help each other a lot....you know, just talking about things, using a book and then giving it to somebody else to use, instead of selfishly hogging it for 10 weeks’ (Jane, Interview, page 9: 422-425)

The support and co-operation within the group proved crucial to motivation, creating active encouragement and positive attitudes. Another important feature of motivation was associated with role models to be considered next.
5.4.4 Role models

The women in my study identified their role models that included non-academic but hard-working people, who influenced their work ethic and motivation. They were further motivated to be role models for their children, through demonstrating the benefits of HE. During the FG I initiated this discussion by disclosing that my mother was an important role model for me but that she was not academic having left school at 14. Role models identified by the women included hard working parents with WLB skills, who managed roles and time to overcome challenges. This created emotion amongst the women, who disclosed wanting to prove themselves to role models. Pam, Jane and Karen depicted parents with strong work ethics as guiding them in their attitudes. However some role models had limited understanding, around attending University, which created personal conflict amongst the women. Some of the women described family members they didn’t want to be like, including those who did not work and had limited opportunities. Gerson (2009) found choices around lifestyle and gender expectations often influenced by either inspiring parental role models or negative experiences to avoid, paralleling the experiences recounted in my study.

The women wanted to be role models for their children, which proved a significant motivator. For example, Wendy would be the first in her family to obtain a degree and wanted to show this possibility to her sons. As HE study was predominantly in the home space, motivation was derived from demonstrating the potential benefits. Jane recounted affirming changes in her older daughter (age 14) which she attributed to her positive role modelling of HE study:
‘[My Daughter] never wanted to go onto Uni or anything, but she has just decided that she wants to do a degree’ (Jane, Focus Group, page 42; 1001-2).

Similarly, Simone described her children asking ‘how many more words mum?’ as she was completing her assignment (Simone, Interview, page 14: 660). This demonstrated the positive effects of overlapping home space and HE study. This has comparability with the Webber’s (2015) findings, who in examining a similar group of adult learners, identified mothers as good role models who showed children how to study. Therefore, role models were motivational and provided future focus, which is the final subtheme to be considered within motivation.

5.4.5 Looking to the future

Future projection was a key motivator amongst the women, as short term compromise to WLB and well-being was accepted for longer term gains. Motivation was intrinsically and extrinsically related to personal achievement, through improved career prospects and earning potential, alongside personal development. The women wanted to improve their situation, by enhancing career prospects and broadening opportunities. Attending University was viewed as beneficial for personal life, family prospects, and workplace performance. Sarah described her motivation to be involved in HE study:

‘...I like stretching myself ...challenging myself’ (Sarah, Interview, page 5: 225)

Bringing HE study into the home space created potential benefits and formed the ‘learning family’, as younger children observed and undertook homework alongside parents, and college / University age children shared experiences. Jane described this behaviour:
Learning at home was for convenience but created a positive learning environment, with studying becoming normative and opening opportunities for families. Therefore, although the women often had reduced WLB and compromised well-being, they accepted this as worthwhile with future benefits outweighing current sacrifices. Motivation created success, with resilience enabling adaptation and coping strategies, hence the women continued with the trio of spheres of commitment, which will be considered next.

5.5 The trio of sphere of commitment, well-being compromise, adaptation, and personal motivation

As the findings have been considered connections between the three significant themes are evident. Table 10 demonstrates the connections between commitments, compromised wellbeing, adaptation and motivation:
Table 10: The trio of spheres of commitment, consequences for well-being, adaptation and motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workplace</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours / dedication to team &amp; early years / limited flexibility</td>
<td>Study day /deadlines unfamiliar/ academic</td>
<td>Child care Housework – cleaning, cooking, shopping,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study in the home**

**Leisure:** Family centric/ serious

**Consequences for well-being**

Work life imbalance / earning and caring commitments / unfamiliarity with study and unexpected demands / diminished leisure and free time

Physical and emotional effects:

- Strain
- Illness
- Fatigue
- Sleep deprivation
- Stress
- Guilt

**Motivation and determination**

- highly valued second chance
- Early Years sector
- role models and work ethic
- being a role model
- future focus

**Personal strategies and adaptation**

- personality and attitude
- planning and time management
- support from household, workplace and peers
- transformation and increased confidence
- personal coping strategies/perception
Table 10 depicts the trio of spheres of commitment and typical activity of each and areas of overlap. For example work-based learning overlapped employment and study, with further overlap between learning and home space as most independent learning occurred there. Leisure is separated to demonstrate how it is pushed out, but also altered to form serious leisure or protected as family time. The trio of spheres of commitment reduced time and created WLB pressure and compromised well-being, diminishing free time, creating emotional and physical effects. However, negative implications were countered through positive reactions, as the second theme is indicative of adaptation and the third being motivation to continue and succeed. Well-being and WLB compromise were accepted as the women accommodated short-term sacrifices for long term goals as they were convinced of the benefits of Higher Education.

5.6 Summary

In summary in this Chapter I have considered the findings from the semi-structured interviews and FG. The findings were presented through a combination of quotes and summation of findings, based upon the thematic analysis. The first theme being the trio of spheres of commitment as HE study is added to employment and family, with the sub-themes of overlap, time use and pressure, reduced free, leisure and me time. Considering this pattern revealed that the trio of spheres of commitment created WLB disequilibrium and compromised well-being. The second theme concerned adaptation and gave consideration to ways personal and household strategies were developed in response to the situation. The sub-themes covered were time-management, household / family, workplace and peer support, changes in personal / household strategies and resilience. The third
The theme which has been considered in this chapter was concerned with motivation to continue with the trio of commitments. The sub-themes covered included the diverse sources of motivation, such as the EYs, HE study representing a highly valued second chance. Also, the positive effects of support, the significance of role models and being future focused. There was a review of key aspects and their interconnection, that will form the basis of the discussion, as the themes identified as significant will be discussed in Chapter Six.
Chapter Six: Discussing the trio of spheres of commitment, adaptation and motivation to succeed

“...make it easier for everyone else, it might not be easier for me...I have to be wonder woman almost” (Jane, Interview, p6: 276-277)

6.1: Introduction

This chapter begins by outlining links between three significant themes of (1) trio of spheres of commitment, (2) adaptation and (3) motivation. Boundaries between spheres, in terms of blurring or separation, role expansion and time-based strain will be critically considered, discussing situation, personal perception and gender. The distinct nature of the trio of commitments, in comparison to the usual focus of a duality of commitments within WLB, will be discussed in the context of findings from this study and existing research. Well-being will be explored comparatively, including objective reduction of well-being identified through tiredness, stress and ill health, as opposed to subjective measures, reflected through raised self-esteem. I will consider leisure depletion, as free-time is re-allocated to HE study, contrasting with its alteration to become more productive and akin to serious leisure. Adaptation, personal strategy and motivation will be viewed through the sub-areas of control and WLB; separation and integration; employer and household support; gender, role models and student identity. Resilience will be critically explored including its contested nature and place within individual and group development. I will evaluate the formation of the learning family, associated with change in cultural capital within some households. Significant points for discussion will be brought together to explore: WLB experiences of women undertaking HE, exploring identity, anxiety and achievement, and the implications for HE practice. The next section will discuss the link between the three significant themes.
6.2 Intersection between the trio of spheres of commitment, adaptation and motivation

In this section I will provide a brief account of the intersection between the three main themes, established from the review of the findings (Table 10). The main theme was related to the introduction of the third sphere (HE study), which had major impact upon the other two spheres of employment and family. This culminated in initial significant imbalance and disequilibrium in WLB and well-being. The situation created through the presence of this trio of spheres of commitment created a reaction amongst the women involved, representing a transformative process. The change involved an adaptation which rebalanced the new situation and achieved a level of equilibrium, albeit precarious at times for some of the women. The adaptation process was evident through the use of strategies, whereby women drew from their own and their household’s resources, to enable them to continue and succeed in HE. The third critical aspect within the situation was that which encouraged adaptation, embedded within the women’s high motivation to succeed in HE study. This motivation was drawn from the value placed upon HE study, in terms of wanting to advance the EYs sector, engage in personal development and improved the future prospects for themselves and their families. Upon facing imbalance, with the addition of a third sphere of commitment, the women were able to adapt due to their motivation to succeed.

The initial WLB disequilibrium was due to the addition of a further sphere of commitment rather than the substitution of it with a pre-existing sphere, creating three distinct areas of demand. The women in my study used personal resources to accommodate the new situation, and developed strategies, including reducing employment and/or gaining support from others, such as family. Strategic approaches were used by the women in my study, that enabled their continuation with HE. Jarvis (2005) also found determination amongst individuals and households to alter circumstances of commitment within daily life, as a way
of successfully managing demands. As time was taken by HE study time shortage arose amongst the women in my study, leading to increased emphasis upon time planning to facilitate this new priority. Similarly, Wajcman (2008) argued time use patterns were significantly influenced by circumstances other than employment, proving most significant for women with domestic responsibilities. Adaptation was necessary as HE study was added to the women’s commitments, but there was sometimes a delay within the adaptation process. This created detrimental outcomes, including adverse effects upon the women’s well-being.

There was evidence of compromised well-being, but this was not uniform amongst the women in my study, and often related to their attitude and ability to adapt. This adaptation generally entailed a reduction in commitments and/or more effective use of own and/or household resources. However, role conflict alongside persistent time pressure amongst some of the women created negative implications for well-being, reflected in both physical and emotional effects. Cassidy (2005) argued reduced free and leisure time can deplete individual health and well-being opportunities, creating increased fatigue and stress. However, the findings from my study demonstrate further complexity as personal factors influenced the situation. Primarily, motivation to continue with HE study and emphasis upon future gains had a significant effect upon well-being. In my study the women with the greatest demands did not necessarily have the most negative views of their well-being, which related to positivity in attitude and approach to the situation. Orton (2010) asserts that attitudes can be highly influential in building positive motivation and well-being.

Positive motivation for the women in my study was derived from acting as role models for their children and being more able to contribute to the EYs sector. The women in my study
showed personal resilience; therefore, while there was compromised objective well-being, there was increased confidence and self-esteem, representing enhanced subjective well-being (Abel, 2016; Tilford, 2017). This proved important in enabling adaptation within everyday lives and successful management of all spheres of commitment. Significantly there was indication of changes within some families which represented the development of the ‘learning family’. This was related to HE study becoming embedded within the everyday household activities, as the spheres of commitment intersected. As I have outlined the intersections between the three main themes and discussed some of the key aspects of each, I will now discuss all the points more fully within this chapter. I begin by exploring the trio of spheres of commitment.

6.3 The trio of spheres of commitment

The formation of a trio of spheres of commitment, as HE study was added to the existing spheres of employment and family care, was critical in the WLB and well-being experiences of the women in my study. The pattern of the women’s lives changed as an additional, unfamiliar commitment area was added, and the energy given to HE study at times created disequilibrium. WLB reflects the ability to manage different spheres of life, and when this is not achieved, people experience problems associated with imbalance (Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Wattis et al., 2012). A significant issue for the women in my study was that they were already experiencing restricted free time, balancing a heavy workload between employment and home responsibilities. Adding HE study to their lives lead to increased pressures. This reflected similarity with experiences recounted in findings of Lowe and Gayle (2007); Yorke and Longden (2010), who argued adult learners who combined employment and learning experienced reduced free time to meet demands.
The women in my study described their WLB in terms of tension, recounting time conflict and role strain. They identified WLB pressure being created through the redirection of free-time to HE study, necessitated as time was limited by employment and domestic commitments and success relied upon time dedication. Wajcman (2008) found the expansion of roles and consequential allocation of time central to WLB discourse, reflecting the experiences of the women within my study, as they managed increasingly complex roles. While time shortage and use could be objectively measured, my study focused upon women’s experiences, attitudes and attributes. The personal perceptions of the women in my study, as they reflected upon their WLB experiences, were highly influential in how they managed demands. Those with the greatest demands and limited support sometimes coped best and portrayed a positive outlook in comparison to those with lesser objective demands, because of personal perceptions. Greer and Patterson (2013), similarly found personal attitudes influenced WLB outcomes. Time based strain was therefore, not only related to objectively measuring time against task allocation, but to emotional attitudes and approaches to commitments.

The women in my study experienced role expansion and tension through adding HE study to life. Each of the trio of spheres of commitment had a number of distinct roles associated with it. HE study added the student role into daily life, with employee and family roles remaining in situ, leading to role conflict as each required the time, energy and attention of the women. This parallels findings of Boyd et al. (2016), who located role based tension amongst those with second jobs, as individuals attempted to manage alongside household commitments. In both my study and Boyd et al. (2016), complexity came from three distinct demand areas. The tension the women experienced further increased through a dilemma.
based on how they placed priority upon commitments, with a change in their focus created through the addition of HE study.

It was evident from some women’s commentary that, despite being involved in diverse activities associated with employment and learning, their maternal role remained dominant. There was indication from their descriptions of day-to-day life that many of the women were affected by persistent societal and structural inequalities, placing primary responsibility for domestic demands upon them. This trend of gendered inequity within society is viewed by Risman (2017) as a continuing restriction upon women and was evident amongst the experiences of some of the women in my study. This was the case even amongst those women in my study who challenged or changed their own domestic situation, in that as household members helped they still expressed feeling ultimately responsible. Christensen and Alfred (2013) and Greer (2013), assert that there has been limited redistribution of domestic tasks, despite the increased normalisation of women’s workplace participation. Hence within my study the position of women was such that, although they undertook demanding external roles, perceived social pressure imposed responsibility for the home and family upon them. This responsibility for the domestic / family was persistently detrimental in the WLB experience and often tipped any balance the women achieved.

Women in my study expressed concern relating to unequal social expectations that placed pressure on them to fulfil their domestic roles and a number directly questioned responsibility being assumed to be theirs. However, strong feelings were provoked and reflected contrasting tensions amongst the women in my study, when they feared their maternal role being might be compromised through other commitments. Hochschild,
(1989); Oakley, (1976); Schober and Scott (2012); Williams, (2000) found women struggled to discard the gendered character of responsibility for family (particularly children), reflecting the dilemma the women in my study experienced. This dilemma was exacerbated through attempts to prioritise their HE study, which the women in my study frequently expressed in terms of its personal importance, negatively equating it with being selfish. Contrariwise, the women understood the potential, through gaining a degree, of a better career, not only from their perspective but for the benefit of their family. However, the mother role was given precedence and any compromises the women in my study made predominately related to their own losses, so as to restrict detrimental effects upon the family. Ruppanner and Hufferman (2014) also found women more likely to accept daily non-work based interference and negative WLB, through placing precedence upon domestic / familial responsibilities.

The women in my study experienced a trio of spheres of commitment, as the addition of HE study was added to their lives, which formed a complex and distinctive situation. Other studies - including research of Crompton and Lyonette (2008); Dex and Bond (2005); Gatrell, et al. (2013); Jones (2003) Kossek (2016); Lewis and Campbell (2007) - tended to focus upon WLB in relation to the two key aspects of employment and life (family), indicating WLB in terms of duality. The women in my study experienced a distinct situation based upon three commitment areas, a complexity Hall et al., (2013) and Emery et al. (2017) argue has received limited coverage in WLB discourse. A distinct pattern was created as the three spheres of demands impacted upon each other, demonstrating added WLB complexity. Hall et al. (2013) asserted just two elements of WLB were insufficient to cover the increased complexity of contemporary life, including the growing significance of leisure and career /
self-development. The restricted theoretical consideration of WLB through three spheres of commitment meant the complexity faced by the women in my study was not fully contextualised. This meant that there were potential restrictions in understanding, and consequently supporting students, amongst employers and the University.

The experiences expressed by many of the women in my study showed that WLB disequilibrium was evident within their daily lives. This was due a time shortage as each commitment sphere required dedication, leading the women to often be time poor, giving up their free-time to accommodate HE study. Each of the spheres had at least one role attached and often more in the case of family, for example, mother and wife. Then, as the student role was added, the women faced further role conflict. Additionally the roles represented responsibilities and, with regards to the mother role, this was often affected by gender and societal expectations.

The combination the trio of spheres of commitment created imbalance for the women in my study. Strategies for adaptation represented individual reactions to imbalance and this will be considered in section 6.6. However, here, I will explore how overlapping commitments can create conflict in role and responsibility. The women in my study frequently undertook HE study in the home space, enabling management of household duties and care of children concurrently. However, domestic demands such as cooking, cleaning and washing, and more so children, proved difficult to ignore, infringing upon HE study. Time allocation was important and the women stretched boundaries in-between spheres, often undertaking HE study opportunistically and extending hours through working late into the evening and night. The blurring of boundaries and extension of productive time to study was made possible through HE study taking place within the home space. Mellner
et al. (2014) identified similar negative boundary blurring amongst home workers who extended hours, made possible through less rigid divisions between home and employment. Overspill represented one part of life invading another, equated with unsatisfactory situations whereby employment dominates the home (Ammons and Markham, 2004; Jarvis and Pratt, 2006). Overspill was often evident amongst the women in my study, exacerbating WLB disequilibrium, creating negative emotional and physical consequences. This pattern of work-life imbalance, created through the trio of spheres of commitment, had implications for the women’s well-being, which I will discuss next.

6.4 Well-being

This section will consider the well-being experiences of the women in my study. Reduced well-being was evident through descriptions of being exhausted, feeling under pressure and unfocused, experiencing illness, and expressing emotional outbursts, such as crying and anger, all of which were indicative of stress and anxiety. High levels of commitment to HE study meant women in my study often experienced mental conflict in terms of being unable to focus adequately on other commitments. One example of compromised well-being experience was a disrupted sleep pattern created through worries about employment, HE study and the family / home. The women in my study described disruption to sleep and rest, which they equated to reduced well-being. Disrupted sleep was described by the women in my study as caused by studying and being active late into the night. Gangwisch (2015) found similar disturbed sleep patterns through working overtime, equated with a lack of leisure in-between work and sleep, paralleling the situation recounted in my study. The women’s lack of rest and disrupted sleep lead them to describe feel sleep deprivation and valuing sleep and rest as a priority difficult to accommodate with their commitments and limited time.
Hochschild (1989) found sleep obsession amongst parents with diverse demands and limited time, which she compared with a hungry person’s focus upon food. In distinction from this study, which concerned domestic tasks, my own included a focus on HE study. One of the issues with HE study was that it proved invasive in requiring high levels of focus which the women struggled to switch off from. The women described further reductions in sleep to fulfil deadlines, accepted as a short term resolution for long term gains, true of many actions which diminished well-being.

The objective well-being of women in my study reflected both physical and emotional compromises, through personal resource and time depletion (Deeming, 2013; Huffman et al., 2012). However, the women in my study actively managed commitments, including reducing demands when plausible and gaining household and workplace support where possible. These responses could be understood from a Conservation of Resource (COR) perspective, a quantitative measure concerning how individuals deploy strategies to meet demands and maintain well-being (Huffman et al., 2012). There were times when the women in my study managed resources and demands well, adapting to improve their situation and well-being. However, there were many demands upon them and a struggle became evident at times.

Social factors influenced the well-being of women in my study, including reduced choices around working fewer hours and/or buying services to reduce domestic demands. Social determinants associated with well-being are linked with restricted opportunities related to income and social expectation (Deeming, 2013; Deneuline and McGregor, 2010; Haworth and Lewis, 2005; Taylor, 2011). For the women in my study, a lack of income restricted options for support and reducing commitments, leading them to compromise objective
well-being to meet demands. Restricted autonomy was significant as they worked for other people, had imminent family needs to address, and faced restricted options due to limited income. This contrasted significantly to professionals, generally more able to exercise control over their lives, through more income to purchase services and rarer skills to negotiate employment terms and conditions (Toffoletti and Starr, 2016).

The women in my study, in undertaking HE study, experienced a positive and transformative process. Therefore, whilst an objective measure of compromised well-being was useful, the favoured measure in my study was subjective. This facilitated a more qualitative appraisal and accommodated the positive implications of participating in HE study and the personal development it encompasses. It enabled a broader perspective, incorporating the influence of personal qualities, such as motivation to overcome challenges, in order to realise future benefits and career development (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). Although HE study formed a demand upon the women in my study, there were significant positives associated with new opportunities, including increased self-esteem, confidence, and personal and professional growth. This development was closely aligned with measures advocated in ‘Five ways to well-being’ (DOH 2008). For example, ‘connecting with others’, ‘curiosity’, ‘taking notice’ and ‘giving’ were all apparent within the high value the women placed upon undertaking a degree, especially in EYs. In undertaking a work based learning qualification the women optimised the benefits of linking with the workplace to enhance knowledge and develop professionally and personally. Aked and Thompson (2011) identified ‘Keep learning’ (DOH 2008), from the ‘Five ways to well-being’ initiative, as a significant contributor to well-being, which they equated with daily opportunities for development, highly evident within experiences of workplace learning.
Well-being is socially constructed (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016), influenced by social attitudes and personal perceptions. The women in my study, through demonstrating positive attitudes towards HE study, showed how well-being was developed through their actions and positive aptitude. Subjective well-being relates to personal approaches, including ‘general happiness’, that considers positive and negative experiences and attitudes (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016; Waldron, 2010). The women in my study were motivated by HE study, which increased through educational success. There was further indication that HE study improved subjective well-being and acted to bolster against the negative effects of demands. Subjective well-being, from a time use perspective, included Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), which considered the allocation of time to tasks during a typical day (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016; Kahneman et al., 2004). From this perspective compromised well-being was often evident amongst the women in my study, as days were busy and demands difficult to accommodate. However, they enjoyed the activity and achievement and this enhanced their well-being experience. However, from a subjective perspective their experience was not straight forward and being widening participation students had added complexity to their experiences. The student role was initially difficult to reconcile within their identity, through unfamiliarity with University culture, creating self-doubt and threatening positive effects upon well-being (Waldron, 2010).

The women in my study had family roles (e.g. mother, wife/partner, daughter, sister), employee roles, and faced the challenge of incorporating the additional student role into their lives. They reflected upon the varied roles in terms of the value they provided as well as the demands. The additional student role as they became part of HE study was valued highly, once the women grew used to it. The positive influence of being involved in HE study
fitted well with expansion theory, considering the balance between excessive demands creating stress and the benefits of managing ‘multiple roles’ (Nordenmark, 2004, 117). Grönlund and Öun (2010) found such role expansion provided a buffer against stress as individuals increased their roles and so experienced greater value and self-worth. Despite role tension experienced by the women in my study, role expansion represented valorisation, through additional valued roles becoming part of life. This role expansion was equated with enhanced knowledge, increased opportunities, and new connections to tutors and students (Nordenmark, 2004). The women’s accounts of their study day provided an example of tension between physical and emotional, being long and tiring, but highly valued and much enjoyed. The well-being experiences of the women in my study were complex, with descriptions of physical depletion, contrasted with strong motivation, increased self-esteem, self-confidence and improved future outlook.

Well-being, from a capabilities perspective, was relevant as the women, through undertaking HE study, experienced a transformation of increased confidence, knowledge, and ability, both academically and within EYs. Capabilities can be defined as enhanced functioning which expands options around roles, aligning well with learning and development (Deneulin and McGregory, 2010). The women in my study consciously engaged in HE study with an aim to improve future prospects and were motivated by their increased capability, including managing additional demands. Capabilities is reflected through enhanced choices, possibilities and personal attributes, increasing well-being in terms of fulfilment and improved future prospects (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). Capability expansion was gained by the women through HE study, which increased academic knowledge, competency and ability to contribute. This was highly motivational for
continuation with the trio of spheres of commitment and the WLB disequilibrium created. Therefore, despite their journey being complex, with compromises to objective well-being, they proved determined and positive. This study shows the significance of personal perception to well-being, while highlighting their shared motivation and commitment to HE study. A further area to consider, which was linked to well-being, was that of leisure, which I will discuss next.

6.5: Leisure Issues

There is a well forged link between well-being and leisure, associated with free time, recuperation and the pursuit of physical activity. Yet the women in my study clearly indicated their free time was shifted towards HE study. The main exception being time protected for family based leisure activity, often associated with children. Therefore, in managing the trio of spheres of commitment, the women described previous pure leisure becoming allocated to HE study. Cassidy (2005) in studying young adults experiencing reduced leisure found significant links with well-being, as leisure created a distinction between work and non-work and formed a buffer from stress. Amongst participants in both my own and Cassidy’s study, leisure was reduced and reallocated to study, increasing the amount of stress reported. The women in my study described experiencing pressure from HE study, leading to emotional outbursts, such as crying and feeling angry, which they associated with reduced personal time. The pattern outlined by the women in my study indicated similar traits to Warren’s (2010) findings that identified leisure’s importance in maintaining emotional stability by providing time-out from demands. This meant reduced leisure increased vulnerability and, at times, compromised well-being.
The reduction in leisure amongst the women in my study included undertaking HE study at weekends, reducing free time, with frequent negative implications upon family time. Bittman (2005) identified negatives associated with employment on Sunday which reduced family time, echoing experiences described by the women in my study as they dedicated weekends to HE study. Some tried to protect Sunday but failed to defend it from impending course deadlines. Even when the women in my study planned leisure with their family, they described being distracted by the academic work they were committed to. This meant the women not only struggled to find time for leisure, but struggled to focus when participating in leisure activities. As this frequently involved their family and children, they felt guilt at their limited focus.

Being individually and socially constructed, leisure is diverse, so whilst commonly associated with time off - which the women in my study identified as markedly reduced - alternatives became evident. The women recounted changes experienced as they gave priority and time to HE study, yet their attitude was not entirely of loss and more often depicted gains. This change might be understood, in terms of the HE study the women undertook, as being indicative of ‘serious leisure’ (Stebbins, 1992) or ‘leisure crafting’, associated with leisure being productive and stretching individuals through valued activity (Petrou and Bakker, 2016). So although the women in my study reduced what might be considered pure leisure, they experienced HE as a highly valued and enjoyable activity, that linked with personal progression. This adds complexity within the experiences of the women as well-being was compromised through less free time, for both rest and physical activity, and time was given to HE study. Yet HE study was pursued willingly, being experienced as enjoyable and rewarding, enabling rebalance despite the loss of pure leisure. In other words, there was
evidence of transformation through adaptation, a significant theme which will be discussed next.

6.6: Adaptation; Personal Strategy and motivation

Adaptation to the new situation, created through the trio of spheres of commitment, reflected both personal strategy and motivation amongst the women, which I will discuss through a number of sub-sections. As the women in my study experienced the impact of the trio of spheres of commitment, affecting well-being and changing their leisure patterns, they reacted. This involved developing personal strategies based upon individual resources, such as planning time, through reallocating personal and free time, and removing demands, including reducing hours of employment. The adaptation process used by women within my study confirms Jarvis (1999) and Jarvis and Pratt’s (2000) assertions that people change, regaining control of competing demands, enabling them to meet the needs of a new situation and find greater WLB. The extent of adaptation success linked directly with WLB and subsequent well-being experienced, equated with developing the ability to not only manage the requirements of a third sphere but find enjoyment. A related, significant aspect of the process of adaptation was linked with control and strategy, which I will discuss in the next sub-section.

6.6.1: Control and strategy

Control proved significant for the women within my study as they attempted to create order, enabling prioritisation of commitments and planning time to meet their commitments. Greater control was associated with improved WLB experience amongst the women, reflecting similarity with Kossek (2016) and Visser and Williams (2006), who also linked favourable WLB with autonomy. Autonomous decisions made by the women in my
study included the allocation of time to study, and where and when to study. This was made possible as HE study involved significant independent study time. However, autonomy was constricted by assessment deadlines, meaning the women were highly study focused, dedicating significant time to meet deadlines controlled by tutors. This paralleled Jarvis and Pratt’s (2005) findings, when studying the intense working patterns amongst freelance project workers to meet deadlines, who prioritised fulfilling contracts, despite their apparent autonomy and workload control. The women in my study often found other commitments to be inflexible in terms of time, with employment dictated by others and care needs requiring immediate attention. Toffoletti and Starr (2016) found similar illusions of control amongst professional women, supposedly autonomous but compelled to meet targets set by others, often extending hours to do so, much like women in my study.

Autonomy was further restricted for the women in my study as they responded to unpredictable events and unexpected demands. This created strain within strategies and eroded control further. The areas requiring priority included staff shortages or their own children being unwell, requiring immediate care. While not ideal, academic deadlines could be met through the women cramming HE study when they lost study time to other demands. This was a response the women described as their study time was lost to the needs of other commitments. Responsibility and control were synonymous and when the women in my study felt out of control they expressed concern at not fulfilling responsibility. The motivation behind their strategies often related to responsibility and hence personal resources were frequently used. However, support from others (e.g. family and workplace) was significant in aiding the women achieve improved WLB, yet this could be viewed as losing control, which created a dilemma. Many studies (e.g. Hochschild, 1989; 2000; Kossek
et al., 1998; Oakley, 1976; McKenry and Price, 2005; Wattis, et al., 2012) find that, irrespective of other significant demands, such as employment and learning, women remain responsible for the domestic and family. In my study the women were influenced by the opinions of others and self-image, which affected their sense of responsibility, making control significant to coping strategies.

Strategies utilised to reconcile the trio of spheres of commitment in my study, were based upon the individual women and their households, with little indication of purchasing supporting services. Options around purchasing services usually entailed tasks such as cleaning and childcare, but the former was non-existent and the latter limited. This was associated with taking responsibility, but also restricted options connected with limited income. Dean and Coulter (2006) found professionals and non-professionals had distinct social experiences, as those with lower incomes had fewer options to pay for services and consequently used their own resources. This did not mean the women in my study did not have support, but that support was mostly informal, typically drawing from the household and extended family. Ward et al. (2010) and Warren et al. (2009) asserted that restricted options for child care and other services were highly evident amongst working class families, based upon cost and income. Therefore, those with a lower income had reduced WLB strategy options available. Control was significant to adaptation, which was also influenced by gender and income within the experiences of the women in my study. Approaches to adaptation can be based upon the separation or integration of commitments, which forms the next sub-section.
6.6.2: Separation and integration in adaptation

Important elements within strategies used by women in my study were separation and / or integration. Separation of spheres protected one from another, while integration created greater fluidity between them. Integration enabled fulfilment of different tasks, in parallel or through moving quickly from one to another, including studying at home to facilitate care. Much discussion surrounds integration and segregation in relation to WLB, but studies remain inconclusive in terms of preference and levels of success (Boyd, et al, 2016; Gambles et al., 2006; Lewis et al., 2005; Taylor, 2002; Troup and Rose, 2012; Wattis et al., 2012).

Personal preference and circumstances were identified as important by the women in my study and strategies changed in reaction to altered and altering situations.

Some of the women described separation as facilitating focus and time division, and used strategies that included reserving time for specific activities and creating separate space for HE study. Some strategies were based upon necessity, for example the presence of disruption from children or the learning styles of the woman. The women in my study sometimes negotiated separation with the household in advance to prevent interruption, which was linked with creating a separate mental space, allowing clear focus on HE study. Emery et al. (2017), identified separation as favourable for dealing with the additional complexity of life, which was equated with protecting participants’ family time. However, this strategy was influenced by social position, as Emery et al. (2017) considered professionals with higher incomes and more choices to purchase support, which contrasted with reduced choices amongst women in my study. Separation was often difficult to achieve for a number of women in my study, even when this was their preference, as they had the domestic demands and needed to find time for the family.
Many women in my study described boundaries as flexible. They used integration based upon overlap, undertaking HE study alongside their children’s studies or going to and from study to attend to commitments. Boyd *et al.* (2016) found fire-fighters with second jobs best able to meet demands through slippery or non-existent boundaries, yet they were not generally responsible for the domestic. The domestic was a significant and often inflexible demand upon the women in my study, with family composition influencing integration within the home space, which proved critical in gaining sufficient focus for HE study.

Integration frequently involved spaces becoming merged and often reflected a lack space available in the women’s households. Jarvis and Pratt (2005) also identified home workers sharing the home space with the family, due to a lack of options. Similarly women in my study explained how their HE study was undertaken within home space, for instance at the kitchen table. This was convenient, but created disruption through noise and the need to clear away to accommodate the family and protect academic work, demonstrating the pitfalls of integrations.

Individual choices were significant amongst the women in my study, who demonstrated diverse techniques reflecting their household circumstances, and personal preferences and abilities. Lowe and Gayle (2007) also identified separation and integration techniques used by the adult learners, demonstrating comparability to the rationale stated by the women in my study. One approach was not necessarily superior to another and there were clearly individual choices made. However, choices were often restricted by necessity and approaches were not static, as the women in my study described abandoning HE study to attend to their family. In this sense, the boundaries of separation were fragile and subject to interaction with the other spheres, making adaptation within the preferred strategy
essential. Another feature influencing either separation or integration was time, with time planning critical to success, which I will consider next.

6.6.3: Time planning in the process of adaptation

Time was a constant factor, as the women in my study dedicated previous free time to HE study while employment and domestic demands often remained in place, making the planning of limited time essential. Time planning and WLB are synonymous, with time restriction and inflexibility often forming the crux of the discussion. Wajcman (2008:1) highlighted time’s significance:

‘It should come as no surprise to learn that ‘time’ is the most commonly used noun in the English language’

The women in my study expressed difficulties around time shortage and felt frustrated at all the demands upon them alongside the limited time available. Wajcman (2008), found women often struggled most with time shortage, through their dedication to household needs despite employment commitments. McGivney, (2001; 2002); Sargent and Aldridge, (2002) identified restricted time as a significant barrier for adult participation in education, as other responsibilities often remained in place, echoing similarity with women in my study.

Time shortage amongst the women in my study made effective time use essential and the women recounted changes in behaviour to include time planning. Although planning time was important, the effectiveness was often reduced by academic inexperience, and women recounted making time, but lacking the academic skills and understanding to fulfil tasks. McGivney, (2001, 2004) and Sargent, (1991) identified limited time, coupled with a lack of
academic know-how, lead to tangible barriers to adult learners’ success. The women in my study found that time allocation and planning for the needs of assessments to be unproductive as they initially commenced HE study (Lowe and Gayle, 2007). This meant time planning could be initially ineffective. However, as the women progressed, their confidence in managing time and academic skills increased, culminating in understanding the benefits of taking time away from study to facilitate new focus. Once more demonstrating the strategies used by the women were not stagnant but rather part of a dynamic, transformative process.

Time use and planning were constricted by demands upon the women in my study. Reduced employment commitments were discussed, and for some women proved essential in shrinking this commitment, which provided time for HE study but was often financially and personally challenging. Lyonette (2015) asserted women committing fewer hours to employment to accommodate domestic responsibility experienced the negative implications of reduced pay and career opportunities. Similar barriers to reduced employment hours for those in my study related to loss of income, yet there were mixed accounts related to effects upon career opportunities. The women in my study viewed time dedication to HE study as improving rather than eroding career prospects, demonstrating critical decisions around reducing their commitment to the EYs sector for long term career progression. The women often proved reluctant to reduce their hours of employment, as a WLB strategy, due to their dedication to the EYs sector. Their employment role was associated with fulfilment, contributing to children’s education and development, representing a significant part of their well-being. Hochschild (2000) found the workplace could be favoured over the home, as it offered more structure, role definition and rewards through payment and recognition.
Consequently, when rationalisation of time to manage WLB was required, complex decision making processes were evident, meaning fewer hours were not always feasible or desirable. Time could be freed through support from others, an area I will next explore.

6.6.4: Support from others: Employer and household contribution to adaptation and coping strategies

The WLB challenges the women in my study experienced, through the trio of spheres of commitment, could be improved through gaining support, typically from employers / colleagues and household members / extended family. Support was important to adaptation but influenced by the attitudes of both the women and those providing support. In terms of employers, support for flexible working would have been beneficial but accommodating this was formally limited, reflecting the customer-lead aspect of the EYs sector. Additionally, there were indications of limited understanding amongst employers, which Harvey (2009) identified as employer misgivings that dedication to education through foundation degrees was indicative of less workplace commitment. This was an attitude evident amongst some of the women’s experiences within my study. Lewis and Cooper, (2005) questioned employers’ failures to facilitate their employees’ need to support their family, finding that this undermined employee dedication, WLB and well-being. The women described some supportive colleagues who offered to cover sessions but they were reluctant to seek support, being concerned the colleagues were themselves stretched to capacity. Hymen, et al. (2005) argued collegiate support was often used where limited formal workplace support was evident, however, individuals proved reluctant to use informal support when it was perceived to have negative implications upon colleagues. Women in my study only requested collegiate support when no other options were
available. Hence, participants in both the study of Hymen, et al. (2005) and my own proved ever mindful to not burdening colleagues.

The women in my study described varying levels of workplace support from employers and/or colleagues. Higher levels of support provided positive feelings and workplace loyalty, with restricted support often creating the opposite reaction. Levels of support reflected workplace culture, with a supportive environment created through the combined positive attitude of employers and colleagues (Higgins, 2010; McGivney, 2003; Sargent, 2002). The development of a positive attitude had the potential to create a learning workplace (Evans et al., 2006), whereby learning was embraced by employers and colleagues through an understanding of mutual benefits. The benefits included transformation of practice through an improved, up-dated, competent and knowledgeable workforce. This encouraged support and motivated those engaged in learning, and in turn inspired others to participate in learning. Additionally, there was increased commitment and loyalty derived from the experience of feeling supported and valued.

Some women in my study negotiated the addendum of HE study and prepared their family by seeking support prior to commencing their degree. Where this was the case the women highlighted how this helped them to cope with demands, which was also identified as a strategy used by participants in research by Emery et al. (2017). However, the adaptation process varied and not all the women in my study planned ahead, sometimes reflecting limited understanding of the additional demand which would be created by HE study. This meant some households adjusted in response to work-life imbalance in a more ad hoc way, creating gaps in responsiveness and adding to negative experiences. Disparity within their
experiences of support was apparent, including some of the women receiving no / limited family help, which was evident through the comments in Chapter Five (page 149).

The amount of support women in my study received related to what others were able to offer. For example, some women had younger children who could not help but represented a demand, while others did not have a partner to contribute, being lone parents or with partners working away. Minotte (2012); Warren et al., (2009) and Ward et al., (2010) found similar restricted choices amongst lone parents, being solely responsible for the household without another adult to help. Limited household support created emotional responses, as some women in my study expressed feeling their workload was not understood. The women in my study showed variation in attitudes towards support, generally being more forgiving of children, but much less so of husbands / partners. Williams, (2000) found women more willingly accepted limited support from their children but not their partners, which created increased negative reactions at being unsupported. Gender, and more particularly the mother role, influenced strategies and the next sub-section will consider this alongside student identity.

6.6.5: Influence of gender, student identity, and role models upon adaptation, strategy and motivation

The women in my study depicted variation in terms of individual attitudes towards gender and responsibility. Their experiences of the trio of spheres of commitment were influenced by roles and sense of responsibility, as previously considered, which influenced the strategies they deployed. Role identity and tension between the primary familial, employee and student roles influenced strategy, with some difficulty experienced encompassing the new student role, especially when perceived as competing with the existing primary role. Personal identity associated with being a good mother who prioritised child care, influenced
strategies, leading some women to manage commitments independently. Fulfilling demands from employment, domestic and HE study created time-based shift-type patterns, indicated through a second and third shift. This reflected similar patterns to those identified by Hochschild (1989; 2000) when considering parents’ strategies for managing varied commitments. Kramarae’s (2001) study of women learners undertaking distance learning showed similarity to women in my own study, as they studied into the night after completing other responsibilities. While Dex (2003) argued women, through domestic care and employment, had a double burden, the women within my study often experienced a triple one, created through the trio of spheres of commitment. This meant the women managed their workload as best they could and demonstrated creative solutions and high levels of commitment. However, a strategy of only using individual resources, without help, amongst the women was akin to WLB disequilibrium.

The women’s strategies were personally and individually determined, affected by circumstances and limited options, such as being a lone parent. While attitudes made some women reluctant to seek support due to personal perception and self-image. This was akin to ‘supermom syndrome’ (Hochschild, 2000; Shaevitz, 1985), whereby employed women still completed all domestic tasks themselves, reflecting the persistent dominance of their mother role. This strategy was evident as the women in my study extended their own productive time, stretching themselves and doing everything, wanting to be good mothers, employees and students. In relation to their WLB and well-being, this strategy appeared negative in terms of physical depletion. However, some women expressed feeling successful and in control, as they met all commitment spheres through their own means.
A significant change the women experienced, which influenced success, was the assimilation of student identity, which reflected changed attitudes and behaviours. They linked motivation and continuation in HE study to the influence and support of peers within the student group. Bowman and Felix (2017) asserted that the development of student identity and of a sense of belonging, through relationships with peers, was central for continuing in education. Additionally, Thunborg et al. (2013) argued student identity was dependent upon a number of motivational factors, including making contributions to improve practice and committing to future career prospects. The women in my study reflected comparable views, identifying their academic skill development and improved career prospects as being motivational to their continuation in HE. This was identified by the women as influencing their acceptance of short term WLB compromise for long-term goals. This in turn influenced the strategies the women developed as they gained support from their student peers, helping each other understand HE requirements, while encouraging a positive, can-do attitude.

The women became role models for self-discipline and ambition within their family, which influenced their motivation and strategies. As role models, the women began as inexperienced in education, yet demonstrated a strong work ethic and an ability to manage conflicting demands effectively. Stam et al. (2014) linked work ethic and gender identity, arguing women with more traditional gender identity worked fewer hours, while a less traditional gender identity meant a stronger work ethic, indicated by more hours working. However, I found variation in working hours amongst the women in my study, sometimes reflecting limited choices, but not necessarily gender identity. A strong work ethic was evident amongst all the women, which influenced how they met the challenge of
accommodating the trio of spheres of commitment. The women hoped to be role models, representing the potential of learning to their children, as many would be the first in their family to achieve a degree. Strategies, motivation and self-determination were important to well-being, with adaptation being a significant part of the process to re-establish WLB.

Another influential factor in this process was resilience, which will form the discussion in the next section.

6.7: Resilience

As I spoke with the women, their resilience became evident through their motivation to accommodate the new situation and continuation with HE study despite unfamiliarity and WLB pressures. Resilience was associated with the ability to bounce back, through mobilising internal and external personal qualities and skills (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). In my study the women’s resilience came from either prior experiences or new strategies developed in response to HE study, and sometimes due to feelings of stress. Tilford (2017: 106) argued resilience developed within people in response to adversity, and included ‘self-efficacy, self-esteem, positive emotions [and] hardiness’. As the women in my study continued with HE study, alongside other commitments, resilience developed and grew. Resilience reflected a coping ability developed throughout life, for example, women building careers despite limited resources or managing households effectively despite being lone parents. Others experienced adversity, including changed family circumstances, long-term illness or additional demands from dependents and their own learning needs. Some women observed resilient behaviour within family experiences, with hardworking parents acting as role models. Resilience was not necessarily constant during HE study, often limited in the
beginning, but it increased in response to new situations, making personal development apparent (Dunn et al., 2008).

The development of resilience amongst the women in my study was not only based upon individuals, but within a group context. Abel (2016) considered resilience from the perspective of communities living under difficult circumstances, adapting in response and depicting coping strategies associated with mental strength and putting events into perspective. The women within my study often assessed their current situation by making comparisons with their own previous experiences, via reflecting back upon their lives, or considering the experiences of their parents. This seemed to help the women to gain perspective and identify their ability to cope within their current context. Improved future prospects proved strongly motivational as the women persisted with current temporary demands, with transformation to date showing still more potential for positives changes to come. Abel (2016) associated resilience with improved self-confidence and the ability to cope with demands, both evident amongst the women in my study. A further significant feature of resilience, within HE context, was the importance of a longer term commitment, with success amongst the women in my study associated with visualising an improved future. The women achieved this through looking both back at their change, whilst projecting forward to their future potential. McIntosh and Shaw (2017: 10) found future focus critical to success and the building of resilience, linked with ‘willpower’ and ‘self-control’. These attributes were amongst the women within my study, who demonstrated high levels of dedication and the will to succeed, despite ongoing commitments, limited resources and self-doubt.
The women in my study managed commitments and achieved workable solutions using their own resources and / or by mobilising support. Dunn et al. (2008:44) considered resilience and prevention of ‘burnout’ amongst medical students, whereby excessive demands created risks to continuation with the programme of study. They conceptualise this through the identification of what they refer to as a ‘coping reservoir’ based upon negative and positive inputs. The ability to succeed being linked with the resources the students were able to draw upon. The negatives were associated with stress identified included internal conflict, time and energy being depleted through demands. Meanwhile positives within the ‘coping reservoir’ were psychological support, social / healthy activities, mentorship and intellectual stimulation. The women in my study experienced many gains, including moral support from family, friends and workplace, which proved as important as practical support. However, in a similar way to findings of Dunn et al. (2008) the women within my study did not reflect a simplistic equation, in terms of the operation of a coping reservoir. The women’s ability to cope, like participants within the study of Dunn et al. (2008), was highly influenced by personality and levels of individual resilience. Dunn et al. (2008) identified significant risks for the medical students related to entering a new workplace. Conversely a substantial benefit of work based learning for the women in my study was workplace familiarity and increased greater confidence in this sphere associated with learning from HE study. Conversely, Dunn et al. (2008) had a more traditional and academically confident participant group, which was favourable in terms of their orientation towards University. This contrasted with the women in my study who questioned attendance at University and showed self-doubt, which initially threatened their continuation. However, later growth in confidence and resilience, and finally developing a sense of belonging resulted in the women continuing with their degree. Hence there were
different positives and negatives which influenced experiences and resilience amongst the student’s dependent upon their individual circumstances and strengths, however, this changed over time allowed continuation with learning.

The concept of resilience has become increasingly common within a HE context to consider how internal and external factors influence learner success and to enable those involved in education to optimise support to learners (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). However, from a social construction perspective, resilience could be equated with neo-liberalism, associated with individuals and communities coping with disasters (Olick; 2016). Davis (2016) considered the increased popularity of resilience during economic recession, focusing upon the individual’s responsibility to manage their affairs and make sacrifices to cope with limited resources. In my study, resilience could be considered in terms of individual responsibility, as HE study was highly individualistic and based upon personal responsibility, with resilience proving significant in the women’s approaches. This might be expected as education is competitive through the focus upon assessment outcomes. However, a crucial element of the motivation and determination amongst the women in my study was derived from the student / peer group, which increased confidence within individuals. Sargent (2002), and McGivney (2001; 2002) indicated that positive environments draw individuals into education, with adult learners valuing social opportunities. In my study strength was evident amongst the women as a group of supportive peers, indicated through cooperation and encouragement. Therefore, resilience as a concept should be more encompassing, in this instance associated with the development of co-operation/ a community (community of women) rather than individuals. DeVerteuil and Golubchikov (2016) assert that positive attributes of resilience, as a construct associated with self-determination amongst
individuals and communities, pre-dates the link with neo-liberal ideology and should be reclaimed within this context. In my study resilience is individually and communally significant, reflecting both the strength of each woman and her place within a group. However, adaptation lead to change in the women’s resilience, there was also change within the family, which I will explore in the following section.

6.8: Learning family

The women in my study, as widening participation students, were usually from social backgrounds whereby University attendance was not a norm. Barriers to HE study included gaps in expectation, which had been enforced within the attitudes of the parents of some women who previously said education and University was not for them. Significant cultural gaps exist between working and middle class families, making participation in University abnormal to the former, whilst expected for the latter. Reay (2006) found participation and acceptance within HE heavily influenced by social class, meaning working class families were often excluded, not necessarily formally, but rather through identity, expectations and belonging. Reay et al. (2006; 2009 a;2009 b) argued factors with excluded working class people from University, included limited role models and no one to provide advice. The women in my study experienced change through entering and becoming part of HE, representing them stepping outside normal social expectations. Skeggs (1997) considered the difficulty encountered when standing out from one’s community and peers, identifying self-doubt connected with limited belonging when entering college and gaining qualifications. Such challenges were recounted amongst the women in my study, but they experienced changes through individual growth. This was reflected in their confidence,
personal and professional development, influenced by their familiarity with HE and student identity became apparent.

The experiences of the women in my study influenced their families. This related to some households providing support and all being exposed to HE study, through overlapping spheres of commitments, i.e. HE study in the home space. Restricted options caused the women to study alongside their children, doing reading, writing and working on computers, effectively doing homework together and sharing learning experiences, through an incidental process of convenience. The paraphernalia of study was brought into the home, e.g. books, articles and computers. Some women had older children at University or college, leading them to support and encourage one another. Therefore, just as engaging in HE study created transformation within the women, positive reinforcement occurred within the family, culminating in a cultural shift. Higgins (2010) identified significant barriers for foundation degree students as attending University was not a normal activity. Reay et al. (2006; 2008) utilised Bourdieusian concepts to consider how different expectations influenced whether attending University was normal or not, related to different experiences and role models. The concepts used included habitus and field which were both influenced by social factors. Habitus being the disposition of the individual created through social class, family and schooling. Field the structural and structuring conditions, created through the system or social position. Both influence the cultural capital of the individual and tend to have a long lasting effect upon disposition, with education tending to favour the middle classes and so seeming to perpetuate inequality (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus can be changed through engaging with a new field/environment, such as entering University. In this instance, the transformation occurred within the mother, but affected the family, as the
influential habitus altered. Hence a situational shift was made possible, not only amongst the women in my study as they become part of HE, but through normalising the experience for their family. The women, by reflecting highly positive views of HE study, which focused upon improved future career prospects for themselves and their family, created positive attitudes within their family.

This positive phenomenon identified how undertaking HE study within the home environment developed the ‘learning family’, as the family of some of the women experienced a transformative process. This transformation was initiated through children observing and so becoming interested in HE study, with increased awareness of the opportunities made possible through attending University. Once a degree was achieved by a family member it became an accepted norm. The term ‘learning family’ is based upon similarity between these changes and those Evans et al. (2006) found within the workplace. This was associated with member of the workforce engaging in learning and becoming positive role models for other employees and learning opportunities being seen as a ways to develop, leading Evans et al. (2006) to identify the learning workplace. As the learning workplace was derived from viewing learning and raised interest in the opportunity at work, the ‘learning family’ reflected similar traits, albeit within a different environment and group. Therefore, restricted choices and blurring boundaries to overcome WLB difficulties created role models, with children displaying interest in their mother’s study, and understanding their field of study, assessments, and potential outcome. In my study the justification of compromise was often related to long term benefits for the family. Table 11 outlines this process, depicting how undertaking HE study created the trio of spheres of commitment, leading to time and roles conflict, and so guilt and anxiety. However, there is a significant
positive change, as spheres become blurred to manage commitments there was role
modelling and so the formation of the ‘learning family’. As this section has explored the
development of the learning family the following will consider the significance of entering
HE to the women in my study.

Table 11: The development of the ‘Learning Family’
In my study the women adjusted to their new situation created through the addition of HE study and achieve success through personal strategies, motivation and resilience. Their journey through this change was complex, influenced by circumstances of their lives related to family composition, support, and personal attributes and attitudes (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). The transformation the women experienced was positive and disequilibrium within WLB and compromised well-being were accepted and managed for long-term gains. Bloom (2016) disputed whether WLB was realistic, seeing it as aspirational but unreachable, with many people just managing as best they can, reflecting some similarity with the women in my study. WLB experiences amongst the women often related to personal circumstances and an interplay between demands and support, meaning the stage of development within their family often influenced demands therein (Baxter, 2000; Gerson, 2009; Houston and Waumsley, 2003). For example, those with younger children often needed distinct space and time, studying at evening and night time, while others with older children studied alongside them. Some women described managing care responsibility for their own children and older parents, referred to by Keene and Prokos (2007) as the sandwich generation, reflecting these two sets of care responsibilities. In contrast some women described being at the right stage for study with reduced demands and lots of support around them. Diverse circumstances and familial stages influenced WLB experiences, making strategies and adaptation essential to success, with planning prior to commencement of HE study equated to a smoother transition.

Support was essential to success, yet the women in my study often commented upon the gaps in this through formal mechanisms. They therefore often depended upon informal
networks and their own attributes to solve WLB disequilibrium. Societal change and the commonplace employment of women created interest in WLB concern and policy, often focused upon the importance of being family friendly and flexible (for example, Employment Act 2001; Employment Act 2002). Flexible working focused upon hours and patterns of employment, and often the presence of children within the family (Drew et al., 2000). However, for the women in my study employment and family form only two of three commitment spheres, with the addition HE study not accounted for within WLB policy, which tends to be focused upon hours in employment. The women described changing their behaviour in response to their situation, which reflected motivation to succeed and acceptance of support to help them to manage conflicting demands. This was encapsulated within the development of resilience, enabling the women cope with their conflicting demands and roles, with a personal transformation connected with a shift in attitude and identity (Abel, 2016; McIntosh and Shaw, 2017; Tilford, 2017). Therefore, limited formal support meant utilising personal / household adaptation, displaying indication of managing and taking charge of their WLB (Jarvis et al., 2005).

The experiences described by the women in my study reflected a significant identity shift, which involved academic development and becoming part of a student community. This expanded the outlook of the women as they developed a new student identity, which linked with the other primary identities (e.g. mother and employee) (Thunborg et al., 2013). The transformative process was often challenging as the women in my study encountered HE study in terms of unfamiliarity, experiencing anxiety around ability and lack of belonging. However, through their own adaptation and motivation, with support from student peers, they experienced development and improved confidence to counter this. The previous
exclusion from learning amongst some of the women in my study heightened the barriers to HE study. Some of the women struggled as some husbands / partners expressed concerns that they might grow apart as the women became more qualified and accomplished as graduates. This represented a significant gap between the women in my study and their family and community, due to their participation in HE. Skeggs (1997), when researching working class women undertaking Care courses, identified their dilemma at standing out from their social group, including concern at being viewed as seeing themselves as too good for their community. This clearly formed a similar concern for the women in my study, who questioned their belonging in University and whether they made the right choices in undertaking HE study. However, the women described overcoming doubts, through valuing their accomplishment for not only themselves but their family. The experiences of women in my study were complex, as they managed the trio of spheres of commitments and underwent a significant transformation, countering negative effects upon well-being through their positivity. This transformation was essential to continuation with HE study and is significant for HE practice, which I will consider next.

6.10: Implications for practice in Higher Education

This study explored WLB in an HE context, considering women undertaking foundation degrees, and consequently identified number of implications. The women in my study when considering the composition of their daily lives, depicted imbalance as HE study was added to employment and family / domestic commitments to form a third sphere of commitment. As discussed WLB is often seen in terms of duality, which Emery et al. (2017) found restrictive, as is indicated in the findings of my study. The dualist approach to WLB restricts understanding around pressures experienced by work-based learners and the plight of many
adult learners, who combine learning, employment and domestic responsibilities. As previously stated this equates with gaps in policy to support those in similar situations to those depicted by the women in my study. WLB policy should be informed by research, yet restrictions associated with understanding of the greater complexity of WLB represent a significant gap around the complexity of some learners lives (Wiggan, 2012). The women in my study described long working hours, created through the combination of employment, HE study and family, yet this was hidden within the amalgamation of activities. Yorke and Longden (2010) also identified foundation degree students to be part of ‘hidden long hours’ culture, and as such overlooked, subjected to limited understanding and received restricted support. Therefore, WLB policy potential excludes those experiencing circumstances similar to the women in my study, as this represents a situation unrecognised making practice more difficult to challenge.

A potential way of improving the experiences of learners like the women in my study would be through improving jointly owned supportive actions and strategies between University, workplace and learners. My study showed employers’ support of the study day, which included instances of options around additional study days and childcare at the workplace. However, there were often restrictions described by the women that hindered them in relation to engagement in HE study alongside other aspects of their lives. Some of the women expressed feeling well supported, yet others, in lacking such, experienced outcomes practically (e.g. restricted flexibility with hours and study leave) and emotionally (e.g. feeling learning was not valued and understood). Similarly, Higgins et al., (2010) and Harvey (2009) identified resistance amongst some employers formed a clear barrier for adult learners that created a risk of students discontinuing with study. Better collaboration between the
workplace and HE organisations would improve understanding and prepare employers and educators thus enabling support of learners. Greater employer awareness of the benefits of HE study for the workplace would be significant and achievable through increased information about the knowledge and competency the curriculum offers. Additionally, increased understanding of practical aspects of the degree, in terms of format and assessment deadlines could help encourage flexibility to aid learners in achieving their educational goals. Examples of better support usually involved a more informed workplace, often influenced by another employee studying previously, demonstrating the value of sharing the workforce transformation process.

As previously outlined the women in my study described experiencing a process of change as they attended University, which can be equated with a transition. A significant benefit could be gained from understanding the difficulty people can experience when undertaking the move into University. The women in my study indicated changes around identity and belonging, but also in altered behaviour as new demands upon their time required changed patterns within their daily lives in order to achieve outcomes. Universities could create improved links to assist employers in preparing learners for work-based degree programmes, which would create mutual benefits for employers, educators and ultimately learners (McGivney, 2001; 2002; Sargent, 2002). Overcoming such barriers proved essential for continuation with HE study amongst the women in my study, making employer and University partnership and collaboration significant in enabling a seamless system for learners, from entry to exit.

The women in my study were widening participation students, and experienced a significant cultural divide between themselves and the University as discussed. Reay (2006) asserted
differences in role models and norms divide social classes in relation to accessing HE study, with middle class people benefitting from knowing those who have attended University. Although the women in my study often lacked the role models, they represent a change whereby they themselves become positive role models. HE institutions must consider ways to include positive role models in publicity and peer mentoring of learners and applicants, reflecting greater diversity of experiences by encompassing widening participation learners (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). This is a challenge for the HE sector, to show the greater potential for personal and professional development, and inspire families and communities. There are a number of implications for the women as they engage in HE which will be discussed next.

6.11: Implications for women who start Higher Education

My study focused upon women experiencing problems managing commitments connected to their domestic responsibilities and being bound to roles, such as, mother and wife / partner (Oakley, 1976, and Webber, 2015). They were influenced by perceived social attitudes, so when they gained support and delegated domestic tasks they expressed a sense of duty and anxiety at being negatively judged. This created practical and emotional responses which affected their integration into HE. However, the presence of women within HE is essential for equality, and requires clear policy and strategy to provide an infrastructure to support women. This is seen to be important to encourage their contribution to economic development through a more effective labour force. The Leitch Report (2006), projecting forward to 2020, found skill deficits within the workforce, therefore, identifying the requirements for major improvement in higher academic and competence levels in order to maintain international economic competitiveness within the
UK. It advocated the potential to improve workforce productivity through increased HE the skills and competency subsequently built. This highlighted the importance of engaging with women, including those who had taken time away from the workplace to raise their children. Furthermore, Leitch (2006) found 70% of the 2020 workforce had already completed compulsory education, making the engagement of those over the age of 25 years important for HE to have the necessary impact. These features when combined mean that there should be increased focus upon widening participation. This demonstrates the importance of HE as a wider priority and the need overcome the barriers to University, significant for the initial engagement and continuation with HE learning amongst women (McGivney, 2001; Sargent, 2002).

Mothers are often role models for children and so the development of an affinity with University and student identity has potential for more far reaching changes (Gerson, 2009; Webber, 2015). However, as discussed here the women experienced guilt and self-doubt at the conflicting demands upon them, effectively undermining their potential to have positive effects upon their families. Liss, et al. (2013) found maternal guilt often prevented women undertaking activities which were potentially seen to be at odd with the needs of their children. Peters (2014), in researching parenting interventions, found mothers expressed greater amounts of guilt than fathers, and were more often held responsible for their children’s behaviour, showing similarity with the women in my study. The positive changes within the family and the potential to re-shape the future of students and their families should be harnessed to counterbalance the negatives views experienced by the women.

The importance of the home space in adult involvement in HE study requires recognition, especially when connected to women with other commitments to manage. Adult education
has a long history of study taking place in the home (Guild and Evans, 2010: Sargent and Aldridge, 2002; Skaalvik and FinBank, 2001), based upon the other demands learners must accommodate. The contemporary situation encompasses technological advances that provide mechanisms for further flexibility, which should improve facilitation of HE learning within the home space (Cauhill, 2015). In my study overlap was found to be critical to success, yet was also problematic as other activity in the home space was intrusive to HE study and, without family support, often ineffective. The women who were most successful planned and communicated with their family, so they would understand the importance of the protection of time for HE study, sharing their challenges and aspiration. Once more, the preparation and reflection upon how home space can be encompassed into planning and formulation of routines is critical to creating understanding within the family and facilitating the success of women in HE study. However, this was often difficult to manage and where there was a lack of planning gaps became apparent.

The imbalance within the lives of the women in my study was often due to gaps in resources. Lee et al. (2014) in researching the WLB experiences of married women, identified conflict due to feeling overwhelmed by demands, which created negative well-being implications. This situation was improved where the family contributed to household tasks in both the study by Lee et al. (2014) and amongst the women with my study. Gaps were seen between the support women needed and the help they received, which needed to be recognised as a problem when wanting to give time to HE study. Earlier discussion about the need of support to undertake HE study would help the women in terms of reducing WLB disequilibrium. Managing the home environment was critical to success of the women in my study, as their other responsibilities took them away from study. Strategies
including communication and planning created changes within the household, i.e. on a micro level, which proved significant to the success women in my study experienced.

However, from a macro perspective, societal changes in relation to attitudes, expectations, and then policy would create a further reaching shift in the experiences of women entering Higher Education (Webber, 2015; Reay et al. 2005).

6.12: Summary

This Chapter discussed the key themes located within my findings, bringing them together with other pertinent studies, including some areas not previously explored, which reflected new discoveries. The Chapter began by considering the implications of the trio of demands, as HE study was added to the women’s lives and the areas of WLB and well-being which are critical to this thesis. This has been achieved through exploration of commitment areas and boundaries, to look at segregation and integration between spheres, incorporation the positive and negative effects of overlapping the spheres of HE study and home space. These include guilt at a lack of focus alongside the development of the ‘learning family’, which represents a cultural shift for not only the women but their children. Well-being might have been expected to be wholly negative; however the differentiation between objective and subjective approaches reflected positive outcomes associated with increased capabilities, which sustained the women despite imbalance. Another unexpected outcome was the great resilience evident within the women, not only in terms of individuals, but at a peer or communal level. While leisure was reduced in terms of pure leisure, there were important changes in perception of HE study, which might be equated with serious leisure or leisure crafting, reflecting productivity through leisure. Finally, the significance of the experiences of women in HE and the implications for HE practice were brought together. The next
Chapter will be the conclusion, which will examine the research objectives in conjunction with the key findings, considering the contribution to the field of research, and policy and practice. In Chapter Seven I will also evaluate the limitations of this study, reflecting upon my experiences of undertaking this research, and consider potential future research ideas.
Chapter Seven: A study of resilience, the role of motivation and adaptation in managing the trio of spheres of commitment:

“...because I have started it so I am finishing it” (Karen, Interview p 4; 176)

7.1: Introduction

This is the final chapter of my thesis and here I draw together a number of conclusions. In Chapter Six I discussed the main findings in relation to the key themes. I begin this chapter by summarising the key themes and revisit the research aim and objectives to evaluate how successfully these have been addressed during my study. I acknowledge the limitations within my study and reflect upon the influential factors upon choices, making the links between my personal and professional roles. Then I provide a reflection of undertaking this study and explore areas for future research including a consideration of the implications for policy and procedure.

7.2: Review of the study

My thesis is about the WLB and well-being experiences of women undertaking HE study who were managing a trio of spheres of commitment. The women adapted to the addition of the third sphere (HE study) and developed a range of strategies, as they became motivated and determined to succeed in all the spheres of their lives. Their experience of WLB was at times in disequilibrium and they had to compromise their well-being, adapting in their own ways (Greer and Patterson, 2013). Loyalty to their work in the Early Years sector, and a desire to improve their own careers and prospects for their family, drove the women in my study to develop personal and household strategies (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). Their motivation was influenced by role models, such as hardworking parents, and the
personal development of resilience, while on a familial level the formation of the ‘learning family’ proved significant (Abel, 2016; Tilford, 2017). While objective well-being amongst the women in my study was often compromised, due to excessive demands upon them, their subjective well-being was improved as learning gave improved life satisfaction and increased capabilities (Deneulin and McGregory, 2010; Sen, 2001). A similar pattern was evident in relation to their experiences of leisure, as free time was reduced and allocated to HE study, yet significant changes gave rise to serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992) and leisure crafting (Petrou and Bakker, 2016).

From a social constructionist viewpoint there were significant characteristics associated with gender identity / roles, HE study, WLB and well-being (Burr, 2015; Courtney, 2000; Gambles et al., 2006; Loscocco and Bird, 2012). As women, they experienced stereotypical expectations related to their roles, including commitment to many different priorities including domestic responsibilities. The women experienced guilt and tensions related to their mother role if they perceived they were unable to perform all domestic commitments, leading them to look to others for assistance (Hochschild, 1989; 2000; Kossek et al., 1998; Oakley, 1976; Wattis, 2012). Their guilt formed part of a personal dilemma related to the requirement of meeting the needs of their family in the short term. While their dedication to HE study improved future prospects both in terms of the women’s own career and their family through increased earning potential and their ability to be a good role model to their children. Parallels can be drawn with Webber’s (2015) research where the participants questioned positive and negative aspects of their new role, as the participants were mothers also involved in learning and career development.
In relation to HE study, a social construct associated with familiarity and knowledge was evident, as the women within my study were part of a social group labelled non-traditional. The application of this label is widespread and accepted but reflects a division within society in terms of accessibility, implying that they are usually excluded from HE (McGivney, 2001; Reay et al., 2006; 2008). Subsequently by participating in HE study, the women might be viewed as challenging social preconceptions that aligned HE study with only the middle classes. Skeggs (1997) identified a dilemma at seeming too good for your own community, preventing working class women stepping outside the usual parameters of their own social context.

WLB from the Global North perspective has primarily been associated with duality, related to work and life, hence disputed in terms of the real composition and complexity of life (Emery et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2013). In my study the further commitment of HE study created a trio of spheres of commitment, which the dual dominant propositions around WLB cannot encompass. This made the challenge of achieving balance more difficult to understand (Yorke and Longden, 2010). Additionally, when considering WLB in terms of separation and overlap, overlap was pronounced as HE study invaded physical space and the women’s minds (Greer and Paterson, 2013; Kossek, 2016; Ward et al., 2010). Finally, in terms of understanding well-being, a further social construct emerged associated with the physical bounds of well-being against the emotional. Whilst a clear and tangible reduction in objective well-being was evident through increased tiredness, illness, stress and anxiety, subjective well-being improved with increased resilience, motivation and personal gains (Deneulin and McGregory, 2010; Sen, 2001). Therefore, the consideration of WLB and well-
being experiences amongst the women, were significantly influenced through the exploration of the issues through social construction approach.

7.3: Research aim and objectives

Here, I consider how I have achieved and met the research aim and objectives.

The aim of this research was to explore women’s everyday experiences of work-life balance and well-being whilst combining, employment, higher education and care of family in North West England.

This aim was addressed through the use of qualitative methodology, (semi-structured interviews and a focus group), enabling insight to be gained from the women’s voices, reflecting the influence of feminist approaches. The everyday experiences of a group of women, who began their HE study through undertaking a Foundation degree in EYs were explored. This meant there were some common and influential aspects within their experiences, one being that they were classed as widening participant / non-traditional learners. The focus on women from lower social classes aided the development of an understanding of diversity within WLB. As the women experienced restricted options around reduced employment and affording supportive services, which adversely influenced their WLB. Additional distinction was included through exploring the effect of three spheres of commitment (HE study, employment and family) rather than the usual two. This formed the first significant theme, with the other two being inter-connected, representing responses to the first, in terms of adaptation to address the demands from commitments, alongside the motivation to do so. In relation to well-being results were inconclusive and dependent upon definitions. Hence, objective well-being was evidently compromised and
directly linked with the additional commitment, yet if considered from a subjective viewpoint there was a clear bolstering derived from learning. Therefore, my study and subsequent thesis meet the overall research aim. The research objectives will be individually considered in a similar way, in the following sections.

RO1: ‘To examine how women experience work-life balance whilst working, studying for a degree and caring for family’

The first research objective critically considered WLB, as the women were asked to explore their commitments and the effect upon their daily lives. The women experienced significant demands as they were employed within the EYs sector as a requirement of the work-based learning programme, with a strong sense of commitment to the EYs sector evident. The demands within home space varied dependent upon individual / household situations. Diversity within experiences was based upon the demands and support from the family, influenced by features such as age and requirements of children, and the presence of supportive adults. The demands created by adding HE study was influenced by the women being largely widening participation students, and as such were often unfamiliar with academia. Concern related to how progress was affected by their ability to meet the needs of HE study whilst other demands infringed upon the time and energy. Social position was influential in terms of restricted choices around purchasing supporting services including childcare and domestic help, while this was also affected by personal decisions related to whether this was acceptable. Individual attitudes were highly influential within the group, in relation to sense of responsibility. Some of the women showed evidence of the super-mom type approach, hence doing everything for the household. Many women committed much time and energy to employment and HE study, reflecting dedication, and possible workaholism, through a complex attachment as both employment and learning. The
findings represented rich and personal experiences, linking well with the research of others, while providing some unique insights within individual stories. The findings from this research were often akin with imbalance rather than balance as the commitment to HE study was added to already busy lives so created a state of disequilibrium.

RO2: ‘To explore women’s perceptions of well-being whilst combining employment, higher education and caring’
Perception was influential in personal views and experiences of the women’s well-being, with the ability to manage commitments effected by their personal attributes. The expectation from the onset was that excessive demands and limited help would create the worst experiences of WLB and well-being. Yet when explored from a personal perspective there were a number of counter indicators primarily genuine positivity around the benefits of HE study. This included increased personal and professional self-confidence and universal positivity about future prospects. Leisure depletion was linked with reduced well-being, as the women reflected having limited ‘free time’. Conversely, their descriptions of HE study showed that they found it to be enjoyable, reflecting awareness of personal and familial gains, which showed clear links with serious leisure.

An area of significance within my study, not initially expected, was the growth of resilience, which proved critical to motivation and adaptation amongst the women. Resilience was personal and related to experiences throughout life and during the degree, affected by attitudes, role models and the sense of community amongst peers. There was evidence of attachment to all of the spheres of commitment, and the role and responsibility associated with each, although the mother role was most dominant. Mothers involved in my study often experiencing guilt and self-doubt, fearing negative effects upon their children. Hence they described themselves in adverse terms when they were dedicating time to their HE
study, including seeing themselves as selfish, which created many personal challenges.

Additionally, there was evidence of a transition to encompass HE study within life, but this was not simplistic and there were gaps in knowledge that created a struggle to realise student identity. Difficulties encountered during the period of transition had the potential to diminish well-being. However, the women often continued and sometimes thrived, through use of personal strategies and fuelled by motivation, with short term compromise accepted for the long term benefits of a degree. Therefore, whilst well-being was compromised from an objective view, often from the subjective view and that of the women’s perception there was an improvement.

RO3: ‘To establish how women manage conflict with regards to work-life balance and well-being within a higher education context’

Conflict created through the addition of HE study rather than exchange with another commitment area was critical within my study. However, a number of techniques were deployed to adapt to the situation. These were influenced by the women’s positive aptitude and determination to continue with the trio of spheres of commitment, as HE study was added to the usual duality of employment and life (family). Individuals and their families responded by making changes to establish new patterns of behaviour, enabling the management of new demands and circumstances. However, diverse responses to managing the trio of spheres of commitment were evident amongst the women in my study, including evidence of integration and segregation of commitments, reductions in employment and gaining support. While there were patterns in responses, they were also highly individual and influenced by circumstances and attitudes of the women and others around them.

Control of time and commitments was significant in how the women managed their WLB, although autonomy sometimes lead to working longer hours and making greater effort,
reflecting both responsibility and dedication towards obtain a degree. Many contradictions were evident as the women’s sense of control of WLB meant they were often effectively doing everything, or organising others to contribute, creating potential compromised personal well-being. The women often accepted some interference in WLB based upon familial needs, finding support from husbands / partners was often restricted and a matter of choice. Women in my study were successful in achieving their desired goal, although their WLB was often in state of disequilibrium and could be based on ignoring demands at times to place priority on others. Although objective well-being was often compromised, the positive effects of HE study in raising self-esteem and future prospects was highly positive and motivational. Success was derived from valuing HE study for its contribution to future prospects, with the development of resilience and the learning family, counteracting negative outcomes. However, complexity remained in terms of individual attitude and perception, often influencing personal and household strategy.

RO4: ‘To develop a new understanding of how women manage to negotiate working, higher educational study and caring responsibilities’

This study has developed new understanding by either extended knowledge or raising areas which might be considered under researched or novel. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the significance of women being the participant group, in that they experience gender inequality within society despite progress made in terms of greater equality in employment and education opportunities. Consequently when exploring the negotiation of demands it was important to consider the implications as women were seen to be responsible for the domestic sphere. There was additional complexity in researching the experience created through the trio of spheres of commitment, as WLB overwhelmingly emphasised duality, meaning the triple demand areas within this study had received limited
attention. The complexity of everyday life for the women involved in this study highlights the ways in which contemporary living patterns have developed, to encompass different arrangements. Exploring the area of well-being has proved much more complex than initially expected, in that the area is multi-dimensional, reflecting the values and attitudes of diverse individuals across society. While the economic and objective assessment remain significant indicators of well-being, the subjective, personal and individual elements of the experience have been taken into account to create an enriched view. Additionally while there has been expansion of knowledge around Foundation Degrees there remains restricted understanding of student experiences, particularly around well-being, which my study has in some ways addressed. A complex picture of leisure became evident, as pure leisure was clearly diminished potentially reducing well-being, but pleasure was found in HE study aligning it with serious leisure.

Therefore, the story considered is not simply about loss of time through increased demands depleting the women but one of significant gains. Gains on an individual level were through the increased resilience of the women, as they embraced the student role and identity. Additionally gains for the household included the emergence of the learning family, as the women’s HE experience had the effect of normalised University within the home space. This represented a significant cultural shift and a highly positive finding. The ‘learning family’ in my study was created not through teaching children but rather role modelling to them, and was a consequence of WLB pressure, creating an important cross-over of spheres. Hence significant positive impact was based upon managing many demands based on personal resilience, endurance and change within family space and so attitude. Finally, as the research approach was in-depth, unique insight has been gained from a small group. Yet this
will be generalisable to other similar groups of working class women engaging in employment, HE study and coping with family responsibilities, as they are likely to relate to the experiences conveyed. The following section will consider the limitations within this study.

7.4: Limitations of the Study

Despite the indication that this study has met the overall research aim and individual research objectives, as is the case with most research there are a number of potential limitations evident. A rationale for the theoretical and methodological choices is provided in Chapters Three and Four. Many benefits are derived from an insider researcher perspective, including familiarity with the research setting, yet barriers can include assumptions made by researchers and limited confidence amongst participants related to the confidentiality of their disclosures (Hanson, 2013; Humphrey, 2012; Mercer, 2007). Positional power within this study may have influenced commentary, with the interaction between the women who were students and me as a lecturer/researcher creating a restriction in respondent candor. Mason (1996) and Letherby, (2003) argue that positional power can reduce interaction and inhibit participants. In drawing upon feminist approaches and technics, including disclosing personal information to build rapport and spending more time listening than talking, I tried to reduce the impact of the power imbalance. This was reflected in the women’s apparent confidence in providing detailed level of personal feelings and experiences. However it is accepted that levelling this perceived power imbalance is complex and difficult to assess.

A further limitation might be associated with the small scale nature of the study. This study was based upon a small group of students (ten) and if more students had been interviewed at the time greater variation in findings might have been found. Also if the focus group had
preceded the interviews to identify key issues, findings may have been different (Creswell, 2009: Parker and Tritter, 2007). However, this approach reflects a particular set of circumstances, at a certain time and the focus group was used as a confirmation tool (Simmons et al., 2015). These circumstantial aspects of the women’s experiences could influence findings, making further research in terms of groups in different positions or through a cross sectional design that included comparative groups and could have produced more diverse insights. The limited numbers could be seen to be restrictive and engaging with more learners, across a range of circumstances, would have potential benefits. If the research was repeated then the inclusion of students from a different location or University could have extended the study and created greater rigor in terms of findings (Gray, 2009).

The decision to undertake the focus group after the interviews, was crucial to feedback the findings from the interviews, to appreciate the commentary. This was based upon the influence of feminist approaches, as the FG formed a way of feeding back, which allowed potential to show value to the women’s initial contributions (Letherby, 2003). Additionally feeding back findings from the interviews through the FG checked authenticity of previous commentary. However, not all the women wanted to be further involved, and some said they were unavailable at the time. In terms of a limitation this could mean those involved in the FG could be seen as self-selective, subsequently restrictive in terms of re-engagement (Gray, 2009). There remain risks with identification of the participants, whilst I used pseudonyms agreed prior to commencement, it may still be possible to identify the student cohort (O’Reiley and Kiyimba, 2015).

The focus group was a feedback mechanism and identified further findings, although there were some potential flaws within a method which depended upon interaction and
confidence within the group. O’Reiley and Kiyimba (2015) identified a number of issues in undertaking focus groups that were related to interactions between participants. These can include invasion of privacy and risks of disclosure. The risks can influence the researcher’s behavior, leading them to intervene and steer activity. Letherby (2003) considered how qualitative data should provide insight, which can then be linked into a wider and bigger area of knowledge, which reflects part of what I would hope to achieve.

Tension and potential limitations during the writing up process occur, as the findings are formed into a thesis, available in the public domain, in this case a PhD thesis. In Chapter Three, I discussed the importance of the voice within feminist approaches (Letherby, 2003; Mauthner et al., 1989; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998) and showed my commitment to this. However, O’Reiley and Kiyimba (2015: 158) argue that the ‘tidying up’ process, whereby findings are prepared to be presented to others involves choices and is selective, returning power to the researcher. In creating this PhD thesis I have presented findings that were analysed by myself and edited, which is a selective process and maybe viewed in terms of power being with me. Letherby (2003) considered the ways in which research findings were influenced by how others perceive and relate to them. Hence the thematic review of the findings involves being selective, even within a rigorous and well tested framework with numerous levels of reading and checking. This means that the review will be influenced by subjective reading of the interviews and focus group transcription. Limitations surround the findings and their authenticity, with the women’s expressions eroded during the process of analysing the findings (Letherby, 2003; Skeggs, 1997; Ramazanoglu, 2002). To overcome this risk I attempted to bring the voices of the women to the foreground and immersed myself in their words, so trying to understand and respectfully protect their experiences. As I have
now provided an overview of the limitations within my study, I will reflect upon the research experience.

7.5: Reflecting upon this study and the gains achieved and challenges faced

Beale et al. (2004) identify reflection as critical thinking related to how researchers might understand their role. I will begin by considering my background, attitudes and values, which have inevitably been influential.

7.5.1: Personal and professional experiences

Undertaking this PhD has been challenging, yet of great importance to me, and has led me to develop as a researcher and in my personal life. It has not been easy to complete, but the learning I have gained has motivated me. I began this study with a passion for understanding WLB and wanted to draw on my experience as a learner, teacher, lecturer, researcher and woman who benefitted from educational opportunities beyond social expectations. The social science approach was significant as it has enabled me to reflect on my career and personal life, articulated by Oakley (2005: 182):

‘Studying the social sciences is a way of studying ourselves’

At the beginning of and during this doctoral study, I frequently experienced ‘imposter syndrome’, which is an anxiety associated with feeling unable to fulfil a new work role. Putten (2001) argues ‘imposter syndrome’ is widespread amongst working class people entering HE. I was combining a full time lecturer, programme leader and latterly a managerial role, with undertaking a part-time PhD, alongside my own familial roles, and this lead to conflict between my own roles and responsibility.
The personal and professional can collide with one another but are critical to whom we are and the approaches we take, and have proved significant to choices in this study. Letherby (2003) described researchers as the sum of the parts which makes them up, with self-awareness important to approaches taken. Professionally, I observed women undertaking learning and struggling with their daily lives, through teaching Foundation degrees and previously in Further Education. As a lecturer I continue to emphasise time management in my teaching and support to student and encouraged them to succeed. My own personal experiences of learning, work and family meant that I could empathise with the women in my study. I am the youngest child in a family of seven and my brother is disabled, and throughout my childhood I was part of a hard working family. My mother was an influential role model for me, being an excellent juggler of demands. Additionally, my family was traditional working class, with emphasis very much upon working, but as I went into further and higher learning they encouraged me, yet did not understand. In relation to my own identity going into HE was going against the norm for someone on a large council estate in the late 1980s. Reay (1997: 20) in examining her own experiences considers the paradox working class women face when entering an academic environment:

‘The female academic from a working class background is the end product of very different processes of those of social reproduction. She is caught in change and transformation. However, the positive connotation invested in terms of transformation and change mask an inherent negativity often overlooked in discussions of meritocracy’.

I was determined and have been successful, and undertaking this research echoed some of my own experiences. For example, I applied for polytechnic, as I did not think I would be good enough for University and I describe myself as struggling through education.
I have combined employment with family responsibilities and when I began this study my children were nine and ten years, they are now young adults at University. My own children have entered HE without question, knowing they belong, although they have told me they experience identity issues, through relating to a working class community readily. I have experienced much guilt and self-questioning, at dedicating time and effort to my PhD, coming away to address family needs, including loss and crisis, causing my learning to be moved aside. I have benefitted from having a supportive partner and family.

Letherby (2003) finds that feminist approaches can often directly relate to personal experiences. In my study I found that the women’s situations were affected by social expectations, with guilt around family needs that echoes my experiences. I describe myself as a feminist, and have developed my own sense of self as a mother. I have never strived to achieve ‘supermom’ status, but I enjoy being a mother and prioritise this role, which causes conflict in other areas of my life. I experienced emotional connections with the women in my study similar to those of Bell (1994) who found challenges through the consideration of parallels between her own life and her participants, desiring her PhD to be protected from the other challenges of her daily life. Additionally, Parr (1997) argued that as a woman returning to education, and researching the experiences of women returners, she experienced a double edged sword with ability to share experiences, yet this created emotional tensions. Both of these points reflect significance for me and there was emotion in considering the experiences of the women in my study alongside my own. I have a strong belief in equality for women, which has driven me to become involved in education; and the notion of gender interests me, leading to a focus on women in this doctoral study. I agree the views forwarded within Feminist approaches that consider political consequences being
derived from personal experiences, which connects personal experiences with our professional and academic approach and outlook (Schuster, 2017).

7.5.2 Reflecting upon the research process

On commencing this study, I drew on my knowledge of sociology as a discipline and previous experiences of research with women in my under-graduate and post-graduate studies. Sociology and undertaking research with women was familiar ground for me. When I began this study, my ontology or assumptions of the world (Henn 2006) was that I would find that which I thought I observed; women with too many demands, too little support, limited WLB and well-being compromise. However, I found greater complexity by drawing from a social constructionist perspective and immersing myself in the academic literature, leading to greater understanding of WLB and well-being. I was informed by feminist approaches as they reflect my personal and professional values, but found the theories confusing and complex. I felt uncomfortable making an outright claim to be doing feminist research, reflecting the diversity / complexity within feminist approaches (Harding, 2004; Letherby 2003; Ramazanoglu, 2010).

Qualitative methodology is also a familiar path for me (Flick, 2006: Henn et al., 2006), and I wanted to understand the women’s experiences in their words. The role of voice was critical and I gave careful consideration to positional power, being aware of the gap between myself and the women, using interpersonal skills to offer reassurance (Letherby, 2003; Mauthner et al., 1997: Ribbens and Edwards, 1997). Interviewing students from another programme led to some difficulties in initially engaging them and then in terms of rapport, but I knew that this was the correct, ethical choice. I worked hard with the interpersonal aspects of interviewing women and facilitating a focus group. This was informed by the
practice of Oakley (1976) and Hochschild (2000; 1989), who have influenced me from an early point. Being aware of the use of language, disclosure, body language, sensitivity and the interpersonal to engage and create a trusting reassurance (Letherby, 2003; Mauthner and Daucet 1997; Skeggs, 1997).

The initial non-responsiveness of participants worried and frustrated me, and I was grateful for help from gatekeepers. Once one participant offered to speak with me, others were encouraged to. Further concerns related to ensuring my identity at the University did not form a barrier. At the time of the research I was often teaching off campus and as the EYs students attending in the evening there was a beneficial distance between myself and them. Being conscious of my role, I ensured that all of the interviews and the FG took place in a neutral space, a small meeting room for the interviews and classroom, the students used, for their FG. While I disclosed my credentials and interest, I tended to focus more upon my personal experiences, for instance my upbringing and as a mum. The interview process was unexpectedly emotional, as the first interviewee reflected upon role models and her life, and she was clearly upset, which I did not expect. On reflection, I should have been more prepared for the emotional aspects of the interviews. Oakley (2005: 217) expresses the unknown aspect of the interview:

‘Interviewing is rather like a marriage: everyone knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets’

As the interviews continued, I experienced emotional response amongst the women but I was better prepared. Sometimes I felt frustrated at their plight and helpless to respond to their needs at this time.
After each interview, I made reflective field-notes about my thoughts recording how the women seemed and how I felt during and after. These were mostly positive experiences with a significant exception:

’I feel drained and emotional...like crying...I am sure that interview went badly’ (Field notes, page 7)

When I later listened over the interview, transcribed it and made further reflective notes, the actual interview was very different than I initially thought, with good dialogue and interaction. What I realised after discussion with my supervisor, was that I felt tired and preoccupied, and while, I don’t think this was obvious to the participant, I felt unfocused. This might be seen to demonstrate the ‘emotional roller-coaster’ which Beale et al. (2004:146) locate within the research process, previously considered in Chapter Three, making debriefing and support crucial.

The FG took place after the students had submitted their dissertations and a mixture of relief and exhaustion was tangible. The group had their own energy and identity, and this helped as I didn’t need to spend time building a connection as the participants already had this. I realised during the FG that while I had been immersed in transcribing interviews and felt I knew the women, they had previously met me for only one hour a little over a year ago. As I fed back the findings they were surprised at what I ‘remembered’, I could see this was strange for them. This demonstrated to me the different experiences of the interviews in terms of the participant and the researcher. There was emotion within the FG, but I felt more ready and reassurance was not always gained from me but rather other group members showing the connection between them. As the FG progressed questions came from the group, based upon their personal / peer relationships, making me feel intrusive at
times. Olsen et al. (2011) consider the importance of trust and sensitivity within the research process, which was highly evident to me. The FG brought ethical challenges, through questions and comments generated by the women and at times I wanted to move on, but needed to ensure that I was led by the women. The researcher has a privileged position which at times is difficult to manage, I wanted to reassure, give advice, but this was not my place. At times personal role conflict was evident for me, but at this point my role as researcher needed to take precedence so I was able to facilitate the FG discussion. At the end of the FG, I once more reflected upon the experience. I found that Kleiber’s (2004) observation that a FG was a good way of considering social construction, related to the nature of social interaction rang true. There was a complex web of relationships within the interaction that I observed as an outsider, but did not know fully.

There were two stages of review and transcription, one for the interviews, the other the FG. The transcription was time consuming and challenging, but also insightful, creating a desire to learn more. Patton (2002: 384) considers the importance of accuracy in transcription:

‘...all is wasted unless the words of the interviewee are captured accurately’

I wanted to immerse myself in the findings, influenced initially by Mauthner and Doucet (1997) who advocate four levels of reading of interviews: 1: Identification of the overall plot, 2: Consideration of the readers position within the findings; 3: Exploration of the relationship to identify dominant themes; 4: Looking at the findings within the overall context. This proved when initially listening to the digital recordings and then going through the transcription process to write reflective notes about the areas. Subsequently, a thematic review was undertaken as outlined in Chapter Four, following Braun and Clarke (2006). While I found this time consuming, it also meant I became very familiar with the findings.
The thematic review was frustrating as during this time I questioned my interpretation. Sometimes I found an area which I thought would be significant and it was not, other times I felt over selective and as if I was trying to find themes which did not exist. The guidance was important, I did this slowly and methodically, ever being concerned I would miss something important. The writing up which followed was long, interrupted through changes in supervisors and a lack of guidance at times, and consequently this has taken much longer and created many frustrations.

7.5.3 My WLB and well-being

The production of this thesis spanned a number of years and I feel there have been peaks and troughs in time allocated to the PhD, based on other demands that took priority. During the period of undertaking this study, my work role has changed and steadily become more demanding, with my study coinciding with developments in HE policy and funding, leading to significant changes within my organisation. Von Alberti-Alhtaybat et al. (2017:192) identify a rise in ‘managerialism’ in HE, due to the implementation of the spending review by the UK government, with tuition fees in England, set at £9,000 per academic year 2012/13. Consequently my University, in keeping with the sector, was in a new situation whereby students were increasingly seen as customers and there was increased competition and pressure to recruit learners (Bunce et al., 2017). Additionally, my family experienced many changes and demands that are normal, but nevertheless significant in terms of the time and emotion they require. I continued to experience empathy and connections with the women in my study, as my WLB reflected disequilibrium on occasion and depleted well-being at times. I understand the trio of spheres of commitment from my own perspective; as I am employed as a senior lecturer, programme leader and more
recently Associate Teaching Professor, and my familial roles of mother / partner/ sister and my additional role of a PhD student.

7.5.4: Why I became involved?

I have wanted to undertake a doctoral study since I completed my degree and did a Masters soon after, but during my Masters the death of my mother created a huge personal strain. The journey through this PhD has been very challenging, full of ups and downs, beginning with excitement and apprehension, and there was evidence of success and failure. Just as the women in my study might be seen to be resilient, I think this forms a significant gain for me, being more knowledgeable of WLB and well-being, understanding the complexity life more. In my reflective diary I wrote:

’...I have often been alone in my PhD’ (3, page 17)

However, in the last 18 months, I have felt more supported and that I was given permission to enjoy my study, so whilst the journey has been tough the learning has been immense.

I feel privileged to have heard the women’s stories and believe this helps me support other students in preparing for and continuing with HE study. This knowledge has also helped me support and lead the team in which I am based to understand the experiences of learners, initially on a programme level and now more widely within the school and University. Kiat Kon and McDonald (2015), argue changes in HE require a more business-like approach, requiring leadership and direction, based upon student outcomes and flexible approaches. I know that my next steps are to influence more widely, through conference and writing to highlight the experiences of the learners managing a trio of spheres of commitment. I also feel that although this has taken longer than I ever anticipated, I am more confident in my
academic role and feel less of an imposter. The next section will consider possible areas for further research in this area.

7.6 Areas for further research

This research was of small scale and qualitative, concerning the experiences of ten women. I could have included other cohorts of students and indeed men, although given much of my teaching has been with women, their experiences caught my research interest. Megan (one of the women) lived with her parents, but faced distinct experiences and challenges. Other women had their own home, but had different experiences of WLB dependent upon the ages of their children, in terms of whether they had a young family or adult children. Therefore, there were distinct issues amongst the women within my study which a larger sample could have explored more fully. Whilst this study was focused upon those undertaking work based learning, increasing numbers of students are often precariously employed, in jobs unrelated to study, creating different WLB challenges. McCoy and Smyth (2007) and Van Der Meer and Wieblers (2001) researched the effects of the growing necessity to be involved in employment amongst traditional students due to reduced funding availability. They found a fine balance in orientation towards the workplace in terms of time and energy commitment, with potential for it to become detrimental to academic work. The current policy regimes will mean that there are increasing costs associated with HE study, leading more students to feel the necessity to work.

This study focused upon the learner’s experiences and it would also be useful to consider the academic viewpoint in terms of the advice and mechanisms for support within the university. There is also the employer perspective, as there are often gaps in the support offered from the employers and exploring the rationale behind this to try and understand
their struggles and how might this be overcome. Undertaking research that includes the views of those who support learners in terms of educational providers and employers would be beneficial to establish a fuller picture. There is an increased recognition of the importance of supporting learners in terms of WLB and well-being (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017), given the changing nature of the HE sector (Bolton, 2017), and the introduction of annual fees of £9,000 (Atkins and Ebden, 2014). Additionally the recent announcement by Jo Johnson MP of the possibility of introducing two-year degree, which are seen to have the potential to give students greater flexibility and cost savings through shorter time to obtain a degree (McKee and Siddique 2017). However, Hunt (General Secretary of UCU, cited by McKee and Siddique, 2017) asserts:

‘Our Universities must remain places of learning, not academic sweatshops and the government needs to resist the pile em high teach em cheap approach to students education’.

However, there remains an appetite for change and the HE sector needs to keep this in mind so as to offer learners the best opportunities, with future practice taking into account the contemporary situation.

Given the timing of my study it is important to consider the prevailing ideology within the English Parliament currently and the effect of austerity. Reay (2012: 588) in considering developments in education, finds that since the 1980s the terms ‘equality’ and ‘social justice’, have become ‘shadows’ of what the left envisaged them to be in the 1960s and 1970s. She equates this with the rising influence of neo-liberalism and the emphasis upon the responsibility of the individual within society. The contemporary situation is such that within the education policy there is much reference to widening participation and
recognition of the importance of engaging with the ‘life cycle’ of the student (Atkins and Ebden, 2014: 8). The strategy also recognises the importance of collaboration between partners, such as employers, community and University (Atkins and Ebden, 2014). However, this is within the acceptance of the fact that individuals not the ‘public purse’ must be responsible for Higher Education (Atkins and Ebden, 2014: 14). Further issues raised are associated with the ethos surrounding university, in terms of students being viewed as consumers, encouraged by government as a way of potentially pushing up standards. Consequently apprehension is raised that this focus creates a risk to student identity in terms of the importance of the learning process as opposed to the end result (Bunce et al., 2017).

Austerity in England is persistent, leading the current UK Prime Minister, Mrs May, to give recognition to the plight of hard working families who are ‘just about managing’ (JAM) and are the ‘Squeezed Middle’ (Stenning, 2017). The Resolution Foundation stated that these definitions could be applied to 6 million working families, who earn below the average income, due to a combination of poor wages, inflation due to Brexit and the direct effects of Government policy (Sadha, 2016). Stenning (2017) argues that this group by definition are ‘having to manage’, which means that they are living with the stress of something going wrong, considering all their expenses and postponing leisure. Consequently choices are made within these circumstances, which might include reduction in the likelihood of attending University, as there will be increased pressure to earn. Hence given these situational / macro factors, the research could find different outcomes within a new set of circumstances, which might include greater social inequality and a threat to widening participation.
Further research concerning the learning family could be undertaken to consider the broader implications of the widening participant agenda of the 1997 New Labour government. Hence researching significant changes, which might have taken place amongst the children of parents who were the first in their family to attend University. Therefore exploring how subsequent generations can be influenced by their parents’ involvement in HE study and how patterns of HE involvement are impacted by parents as role models (Gerson, 2009).

Further research could be conducted through re-contacting the women in my study to look at the changes within their lives since completing their Foundation degree, to explore any significant changes to individuals and their family. The EYs and other foundation degrees have been offered for up to 15 years meaning significant alumni exist who might be available to be involved in research of this kind. Greater understanding of the experiences of Widening Participation has current importance in the light of Ebdon (2017) for the Office For Fair Access (OFFA), identifying significant backward movement in widening participation. Therefore, greater understanding of the experiences of widening participation students will enable the identification of barriers and help identify ways in which they might be overcome.

The situations and personal experiences of the women explored during my study, depicted the creation of WL imbalanced, through the trio of spheres of commitment, managed through adaptation and motivation, reflecting resilience. Further research related to student’s resilience would represent a useful contribution to knowledge, particularly in relation to both individual and peer resilience. In terms of both WLB and well-being there is significant association with resilience (Abel, 2016; Dunn et al., 2008; McIntosh and Shaw, 2017; Tilford, 2017). From researching this group of women, there is an important
contribution in terms of the resilience developed through a group of peers, reflective of co-
operation. Reay (1997: 22) asserts that the self-development experienced by working class
white females as they participate in academia is most often about being socialised from a
collective and community base. This is often at odds with the ‘competitive individualism’
prominent within University, but here is critical to successful development of resilience.

Research that considers WLB from a wider perspective other than that of dualism would be
significant, as this approach would be addressing the complex reality of contemporary life
(Emery et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2013). This study has indicated that there are gaps in what is
known, with most research being concerned with employment and life (family) which does
not account for the contemporary situation. Changes in life and living patterns must be
responded to by social research. For example, leisure and consumptions within a
contemporary perspective should reflect emphasis placed upon the importance of self-
improvement and development throughout life (Ransome, 2005). Additionally there is
pressure upon parents in terms of productive development with children outside of the
education system, associated with opening up increased leisure opportunities (Ward, et al.,
2010). In relation to learning being added to lives there is a particular complexity which
should be given consideration within WLB discourse (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Reichwein and
Gow, 2013; Van Der Meer and Wieblers, 2001; Yorke and Longden, 2010). This means that
there is a need to research WLB in its fuller diversity so that policy can be developed which
is meaningful for a wider range of situation, as currently it fails to provide the protection
people need. The next section will explore how this study has highlighted areas of possible
implication for policy and procedure.
7.7 Contribution to the implications for policy and practice

This section will consider the contribution my study can provide to policy and practice. WLB definition needs to be further considered to encompass the complexity of people’s lives (Emery et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2013). While much of the legislation which informs policy relates to workplace flexibility (Dex and Bond, 2005; Jones, 2003; Kelly et al., 2014; Lewis and Cooper, 2005; Moen, 2011 Kossek, 2016), there remains limited appreciation of the diversity within people’s lives and the subsequent hidden hours experienced. Furthermore, it is crucial to consider why policy can be more rhetoric than reality, in that the existing policy is often under-utilised (Dean and Coulter, 2006; Gatrell et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2010; Warren et al., 2009; Yorke and Longden, 2010). A greater understanding of the link between policy and WLB needs to be developed, so enabling greater consideration of how well-being is experienced. In terms of policy development and practice, increasing collaboration between the factions of workplace and University is required to foster a true sense of practices which benefit learners. This would require better understanding of learner’s experiences in undertaking work-based learning, so the University and employer might be more flexible and better able to provide support. Kettle (2013) in exploring the importance of University linking with employers, advocates for flexibility in terms of Pedagogies to include aspects which make sense to employers, encouraging greater collaboration. This means that the University may need to change their ways of working to encompass the needs of the employer. Kettle (2013) cautions that this is not easy to achieve as there is often a significant gap in priorities, as business is concerned with commercial benefits and HE is focused on academic achievements. Overcoming this gap is critical to making joint approaches successful. Much would be gained from employers understanding
the benefits of learning in terms of the advantages of a more knowledgeable and competent workforce (Dearing Enquiry, 1997; Evans, et al., 2010; Harvey, 2009; Higgins et al., 2010; Leitch, 2006).

A particular challenge for learners taking a less traditional route is associated with identity and role (Reay, 2007). In cases of learners undertaking work-based learning programmes the tension is exacerbated through the dual role of worker and learner, which should complement each other, but are more often at odds. For parents / those with care responsibilities, further demands create guilt, as roles of mothers and partners are crucially important for the family, but at times conflict with the learner role. A critical part of the issue is associated with a limited sense of belonging, which creates self-doubt and increases risk of withdrawal (Sargent, 1991; 2002; McGivney, 2001; 2003). Consequently, HE should enhance support to adult learners through transitions into University to support the development of a learner identity, which is important to success (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). Flexibility and student centred approaches should not subscribe to one size fits all, but recognise individual needs and problems experienced by widening-participation students (Higgins, 2010; McGivney, 2001, 2003, Sargent 1991; 2002). Furthermore, fuller partnerships between the University and workplace could be developed, to ensure that new knowledge is better received in the work place (Harvey, 2009; Kettle, 2013).

In my study, overlapping commitments meant that HE study was often subsumed by employment and family commitments, and frequently managed through a third shift type approach, undertaken in the evening and at the weekend. HE providers need to further recognise the pressure learners experience and provide guidance associated with WLB and well-being, considering time management, including the importance of breaks from HE
study. Sargent (1991; 2002), McGivney (2001; 2003), Reay (2007), Reay et al. (2005) comment upon the challenges and barriers which are experienced which include a lack of familiarity with academia and limited time availability. Clearer guidance, which does not assume prior knowledge, at the onset of HE study should be provided, which should incorporate guides around assessment planning to use initial smaller achievable targets to help organise workload (Sargent, 1991; 2002). Where feasible, there needs to be an increased recognition of the impact of deadlines from the workplace, with study time facilitated.

Motivation to continue in HE study was critical to overcoming barriers faced and learner success. This should be further developed through the use of mentoring schemes for both the university and workplace. The sharing of experiences which have helped former and existing learners to cope with the combination of demands should be publicised so developing a greater range within the role models shown. Examples of groups within the learning environment and active peer mentoring should be used to share strategies and attitudes to inspire others (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). Recognition of the significance of peer support would be beneficial if more opportunities for networking were provided (McIntosh and Shaw, 2017). Inspirational stories can be used on to show transformation and possibilities during and prior to commencement in HE study. Ebdon (2017: 7) identifies the current situation in education to indicate a continuing disparity between the experiences of those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and other groups, with a ‘calamitous drop’ in mature learners entering HE. Consequently there is a genuine need to understand the experiences of widening participation students and the real and perceived barriers to their engagement with HE study.
In my study adaptations made by women within their family lives reflects diversity and creativity. The process of adaptation is critical within WLB and often determines how successful people are in terms of managing demands within their lives (Bryan 2007; Dex, 2003; Jarvis and Pratt, 2006; Lewis and Cooper, 2005). Societal changes occurred over the time of the study reflecting growing acceptance of HE study within the households, which improved morale, and provided practical support. It would be useful to consider pre-planning, helping families / communities understand the demands and values around HE study, so they are quicker to provide support.

The ‘Learning Family’ is a positive finding within this group of predominantly non-traditional learners. Reay (2005; 2009) identified distinctions in cultural experiences between social groups which restricts access to and belonging within HE. The changes within the family which meant entering HE were viewed as a real option, had greater significant as this contrasted with the previous exclusion some women had experienced. Changing attitudes emerged as the women became role models for their children, taking learning into the home, sometimes studying alongside their children and offering advice and support around learning. This change is the true aim of widening participation, not only related to opportunities for individuals but their family and community around them. Significant benefits and opportunities were role modelled through the engagement of mothers in HE, meaning families gain insight into possibilities and removing barriers to ambition which created differentiation in social expectations.

Changing leisure patterns were seen with clear depletion of pure leisure, but transformation to serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992), impacting upon not only the women but their family. For example Jane described how her husband complained weekends were taken with HE study
and other commitments, saying: ‘we could be doing Sunday things’ (Interview Jane, page 17: 861).

However, there was indication of change being accepted, including HE study being favoured.

There is a clear association between adult learning and leisure. As leisure can form a pathway into learning and can bring people into learning, with learning environments bringing important opportunities to socialise for adults, which is akin with leisure (Sargent, 1991). Nevertheless, there is a need to consider the significance of leisure depletion and well-being, with planned leisure with family and friends encouraged and leisure through activity encouraged to maintain wellness (Cassidy, 2005; Cardwell, 2005).

Individual well-being was influenced by the addition of the third sphere, HE study, with objective compromise in many cases and sacrifice of personal well-being to achieve the women’s learning goals. This was accepted by the women as a temporary situation, until they completed their degree. The impact on health included emotional stresses and strains, and physical compromises to health and well-being (Cassidy, 2005; Cardwell, 2005).

However, there is a much more complex situation when considering well-being subjectively, with raised self-esteem and capabilities bolstering the women (Deneulin and McGregor, 2010; Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). This compromise should be understood by HE providers and employers from a viewpoint of responsibility and duty of care to the learner, including better support and pastoral care to facilitate changes. However, the positive effects also need to be given recognition, as the focus upon the positive experiences and outcomes will have the ability to offer a boast to students at the times when they feel depleted.

Options regarding paid employment are often restricted amongst adult learners who may have family commitments, and the ability to earn makes work-based learning a good proposition (Higgins, 2010; McGivney, 2003; Sargent, 2002). This is enhanced through an
ethos which places value upon workplace activity recognising skills and experience development (Harvey, 2009). However, complexity is created through employment taking time from HE study, preventing fuller dedication to study, with a fine balance between working enough and too much. The current policies and fees for HE leads to concern amongst students over the cost of University, making working whilst attending University common (Atkins and Ebden, 2014). Furthermore, alternative arrangements including work-based learning will become more commonplace, through the introduction of Higher Apprenticeships which have much in common with Foundation degrees. Riley (2017) asserts that whilst student tuition fees have become part of the infrastructure of HE, the spending review of 2015 introduced the employee levee which should raise £3 billion by 2019/2020 (HM treasury 2015). The development of higher apprenticeships is seen as a way of combining work and learning, including bachelors and Masters degrees, with tuition costs met through the levee of employers rather than individual students (Riley, 2017; Halfon, JRF, 2017). This trend will mean that there is increasing amounts of employment and HE study taking place alongside each other, making WLB an issue of increased concern (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; McCoy and Smyth, 2007; Ooms et al., 2011; Van Der Meer and Wieblers, 2001; Yorke and Longden, 2010). An understanding of the realities of students’ experiences amongst educators is essential to provide effective support, rather than increasing the problems that students face. Learning can often be seen as a relentless machine oblivious to the plight of the individuals it seeks to serve, and countering this will involve a more student-centred approach to learning. As such, an understanding amongst educators of the realities of students’ experiences is essential to provide support, while a lack of understanding will increase the problems that student face.
7.8 Some final thoughts

To close, I would like to acknowledge that undertaking this research has marked a significant personal and professional journey for me. The use of a social construction approach has created a genuine interest in the basis of knowledge, which has helped me question WLB, well-being, gender and leisure. Equally significant has been engaging with feminist approaches, which has enabled me to consider use of power throughout. The insight gained through a qualitative approach has suited my purpose and interest and having undertaken quantitative research previously, I feel that the interactions with the women were important to me. I have tried throughout to be open minded. In taking this approach I have found differing pertinent views of WLB, well-being, leisure and resilience. A most encouraging phenomenon was the ‘learning family’, which should alleviate guilt and self-doubt, as the positive potential of the overlap between the home and learning space is realised. There is a true sense of widening participation creating personal, familial and community change. I hope going forward this will be further recognised. I also hope that increasingly those involved in education realise the privilege of some above others in that students are not wasting time, they simply have not time to waste.

7.9: Summary

The final section of my thesis will provide a summary of the main points I have covered in this Chapter. The Chapter began by providing a review of the main areas covered in the thesis and outcomes of my study. The Chapter then progressed by referring back to research aim and objectives, to offer an evaluation of the goodness of fit in terms of whether these were addressed, here I concluded they were indeed met. In the next section I reflected from a personal and professional perspective, on my interest in WLB and well-
being, wish to research women in HE study and my experiences of the various research stages. This reflection was demanding as I found this process challenging and it is difficult to consider, although in the spirit of feminist approaches I know this is important. I have outlined a number of policy and practice implications which this research can support, in that a study of this kind should have something to say in terms of making change. I would like my final comment to reiterate my admiration for and gratitude to the women in my study, who managed the trio of spheres of commitment, with creative solutions, endurance and great motivation.
References


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Appendix 1

Participant Information Sheet

Work-life Balance and Employed Adult Learners

This research aims to examine Work-life Balance amongst adult learners, who are involved in Work Based courses. This is part of a PhD study undertaken by myself at the University of Bolton.

The study hopes to gain knowledge and understanding around some of the issues faced by students who combine work and study, with the intention of sharing findings with those involved in Education and Social Sciences. The research will initially form the basis of a PhD study, it is also hoped that related publication may come from the study.

The research is to be carried out in two stages, the first stage will be a semi-structured interview of around 1 hour, the second a focus group also of one hour.

The interview will be considering your WLB experiences, all information will be treated in a confidential and sensitive manner / the interview will be recorded / you can decide to withdraw, i.e. stop the interview at any stage / you can decide not to answer any questions

The second stage on the research will be a focus group with hence you will be asked for contact details to be stored until this time. I will then approach you, to see if you are willing to be involved Participants may be assured that all information will remain anonymous.

Please allow me to take this opportunity to thank you, for your involvement in the research.

Joanne Smith (PhD student)

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01204 903784
Work-Life Balance & Adult Learners, Interview schedule:

In some cases not all the questions will be required, if the respondent is happy to talk, be prepared to listen/reactive.

Demographic (Age, Ethnicity) / hours of employment / type of workplace / family (Children: Number and Age / partner / other responsibility within wider family)

Work-Life Balance:

1. What would you understand by the term Work-life balance?
2. Look at the following images:

Would any indicate your experience or mean anything to you? (Yes / No / explanation)

Figure 1

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Figure 2

![Figure 2](image2.png)

Figure 3

![Figure 3](image3.png)
Impact of Study

1. If you were asked to describe the main differences before you studied and now, what might they be.
2. Are there key things which make study easier or more difficult?
3. When you experience difficulty what makes you continue?

House work & other responsibilities:

4. Tell me about you experience? / Describe the level of responsibility you have for house work at home.
5. Do others contribute? If so what do they do? If people from your house hold were asked to describe their activity how do think they do this?

Describe a typical day:

6. What are the competing demands upon your time? How might you describe the level of ease or difficulty?

Role models:

7. Which other women do you feel have influenced your way of dealing with competing demands in your house work?
8. How might you compare yourself with such people, are things easier, more difficult?

Hours of work:

9. If you could work fewer hours would you? If yes why don’t you? If it’s about money do you feel you value income more than time?

Partners & other family member:

10. If you have a partner do they work more, less or about the same as you? How much time do you each spend at home, what do you tend to do with your time. If you are in need of time to study how is this accommodated within your schedule
11. Describe your leisure activity / is it time with the family / is there much of it
Appendix 2 Work-life balance and Adult Learners, Focus group:

Introduce the research topic and purpose (all respondents to be given written confirmation around aims and the right to anonymity (Refer back to interview guide/ consent to be checked throughout the focus group)

Outline the aims of the focus group:

The focus group is a way of reflecting on the key findings from the semi-structured interviews:

The interviews which were conducted between May – July 2010, demonstrated a number of strong themes the idea of this focus group is to raise these for the discussion in the group. It is also hoped that new information and themes might emerge from this discussion.

One of the features of WLB is around competing priorities, reflected in the use of the image of someone juggling, therefore, I would ask you to write any things which take up your time in any context, this can be done throughout the discussion: (Post-it notes)

Themes

It would seem to be the case that for many people there is a fine balance to be struck in relation to achieving all you wish to achieve

Consider the responsibilities you have and how there might weigh you down at times. What are these responsibilities? Now on the other side of the balance consider the things which make things help regain balance.

Overlapping aspects of life and demands:

One of the things which emerged from the interviews was that there were clear areas which overlap which each other. This was particular noticeable in terms of study taking time away from the domestic and competing with family time. There was also a sense that at times there was frustration in loosing time which could be devoted to study to the needs of the family. There was also a clear sense that leisure time had been reduced.

Juggling and Multi-tasking are key themes:

Juggling is often associated with achieving WLB consider the things which you might be juggling:
The Impact of Study:

One of the areas which this study is concerned with the place of education and learning, this is a key feature given that the area is concerned with adult learners:

I asked people to what the impact of study had been there were lot of positive feedback about people feeling more confident and a sense of achievement. The negative was often associated with time being taken away which had created time pressure, including having less leisure time and not getting to spend time with friends etc.....

Attitude towards learning:

There has been a positive attitude towards learning throughout the interview, were there is a strong commitment to study, even when they is difficult and almost against all odd

Do you find this to be the case? / Why?

Another theme which comes from the interviews is around motivation.......how important is this in relation to success?

Time & Place to study

The majority of respondents said that they would tend to work at home. Why do you think this is the case and can you comment on any of the problems this might cause?

A great number of respondents said that they would generally do the majority of their study at evenings and weekends. Why do you think this might be the case? Could you comment on this as an issue?

Deadlines:

The people that I interviewed said that they did meet their deadlines but this was often difficult, the key feature seemed to be around planning time the thing that seemed to cause problems was around unexpected events. Can you tell me how you feel about this?

Routines:

A key to meeting deadlines is around planning and routines, how important do you think this is?
Responsibility for housework / household tasks:

There is variation across the respondent group in terms of household responsibility, but there were a number of people who felt that others might help them, but they did the most and felt a sense that they were ultimately responsible: Can you relate to this?

I asked people in conjunction with this how likely they are to ask for help from others in their household and many said they were not comfortable with this.....why do people not ask for help when they clearly seem to need it?

Attitude towards Family commitments:

This is an area which was discussed quite a lot within the interviews and there is a clear sense that individuals see their commitment to family as very important. To what extent does this help with study? To what extent does it hinder with study?

Support from Family Members:

Those who seemed to have the most success in terms of achieving Work-Life balance were frequently those who gained support from family members. Can I ask to consider what difference this might make to you?

A recurring issue which I challenged at times was that respondents felt that they were overworked, but at times there was reluctance to ask for help, what do you think of this?

A supportive Network:

This seemed to be the key to the success experienced by a lot of respondents, where might this form and how important do you think it is?

Views of work:

Over-time:

Most of the people that I spoke with said that they rarely did overtime, this was unsurprising given the amount they were doing already, but when they described their typical working day they described doing extra time at the beginning and end of the day, this seemed to be associated with planning / overall commitment to their work, would you like to comment on this practice. Why would this happen?
Time:

Needless to say a lack of time poverty was most frequently reported pressure respondents experienced......Can people relate to this? What are there solutions to this?

It is clear that there are strategies for solving problems around WLB.....If you were to share these with other what might they be?

Where we come from / Work ethics / Role models

When I initially asked about role models I believed that there would significant women that would be quoted, this was true in some cases but in many it was the father. Who are yours and how important have they been to you? (Share own experience)

Emotion:

Emotion was commonly encountered during the interviews, this was associated with reflecting on the past, but also current situation, this was a little unexpected in a way and something which I had not been prepared for, but it also gave insight.

Can you comment on why people might experience emotion associated with work-life balance?

Stress:

Stress was a common experience for / reported from respondents, there were comments about the pressure from competing demands. What would you see to be the most common causes of stress for people a position where they are involved in study and work?

Leisure:

The impression given in the interviews was that leisure time was frequently reduced by the demands of study and the respondents frequently said that they did not have much leisure time and that when they did it was common to feel guilty.....What might be the reasons for this guilt?

Furthermore it seems to be common to share leisure time with family members, how might this be different to having time out / ‘me time’? Can one be equated to the other?

Difficulties people experience: When respondents feel exhausted and as though they can’t carry on, they do so, what do people do to carry on?
Coping strategies:

Through the interview process it became obvious that people had a number of ways in which they coped with what where demanding schedules, were competing demands were normal part of day to day live. When you think of all the demands you have what are the ways of coping……..

If you were to advise someone what would you say.

Looking at these images the first one depicts a stage of balance between demands which a person has and their ability to cope, this might be seen to show someone who has balance.

Even when people are generally good at balancing demands there will be times when the demands upon them lead to too much:

The group will be asked to consider when this might be and look at some of the things which they consider to lead to imbalance.

The group will then be asked to consider actions they take and support which they might get which leads to greater ability to cope.

A ‘drive’ to succeed:

Motivation:
One of the features which has come strongly through the interviews is that there is a sense that there are overlapping responsibilities and demands upon times.

This might be seen in the diagram below:

Work-Life Balance: Overlapping Demands

Overlap within the domestic
Leisure and study compete for time
Thinking about work at home and home at work
Work-based learning