Empowering ‘other’ students:

a skills intervention to increase the academic and cognitive abilities of mature female students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in higher education

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Abstract

This thesis addresses an under researched area of mature students in Higher Education fulfilling a myriad of identities. The study adopts an action research approach (Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Kemmis *et al.,* 2014) that addresses the intersectionality (Crenshaw,1989; Hill Collins, 2015) they face. This study looks at the unique and particular challenges faced by ethnic minority women.

Many mature students, who increasingly, are making up a higher percentage of the student body, embark on a degree-level programme with the added burden of trying to fulfil the obligations of their multiple identities. For most female students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, socio-economic constraints make the pursuit of a higher-level qualification an almost impossible endeavour. However, the need to reinvent themselves and redefine their identities beyond those of wives, mothers and homemakers, makes the achievement of a university degree a necessary undertaking. Besides, a degree would (one might hope) also raise their status and perceived worth within their respective communities. Unfortunately, many of these female students embark on this journey ill-prepared, laden with attitudes, behaviours and internalised prejudices that impact negatively on their learning experiences. What ensues is disenfranchisement and a sense of alienation within their learning environment. Findings from this study showed that with the right support, mature students from BAME groups could develop self-appreciation and rid themselves of those encumbering attitudes. The unfortunate reality is that many higher institutions do not expect to provide the level of support needed by this historically marginalised group of students.

With particular focus on a London-based university, this study examines the academic difficulties experienced by students from BAME groups on a year-long top-up degree programme in health and social care. Influenced by action research (Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Kemmis *et al.,* 2014), this thesis elucidates the steps taken to empower the students and improve their learning experiences. Tailored support, which involved the use of tools that encouraged critical reflection, over time, brought about changes in the students as they gained a better understanding of the reasons for their academic challenges.

As a theoretical framework, intersectionality (Crenshaw,1989; Hill Collins, 2015) provides an understanding of how various social identities, such as age, gender, race and class, intersect at individual, micro levels of experience to disadvantage particular groups of

students academically. Intersectionality also highlights the importance of viewing academic challenges from a multilateral dimension, as opposed to one that is unilateral, or even bilateral.

Keywords: action research, intersectionality, academic skills, mature students BAME groups, neo-traditional, internalised prejudice, habitus, cultural capital.

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Abbreviations

ALP – Active learning pedagogy

AMR – Annual monitoring review

AQD – Academic quality and development

AR – Action research

BAME – Black, Asian and minority ethnic

BERA – British educational research association

BIS – Business innovation and skills

CPD – Continuous professional development

CV – Curriculum Vitae

DoS – Director of studies

EAP – English for academic purposes

EC – European Commission

EI – Emotional intelligence

EHEA – European higher education area

FFA – Force field analysis

HE – Higher education

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HND – Higher national diploma

H&SC – Health and social care

IOH – Institute of Health

IT – Information technology

L&T – Learning and teaching

NALA – National adult literacy agency

NNES – Non-native English speakers

OECD – Economic co-operation and development

OfS – Office for Students

ONS – Office of National Statistics

PL – Programme lead

PREP – Post-baccalaureate Research Education Program

SES – Socio-economic status

SMART – Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound

SOAS – School of Oriental and African Studies

STEM – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

THE – Times Higher Education

UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UCL – University College London

UK – United Kingdom

UoC – University of Cumbria

WP – Widening participation

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Dedication

To my children, Opeyemi and Ayokunumi, who believed in me, and my father, Prof. T. O. Orebamjo, who encouraged me to see the project through and not give up. Daddy, sadly you passed on before I could complete it but rest in peace and the assurance that I have done you proud. I will surely miss your inspiring presence.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study examines the academic difficulties experienced by mature female students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups in higher education, with particular focus on a Health and Social Care (H&SC) top-up degree programme in a London-based university. It highlights the academic challenges, especially the absence of academic skills and the attitude of the students when confronted with this lack. Influenced by 'action research' (AR), this thesis will elucidate the steps taken to mitigate these academic difficulties. Using 'intersectionality' as a theoretical framework, the research provides an understanding of how various social identities, such as age, gender, race and class, intersect and impact directly on academic experience. This research highlights the importance of viewing academic difficulties as multi-dimensional, rather than as the result of a single cause, for example, insufficient schooling.

Based on the above considerations, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can we support mature female students from BAME groups when they return to Higher Education?
2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences?
3. What kind of interventions do we need to consider and put in place and how do they impact the students both in terms of academic and personal development?

The above research questions informed an AR project in which an intervention was carried out with the intention of encouraging students to focus and reflect on their academic skills, in order to bring about an understanding of the reasons for their academic challenges. The intervention offered extensive academic support, including increased contact time with tutors, intensive IT and English language support and repeated self-appraisal by the students. It was carried out with the following tools: skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs, which were used over the year-long period to encourage student reflection, fine-tune the next phase of the AR and inform the type of intervention to put in place. Semi-structured interviews with all the students and some tutors at the end of the programme provided invaluable insight into the thoughts and feelings of the participants and further feedback on the intervention.

1.2 Researcher positionality

The term ‘positionality’ defines how race, class, gender and other forms of self-identification, experiences and privileges, influence research (Hammersley, 1993; Mercer, 2007). As such, my own research journal was incorporated in the corpus of data for this study, which, as I will explain below, is a record not only of my experience as a researcher throughout this study, but also, and perhaps more important, a testimony of my own involvement in the intersectional nature of the project as a mature Black woman. This involvement is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, the theoretical chapter and the methodology chapter, Chapter 4. It was important to do this as my positionality is a thread in this research.

Reflecting on the researcher’s positionality from a ‘traditional’ perspective, we are encouraged to consider how the multiple identity dimensions in which we might operate (for example, lecturer, researcher, mother, student, daughter, educated Black woman) could become competing interests (Strauss, 1995) that pull us in different directions, sometimes called ‘loyalty tugs’ (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007 p. 70), which could impact our interpretation of the collected data. I do not disregard such considerations, or the value of reflecting on the researcher’s positionality, I simply defer them until Chapter 4.

However, the following must be clarified here: most of the students on the H&SC top-up degree programme were from minority ethnic groups, had jobs and/or were mothers, and struggled to engage with the programme. There was an implicit assumption by the university and the students that as a woman, I would be more understanding of their plight. Added to this, the students believed that my being Black meant I shared their experiences and would be more sensitive to their predicament. I was, therefore, cast in the position of one who could affect the necessary changes that would help them (Egharevba, 2001). It was this positionality that necessitated an intersectional approach and evolved into the detailed discussion of my involvement presented in Chapter 4. Below, I introduce the context of the research and the layout of the thesis.

1.3 Context of the study

In September 2017, I was approached by the University of Cumbria (UoC) to run the newly commenced top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care at the London campus. All the students to be recruited onto the programme were to come from private colleges

(alternative providers) in London. The programme commenced in January 2018, with twenty-five students, all of whom met the entry criteria of having a level 5 qualification in a related field. Based on my experience, a more rigorous admission process was needed in order to determine each student's ability to study at degree level, especially since many of the students were adults over the age of 35 and had English as a second language. My reservations were justified within the first month, when a fifth of the students dropped out of the programme, and at the end of the first semester, only a fifth of the remaining students passed the first semester assessment (UoC, 2018).

The first two years were extremely stressful and often demoralising. Attrition and failure rates were high and the university had to consider the practicalities of maintaining the programme. At that point, I took it upon myself to make changes to improve the programme. The magnitude of the responsibility weighed heavily on my mind and I soon realised that the solutions required an in-depth understanding of the problem. For instance, coming up with ways to increase the level of student engagement and attainment, inevitably, led me to ask why students found it hard to engage in the first place, and what, exactly, it was that I wanted them to engage with. The students' apparent lack of basic academic knowledge and skills required critical examination and demanded an analysis of the nuances of gender, race, culture, age, socio-economic circumstances and individual characteristics as potential factors in the equation (Cooper, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989).

Furthermore, although my initial premise was that these mature students were not well-equipped to study at level 6, I soon came to realise that both their motivation for returning to higher education and their understanding of the requirements and expected level of difficulty were somewhat different from the assumptions of the more traditional type of students, that is, eighteen-year-olds who enter university for personal and professional development (Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017). What also emerged, to my surprise, was that for some of these mature students, financial incentive was often the motivation, and obtaining a qualification was not, necessarily, a priority. It also came to light that some of the students thought that a higher degree could be achieved the same way as a Higher National Diploma (HND), without additional effort on their part. This belief was fostered in many of the students who obtained their HND from alternative providers, where a high level of student engagement was not considered a priority (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Lancaster, 2020; Molinari, 2014). Consequently, expecting the students to engage fully with the programme, including class-based activities and formative assessments, generated a lot

of resentment, as this exposed their inability to perform even the most basic tasks. Completing summative assessments was not an issue and the reason for this, I later discovered, was that many of the students used the services of third parties.

A few of the students, however, regarded the attainment of this higher-level qualification as an opportunity to develop personally and professionally and to improve their socio-economic status. The determination of this latter group of students compelled and motivated me to introduce changes to the top-up degree programme.

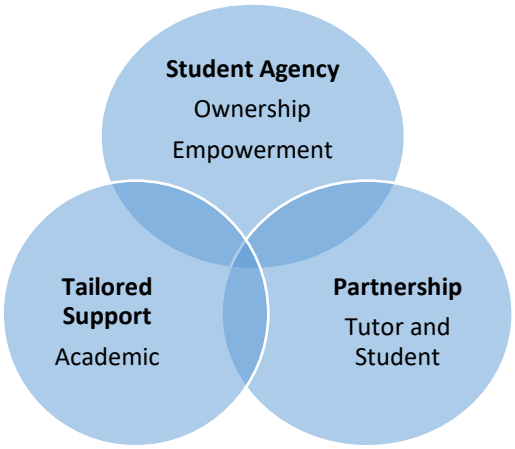
Research into the reasons behind academic difficulty encountered by older adult students (Balduf, 2009; Demie and Lewis, 2010; Gillies, 2008), tends to favour single or homogenous explanations, such as cognitive ability, gender, age, race or socio-economic status, without attempting to explore individual academic experiences from a multi-dimensional perspective. A consideration of the different dimensions that mature students experience is, therefore, particularly important for female students from BAME groups. Bangs (2016) and Biggs and Tang (2011) believe that a recognition of the multi-faceted realities within which this group of learners operates would facilitate a more appropriate pedagogical approach, allowing these students to achieve their fullest potential. In addition, focused support of these learners could mitigate the feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement often experienced by them (Hine, 2013; Knowles *et al*., 2012; McCall et al., 2018). The academic challenges of the students on the top-up degree programme, together with critical reflection and extensive engagement with literature on widening participation (WP) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Knowles *et al.,* 2012; McCall *et al.,* 2018; Moore *et al.,* 2013; Pratt and Ross-Gordon, 2002; Pratt, 1998), highlighted the need for a shift in the programme's methods and practices.

This shift could begin with an appreciation of the students' own capabilities as mothers, wives, homemakers and in some cases, professionals; roles that require some level of skill and competence that enable them to succeed in these various roles (Chapman, 2013). It is therefore important to dispel the deficit thinking that focuses on the problems rather than the potential of the students and acknowledge that the students do not come into higher education 'empty' but rather, laden with dispositions that give them the resilience to survive in uncongenial environments that relegate them to subordinate positions. Exploiting those dispositions through the provision of appropriate support will

improve the students' educational experiences (Chapman, 2013; Freire and Ramos, 2018; Knowles *et al*., 2012; McCall et al., 2018). So, rather than viewing the students as lacking the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to succeed in higher education, it is important to ask, 'whose capital?'. Higher educational institutions should dispel with the out-dated view of seeing capital from a white hegemonic perspective and acknowledge that there are other cultures that are equally important and worthy of recognition (Emerson and Yancey, 2010; Patton *et al.,* 2016; Yosso, 2005). Consequently, the intrinsic capital the students possess should be exploited to alter the hierarchical and unjust status quo in higher education. The overall aim of this study therefore was to give the students an understanding of the reasons for their academic challenges and acquire an awareness of their educational options, which has been a time-honoured practice in intersectional feminist research (hooks, 2000; McCarthy and Grosser, 2023). This principle is expanded upon in Chapter 3, and explains how the intersectional approach adopted in this study allowed for the appreciation of the students' intrinsic capital. The steps taken to utilise this resource to bring about a more positive learning experience is explained in greater detail in the methodology discussion in Chapter 4.

Addressing this need began with a look at the 'associative learning' process (see Figure 1, below), in which ideas and experiences reinforce one another and are intrinsically linked in such a way that each one is rendered ineffective in isolation.

Figure 1 The associative processes (my depiction)



With this in mind, I developed an intervention in which support went hand-in-hand with a good student−teacher relationship and student agency (Gazley *et al.,* 2014). In doing so, I attempted to offer my students not only a set of 'hands on' skills in English writing and

IT but an enhanced opportunity to develop the kind of reflective ownership of the learning process that leads to long-term empowerment and confidence.

1.4 Organisation of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. In Chapter 2, the review of literature, I begin by highlighting the changing nature of the higher education students before going on to discuss, in detail, the academic experiences of mature female learners from minority groups with 'WP' in mind. The chapter also offers an overview of the most common practices of improved teaching and learning (T&L) relevant to BAME mature female students.

Chapter 3 presents 'intersectionality', which forms the theoretical basis of the study. It explores its origin with a history account of women's oppression, especially Black women and their struggle for equality. It then goes on to examine the use of an intersectional approach in higher educational research, with emphasis on race, class, gender and age. The chapter also includes a discussion of Bourdieu's theory on forms of capital, along with the associated theories of 'field' and 'habitus', since these are important elements in educational intersectionality. It is however important to mention that Bourdieu's theory acts as a springboard to intersectionality and is not meant to provide an understanding of the reasons for the academic challenges experienced by mature female student from BAME groups. In addition, the theory does not acknowledge the nuances that existed within and between individuals and hence does not provide an appropriate theoretical base for my study. Instead, intersectionality, from the standpoint of gender, race, age, class and institutional disparity, resonates much better with this project and my intervention.

The final section of this chapter discusses intersectionality as an empowering tool that provides the students with an understanding of their identities and the educational demands on them. The chapter concludes by exploring the limitations of an intersectional approach.

Chapter 4 explains the methodology of the study, which used mixed methods for the generation of data. Quantitative methods, in the form of skills audits, feedback sheets and achievement grades, were used to determine the level of skills students possessed and the progress made over the course of the programme. Qualitative methods, in the form of learning logs and interviews, were also used to capture the voices of both the students

and tutors in regard to their perceptions of the T&L process on the programme, and also, the students' academic experiences. My own in-depth reflective account is also presented in this chapter detailing my journey as an agent of change. Using my personal reflections, the pivotal role I played in raising the students' level of consciousness is highlighted.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis and findings of the research. It contains sections on the quantitative data collected from the skills audit and feedback sheets, and also, qualitative data from the participants' learning logs and interview transcripts. The skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs were research tools that aided an intersectional approach and enabled the students to gradually confront their lack of academic skills and develop themselves as reflective practitioners. The interviews allowed the students, through critical reflection, to make links between the multiple roles they upheld, and to develop their ability to successfully place themselves within their learning context.

In Chapter 6, the final chapter, a discussion of the study is presented − what the problem was and what was done to mitigate the problem − before going on to provide recommendations for future research and my own professional practice.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the literature on the academic difficulties experienced by mature learners in higher education (HE). The topic is vast, and it should be emphasised that academic difficulties do not apply to all mature students. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the challenges most relevant to the demographic similar to the students on top-up degree programmes in Health and Social Care, namely, females over the age of thirty-five and usually from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. A top-up degree is the equivalent of level 6 of an undergraduate programme, where students are admitted after completing a relevant degree at foundation level or a Higher National Diploma (HND) equivalent to level 5.

This chapter starts by examining the changing nature of higher education students as it shifts from the traditional students, categorised as between 18 to 25 years old, to a new wave of students who are being integrated into higher education and do not fall into this category. The chapter goes on to define academic difficulty in the context of widening participation (WP) as the academic difficulties of educationally marginalised groups need to be considered from a socio-economic standpoint. Strategies to mitigate the academic difficulties of mature students from BAME groups in HE are also included, with an examination of some of these and their limitations. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review and stresses the need to ensure that HE policies and processes are more inclusive so that every learner, irrespective of race, age, gender, culture or socio-economic circumstance, is able to achieve to their fullest potential (Casey, 2016; Imhof and Spaeth-Hilbert, 2013).

2.2 The changing nature of higher education students

The nature of higher education students is continually changing and evolving, as increasingly, the student demographics fall outside the category of those previously referred to as ‘traditional students’ (Chung *et al.,* 2014; Gulley, 2016; 2021; Westervelt, 2016). ‘Traditional students’ were considered to be between the ages of 18 and 25 years and enrol into higher education immediately after their secondary education (Gulley, 2016; 2021; Iloh, 2018). ‘Non-traditional’ students on the other hands are viewed as mature, first-generation university students, with low socio-economic status or students from minority racial backgrounds (Office for Students (OfS), 2021; McVitty and Morris, 2012).

Wong (2018) describes ‘non-traditional’ students as those from lower classes and who are usually under-represented in HE. For Leggins (2021) ‘non-traditional’ learners are adult students who for various reasons, enrol into higher education later in life. These reasons she adds, could include financial constraints, family commitments, career change, disability and military deployment. The changing profile of higher education students, together with the need to encourage historically marginalised groups to return to education, has led to a government reform of education that ensures lifetime skills guarantee. In a new Bill – Lifelong Learning (Higher Education Fee Limits) Bill 2022-23 – adults would be able to access funding to retrain and/gain new skills. This new funding scheme known as The Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) (Gov.UK, 2023), will empower mature learners in such a way that enables them to study and still fulfil their personal commitments and ensure social mobility.

As the profile of higher education students changes, the change appears to shift in favour of the above definitions of ‘non-traditional’ students as increasingly, many more people delay going into higher education after completing their secondary education. Statistics in fact show that between 2019-2020, about 130,000 mature students were studying full-time in higher educational institutions in England compared to just over 95,0000 between 2010-2011 (OfS, 2021). Figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (2020) indicate that nursing and allied courses such as social work, admit a total of 71% of students over the age of thirty. Additionally, higher education students now also include those under the age of twenty-five with characteristics such as parenthood, full time workers and financially independent, which previously, were ascribed to adults and/or non-traditional students (Chen, 2017; CohenMiller, 2023; Soares, 2013). Moreover, ‘non-traditional’ connotes the deficit thinking that favours the ‘othering’ mindset (Gulley, 2021) as it alludes to a duality of the student body, which in turn, results in disparity between student groups (Iloh, 2018; Gulley, 2016; 2021). Gulley (2016) believes that the classification of students as different form the ‘usual’ impedes inclusive policies and sends the message that these group of students do not belong in the academic arena and require extensive interventions to succeed. For Chapman (2013), mature students in fact bring a lot of knowledge and experience into the classroom which younger students do not possess. She adds that their prior knowledge and experience enable them to process new information by making links to past experiences. In support of Chapman’s view, Credé and Niehorster (2012) believe that mature learners are more resilient and possess personal qualities that allow them to adapt to challenging situations.

Given the shift from past norms of higher education students, it is now apparent that 'non-traditional' has become an obsolete term that should be discarded in favour of 'contemporary', 'new traditional' or 'neo-traditional' students (Carnevale *et al.,* 2015; CohenMiller, 2023; Gulley, 2021; Westervelt, 2016). My submission like Gulley's (2021) would be to do away with the outdated mode of student categorisation altogether and refer to learners simply, as 'students'. Nevertheless, to better understand the challenges some group of students face in higher education – which is part of the focus of this study – the term 'neo-traditional' will also be used in this thesis to refer to mature female students from BAME groups.

2.2.1 'Neo-traditional' not 'incapable' learners

Neo-traditional students often experience academic challenges as they need to balance their studies with work and family responsibilities. It is therefore crucial to support this profile of students instead of perceiving them as lacking the necessary academic skills to succeed in higher education. Such deficit thinking is rooted in the outdated belief that academic success is only possible through a linear educational trajectory and risks overlooking the unique arsenal of resources the students have gathered from life experiences and bring into their learning communities (Chapman, 2013; Leggins, 2021; Soares, 2013). These life experiences, gained through employment, raising their families or military service, inject valuable insights into classroom discussions and widen the scope of educational experience (Leggins, 2021; Soares, 2013). In addition, these students possess skills such as problem solving, management and interpersonal skills, which have been developed over time which, if properly exploited, could enhance their academic performance (Lumina Foundation, 2019). So also, in contrast to their traditional counterparts, neo-traditional students are usually motivated and maintain a strong sense of purpose, commitment and maturity, which can impact positively of their peers (Leggins, 2021; Soares, 2013). Furthermore, as neo-traditional students now make up a high percentage of the student body, higher education institutions can now be seen as inclusive and diverse learning environments which is an important consideration in the 21st century (CohenMiller, 2023; Gulley, 2021; Westervelt, 2016). Effective support could include more flexible programmes that will not only address the diverse needs of today's student body, it will ensure that they achieve to their fullest potential. This was part of the aims of this study which set out to improve the learning experience of mature students from BAME groups. My intersectional approach acknowledged the nuances that existed within and between this particular group of students and utilised their latent skills to bring

about academic success. How I did this has been discussed in greater detail in the methodology section in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

The above discussion on neo-traditional students is of relevance to students that enrol on the top-up degree programmes in the United Kingdom (UK) (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Lancaster, 2020; Molinari, 2014). In the southeast of England for instance, most students on such programmes tend to be adults over thirty-five, with all being from minority ethnic groups (Davies *et al.,* 2002; Leggins, 2021; Martin, 2015; Reay, 2002). In addition, most of the students are immigrants with low socio-economic status (SES) and have English as a second language (Martin, 2015). The majority of the students who enrol on the top-up degree programme are women from communities in which, historically, cultural and religious conventions have restricted their advancement (Davies *et al.*, 2002; John, 2016). The discriminatory processes within these communities are based on the belief that educating women could alter the power balance between men and women (Davies *et al., 2002).* Attempting to free themselves of these enforced cultural limitations, the women often seize the opportunity for personal and professional advancement by undertaking a programme in HE (Reay, 2002; 2003). The women should not be perceived as helpless victims that need rescuing; instead, their latent skills and life experiences should be utilised so that it translates to academic success. The adoption of an intersectional approach in this study is what made this success possible. This is expanded upon in the methodology section in chapter 4.

2.3 Defining academic difficulty in the context of widening participation

Foushée and Sleigh (2013), Hobson and Morrison-Saunders (2013) and Kember *et al*. (2010) view academic difficulty as the lack of understanding of course content, inability to maintain a high degree of motivation and not having the time to study. Reay *et al.* (2009) see academic difficulties as the inability to balance academic demands with work, personal responsibilities and social experiences. These definitions are supported by Salih *et al.* (2021) who describe academic difficulty as having inadequate learning skills together with difficulties managing study load due to socio-economic or psychological problems.

Many mature students may, hitherto, not have considered progressing to HE were it not for WP. The WP initiative sought to end the educational divide, which maintained that a degree qualification was the prerogative of the select few (Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2018). In a bid to embrace inclusive policies and practices, many universities now admit these historically marginalised students but without a deep enough appreciation of the socio-economic circumstances or cultural values of BAME students (Sanders-McDonagh and Davis, 2018). Studies show that mature learners from BAME groups experience academic difficulties in HE (Foushée and Sleigh, 2013; Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Kember *et al*., 2010; Hall, 2017; Hammonds, 2017; Murphy, 2017), but in the majority of cases, students enrol on their chosen programme ignorant of their lack of skills. The universities, for their part, do not provide the extensive level of support that this student profile often needs (Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Keohane and Petrie, 2017; Sanders-McDonagh and Davis, 2018). It has been argued that if students are admitted into a system in which they are likely to experience discrimination and academic disadvantage, it is important that the focus should be not on recruitment, but on effective academic support, differentiation of teaching and learning, and career progression (Shanahan, 2000; Tudor, 2012). These strategies can only be achieved if educational policies actively promote inclusion by ensuring that they are derived from broader considerations (Forman and McCormick, 1995; McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Shanahan, 2000; Tudor, 2012). Though the WP agenda can be considered a benevolent strategy, designed with inclusivity in HE at its core, it fails to consider the nuanced dimensions that deny these already marginalised groups fair and total access. This study however acknowledges the strides made to ensure inclusivity in HE, but these students continue to experience academic challenges.

Many neo-traditional students especially those from BAME groups continue to enrol on degree programmes having the assumption that they possess the knowledge and skills needed to undertake this level of study. However, this assumption is very quickly dispelled once their studies begin and they are unable to meet the requirements of higher education study. Many come to realise that they do not possess some fundamental academic capabilities. Because of this, often severe, shortfall in skills, the students experience numerous problems such as: (a) inability to comprehend concepts, (b) inability to fully engage with the programme, (c) lack of academic skills. These, in turn, lead to frustrations and internalised prejudice. It was for this reason that this study utilised an intersectional

approach to mitigate these challenges which were commonly experienced by students on the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care.

2.3.1 Inability to comprehend concepts

Mature students from BAME groups and disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle to understand the language of instruction (Allan, 2014; Tudor, 2012). This stems from the fact that most of the students have English as a second language (McWilliams and Allan, 2014) and do not possess the advanced language skills that are necessary to deal with abstract concepts (Forman and McCormick, 1995). As a result, it is difficult for them to engage successfully in verbal or written forms of academic discourse. In order to cope, some may attempt to translate English texts into their native tongue in order to gain a better understanding of the information being conveyed. In the process, the information can get lost in translation, leading to misinformation and misunderstanding (Bialek *et al.,* 2019; Vives *et al.,* 2019). This creates additional challenges for the academic who is aware of this limitation, requiring them to search for simpler alternative words, which may not always entirely convey the point being made.

Forman and McCormick (1995) draw attention to the flawed assumption of HE institutions that these students would automatically learn to use the language of academia upon entry and admit that it is a complex problem. They emphasise the importance of considering the complexity of the linguistic identities at play and argue that HE policies and practices need to reflect the needs of neo-traditional students especially those for whom English is a second language, as these impact their experiences and how they navigate their way through the structures of their learning environment. Along similar lines, McWilliams and Allan (2014) and Tudor (2012) argue that many neo-traditional learners from minority groups coupled with low SES, lack academic socialisation. They argue that the students' low SES gives them limited opportunities to build a good enough (academic) register that would enable them to successfully engage with academic literacy. Tudor (2012) further discusses the need to understand the 'literacy autobiography' (p. 9) of the students, as the language of academia can be difficult even for those who have English as their first language. Tudor argues that expecting non-native English speakers to learn a language that is culturally specific, only further exacerbates the alienation of those who were already marginalised. Tudor (2012) adds that this devalues the students' sense of self-worth in that their inability to fully engage only highlights their difference. She however stresses

that this difference should not be perceived as lacking the capability but rather, as requiring the support that meets their learning needs.

2.3.2 Inability to fully engage with the programme

Another challenge for neo-traditional students is the inability to fully commit to the programme. Trying to juggle the demands of their numerous obligations always proves difficult, and some end up giving up on their studies altogether (Swain and Hammond, 2011). As neo-traditional students are now a part of the norm, effective support that consider the realities of the students is mandatory. This is of particular importance in programmes like the top-up degree in Health and Social Care (H&SC) which attract mostly female students. In her study of mature female students on healthcare programmes at university, Shanahan (2000) concluded that even though these mature students had the advantage of work and life experience, many failed to complete or struggled to fulfil their goals because their respective cultures did not provide opportunities for personal and educational development. Shanahan adds that in some cases, women are married by the age of eighteen and spend the next twenty or more years performing the role of wives, mothers, homemakers, and in some cases, breadwinners. Consequently, even though the acquisition of a higher-level degree would potentially increase their life prospects, many are not able to develop themselves academically or acquire the necessary skills for degree-level study. That is why studies (Chapman, 2013; Leggins, 2021; Soares, 2013; Lumina Foundation, 2019) stress the need for higher education institutions to provide adequate support for neo-traditional students so that they achieve to their fullest potential.

Similarly, Reay (2002; 2003) observes that mature female learners from BAME groups – for instance, those from South Asia – aspire to develop themselves but often find it difficult to go against the dictates of their respective culture, as doing so could result in alienation from their families. Reay's (2003) argument is that, in most cases, the choice to pursue a higher-level qualification would have to be carried out without neglecting their domestic commitments, despite little or no help from their families. Some, therefore, end up questioning the wisdom of the decision to return to study as they risk estrangement from their families. Reay's observation is representative of the mature female students of South Asian origin, who have really strong cultural ties and rarely associate with people outside of their immediate family and social network (Reay, 2002, 2003). For those women not born or raised in the UK, language can pose a barrier to fully engaging with their programme, developing their interpersonal skills or taking advantage of any form of

support. This view further supports the findings of Forman and McCormick (1995), McWilliams and Allan (2014) and Tudor (2012), who highlight the difficulties non-native students experience with academic literacy.

Reay and Shanahan, like other scholars (Forman and McCormick, 1995; McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Tudor, 2012) propose a review of HE policies that considers the personal circumstances of the students, so that they are able to engage effectively with their chosen programmes. Their thinking, like that of Forman and McCormick, stresses the importance of broader educational discourses that consider an individual from multiple perspectives so that teaching and learning (T&L) is more effective. This was a consideration with the intersectional approach of this study.

2.3.3 Lack of academic skills

The lack of academic skills is, perhaps, the greatest challenge for many neo-traditional leaners. Several studies (Hall, 2017; Shanahan, 2000; Webb *et al*., 2017) show that having been out of education for a long time, most mature students find it difficult to cope with the demands of degree-level study, which involves the use of information technology (IT), extensive reading, note taking and academic writing. Shanahan (2000) demonstrates that most mature students arrive ill-equipped for study as they have the added responsibility of work and family life, which prevents them from developing the necessary skills. This is compounded by a lack of experience, as most are never exposed to situations that require the use of academic skills. Webb *et al.* (2017) observe that for mature learners from minority groups, socio-economic and cultural factors impact greatly on their ability to acquire academic skills. They refer to the concept of habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), that is, the sum of skills, habits and dispositions people possess due to life experiences. They argue that the low SES of many of the learners from BAME groups prevents them from acquiring the skills and dispositions that will enable them to succeed in university:

> *Habitus drives feelings of incongruence for those students from lower social classes who do attend higher education, who sit in contrast to their middle-class peers who are akin to 'a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted. (p. 127).*

It is for this reason that Adebisi (2019) and Basu (2019) stress the importance of giving these students access to mentors they can identify with. Mentors can be individuals who have successfully negotiated similar challenges and can provide the motivation for

personal development and socio-economic advancement. Adebisi (2019) and Basu (2019) imply that the racial background of the mentor might be important. Sharing experiences of race and racism gives the impression of being 'one of us' and so it is likely that 'the notable individual of colour' is worth emulating. Owoseni (2020) upholds this view and stresses the importance of role models saying,

> *Black students need to see people who look like future versions of themselves. (p. 2204)*

Notable Black educationalist like Dame Jocelyn Barrow fought tirelessly in the sixties to address the inequality in the funding of Black schools and white schools in. Barrow also went on to pioneer multicultural education; one that recognised the needs of different ethnic groups in the UK (Heath and Sherwood, 2023). To later become the first Black woman to be a governor of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and be awarded an OBE (Osborne and Vernon, 2020), would have shown women from minority groups that anything was possible, if you set your mind to achieving it. On a personal level, having parents who were academics, especially a father who became a professor, certainly gave me the aspiration to excel academically. Consequently, as a Black female researcher researching the experiences of students from minority groups in HE, there was a natural inclination to try to mitigate the academic challenges of this group of students. As suggested by Adebisi (2019), Basu (2019) and Owoseni (2020), I believed that my racial profile conferred upon me some credibility as 'one of them' and that the students would be more accepting of me, and view my attempts to improve their learning as emanating from a place of genuine concern and desire to help. I also believed that being a Black woman, I probably had a better understanding of the reasons for their academic challenges and was able to provide the appropriate solutions to alleviate these problems. In line with Owoseni's (2020) statement, the female students would see me as an individual who, despite the odds, had been able to overcome negative and repressive experiences and assume a position of authority in a White establishment.

Financial and cultural forces are also seen to contribute to the paucity of academic skills in some neo-traditional students. Many from minority groups struggle financially, which often requires them to take up one or more jobs in addition to their studies. In effect, there is no time or money available to engage in any form of training or activity that might develop them academically. Furthermore, in some cultural instances (for women especially), trying to develop academic skills is often considered to be a waste of time

(Webb *et al*., 2017). Consequently, family situations and social conventions can mean that individuals adopt beliefs and dispositions that prevent them from engaging in academic activities (Reay, 2003; Shanahan, 2000; Swain and Hammond, 2011). Most, therefore, opt for vocational skills that are manual or practical in nature and guarantee easy access to jobs within the trade sector. For some neo-traditional students from minority groups, cultural beliefs could mean they grow up with 'not-for-the-likes-of-me' or 'can't-do-it' attitudes which, invariably, obstruct academic development (Fyfe, 2020; Shanahan, 2000). For instance, in some cultures, women are encouraged to develop their domestic skills, as the belief is that women should be trained to be good wives, mothers and homemakers. Should opportunities to develop themselves beyond these arise, many fail to take these up for fear of going against the dictates of their respective cultures (Reay, 2002; 2003; Shanahan, 2000). For those aspiring to learn, having to do so without the support of their social networks requires courage, determination and extensive support from training providers, yet the unfortunate reality is that institutions do not have a deep enough appreciation of the students' cultural and social circumstances (Forman and McCormick, 1995; Reay, 2002; 2003; Shanahan, 2000).

In the London-based top up degree programme in H&SC, the lack of academic skills becomes apparent soon after the commencement of the programme, when many of the students show their unable to take notes, produce coherent texts or make use of online resources. Even when academic support is provided, many of the students do not adequately make use of this, either because they do not know how to access the support, or do not know the extent to which they need support. My use of skills audits and learning logs (discussed in the methodology chapter) was an attempt to encourage the students to engage in a critical self-appraisal so that they could be aware of any shortcomings in their skill sets and gain a better understanding of the reasons for their academic difficulties. Insights into the strategy and reactions from the students are discussed in detail in section 4.8 of Chapter 4.

2.3.4 Students' reaction to lack of skills: frustration and internalised prejudice

One of the greatest challenges for neo-traditional students from BAME groups is coming to terms with the lack of academic skills and addressing them effectively and in a timely manner. For example, in the year-long programme of the top up degree programme, students have 200 hours of contact time with tutors and are expected to engage in an

additional 1000 hours of independent study. They are, then, expected to produce coherent essays and engage in reflective exercises based on personal and professional development. On the Evidence-Based Practice module, for instance, students need to demonstrate critical knowledge and understanding of the principles of evidence-based practice, as well as the skills needed to locate and evaluate relevant information from a variety of sources. None of the students were able to do these for some, or all, of the reasons discussed above. In addition, the short length of the programme meant that it was almost impossible for the students to develop the required skills on time. This resulted in anger and frustration, which Forman and Mccormick (1995), Reay (2003) and Shanahan (2000) say comes from a feeling of being out of depth in their learning environment. Researchers agree that expecting students with this profile to adapt to a system that can be considered hegemonic at best, not only puts them at a disadvantage, but also, demonstrates a lack of understanding of their experiences (Webb *et al*., 2017; Swain and Hammond, 2011; Fyfe, 2020; Shanahan, 2000).

In addition to experiencing inner turmoil, it has been suggested that students engage in what Webb and Sepúlveda (2020) describe as a 'mental negotiation'. They try to justify their presence in a hostile environment and, at the same time, re-signify themselves as not just mothers, wives and homemakers but as role models for their children (Kohli, 2014, Merrill, 2014)**.** Hall (2017) argues that these feelings are magnified when the students are thrust into a space where they continually negotiate and re-negotiate conflict and tension, while trying to conform to the structures and policies of the dominant narrative. This, in turn, means that the students often begin to feel undeserving of membership of this vastly hegemonic system.

Attributing their limitations to personal circumstances results in internalised behaviours, whereby the students mentally exclude themselves from an environment that constantly devalues their individuality, beliefs and culture (Fyfe, 2020). The students view themselves as subordinate to the dominant culture and cannot help but absorb the prejudiced messages that constantly bombard them. They end up adopting the White mindset that results in various forms of inferiority complex, powerlessness and hatred of their own racial identity (Fyfe, 2020; Hall, 2017; Reay *et al*., 2009). Reay *et al.* (2009) sum these experiences up as a situation in which the students' habitus is thrust into an unfamiliar field that generates great levels of anxiety and discomfort, adding that even though most of the students desire to have a degree, they find it difficult to adopt the expected behaviours and culture of their learning environment. They conclude that as

most of the students lack the resources in the form of the various ‘capitals’ (Bourdieu, 1986) to address the status quo, the only choice open to them is to either accept the situation or disengage. This, therefore, poses a challenge for tutors to get the students to draw upon latent assets that have been gathered from their life experiences, to succeed with their studies. Those assets have enabled many of these learners to adequately manage their time and energy as well as financial and material resources for the benefit of their respective families.

The students adopted the belief that they were academically inferior because they found it hard to adapt and attain a sense of belonging within their learning environment (Fyfe, 2020). Cole (2020) and Cooper (2016) argue that the portrayal of HE as the domain of the dominant elite does little to dispel the negative perceptions of the minority students. Though many HE institutions now admit students from a wider social network, the hierarchical system is still very much prevalent, endorsed by policies and procedures that inadvertently perpetuate discrimination and exclusive practices (Shanahan, 2000; Tudor, 2012). The experiences of the students demonstrate how educational practices continue to promote social injustice in the way they marginalise students who, historically, have been excluded from participation in HE. Several scholars (Forman and McCormick, 1995; McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Shanahan, 2000; Tudor, 2012) have, therefore, stressed the importance of educational discourses and practices that aim to bring about a balance of this injustice. This approach, they maintain, would rid HE of the hierarchical system that places some racial and socially disadvantaged groups lower than others.

The above considerations highlight the structural inequalities that exist in HE, especially for older learners from minority groups, and it becomes apparent that a more nuanced approach needs to be developed (Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Kember *et al.*, 2010). Burke (2017) argues that older adult female students are less likely to succeed in university because success is usually viewed based on hegemonic, masculine standards, which must be adhered to in order to be considered legitimate. As such, she goes on to say, women have to position themselves according to these dominant, often White, masculine characteristics that symbolise autonomy, authority and rationality. Those not able to do this may end up developing internalised prejudices that further impede their progress (Donnelly and Evans, 2016; Fyfe, 2020).

Of course, there are various measures in place to support these students that are aimed at reducing non-progression and attrition, but, as with the reasons that necessitate them

in the first place, their success depends on more than one factor. The following section critically examines ways in which the learning difficulties of neo-traditional students, especially those from minority groups, can be mitigated. There is a wide range of strategies/approaches available and the ones outlined have been chosen for their direct relevance to this research. Further, they acknowledge the subtle play between, and within, individuals. The strategies and approaches discussed below accommodate these nuances and, in that sense, they are not just important as inclusive practices for disadvantaged learner groups, they are useful for all students, irrespective of their background. The strategies and approaches include; skills intervention, tutor−student relationship, student empowerment and reflective practice.

2.4 Strategies and approaches to mitigate academic difficulties of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students in higher education

2.4.1 Skills intervention

Skills intervention is a targeted action that aims to address gaps in knowledge or individual weaknesses (Desai *et al.,* 2021). In education, interventions can involve focused instructional sessions in addition to set teaching sessions and can be one-to-one or in groups. The focus of such interventions could be to develop skills in literacy, numeracy, IT, social or even cognitive skills (Deming, 2017; Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2010).

A skills development strategy has been used successfully on the Post-baccalaureate Research Education Program (PREP) in the United States. This strategy aims to improve the learning experiences of mature learners from under-represented groups who wish to progress beyond a first degree (Gazely *et al.,* 2014). In their study to investigate the readiness of students for post-graduate study, Gazely *et al.* (2014) found that preparation for study went beyond acquiring the correct credentials. It also involved identity work, whereby the students needed to adapt their identity in order to be accepted as a *bona fide* member of the establishment they wished to enter. It was, therefore, necessary for the students to be provided with research experience and skills in order to increase their chances of successfully transitioning into, and completing, the rigorous, research-focused post-graduate degree programmes. The rationale behind this initiative was to translate into cultural capital the resources and abilities that the students already possessed before joining the programme. This is because, all too often in educational research, the

discourses of the dominant culture take precedence over those of minority groups and are then used as the benchmark for membership into the HE domain (Shanahan, 2000).

The problem with the PREP programme is that the success rate depends mainly on a student's ability to see the programme through. In effect, students with personal challenges that would impact on their studies would need a lot more support and if not provided, the student would likely not complete the programme. So even though, in theory, the PREP programme should benefit minority students, without flexibility and customisation, students from disadvantaged groups will lose out on such an opportunity.

Another form of intervention is embedded T&L. This a process that allows for the development of skills such as language, literacy, numeracy and other skills alongside the usual learning content (McWilliams and Allan, 2014). The skills gained provide learners with the motivation, confidence and competence necessary for them to progress, gain qualifications and to succeed in life personally and professionally. McWilliams and Allan (2014) emphasise the need to embed literacy skills into HE programmes through a series of workshops. Studies by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2009) and the European Commission (EC) (2013) show that IT skills are useful for raising literacy levels and so recommend the inclusion of IT skills within adult literacy programmes. Both the EC and NALA add that lack of IT skills poses a barrier to learning and also has an impact on older student engagement and retention. In effect, the provision of targeted support brings about student agency as students learn to take responsibility for their learning (McWilliams and Allan (2014). Targeted support could also be carried out using initial diagnostic assessment, which is an evaluation carried out very early on in a programme to determine a student's level of knowledge and their strengths and weaknesses (Shanahan, 2000).

Although embedding skills into learning is a useful strategy, the approach risks omitting other skills (such as social and financial) that are equally important for life. For instance, lack of social skills could result in difficult interpersonal relationships (Hattie, Biggs and Purdie, 1996; Deming, 2017). Also, a lack of financial skills could lead to the accumulation of unsustainable debts through poor spending or poor financial planning (Sternberg, 2016). In effect, the focus on academic or employability skills has its advantages but many more skills would need to be included within HE programmes that would benefit students from disadvantaged groups and help to build their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1986; McCall, 1992; Tudor, 2012).

Active learning pedagogy (ALP) (Freeman *et al.,* 2014) is yet another form of intervention in which students constantly undertake activities within, and outside, the classroom that assess their academic skills in a supportive and non-threatening way. In ALP, instead of just lecturing, the instructor's role is to facilitate learning, as greater responsibility is placed on the learner. According to Carr *et al.* (2015) and Freeman *et al.* (2014), active learning provides the opportunity for students to: a) obtain first-hand experience that the student can reflect upon using prior knowledge; b) be active participants in the learning process; c) develop varied learning skills, which include higher-order thinking and the ability to integrate information and d) develop meaningful relationships within their learning environment by building positive rapport with their peers and teacher. With this approach, students are happy and more enthusiastic about learning. Furthermore, with ALP, students can, then, be given the support that meets their individual learning needs so that very early in the programme, students can begin to work on the skills that are lacking.

As part of ALP, early formative assessment can be used so that problems are identified and dealt with from the start. Shanahan (2000) and Freeman *et al.* (2014) believe that this approach helps to eliminate the unfriendly classroom climate and instead, promotes an environment that fosters increased self-esteem and confidence and a sense of belonging. In addition, students have a more positive learning experience in that they are not just recruited onto a course with established structures but are properly supported to get through and get on in their chosen pathway (Fyfe, 2020). This support, Fyfe suggests, would need to have an intersectional approach that considers the multifaceted nature of individual realities. This would include non-academic attributes with a student-centred focus; one that recognises that all the students will begin their studies with different levels of cultural capital. This would be of particular use to mature female learners from minority groups who, given their multifarious identities, struggle to develop a sense of belonging in HE. The students can be aided to develop an awareness of their inherent capital, by using the accumulated life experiences they already possess as a learning resource. As wives, mothers, workers etc., they are already skilled managers and so can draw on this reserve, which can enable them to succeed in their learning (Shanahan, 2000; Shilliam, 2015).

The problem with ALP is that the responsibility lies with the learner to actively engage in activities set, which requires good time management and self-regulation skills. For students from minority ethnic groups, money is usually a problem for most, and so work commitments are prioritised over learning activities that are required outside of the

classroom (Bowl, 2001; Burton *et al.,* 2011; Swain and Hammond, 2011). In addition, activities that require teamwork may be an issue due to social and cultural barriers (Reay, 2002; 2003; Swain and Hammond, 2011). Finally, for many mature students, especially those from minority ethnic groups, learning involving the use of technology presents a challenge due to a lack of basic IT skills (Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017; Harris, 2008).

Nevertheless, whatever form these interventions take, with proper planning, they could provide an opportunity to expose students to the requirements of academic study and build their confidence by using their latent skills. Furthermore, embedded programmes, in which all students participate, helps to reduce the phenomenon of 'otherness' (Egharevaba, 2001) so that students from non-White backgrounds are not discriminated against. Effectively, this psychosocial approach (Cohen *et al.,* 2006; Walton and Cohen, 2011) helps to improve student engagement and performance as the learning environment poses less of a threat. Equally, it is an approach that helps rid students of internal prejudices and enables them to develop greater self-awareness and an appreciation of their own identities (Cole, 2020; Cooper, 2016).

Development strategies should be a norm within HE so that rather than negating as inconsequential the lived experiences of mature students from minority ethnic groups, these students can be helped to develop dispositions and skills that would ensure a smoother transition into university. As observed by Jivraj (2020), Shanahan (2000) and Shilliam (2015), mature students possess latent skills gathered from life experiences, which could be utilised and further developed to aid academic success. These they believe, will provide the students with the tools to successfully navigate their learning environment and ultimately, have control of their own learning. They add that this process also fosters critical thought and reflection, which are important attributes for self-evaluation. Consequently, students, irrespective of race colour or creed, would develop a deeper appreciation of their individual identities and become their own advocates (Foushée and Sleigh, 2013).

2.4.2 Tutor−student relationship

The tutor−student relationship denotes the various interactions that occur between tutors and students (Biggs and Tang, 2007; 2011; Guskey and Passaro, 1994). Many scholars (Guskey and Passaro, 1994; Harris and Sass, 2007; Ivey, 2011; Tormey, 2021) maintain that tutors play a salient part in the learning process and, as such, it is vital that educational establishments engage in teacher development and support. This could

involve training in not just racial, sexual or gender diversity but also in cultural differences and other categories that could lead to discrimination, whether intentional or unintentional. Kohl (1992) argues that if instructors are unable to connect with the learners and/or have no appreciation of their individuality, learners would, consciously or unconsciously, will themselves not to learn and oppose the system that is trying to educate them. That is, learners would determine within themselves not to respond to external influences that they deem incongruent to their personal beliefs and values. Kohl adds that this would be a natural human reaction to acts perceived as threatening or damaging to self. Harris and Sass (2007), Ivey (2011) and Tormey (2021) further argue that having an appreciation of the individuality of students will enable tutors to identify and respond appropriately to their diverse learning needs. Hobson and Morrison-Saunders (2013) suggest that teachers should not be concerned about taking control of the T&L process, but instead, to allow the subject to lead the T&L. This, they say, happens when time is given for students to grasp and assimilate concepts so that they come up with individual constructs of what is being taught.

Unfortunately, the pedagogical approach that is often favoured by higher institutions is 'constructive alignment' (Biggs and Tang, 2007), in which teaching focuses on *imparting* the subject knowledge so that intended learning outcomes are achieved within a set time frame. The perception is that the instructor holds all the power and so dictates how and when learning takes place. In addition, learners are homogenised so that the unique, yet multifaceted nature of individual students is ignored alongside the different characteristic of each learner (Ivey, 2011). The classroom, therefore, becomes hierarchical, and only those that 'grasp' the subject of instruction thrive. In effect, the instructor is seen as an agent of power and authority, rather than a facilitator of learning (Kember *et al.,* 2010). Learners who cannot cope are, consequently, made to feel inadequate and not worthy of membership in the domains of academia. As a result, these learners may drop out if they do not receive the much-needed academic support they deserve (Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Kember *et al.,* 2010).

Maintaining an environment that is conducive to learning can also be even more difficult when the instructor has some commonality with the learners. In cases where the shared quality is race, for example, it is particularly difficult as the expectation of the students would be for the instructor to act in solidarity to the common racial identity (Egharevba, 2001; Philip *et al.,* 2017). Should both the tutor and the student body come from minority groups, this would be an even more challenging situation as the tutor would have to

become a kind of ‘defender’ of the students (Ashley, 2009). They might even have to endure ‘friendly fire’ (Philip *et al.,* 2017, p. 65) while trying to manage the defensive and self-preserving actions and reactions to perceived threats within the learning environment (Egharevba, 2001; Hollway and Jefferson, 2009; Trieu and Lee, 2018). The position of a tutor of colour invariably confers a level of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu,1984) and places the tutor within the domain of the dominant and privileged class, and hence, they have a level of superiority. Ivey (2011), therefore, stresses the importance of understanding the classroom as a place where learning is a two-way process and one in which mutual respect exists between the learner and the instructor. Ivey adds that higher institutions could create a sense of belonging for the students by ensuring that students are able to connect with not only their peers, but also their learning environment. In support of this view, Kohl (1992) suggests that teachers must try to connect with their learners because teachers play a vital role in student performance. This is because if a student believes that he or she has nothing in common with the teacher, what results is ‘willed not learning’ (p. 27).

2.4.3 Student empowerment

Student empowerment means giving students control of their learning, so that they are able to choose and prioritise what and how they learn, leading to competency and meaningfulness in the learning process (Lawson, 2011; Jagersma and Parsons, 2011). Empowerment was not part of the research design but was necessary to give the students agency. Empowerment can only happen when there is ‘dialectical interaction’ (Moss, Grealish and Lake, 2010) − a process involving the intellectual exchange of ideas between people holding differing viewpoints about a subject. When students are given a voice, it means that they are systematically legitimised and included in the decision-making process, such as curriculum design (Mitra and Gross, 2009). With this approach, when there is contribution from the students as to what they learn, there will be more engagement in the classroom. Research (Davies *et al.*, 2002; McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Reay, 2002; 2009; Fyfe, 2020; Shanahan, 2000) shows that mature students from minority groups often struggle in HE because they are forced to learn within educational structures that disregard their subjective social and cultural identities. This results in academic difficulties as the students are unable to cope in what they perceive as a hostile learning environment.

2.4.4 Raising awareness through reflection

Raising awareness involves making people conscious of an issue or cause, with the goal of ensuring that they understand its importance and take steps to address it (Freire and Ramos, 2018; Klein, 2012). It can be seen that when students engage in reflective exercise they become aware of their own intrinsic abilities and limitations. That awareness generates knowledge, understanding and ultimately, empowerment (Burke, 2012; Freire and Ramos, 2018; Mathieson, 2011; Petersen, 2006). With the research tools in this study, students were encouraged to engage in critical self-appraisal. The focus was not to effect immediate change but to develop recognition of a problem that would trigger a gradual change of thinking, eventually bringing about a transformation of attitude and mindset. In effect, reflection gradually transforms students into critical agents who are able to develop themselves as academics, and go on to become drivers of their own destinies (Petersen, 2006; Mathieson, 2011). However, empowerment can only come about when students achieve a level of consciousness that makes them capable of taking control of their learning (Freire and Ramos, 2018; Gazley *et al.*, 2014; Mathieson, 2011).

This study used skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs that enabled the students to communicate with their tutors on matters concerning their learning, especially their academic challenges. This approach fostered student agency as it equipped the students with the tools to properly create, structure and outline the exact content of what was to be learnt (Jagersma and Parsons, 2011). Gazley *et al.* (2014) argue that student agency improves the learning experience as students take responsibility for, and direct, their own learning. They add that it also fosters critical thought in that agency requires students to engage in academic debates, which entail the need to think critically about what they want to learn, why they have to learn and how their learning will be carried out. This active participation by the students compels them to engage in the learning process as they will perceive this as a worthwhile endeavour. Though the 'student voice' is now a common concept in most higher institutions, it still needs to be infused into educational research which, unfortunately, serves to maintain the same 'deficit' narrative when it comes to learners from minority ethnic groups and fails to acknowledge their asset-based potential (Jivraj, 2020; Shanahan, 2000; Shilliam, 2015).

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined reasons why neo-traditional learners experience academic difficulties in HE and the various initiatives introduced to mitigate these

academic challenges. Literature on neo-traditional learners from BAME groups exposes the need to ensure that educational policies and processes are not founded on structures that are discriminatory but inclusive. The present study aims to enhance the voices of students from BAME groups by ensuring that they are not continuously perceived as victims within a hegemonic system. By utilising their latent skills and experiences gathered over time, my goal was to aid the students to see themselves as capable individuals possessing resilience, strength and fortitude, evident in the various dimensions in which they operate (Petersen, 2006). The focus was, therefore, not just on the development of academic skills and agency but also to empower the students in such a way that enabled them to engage in reflection so that it becomes a lifelong practice that enables them to find solutions to problems themselves.

This approach ensures that every individual is able to achieve to their fullest potential, irrespective of race, gender, culture or socio-economic circumstances. Like the students on the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care, university students in the United Kingdom, and globally, have become diverse in nature (Casey, 2016; Imhof and Spaeth-Hilbert, 2013). This variation compelled the need to utilise student-centred methods that cater for different learning styles. The inclusion of skills development in HE programmes ensures that all students participate, and particular student groups are not singled out or made to feel deficient. The use of the skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs means that every student is actively involved in the T&L process. Furthermore, it is important that the learning environment is not portrayed as a stratified space, grounded on academic abilities, or a place where the instructor wields the power. Instead, the classroom should be seen as a place of safety where there is mutual trust and respect between the learner and the instructor so that learning and teaching is facilitated (Ivey, 2011). This is particularly important for older adult learners in HE who often require reassurance in the classroom, as many lack confidence, due to negative past experiences (Pratt, 1998). One of the major considerations of the study was to ensure that the students felt secure within their learning environment.

The arguments presented in this chapter highlight the challenges experienced by neo-traditional students from minority ethnic groups and may force some institutions to review their policies and practices, so that there is greater inclusivity. If HE institutions admit students who are not academically proficient, it is imperative that they provide the necessary support that would ensure that students with this profile succeed in their course of study (Davis *et al.,* 2013; Fyfe, 2020; Hall, 2017). The students on the H&SC top-up

programme experienced academic difficulties but, as wives, mothers, daughters and in some cases, professionals, they possessed the innate capabilities to succeed in their studies. However, the unique characteristics of each of the students needed to be captured to ensure that the totality of the individual was considered and appropriate responses effected. In this study, the individual approach in AR was adopted, which focused on the problems with a view to developing solutions to mitigate them (Calhoun, 1993). As the main issue was the students' lack of academic skills and their attitude to this lack of skills, the explorative nature of the individual approach enabled an investigation into the effect of the various interventions implemented. A more detailed explanation of the use of this form of AR is detailed in Chapter 4. The following chapter discusses intersectionality, which forms the theoretical basis of this research. It also provides an analytical tool with which to understand the data collected, in that the concept of intersectionality can act as a lens through which an understanding of the reasons behind the academic difficulties of the students, and also the inequalities that exist in HE, can be gleaned.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

'Either/or discourses marginalise women of colour because their intersectional identities are both/and' (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 1244).

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework of my research, which emerged out of three main concerns: the multiple inequalities or disadvantages regularly experienced by my students, their 'reluctance' to seek help with their educational skills, or their apparent lack of knowing how to do so, and the often stark difference between my own experience as a Black female academic and the students' perception of me as tutor, academic and Black woman. Originally influenced by Bourdieu's work, especially the concept of cultural capital, my theoretical explorations led me into the field of intersectionality. I must however make it clear that Bourdieu's theory has not been used in this thesis. Instead, it offered me the necessary perspective for understanding the intersecting inequalities of my students in terms of class, gender, race, age and educational background. It also afforded me an enhanced insight into my own role in the class and in this research and provided a way of creating empowering circumstances for my students.

It was important to begin this chapter by examining the history of oppression as it relates to women of colour, with particular reference to Sojourner Truth (McDuffie, 2011) and Claudia Jones (Baku, 2012) – two notable activists of women's rights – before going on to introduce the notion of intersectionality and its usefulness in educational research. Despite the good range of helpful material to draw on, for this study, I needed to build my own set of tools; discerning and selecting the particular aspects of intersectionality that were relevant to my topic, rather than simply 'borrowing' tools from an existing toolbox. By so doing, I focused on the advantages, specificities and challenges such an endeavour entails. My engagement with intersectionality greatly influenced my perspective and attitude on three levels: a) towards students; b) towards higher education (HE) institutions; and c) towards myself.

I have included Bourdieu's work in this chapter, as it was simply a springboard to intersectionality. It is not meant to explain the academic difficulties experienced by my students, as that would risk diminishing the intersectional nature of social inequalities and render the plight of subordinate groups inconsequential. His concept of cultural capital and associated theories of *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu, 1986) aid the understanding of

how higher educational institutions cultivate and adhere to social standards that favour the dominant class. Having knowledge of these social standards provides a useful resource to understand how certain groups of students successfully manoeuvre through the hierarchical higher educational system.

Finally, since my research stems from my desire to empower students to address the effects of multiple inequalities in an educational setting, I end this chapter by delineating the more generalisable insights and effects this theory can bring to any educational setting. Mindful that no theory is perfect, I discuss the challenges of an intersectional approach.

3.2 History of women's oppression: Black women and the struggle for equality

Feminism is a school of thought that believes in the equality of the sexes (Brunell and Burkett, 2016; Butler, 2013; hooks, 2000). Although largely a western concept that emerged in 1794, feminism has manifested into a worldwide doctrine that promotes women's rights and interest. Even though feminism started as a movement in America to put an end to sexism, female exploitation and oppression, it was (White) western women that appeared to benefit from its doctrine (hooks, 2000; McDuffie, 2011; Smith, 1998). Feminism provided western women with greater educational opportunities, voting rights, and safeguards against workplace discrimination. It also succeeded in challenging prevailing cultural practices that confined women to the domestic sphere and denied them the right to participate in public life, an education or to own property. Although Black women played a significant role in the fight for equality and served on the front-line, their contributions in Women's Movements and Civil Rights are often overlooked (hooks, 2000; McDuffie, 2011). As such, to understand how the intersections of race and gender result in oppression, the distinctive standpoint of Black women and their unique experiences cannot be overstated. The power, resilience, and courage of notable Black women activists like Sojourner Truth and Claudia Jones are worthy of mention because their actions brought about change that would impact future generations of Black women.

3.2.1 Intersectional feminism

Sojourner Truth's powerful speech, "A'int I a woman?" at a Women's Rights Convention in 1951, went down in history as one of the most renowned abolitionist and women's rights speeches in American history. In this speech, Truth not only stressed the fact that she

had as much right as a man but also highlighted the differences in the treatment of white women compared to Black women. She expressed the fact that she gave birth to children the same way White women did, yet Black women were not given the same respect as White women because being black did not matter. Truth added that Black women were women too and should not be considered inferior simply because of their race. Like Truth, Claudia Vera Jones, also a Black communist and political activist worked tirelessly to ensure Black women in America who were often at the receiving end of unjust and oppressive social policies, were given their due respect as mothers, workers, and women (McDuffie, 2011). Jones viewed these women as 'voiceless' and likened them to lambs to the slaughter (Baku, 2012). She added that societies will only be peaceful if women, especially those who experience oppression, are taken into consideration (McDuffie, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the efforts of Truth and Jones laid the foundation for the advocation of a more just society that sees women, irrespective of status, colour or creed, as deserving of respect. Both Truth and Jones' exposure of the discrimination and oppression that result from multiple and overlapping identities – later termed 'intersectionality' – broadens the scope of feminism, which in the main, focused on the experiences of women who were white, middle class and cisgender, to incorporate the distinct experiences and identities of women of colour, immigrant women, poor women and other nuanced groups (hooks, 2015). Truth's speech inspired subsequent feminine movements which advocate for intersectional feminism (Gökarıksel and Smith, 2017, Gold, 2020); a theory that highlights how oppressive and discriminatory systems impact people differently depending on their race, sexuality, class, ability, and other characteristics. This is different from mainstream feminism which focuses primarily on gender. Intersectional feminism sees oppression as an interlocking system (Gökarıksel and Smith, 2017; Gold, 2020).

In later years, in her book, "Ain't I a Woman? (titled after Truth's famous speech), Gloria Jean Watkins, known by her pen name, bell hooks (1982), examined the effect of racism and sexism on women of colour, and concluded that these group of women assumed the lowest status in American society. White female abolitionists were more accepting of their Black male counterparts but were not as accommodating when Black women attempted to raise their voice. In hooks' opinion, the White female reformers did not articulate the rights of women of colour because they did not see them as equal to them. hooks also argued that the Black nationalists of the time sought to break down racial barriers but maintained misogynistic and patriarchal ideologies that strengthened sexism and

promoted the emasculation of the Black woman. hooks' view endorses those of Truth and Jones, who believed that women irrespective of their race or creed should be given equal rights.

3.3 Intersectionality: a theory of multiple inequalities

'Intersectionality' has been attributed to legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), who tried to bring to light the discrimination, oppression and marginalisation experienced by Black women in America, in conjunction with all aspects of a woman's identity such as class, gender and level of privilege (Archer *et al.*, 2007). Intersectionality is a concept framework that sees disadvantage as emanating from compound interacting and overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's proposed model was a response to approaches that regularly ignore nuanced identities in favour of a dominant 'whole' (Harris and Leonardo, 2018). Crenshaw framed intersectionality as an effective analytical tool having three dimensions: structural – how 'race' and gender intersect to make the experiences of women of colour different from White women; political – how the politicisation of anti-sexist and anti-racist narratives actually aid marginalisation of women of colour, and lastly, representational – how the perception of women of colour is influenced by popular culture. For instance, studies show how science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) teachers and students who are women of colour often face the gendered and racial stereotypical views of the White, male scientist (Ong, 2005; Snyder, 2014). Hill Collins argues:

> *Intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that, in turn, shape complex social inequalities (2015, p. 2).*

Intersectionality works by demonstrating the multiple levels on which social identities work, resulting in unique experiences of reduced opportunities, oppression and barriers for individuals (Carbado *et al.*, 2013). For Crenshaw (2015) and Hill Collins (2015), these aspects are not mutually exclusive singular entities, but ones that intersect to construct complex phenomena. So, when it comes to the lived experiences of women of colour, for example, disadvantages that may arise from acts of racism or sexism may be different when racism and sexism overlap. The International Women's Development Agency (2018) defines intersectionality as a branch of feminism that explores how various aspects of social and political discrimination overlap. Following on from this definition, various

forms of discrimination are not exclusive but interconnect, and a particular form of discrimination is often the result, or offshoot, of another. It is the understanding of the unique but intersected experiences that have significant policy implications but which are often ignored.

Intersectionality also highlights the challenges of living between categories, when, for example, people of mixed racial heritage find themselves unable to fully identify with one. In the case of education, Forber-Pratt *et al.* (2021) note:

> *Students who are mixed race may struggle to develop a strong sense of identity because of being 'not enough' of one race or 'too much' of another and getting caught in between (p. 300).*

Along similar lines, Strayhorn (2017) argues that narrow categorisation such as 'Black' or 'White' excludes 'Bi-racial' or 'Multi-racial' people, adding that it is difficult to define exactly what it means to 'identify', as one's identity could also be determined by context. In that sense, intersectionality exposes the flaws of the established and commonly used categories, which, according to May (2015), may not be adequate in explaining individual experiences and issues. In HE, intersectionality highlights the complex ways in which the different aspects of individual identities overlap, resulting in experiences of discrimination and barriers to educational opportunities. (Crenshaw, 2015; Hill Collins, 2008, 2015). Mooney *et al.* (2017) observe:

> *One way to capture intersecting points of socially ascribed categories of difference is to take an intersectional approach that renders visible the demographic characteristics of inequalities in a given context (p. 360).*

Yuval-Davis (2007) points out that in particular contexts, some intersections of an individual's identity are more important than others, bearing in mind that intersections do not remain static but are dynamic and fluid. We can immediately see how this pertains to mature, Black, female students, who 'bring into class' their marital status, cultural and religious beliefs, or current attitudes towards husband and children, along with their desire to learn and take their place in society in ways meaningful to them. In addition, 'a woman' exists within several social categories but the negative implications on her life are multiplied being a woman of colour (Crenshaw, 1989; Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2007). Crenshaw writes:

> *…because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated (1989, p. 140).*

Intersectionality, therefore, exposes persisting inequalities that even anti-discriminatory policies and practices often render invisible, as it brings to focus how racism and other forms of inequality resonate with multiple parts of an identity. In general, intersectionality not only provides researchers with a common language with which to discuss social injustices and inequalities, but links with a wider critical feminist context (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2008; hooks, 2000) that focuses on how power is maintained in gender or race relations that privilege men. This is done through critical methodologies that continuously question and examine established research assumptions and approaches (Zwier and Grant, 2014), privileging difference over binary oppositions and multiple categories over singular ones (McBride *et al.,* 2015; Hancock, 2007).

3.4. Intersectionality in higher education

It is crucial that research in education considers the complex intersecting dimensions within which individual learners operate with a view to gaining a better understanding of how intersectional discrimination takes place (Carbado *et al.,* 2013). The significance of this approach comes to light when examining the academic experiences of mature female learners in HE. Carbado *et al.* (2013) argue that intersectional discourses expose the negative effects that seemingly 'just' educational policies have on learners who fall outside the margins of the 'acceptable'. In effect, given their social and cultural circumstances, for mature female learners from minority groups, the structure of degree level programmes effectively amplifies the challenges of HE-level study, despite operating within the socially 'just' framework of widening participation (WP). Along similar lines, Cole (2020) and Cooper (2016) stress the importance of making the connection between policies that, ideally, address concerns of oppression while, essentially, advancing the interests of those already advantaged. One could, therefore, argue that educational policies and structures should be determined by an appreciation of the multiplicity of individual experiences if they are to truly tackle the inequalities they claim to address.

In the last two decades, there has been a considerable increase in research on WP that draws on Crenshaw's (1989) work of how the privileged in society misunderstand, marginalise and oppress other groups (Crenshaw,1992; 2015; Hill Collins, 2015; Reay *et*

al., 2005; 2009; 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Though the WP agenda has made some strides in bringing about inclusion in HE, it has not been successful in ending systemic educational disadvantage for some groups. Intersectionality, however, has provided a label to work with. A pertinent example is institutional racism, defined by the McPherson Report (1999) as:

> *The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (p. 3).*

Beyond acknowledging the phenomenon, intersectionality allows us to see how, when it comes to Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students, stereotyping and prejudice result in low academic expectation by tutors, which, invariably, shapes the students' overall experiences, self-esteem, ways of acting and expectations (Owusu-Agyeman, 2019; Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021).

In that sense, having an appreciation of the intersectional nature of individual realities allows an exploration of the associations and dissociations of presumptions, discrimination and marginalisation within the HE arena (Crenshaw,1989; Hill Collins, 2008; 2015; Carbado *et al.*, 2013). This, invariably, ensures a better understanding of the educational experiences of learners from minority groups. Crenshaw (1989) and Hill Collins (2008), however, caution that intersectionality should not be regarded as a fixed concept but as a tool that aids the illumination of dynamics that may be overlooked when attempting to explain instances of discrimination or marginalisation. These dynamics are not exhaustive, as it is impossible to come up with comprehensive categorisations of all the dimensions within which individuals operate. Intersectionality should, therefore, be used as a qualitative analytic framework to highlight how multi-faceted, but interconnected, systems of power work to marginalise certain groups (Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Mullen, 2011). By the same token, when used with reference to the educational experience, intersectionality might enable students from minority groups to understand the hierarchical nature of HE institutions, allowing those marginalised to challenge the *status quo* and internalised assumptions of 'inadequacies', 'lacks' and 'failures' (Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Freire and Ramos, 2018).

Though many scholars (Crenshaw, 1989; Chapman *et al.,* 2010; Ravnbol, 2009; Gillborn, 2010; Noguera, 2008) agree that intersectionality is a framework that helps researchers to focus on issues of social justice in education and draws attention to policies that promote exclusion, marginalisation and individual experiences of intersectional oppression, Strayhorn (2017) urges caution. He argues that though intersectionality is important in HE research, it should not be considered as the ultimate tool that can explain all problems. Instead, the use of intersectionality enhances and extends other research practice in that it provides a better understanding of students' realities, and hence, could lead to better educational policies. For Levitt (2018), intersectional approaches help, largely, to generate more robust findings that are derived from wider perspectives and are, therefore, more comprehensive in nature. This is covered in more detail in the methodology chapter, where it is explained how intersectionality influenced the design of an intervention aimed at helping students to overcome practical obstacles and study skills shortcomings.

So far in this chapter, I have discussed intersectionality as a framework that focuses on the meeting points of different categories, such as race and gender (Collins, 1993; 2000; 2015; hooks, 2000), race and class (Anderson, 1990; Liebow, 2002) and age and gender (Krekula, 2007, Mooney *et al*., 2017) providing a deeper appreciation of the unique experiences of individual women which are not born from a 'single-category' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 195). In the field of education, significant strides have been made in terms of research. However, mature students from minority ethnic groups continue to face discrimination and systemic educational disadvantage (Reay *et al.,* 2005; 2009; 2010). It is evident that there is a great, ongoing, need for intersectional studies of, for example, gender, age, race, culture and socio-economic status (Carbado *et al.,* 2013; Clarke and McCall, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Clarke and McCall argue that failing to do so results in the omission of vital subjective attributes that are key to ensuring inclusivity as they have a profound impact on the individual student's learning experience. Carbado *et al.* (2013) argue that a person can never simply be identified as a woman but rather, a Black (or White) woman who is a wife, parent, daughter and/or working class. All these different dimensions make up the woman's identity and so the omission of any of these fails to explain her individual reality in totality. Likewise, a female student can be a single mother with a disability and the exclusion of any of these attributes could prevent the individual from participating fully in education. The collective argument of all these scholars, therefore, is that for educational discourses to be considered relevant, they must

encompass varying individual identities, which promotes inclusivity. In the section below, I discuss how an intersectional framework was created for the needs of my own project. Relevant literature has also been selected for its meaningful contribution to the themes of this study and aid to my understanding of how intersecting identities result in inequalities.

3.5 Intersectional approaches to a top-up programme in Health and Social Care

> *Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization (Hill Collins, 2008, p. 3).*

The aim of this study is to examine and address the reasons behind the academic difficulties experienced by mature female students on a top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care in a London-based university. Usually, students that enrol on the top-up degree programme are women from BAME groups, and though many have already achieved a level 5 qualification through a higher national diploma (HND) programme, they often come ill-prepared for study at degree level. Below, I examine the intersections of race, gender, class, age, education and cultural capital. These are the realities my students thought most relevant whilst feeling that the HE system was something that was, perhaps, 'not for the likes of them'. In the sections below, I introduce gender, age, class and cultural capital as some of the intersecting aspects underlining the challenges they help to articulate.

3.5.1 Gender issues and intersectionality

Gender issues include every aspect of the lives of both men and women within society, which could include activities they engage in, interventions and policies and access to and use of resources (Hill Collins, 2006; McCall, 1992; Petersen, 2006a).

It is often argued that societal success depends on the knowledge, skills and creativity of everyone and not just a select few (Schuller *et al.,* 2006; Lee, 2019). A society that enables individuals to develop or acquire new capabilities ensures a thriving and adaptable economy (Biesta *et al.,* 2011; Schuller *et al.,* 2006; Lee, 2016). As rational as this concept is, the reality is not easily achievable in practice. The continuous lip service to gender equality and the prevalence of patriarchy in many societies mean that men still disproportionately assume power and women maintain dependent status (Adu-Yeboah

and Forde, 2011; Lee, 2019; Polenghi and Fitzgerald, 2020). Unfortunately, this disparity permeates the HE arena, as mature women who choose to return to education do so at great personal cost (Burke, 2012; Reay, 2002; 2003). For those from BAME groups, this could be a lonely journey that involves going against social and cultural dictates (Davies *et al., 2002*; Reay, 2002; 2003; Burke, 2012). Nevertheless, the opportunities for personal and professional advancement have enabled many women to break the mould and pursue HE qualifications. Increasingly, therefore, in educational research, the gendered experiences of mature women returning to education have come to the fore. Studies that examine mature women's experiences in HE show that the acquisition of a higher-level qualification has considerable transformative power on a woman's identity (Burke, 2012; Lee, 2019; Adu-Yeboah and Forde, 2011; Biesta *et al.,* 2011; Schuller *et al.,* 2006). Changes include greater self-esteem and self-worth, self-confidence, self-fulfilment, increased autonomy, agency and increased social and economic status (Adu-Yeboah and Forde, 2011). These changes impact on how women perceive and/or situate themselves within the multifarious roles they assume, as wives, mothers, homemakers and professionals. This transformation is the result of a change in mindset, attitudes, values and behaviours leading to a greater awareness of self, as a result of developed higher-level cognition and analytical ability (Biesta *et al.,* 2011; Schuller *et al.,* 2006).

However, a consistent pattern of under-representation and inequality necessitates WP to shift from current approaches, policies and practices (Burke, 2012). It forces educational researchers to have an appreciation of how the overlap and intersections of the different roles assumed by women, result in multiple axes of inequality and disadvantage in HE (Burke, 2012; 2017; Mcvitty and Morris, 2012; Doddington, 2017). Burke's (2012) suggestion that the widening of participation should involve an examination of the wider socio-economic context within which learners operate, shows her understanding of the academic challenges experienced by neo-traditional learners in HE. Along similar lines, Doddington (2017) highlights the need for higher institutions to adopt a less linear approach to the teaching and learning (T&L) processes, in order to mitigate the academic challenges mature women face. She adds that this can be achieved by ensuring that structures are put in place that actively support the multi-dimensional spheres in which mature women operate so that each one is able to achieve to their fullest potential.

This research echoes Burke (2012) and Doddington (2017). Many of the female students on the top-up degree programme came from communities with social and cultural expectations for women that limited their personal and professional development (Davies

et al., 2002; Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017; John, 2016). The most important of them was their familial duties, which clashed with the expectations of the institutions. Unfortunately, the experiences of these women do not always feature in HE research or other major research types, and yet, women increasingly make up a high percentage of mature students in HE (Mallman and Lee, 2014). This omission contributes to the problems mature, female students face as members of the academic community. McBride *et al.* (2015) stress the need for intersectional approaches in research, stating:

> *Multiple axes of inequality (be they race, ethnicity, caste, class, gender) could not be considered in separate analytical spaces, and it is precisely at the point where multiple oppressions intersect that greater analytic focus was needed (p. 1).*

McBride *et al*. (2015) argue that the multiple identities of the women must not be ignored and so, in their view, the assumption by the institution that the students would dedicate time and effort to their studies is a difficult, if not impossible, expectation. Most will have to make this commitment with little or no support from their family or friends, and still attend to their familial obligations (Davies *et al.,* 2002; Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017; John, 2016). Along similar lines, Kohli (2008; 2014) shows that making the students study in a way that is incongruent with their capabilities, generates feelings of inadequacy and a sense of not belonging to an 'exclusive' community. These expectations, Kohli adds, perpetuate the existing social injustice, which ignores the plight of women who often assume multiple and competing identities. Ravnbol's (2009) contribution to this argument is that from multiple perspectives of say, culture, religion, race, gender, age and class, the students' experiences of intersectional discrimination are highlighted. These varied perspectives accentuate the inter-relatedness and overlap of multi-faceted identities, which are not mutually exclusive but, rather, form the basis on which students are able to manoeuvre their way through the various (oppressive) structures operating within their learning environment.

Following on from the studies discussed above, the present research examines the perspectives of the students from the various, yet intersecting, dimensions of their lived experiences. As a researcher, I felt it was important to constantly reflect on, and respond to, the ever fluid nature of individual realities to ensure that specific needs were met. As these female students had been given access into HE, and gender and cultural specifics did not change, I felt it was important to bring to the fore and discuss their impact on the student experience (Burke, 2012; 2017; HEA, 2008). As Kohli and others argue, I felt that

failure to adopt multifarious approaches when it comes to educational research was leading to simplistic and inappropriate approaches to the challenges experienced by these students (Kohli, 2008; Ravnbol, 2009). In addition, approaches that fail to take the complex realities of these students into consideration only further perpetuate the cycle of oppression when particular aspects of an individual's identity are omitted (Burke, 2012; 2017; Davies *et al.,* 2002; Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017).

3.5.2 Race and racism in education

Race is a social construct used to categorise people based on shared social, cultural or physical attributes (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000; 2017). It is a hierarchical classification of humans used to identify, distinguish and marginalise individuals within societies (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000; 2017; Lieberman, 1997). Racism, however, often involves racial prejudice alongside systemic power that leads to discrimination, perpetuated through policies, systems, attitudes and actions that generate unequal opportunities and outcomes for people based on race (Fredrickson, 1988; Clark *et al.,* 1999). Racism is such a broad issue in HE that it becomes almost impossible to 'systematise' its effects under a single heading, let alone do justice to the rights and expectations of those who are affected by it (Bell, 1991; Carter *et al.,* 2005). Robin DiAngelo (2018), in his book, *White Fragility,* sees racism as an interconnected, complex system that permeates the social, political and economic aspects of life. In addition, racism in education can be exacerbated by other intersectional dimensions of inequality (such as gender, class, age and sexuality, to name a few). In predominantly White institutions, for instance, Black academics often experience a lack of career progression and have to constantly try to dispel the deficit thinking of their colleagues and students towards them (Arday, 2015; Bhopal, 2015; Sian, 2017; 2019). There is a vast body of literature available to legislators and educators on race and racism providing an awareness of the disparate disadvantages experienced by students of colour (Hewitt, 2005; Hughley, 2014; Rhodes, 2010; Sian, 2017; 2019), yet there is still some reluctance to dismantle the foundations that support systemic racism.

In this section, I hope to highlight some of the inherent truths and contradictions that go into 'the mix' of race. From the racial perspective, WP inadvertently perpetuates social inequalities rather than altering the power dynamics in HE, as those who come off worst are always minority students. In her study of the experiences of 12 African students in

HE, Owusu Kwarteng (2021) demonstrates that the negative experiences of the students were exacerbated by the tutors' perceptions. She observes:

> *Many, however, encounter cultural alienation and isolation due to longstanding racist preconceptions and media representations of Africa(ns) as a marginalised and subordinate continent/people, which impacts negatively on perceptions of African international students (p. 2408).*

Inevitably, this perception led to instances of racism, as the tutors had low expectations from the students and failed to provide them with the much-needed support, believing this would have little or no impact on their academic outcomes.

Petersen (2006) states that a major flaw in most educational research is the failure to consider the role of the agency of students from minority groups. These students are often portrayed as victims within a system of policies and structures that limit their individual potential (Burke, 2012; Petersen, 2006). Despite being noble in its intentions, such a view denies students their power and upholds the deficit model that most researchers set out to renounce. In order to dispel the myth that the students are passive, submissive and powerless, and hence, need to be 'saved' (Petersen, p. 75), one has to work alongside them and project their voices. And yet, one might encounter resistance from the students. This resistance, Peterson believes, stems from the students' frustrations at being under-estimated and denied the opportunity to take control of their lives. Petersen further argues that minority female students should not be seen as powerless victims, but rather, as women that possess resilience, strength and fortitude, evident in their various acts of resistance. She therefore, stressed the need for educators to forge strong trusting relationships with their students, so that students do not feel threatened within their learning environment. Additionally, the teaching process should be holistic in nature so that it considers the totality of the individual student's identity using the lenses of intersectionality, so that not just one aspect of the student is acknowledged and brought to the forefront (Petersen, 2006; Burke, 2012).

Harris and Leonardo (2018) explain how intersectionality, as a theoretical framework, illustrates the close interaction between race and gender:

> *…intersectionality enjoys engagement as a way to explain how racism and sexism, as co-constitutive systems of subordination, reinforce each other. Their implication with each other is not meant to be additive but multiplicative, where race and gender subordination mutually impair or disable people of colour as*

always raced, gendered and interiorised subjects in the eyes of Whiteness and patriarchy (p. 15).

According to Harris and Leonardo (2018), intersectionality highlights identities that are often ignored, unnoticed or marginalised because they are considered as components of larger, dominant and/or more important groups. In that context, intersectionality exposes the gap that exists in the categorisation of the complex and inter-relatedness of individual experiences in that it makes it impossible to ascribe singular categories like Black, poor, female or bisexual, as this will be an incomplete categorisation. The authors add that intersectionality does not attempt to displace major discourses based on race or gender as these provide the foundation upon which intersectional synthesis is built.

Researchers like the ones discussed in this section helped me to clarify my own attitude towards my students; to begin to recognise their agency, to attempt to find ways to bring it to the fore and to be prepared for the backlash of those that have been habitually ignored. As Harris and Leonardo (2018) suggest, race and gender subordination jointly impair people of colour by assigning them as inferior subjects, not worthy of membership of the academy in the eyes of Whiteness and patriarchy. My intervention, therefore, tried to emphasise and address the need for multi-dimensional categories and a focus on individual experiences. Like Petersen's, my research also exposes how institutional policies and practices fail to ensure inclusivity in HE as these do not consider the various dimensions in which Black female students operate, and habitually lead to educational disadvantage. In that sense, my aim was to develop agency so that students took control of their learning. Also, by fostering critical thought through reflection, the students developed an understanding of the reasons behind their academic difficulties. In fact, I was no longer prepared to portray these historically marginalised students as victims of an oppressive system but as women who had the capability to make positive changes to their learning experiences.

3.5.3 Class in education

The term class (or social class) often refers to a group of people who share, within a society, similar socio-economic characteristics (Ball *et al*., 2002; Reay, 2003). It can also be defined as the classification of people in relation to level of education, wealth, earnings and occupational prestige and social networks (Mullen, 2011). In education, a student's class is determined by how financial circumstances, living arrangements, access to healthcare services and the academic resources, impact on educational performance

(Reay, 2003; Petersen, 2006a). Given definition and perspective, it is safe to say that the class a student belongs to has a direct influence in shaping their attitude towards education, their way of life and their personality (Ball and Vincent, 2001; Reay, 2002; 2003). This is because many students from minority ethnic groups have low socio-economic status (SES) and are often first-generation scholars in their family with limited access to an extensive network of academic support or resources (Reay, 2002; 2003; Ball *et al*., 2002). As a result, when it comes to choice of HE, most of these students would choose institutions where they might have a sense of belonging and be comfortable in their learning environment without feeling 'looked down upon' by their middle class counterparts. Unlike for traditional students, this fear of not belonging is much greater in mature students from the Black and Asian communities, as many come laden with psychological barriers as a result of past educational experiences (Burke, 2002; Reay, 2003).

The widened participation in HE has not been able to overcome the prevailing effect of social class on participation and outcomes for students from minority groups. Many of the students on the top-up degree programme are from the 'lower' classes, and this factor often compounds their problems (Jonsson, 2016; Cole, 2020; Cooper, 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015; Tudor, 2012). As suggested by Tudor (2012), their lower-class status makes it difficult for students to acquire any form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), especially in an embodied state, that is, in the form of personal choices and values that enable one to succeed in education. In Tudor's view, this form of capital, unlike other forms, is developed from birth and is dependent on the family status and position one is born into. It is, therefore, outside the control of the individual. Peterson (2006), however, sees this position as a myth of the privileged class, who depict the lower classes as inconsequential so that societal injustices experienced by them is dispensed with. Other scholars agree that this belief, unfortunately, serves to justify the numerous inequalities in existence in society and education and absolves policy makers from doing more to address the injustices experienced by minority students (Petersen, 2006; Patton *et al.,* 2016; Webb and Sepúlveda, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

In terms of the impact of class, Burke (2017) argues that older adult female students are less likely to succeed in university because success is usually viewed based on hegemonic, masculine standards that have to be adhered to in order for the student to be considered a legitimate member of the academic community. As such, women have to position themselves according to these dominant − and often White − masculine

characteristics that symbolise autonomy, authority and rationality. In practical terms, class and race in the classroom manifest in a number of ways including linguistic code differences between the instructor and students (Forman and McCormick, 1995), a highly Eurocentric curriculum (Jivraj, 2020; Johnson, 2018; Shilliam, 2015; 2017) and inadequate skills support (Carr *et al.,* 2015; Freeman *et al.,* 2014) – to name a few. Expecting this group of learners to learn in prescribed ways that not only ignore the multi-faceted nature of their individual identities, also reduces their sense of self-worth when they are unable to cope with these prescribed ways of learning.

Aware of the class−race−gender challenge, my intervention tried to bring about effective T&L processes and tailored support so that students were able to develop a degree of critical awareness of the hierarchical nature of the HE arena through reflection and self-appraisal (Freire and Ramos, 2018; Mathieson, 2011). How this was done is detailed in the following chapter. The use of intersectionality allowed me to comprehend discrimination in its multiple dimensions, whether compound or intersectional (Makkonen, 2002). Compound discrimination occurs at any given time and in any given situation, on several grounds, such as culture, gender, age and race. In effect, a highly intelligent, mature female student could experience academic difficulties based on marital status, age and cultural allegiances (Makkonen, 2002). In intersectional discrimination, numerous grounds for discrimination operate together at the same time and are interconnected and inseparable (Artrey, 2018; Makkonen, 2002). In effect, a woman could possess all the above characteristics but the added disadvantage of being Black or Asian, from a lower class, might mean that her academic difficulties are further compounded.

As a Black researcher, I may not harbour many of these internalised prejudices, given my education and social background, but I am not ignorant of the existence of injustices either. I too, have experienced educational systems that had no appreciation of my identity and I have worked in establishments in which I had to repress my individuality in favour of the dominant cultural image of the role I was performing. Intersectionality gave me a deeper appreciation of the students' internalised struggles and ensured that, in my practice, I became sensitive to all the real and perceived emotions. I was then able to identify individual learning needs and respond to those needs through targeted support (Cole, 2020; Cooper, 2016; Jonsson, 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015). The use of specific research tools (for example, skills audits and reflective logs) are discussed in the next chapter. Being able to think critically also gave them an understanding of the hierarchical nature of HE and enabled them to gain an appreciation of the respective

ethnicities and cultures (Egharevba, 2001; McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Stuart *et al.*, 2011).

3.5.4 Age and education

With the promotion of life-long learning, university access was widened, which not only suited the enrolment targets for many universities, but also provided visibility of equity and social inclusion (Burke, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2002; Webb *et al.,* 1997; Mallman and Lee, 2014). This access included older adult students who selected universities they felt would be more accommodating of people from the same racial and socio-economic demographics (Ball *et al.,* 2002; Boliver, 2016; Tight, 2012). Mallman and Lee (2014) argue that this self-selection immediately shows the students' awareness and unconscious compliance with prevailing societal and institutional hierarchies between the upper and lower classes, the 'post 1992' and Russell Group universities, and 'Whites' and 'others'. They add that at university level, all students, irrespective of their background, have to adapt to unfamiliar learning environments, but for older-age students this is particularly difficult given their 'neo-traditional' status. In addition, personal responsibility, coupled with spurious engagement with formal learning, compounds the problem. Consequently, the admission of these 'neo-traditional' students results in misalignment between the universities' need to ensure inclusive practices and their inability or unwillingness to provide adequate support to this historically disadvantaged group (Mallman and Lee, 2014; Merrill, 2014; Taylor *et al*., 2016; Tudor, 2012). This incongruence may be due to assumptions by the universities that the older age of the students means that they have acquired enough life experience and skills to enable them to cope with their studies. Hence, the universities fail to appreciate the risks and anxieties associated with the acquisition of a scholar identity (Mallman and Lee, 2014). For those students who have had negative previous learning experiences, the prospect of returning to study could be formidable.

On the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care, the students were predominantly female, with an average age of 35. In addition to their age, many had had a gap in their education of twenty years or more, with most having spent their time tending to family obligations without much academic development (Davies *et al.,* 2002; McVitty and Morris, 2012; Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017; John, 2016). Most feared having to return to the classroom and having to learn new things, and also worried about appearing stupid or ignorant. These concerns, as we will see in subsequent

chapters, are evident in their everyday engagement with learning: “I am too old to learn in this way, so I know I will fail” (Beanie); or “I don’t want to say what I am thinking because people will laugh at me if I get it wrong*”* (Mona).

The students’ words reinforce Lin’s (2016) view that ‘to adult learners, the commitment to the student role would increase personal distress [as] they would have a negative emotional state if the student’s self-evaluation did not meet the normative concept of a good student’ (p. 121).

Indeed, adult learners often doubt their academic abilities, believing that they might not be able to cope with the rigours of higher-level study like their traditional counterparts. Added to this, the emotional element in the students’ comments reveals their levels of insecurity and highlights the fact that, though an opportunity to redefine their identities has been provided through WP, it comes at a great personal cost. Lin’s observations are supported by Davies *et al.* (2002), Espenschied-Reilly (2016) and Fielden and Middlehurst (2017) who argue that the aspiration of the older learners to re-invent themselves is hampered by their age and the multiple identities they already assume, and so, taking on an additional one is tantamount to renouncing social and cultural norms. Most important in the case of my students, however, is the fact that being mature does not provide a nuanced enough categorisation to explain the academic challenges they all experience (Mallman and Lee, 2014). It is, therefore, important to consider the intersectional and overlapping dimensions of their realities, which include race, class, marital status and economic status, and all of these influence their learning experience.

In my research, constant reflection and extensive engagement with literature on mature students (Ball *et al*., 2002; Burke, 2002; Reay *et al.,* 2002; Davies *et al.,* 2002; Webb *et al*., 1997; Bangs, 2016; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Boliver, 2016; Tight, 2012) gave me an awareness of these individual realities. I understood that many adult learners returning to education have low self-esteem and the fear of failure is one of the greatest barriers to their learning. I also understood the importance of fostering a nurturing learning environment that would enable the students to develop their confidence and make informed choices that would put them in control of their learning. So yes, most of the students lacked the academic skills to enable them succeed in higher education (Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Keohane and Petrie, 2017; Sanders-McDonagh and Davis, 2018). However, an intersectional approach would enable the students overcome these

challenges by exploring their potential without fear or anxiety (Pratt, 1998; Bangs, 2016; Biggs and Tang, 2011; Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013).

3.6. Bourdieu and beyond

I must reiterate that Bourdieu's work does not effectively address the aim of this study. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's influence in educational studies has been considerable and certain aspects of his work lend themselves to an intersectional approach. This is why Bourdieu's theories of *habitus, field*, and *capital* have been used as lenses with which to understand the educational experiences of neo-traditional students in higher education (Burnell, 2015; James, Busher and Suttill, 2015). However, a key difference between Bourdieu and intersectional analysis is that Bourdieu starts with social practice (Bourdieu, 1977) while intersectional analysis begins with identity categories (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2015).

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field and habitus compliment intersectionality as these theories explain how subjective attitudes and dispositions impact on how individuals navigate their way through the HE system (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Gaskell and Lingwood, 2017; Hall, 2017). The 'field' is the relational processes in operation between individuals within a social arena, and Bourdieu believes that this process is governed by rules that are often hierarchical in nature, depending on the level of cultural capital each individual possesses. 'Habitus' is the result of the interplay between the individual's free will and existing social structures, and therefore, will always be socially mediated and provisional, and will also be governed by the extent of operative capital the individual has access to (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's theory is particularly useful as it aids an exploration of the power relations that exist between neo-traditional learners in HE and the institutions in which they are studying. Below I explain what Bourdieu means by capital before going on to explain his three forms of cultural capital.

3.6.1 Forms of capital

For Bourdieu (1984) 'capital' refers to the different forms of resources at the disposal of an individual which enable the individual to gain advantage within society and access opportunities. Bourdieu outlines various forms of capital which include, economic capital, social capital, symbolic capital and cultural capital. Having an understanding of these various forms of capital allows for the comprehension of how social inequalities are

created and perpetuated. It also provides an insight into how individuals or groups navigate the hierarchical nature of society.

Bourdieu (1986) refers to economic capital as the wealth an individual possesses in the form of money, property and assets that can be transformed into financial resources. In his view, the level of economic capital at one's disposal can impact on the position one assumes within society and access to opportunities.

Social capital, for Bourdieu (1986) is the level of influential social networks, relationships and connections an individual possesses which provides access to opportunities, information, and favours. People with social capital shared common values with members of their social network, allowing them to work together effectively towards a common goal (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013).

Symbolic capital represents the power, honour, recognition and prestige an individual possesses within society (Bourdieu,1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013). In Bourdieu's (1997) view, how symbolic capital is distributed is unequal and unjust as it ascribes levels of importance on individuals. This Bourdieu adds, could influence access to resources and social services such as health and education. So for instance, a wealthy and highly educated and connected individual has a better chance of running for political office than one who is poor, with very little education and no social connections.

Cultural capital comprises of the social dispositions that include tastes ideas and preferences used strategically to bring about advantage and access to opportunities and resources (Bourdieu 1986). These dispositions come through the knowledge, skills and education acquired from childhood, and enables an individual to familiarise themselves with the practices, values and norms favoured by the dominant group (Bourdieu,1979; 1986). An in-depth exploration of cultural capital is presented below.

3.6.2 Cultural capital

One of Bourdieu's most influential work is his book – Distinction: A Social Critic of the Judgement of Taste (1984) – in which he examines how cultural habits and inclinations act as social distinctions that aid the perpetration of social inequality. In this book, Bourdieu highlights the interplay between the consumption patterns (that is the tendencies and expected behaviours), social class and symbolic power, determined by levels of income, social position and access to different forms of cultural capital. In a later work – The Forms of Capital (1986) – he introduces the notions of embodied cultural capital,

objectified cultural capital and institutionalised cultural capital which a key mechanisms used to create, reproduce and maintain social hierarchies. By highlighting these forms of cultural capital, Bourdieu attempts to explain how resources are inequitably distributed within society leading to injustice and disadvantage. Bourdieu goes on to add that the level of cultural capital an individual possesses impacts on their life chances and positions within societies.

3.6.2.1 Embodied cultural capital

For Bourdieu (1986), embodied cultural capital refers to knowledge or skills that a person consciously acquires yet, passively inherits, from family traditions and culture (primary socialisation). This form of capital is not transmissible but ingrained into the individual habitus through upbringing, education and exposure to certain tastes and behaviours. Embodied capital therefore enables the individual to be receptive to cultural influences that are similar to theirs. So for instance, a child exposed to the arts and literature, would most likely develop artistic tendencies and a passion for reading and a robust vocabulary. Also exposure to classical music from childhood could develop in one the taste for this genre of music. Other examples of embodied capital could include accents, etiquette, and high level of education. Bourdieu believes that embodied cultural capital is directly linked to an individual's social position, as this form of capital is associated with the social norms of the privileged upper classes, who have access to resources outside the reach of the lower classes (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). The lack of embodied cultural capital could therefore restrict a person's access to other forms of cultural capital such as objectified and institutional.

3.6.2.2 Objectified cultural capital

Objectified cultural capital in Bourdieu's (1986) view, is the tangible goods possessions and resources at the disposal of an individual. These goods symbolise the individual's social status, knowledge, tastes and sophistication (embodied cultural capital) and also convey social distinction and class. Objectified capital could take the form of a collection of artworks, a property portfolio and luxury cars. Unlike embodied capital, objectified capital is transmissible as it is more tangible and can be inherited or exchanged thereby reinforcing existing social classifications. As such, access to this form of cultural capital is advantageous as it affords an individual leverage, enabling them move easily within social environments (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). Bourdieu though adds that the possession of valuable artefacts and expensive items does not automatically confer objectified cultural

capital on a person. This is because one has to be educated enough to understand and appreciate the cultural, historical and aesthetic significance of such items, otherwise, they will simply be nothing but financial assets. Therefore, having this appreciation again depends on one's exposure to the forms of cultures and traditions that develops such.

3.6.2.3 Institutionalised capital

Institutionalised cultural capital is the value placed on formal qualifications such as higher academic degrees, diplomas, professional memberships and affiliations with prestigious institution. This form of capital is often linked to economic capital as it is advantageous when it comes competing in the labour market, accessing opportunities, or for social mobility. As with embodied cultural capital, institutionalised cultural capital is acquired through (primary) socialisation and even though it cannot be inherited, the resources at the disposal of an individual could facilitate the acquisition of a higher-level education or membership of elite establishment.

3.6.3 Cultural capital and education

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital has found its way into many spheres within society and used to explain social phenomena. His theory is particularly useful in explaining the educational challenges some groups of students face. Bourdieu (1986) believes academic success is determined by the level of cultural capital an individual has access to. So, in higher education for instance, proficient academic language skills emanate from an individual's social position, which is, to a large extent, determined by the embodied cultural capital one possesses. Studies (Foushée and Sleigh, 2013; Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Murphy, 2017; Webb *et al.,* 2017) show that many neo-traditional students lack the various forms of cultural capital as outlined by Bourdieu. This was evident in the students on the top up degree programme in Health and Social Care. Most faced academic challenges because as surmised by Allan (2014) and Tudor (2012), they had not been socially acculturated into the skills, knowledge and language required for degree-level study. Consequently, many struggled to understand the language of academia and were unable to engage in subject-based discourses or construct coherent text. The students also lacked the sense of belonging making them feel alienated within their learning environment (Fyfe, 2020; Kohli, 2008; 2014). Bourdieu's theories may therefore help to explain why the students were unable to successfully navigate their way through the higher educational arena that is highly hierarchical in nature. However, over

time, it has lost some degree of relevance for the simple fact that Bourdieu appears to focus solely on the norms of the dominant (white) class and fails to acknowledge or place any value on the other forms of cultural capital that exist within society (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu's omission is rectified in later theories like intersectionality that adopts a multi-lens approach and not only highlights the importance of other cultures and identities; it places equal value on them as it would the dominant ones. Some of the limitations of Bourdieu's theory are discussed in greater detail below.

3.6.4 Limitations of Bourdieu's forms of capital

The Bourdieusian theory of cultural capital has been criticised as myopic and lacking universal applicability because it focuses on just western (French) cultures without an exploration of other cultures (McCall, 1992; Patton *et al.,* 2016 Yosso, 2005). Not only that, it is an acceptable fact that different cultures have their unique characteristics (Emerson and Yancey, 2010; Yosso, 2005) and so Bourdieu's dismissal of other cultures is greatly flawed One can also argue that even though the less privileged classes may not have access to 'elite' culture, they also possess values and cultures that promote educational achievements and enables the creation and transference of cultural capital (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Yosso, 2005). Besides, cultures and societies, in the views of Gayon (2005) and Lewens (2015; 2017), are not stagnant entities but dynamic, in that they constantly change and evolve. They therefore deem Bourdieu's work obsolete because Bourdieu sees culture and society as static systems that transfer rules and traditions to the next generation without changes. Additionally, Bourdieu's theory places greater emphasis on the social and cultural elements that impact on individual experiences and life chances and ignores other considerations such as biological make up, health conditions and psychological make up. This is of major importance as individual health and emotional wellbeing now features prominently in many institutional and social policies because as societies change, so do the needs of the people Stephenson, 2023; Svensson, 2012).

Furthermore, alternative theories of social stratification that challenge Bourdieu's binary class classification of people, have emerged over time (Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1979; Wright, 1985; 2005). For instance, Wright (1985) in his book *Classes* talks about contradictory class locations. He argues that individuals often find themselves in positions contrary to existing class structures resulting in clash of interests and identities. Wright explains that this arises as a result of the complexity of the dynamics of

capitalist societies in which social classes are not static. So for instance, a small-scale business owner is both a petit bourgeois and capitalist (Engels and Marx, 2015; Marx, 1967) in that they are considered self-employed and own their own means of production, but also employ and exploit labour. Wright's theory highlights the fluidity of class boundaries and also, the mobility of class. Where Bourdieu's (1984) emphasis is on how social structures reproduce social inequality, Wright's theory (1985) allows for the movement of individuals between classes based on changes in their socio-economic status. Bourdieu (1984) does point out however, that the odd individual from the working class could rise to a successful position, giving the illusion that meritocracy does work. More importantly, Wright's theory (1985; 2005), unlike Bourdieu's (1984), lends itself well to intersectionality as it recognises that class ascription are shaped by other social factors and identities – such as race, age, gender, class and level of education – and not just by economic status.

Another theory that would stand the test of time (unlike Bourdieu's (1984;1986) is Maslow's (1954) theory of hierarchy of needs. Grounded in psychology, Maslow's theory focuses on fundamental human aspirations and motivations. It suggests that human beings are primarily driven by psychological needs such as food, clothing and shelter and then safety and sense of belonging, before progressing through to self-esteem and self-actualisation. Maslow's theory therefore transcends social and cultural dictates as the basic psychological needs are integral to the human nature and will remain applicable irrespective of time or social and cultural norms. This is for the simple fact that human needs and desires will remain constant but as Gayon (2005) and Lewens (2015; 2017) surmise, societies and culture will remain in the constant flux of change.

One must however acknowledge that human needs are not linear hence, impossible to empirically measure the extent of human satisfaction. This is simply because cultural and social backgrounds determine what individuals choose to prioritise, and the value individuals place on things (McLeod, 2018; Tay, and Diener, 2011) Notwithstanding, Maslow's theory has greater applicability in the field of education in that is provides a framework with which to understand academic development and individual motivations towards learning (Schulte, 2018; Trivedi, and Mehta, 2019). Perhaps the greatest criticism of Bourdieu is that his theories are too deterministic and rigid in his portrayal of social structure (McCall, 1992; Adkins, 2000; Lawler, 2000; Moi, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). McCall (1992) on his part views the concept of cultural capital as too androcentric, as it pre-supposes that the female specie is not capital-acquiring, but rather, capital-bearing,

and that their value depends on the social group to which their spouses or family belong, despite the fact that many adult female students hold down jobs and carry an equal, if not higher, proportion of the familial financial responsibilities (Carbado *et al.,* 2013; Clarke and McCall, 2013; Collins, 2015). Davies *et al*. (2002) and Reay (2002) examine the case of females who are single parents and shoulder the responsibility of caring for their dependant family members on their own. Lovell (2000) and Skeggs (2004), too, reject Bourdieu's philosophy as, in their view, to assign value on a human being based on the level of capital owned by another is denigrating. This androcentric bias is also denounced by feminist scholars (Adkins, 2000; Lawler, 2000; Moi, 1991; Skeggs, 1997) who maintain that some women do engage in capital-generating pursuits and are able to operate in male-dominated fields. For instance, football is no more a male-only sport, and many countries are now headed by women presidents. Bourdieu's presentation of habitus is also rejected as being mono-gendered. Bourdieu appears to place too much emphasis on the biological attributes of the sexes. Feminist researchers, therefore, argue that habitus is determined by the position of an individual within a social space and not based on gender (Adkins, 2000; Lawler, 2000; Moi, 1991; Skeggs, 1997), adding that individuals will present multiple dispositions depending on a given social trajectory. Lovell (2000) and Skeggs (2004) also believe that the biological makeup of women has little bearing on their ability to acquire capital, and view Bourdieu's philosophy as a myopic construct of reality that belittles women.

As a researcher, I do find Bourdieu's concept helpful, as it sheds light on how social and cultural processes impact on individual life experiences. Indeed, my students appeared to 'lack' cultural capital – and that has become an almost standard way of referring to their compounded disadvantages. But then, is not the return to education an opportunity to alter that? Moreover, on an empirical level, Bourdieu's work becomes less credible: as a single Black woman/mother, I am both a capital-generating and capital-bearing subject and my value is not dependent on my marital status. I have been able to successfully operate within my chosen professional field and develop dispositions relative to my social context that are devoid of my gender. I do, however, acknowledge that my level of education and middle-class background add greater value to me as an individual and impact on my life chances and choices (Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Maton, 2008). My personal experiences have impacted my research as I sought to develop in my students a level of criticality that enables them to become aware of their potential and rise above the assumed constraints of their gender, race and culture. I also sought to encourage in

them an appreciation of their own cultures, which have made them resilient and able to withstand and endure life's challenges (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Yosso, 2005). It was, therefore, necessary to come up with not only a skills intervention but also aid the development of agency in the students. How this was done is discussed in the next chapter.

Intersectionality enabled me to consider every factor that can contribute to the marginalisation of my students particularly how certain elements such as race, age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, citizenship, come together to form their identities and also intersecting axes of oppression. Intersectionality certainly exposed how the students were subject to discrimination on a micro level within their learning environment (Carbado *et al.,* 2013; Crenshaw, 2015; Hill Collins, 2008) and a macro level in terms of biased educational policies and processes (Cole; 2020; Cooper, 2016). Of course intersectionality cannot claim to explain every different way in which individuals experience discrimination and oppression as these occur in numerous and unquantifiable ways. I must however admit that overlaying intersectionality with Bourdieu's habitus theory and categories of say class, allowed for greater understanding of the heterogeneous and nuanced nature of my neo-traditional students and my application of intersectionality.

3.7 Professional and personal implications of intersectionality

So far, I have explored intersecting inequalities that pertain to my students in terms of class, gender, race and age. Below, I turn to my personal position as a Black tutor in a White institution. I cannot exclude myself from this study as I am part of the research; I am not an 'objective' external observer but an active participant. What I hope to show below is the pivotal role I played in the research, as a Black woman with the commonality of gender and citizenship of a minority group. This meant that my lived experiences made me a credible candidate to alleviate the academic challenges experienced by the students who were all from minority ethnic groups.

3.7.1 Professional context: an 'other' researching the 'other'

As a Black researcher in a predominantly White institution, taking on the mantle of 'advocate for change' ran the risk of my being viewed as 'championing' the cause of the minorities. It also meant that I might face performance pressures if my efforts did not yield satisfactory results (Banerjee, 2018; Egharevba, 2001). I also risked some kind of

backlash if issues were brought to light that impacted negatively on the reputation of a university that prides itself as a champion of inclusive education. Added to that, the top-up degree programme was always at risk of termination as it required a significant amount of resources, given the student profile – resources the university was not expecting, nor was prepared, to provide. Furthermore, the lack of staff diversity within the university meant that I could not develop informal networks with other teachers of colour or tap into rich cultural resources that would enable me to meet the needs of my students (Achinstein and Aguirre, 2008; Egharevba, 2001; Banerjee, 2018).

This absence of a support structure further hindered my efforts and I saw myself as a token minority in a White institution. From the perspective of the university, the students already possessed a level 5 qualification and so should not require additional academic support. Consequently, my efforts to persuade the university to consider other dimensions of disadvantage were not immediately embraced. It appeared that my role was to attend to the cultural and racial needs of the minority students and did not extend to the level of decision- or policy-making. The reality was that being part of a minority group in the workplace made for an isolating experience as it was difficult to make my voice heard. Intersectionality enabled a greater appreciation of this shared experience of membership of a subordinate group.

At the same time, because all the students were from minority groups, it would be difficult for a White individual lacking cultural sensitivity to assume my role. In effect, I could not help but feel that I was a 'purposeful fit' (Egharevba, 2001; Banerjee, 2018) and that I had to perform better than my White counterparts and prove myself capable and deserving of membership of a White-dominated institution. In other words, I felt that I had to live up to the university's perception of me as an asset capable of representing the 'other' races and meeting the educational needs of students from minority groups (Achinstein *et al.,* 2010; Egharevba, 2001; Banerjee, 2018). This could not be further from the truth, of course, as membership of a minority group does not make one an expert on all minority cultures.

In terms of everyday experience, I was witnessing the frustration of my students in various forms (Names presented are pseudonyms):

That tutor does not even know me; she always gets my name wrong. (Mona)

or

When I read, I don't understand what I have read because the grammar is just too much. How do they expect us to learn all this and write this way? (Nokulu)

or

How do they expect us to do all this reading and writing in this time; don't they know we have families to look after? (Joy)

or

I have to work because I need the money so I can't come to class all the time. (Beanie)

Cohort after cohort, I heard the above statements spoken in different ways by different students. Echoing the thoughts of other scholars (Reay *et al.,* 2001; Davis and Harrison, 2013; Davies *et al.,* 2002; Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Pawar, 2014), I often wondered why the university continued to admit students who stood so little chance of succeeding at degree level. Boliver (2016) and Tight (2012) argue that post-1992 universities are often the preferred institutions for minority students because these universities, unlike their more established Russell Group counterparts, appear to be more accommodating of not only minority ethnic groups but older adult learners as well. Unfortunately, the reality is that some post-1992 universities do not provide the extensive level of support this demographic requires (Boliver, 2016; Pawar, 2014).

Teaching on the top-up programme, I constantly witnessed the frustration of my students in their struggle to cope with the demands of degree-level study. As a result of just such experiences, many students in comparable circumstances feel that they have been set up to fail and so either drop out altogether or finish the programme without achieving any credits. For some, the high cost of a degree qualification justifies using the services of third parties to complete their assignments (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Lancaster, 2020; Molinari, 2014). Knowing that the experiences of these minority students are the result of intersected inequalities, I felt the need to mitigate these problems and to work in such a way as to assist the students to develop a different attitude to their disadvantages, acquiring a level of cognition that would give them a better understanding of the reasons for their academic difficulties. I realised, however, that though they were all mature women from minority groups, I could not 'reduce' them to a singular categorisation based on gender, age or race as this would have been limiting and restrictive because there was always more to each of the students than the categories ascribed. Everyone came with

unique habits and dispositions that made it difficult for them to successfully navigate their academic environment. Nonetheless, as wives, mothers, daughters and home makers, they were already equipped with latent capabilities to effect meaningful changes to their academic experiences (Shanahan, 2000; Shilliam, 2015; Jivraj, 2020). Furthermore, as a critical practitioner, I needed to take action to address the academic challenges that the students were experiencing in a way that could be considered progressive and anti-hegemonic (Archer *et al.,* 2007; Cooper, 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015; Mullen, 2011).

As a Black woman researching other minorities, intersectionality was particularly useful as it provided analytical tools with which to explain the extent of my connections and dissociations with the lived experiences of my students. So, for instance, my gender, age and racial identity provided some shared experiences with the students. This ethno-racial match facilitated a student−teacher bonding process as the students felt more connected with me. It was the commonality of gender and the citizenship of a minority group that afforded me some credibility as a researcher and teacher in their eyes (Egharevba, 2001). Moreover, as a woman that assumes multiple roles – single mother, doctoral student, daughter, professional minority in a White institution (to name a few) – intersectionality allowed me to utilise the knowledge gained through these multi-dimensional roles to cope with the challenges I faced. My minority status meant that I, too, had experienced Eurocentric educational structures that had little or no appreciation of my individual identity, and yet, managed to overcome those challenges. Intersectionality, therefore, allowed me to 'hear' the students' exasperation, fear and anxieties that were 'audible'; for example, in their earlier log entries, as they resigned themselves to the fact that they would, most likely, not complete the course. Many were apprehensive about the unfamiliar and difficult ways of learning, and I felt compelled to allay these fears. I was not going to view the students as incapable of learning. I had to try to understand the nature of their learning and alleviate their problems.

Adding to the challenge to bring about a more positive learning experience was the way I was perceived by the students. To them, being Black conferred upon me the role of a 'saviour' who would shield them from the unjust practices of the oppressive 'task masters'. I embodied the familial, and familiar, aspects of their consciousness. Like them, my race afforded me membership of the minority group, and this was a characteristic the students could identify with. To them, I was, therefore, the perfect intermediary, who would make their 'oppressors' understand their needs and provide them with the support needed.

Initially at least, they failed to appreciate the fact that my position as a tutor came with limited powers. This meant that I was constrained within the powers of my job role, which did not extend to decision-making. Unable to effect the desired changes earned me the nickname of 'Oreo'; black on the outside but white on the inside. In their view, I had 'sold them out' to the White institution and forgotten my Black roots. Unknown to the students, I was in a constant battle on their behalf, trying to bring about a more level playing field. As their course progressed, the students did gain an appreciation of my efforts as they acquired a better understanding of the hierarchical nature of their learning environment.

Most importantly, irrespective of whether the students were accepting of my efforts to improve the T&L process, to them, I was the embodiment of 'Black girl done good'. The students saw me as a model of their aspirations and it gave them the belief that they, too, could succeed and 'become somebody'. Though I agree with those who stress the importance of role models for students from minority groups (Shilliam, 2015; 2017; Adebisi, 2019; Arday *et al.,* 2021; Basu, 2019; Jivraj, 2020), assuming such a role meant that I had the added burden of carrying their hopes and dreams and ensuring these came to fruition. I had to bear this responsibility whilst being mindful of the students' unique differences that define their individual identities. Nevertheless, though it was impossible for me to envisage the personal and professional implications of the task undertaken, I did have intersectionality as an analytical tool that aided my understanding of the nuanced dimensions of each of the students' learning experiences.

3.7.2 Personal context: perceptions of another 'other'

Intersectionality eventually exposed the incongruence (real and perceived) between the female students' socio-economic realities, those of the dominant group, and mine (Cooper, 2016; Philip *et al.,* 2017). My education and social standing confer upon me a level of cultural capital that allows me to successfully navigate potentially discriminatory situations or environments. These latter attributes were what most of the students lacked, making it difficult for them to challenge, or overcome, instances of discrimination and/or prejudice. To the students, I was not a 'typical' Black person but part of the oppressive system (Egharevba, 2001). The reality was that I, too, was a member of an isolated minority group in a predominantly White institution, battling my own frustrations, fears and anxieties. Invariably, I was, myself, a 'defended subject expected to defend other defended subjects' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2009; 2013; Egharevba, 2001). 'Defended subject' is a psychoanalytic term that implies that anxiety is intrinsic in human nature, so

that perceived threats to the self, results in anxiety (Hollway and Jefferson, 2009). Bourdieu (1984) explains these issues as being a result of the intersections between agency and structure that impact on the ability of individuals to act independently, either as free agents or as determined by social structure. Viewed via intersectionality, I was better able to understand why so many of my students felt I had little in common with them, as it revealed that the ascription of symbolic power creates a barrier.

3.8 Intersectionality as an empowering tool: implications for the marginalised

Given my insight on intersectionality above, how could I help my students benefit from it? How could they create their own understanding of their identities and the educational demands? I knew that an intervention in IT and English only went some way but did not address the attitudes and perspectives these women came with. I also needed to consider the multiple intersections of the students' identity. The answer lay in 'agency' − a state of being in control of one's life and having the capability to take charge of one's thoughts and actions (Burke, 2012; Mathieson, 2011; Petersen, 2006). Bandura (1986; 2001) views agency from a social cognitive perspective and associates agency with an individual's self-efficacy and drive to control how and what they learn. Many institutions now commonly consider student agency and ensure structures are in place to promote this. In a study by Zeiser, Scholz and Cirks (2018), in which students were actively involved in deciding what and how they learned, it was found that student success was greatly increased. Mathieson (2011) believes that contemporary HE institutions should dispense with generic approaches to T&L, and instead, develop student agency by considering the complex social contexts in which the students exist. What Mathieson is saying is that a socio-cultural approach with a focus on encouraging students to engage in reflecting on their potential and limitations as they pertain to their learning, can empower them to become critical agents as they develop their identities as academics. Mathieson, though, warns that the value of such an approach is dependent on the quality of the educational structures in place and their ability to create environments that encourage active student engagement.

The research tools (skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs) encouraged the students to evaluate their academic skills, confront their shortfalls and, with support, take the necessary steps to address their challenges. In the study, I knew that developing student agency was not going to be immediate, but gradual, and hoped that the learning

tools would encourage the students to develop an awareness of their innate potential. Vygotsky (1978) was of the opinion that appropriate learning tools and social practices enable individuals to develop agency that allows them to negotiate and interact within different social contexts. The problem was that the student had embarked on the journey into HE heavily laden with internalised prejudices (habitus) (Bourdieu, 1984) that prevented them from challenging the culture and practices in operation within their learning environment and taking control of their learning. What was, therefore, needed to rid the student of this 'psychological baggage' was a gradual awakening through critical reflection, so that entrenched perceptions could be deconstructed and social injustices actively challenged (Mathieson, 2011; Reeve and Tseng, 2011). This is because when students constantly engage in critical self-appraisal, they gradually become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses (Mathieson, 2011). So, rather than merely paying lip service to addressing social ills, the adoption of an intersectional approach enabled me to, at least, *begin* the process of transformation of the students' attitude and mindset. It also enabled me to instil in the students an appreciation of their respective cultures that would arm them with the resilience to withstand and endure future challenges (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Yosso, 2005).

Making use of the growing awareness of the complexity of individual lives, institutions need to aid the understanding of how intersecting and overlapping systems of oppression and disadvantage are experienced differently by every individual or group (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Webb and Sepúlveda, 2020; Yosso, 2005). Thus, institutions would be able to identify which experiences shape peoples' lives and develop appropriate agendas for advocacy. By this, all students could exercise the right to voice their opinion on issues pertaining to their learning, and their views and wishes would be taken into consideration when decisions are made on matters concerning them. Institutions could then be considered legitimate advocates of communities that, historically, have suffered social injustice.

Intersectionality has become a powerful tool that marginalised groups can use to exercise agency. It provides them with a deeper understanding of their inner potential and rids them of apparent limitations so that they embrace available opportunities and resources to make meaningful changes to their lives (Reay *et al.,* 2005; 2009; 2010; Web *et al.,* 2017). On the matter of gender, the role of women in every society is crucial, yet the constraints on their multi-faceted identities have meant that opportunities for women remain limited. Intersectionality recognises the phenomenon of multiple and overlapping

identities and attempts to remove these limitations. On programmes like the top-up degree in health and social care, an intersectional approach raised the students' awareness of their identities, resulting in a more positive sense of self. They were able to begin to dispense with internalised prejudices as they acquired a better understanding of how their negative sense of self directly impacted on their academic achievement. An intersectional approach meant that students were able to develop a level of cognition that allowed them to reason beyond racial or class identification to a level of consciousness that facilitated an understanding of the hierarchical nature of society. The students were then able to cultivate a more positive attitude, take ownership of their learning and become key holders of their own destiny (Blakesley, 2016; Trieu and Lee, 2017). Ultimately, the students were able to change their habitus and no longer struggled to navigate their way through their learning environment. They acquired a new sense of self-worth that enabled them to see themselves as equal players not only within the classroom but in society. It is, however, important to remember that intersectionality is designed for specific context, and in this study, an intersectional approach enabled an appreciation of the differing needs of the students, given the various social dimensions within which they operated (Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Kember *et al.*, 2010).

3.9 Challenges of an intersectional approach

Despite the obvious merits of intersectionality, it could be argued that it has become a popular 'buzzword' in social and political discourses since it emerged from critical race theory. To conservative thinkers, the concept of intersectionality negates itself in that it inadvertently creates another hierarchical system and renders some as subordinate (Hearty, 2016; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008; Harris and Leonardo, 2018; Strayhorn, 2017). Categorising people as oppressed and/or disadvantaged based on multiple identities creates what Hearty (2016) terms a 'hierarchy of victimhood' (p. 1) whereby individuals or groups are considered victims of a particular system by virtue of their identity. Invariably, the portrayal of these 'victims' as more deserving of support and compassion justifies certain legislative actions to the detriment of the 'privileged', who should, instead, be suppressed and censored. In other words, intersectionality dismantles social and cultural hierarchies but goes on to create different ones. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) surmise that intersectionality creates a new caste system and places minorities and other marginalised groups on top. They add that those with multiple identities risk rendering invisible those with single or binary identities as they are excluded

from their identity group. This results in what Vaughns and Eibach see as double jeopardy, because people with multiple subordinate-group identities experience greater disadvantage than people with singular or dual identities and so the experiences of the former are deemed worthy of recognition. In effect, a Bi-racial or Multi-racial African woman, would find it difficult to identify as a 'Black woman' as her ethnicity does not fit the prototype of Blackness (Harris and Leonardo, 2018; Hearty, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017; Vaughns and Eibach, 2008).

3.10 Conclusion

An exploration of the intersecting inequalities experienced by my students, together with the studies on intersectionality presented in this chapter, highlight the fact that intersectional approach in HE research cannot be overstated. This chapter has highlighted key aspects to consider in educational discourse, with its main topic being the lived experiences of neo-traditional, female learners from minority groups. Intersectionality invites us to challenge educational practices, structures and policies that still adhere to the use of singular categorisations of students experiencing disadvantage or discrimination. This study acknowledges that it is impossible for research to capture every nuance of individual realities, but researchers need to be more aware of the core phenomena occurring at certain intersections of race, class, age and gender. In this research, intersectionality has been used as a qualitative analytic framework that highlights how multi-faceted but interconnected systems of power work to marginalise certain groups within society (Mullen, 2011). I also developed my own reflective position and laid the foundations for working out how to help students on a journey of reflection and empowerment so that they were more in control of their own learning.

The next chapter presents a detailed outline of the AR process, which was an attempt to mitigate the academic challenges experienced by BAME students on a top-up degree programme. It also explains my positionality through the inclusion of my reflective diary, detailing my experiences as an agent of change. Intersectionality provides a useful tool for interpretating the collected data.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter articulates my intervention to mitigate the academic difficulties experienced by mature female students on a top-up programme in Health and Social Care (H&SC). My professional experience, together with continuous reflection, formed the springboard for an empirical study in the form of action research (AR) (defined and discussed below). In a bid to avoid mere tokenism through perfunctory measures, I took decisive action to not only mitigate the academic difficulties experienced by the students but also, to invite them to reflect on their experience of my endeavours. The aim of this study was to make the students understand the reasons for their academic challenges and acquire an awareness of their educational options. Giving women an awareness of how their multiple identities interact and overlap to result in different forms of discrimination, and exacerbate inequality, is an approach that has been a time-honoured practice in intersectional feminist research (hooks, 2000; McCarthy and Grosser, 2023). This was, therefore, not a study in which I simply observed as I collected data; I also wanted the students to be actively involved so that they took control of their learning. In addition, I wanted them to develop an awareness and appreciation of their individual identities and dispel any internalised prejudices they may have been harbouring. My reflections provides an insight into the arduous process of trying to bring about a more positive learning experience for the students.

The chapter begins by explaining the problems that led to the initiative, and goes on to explain AR, the design rationale, the tools used and the cycles of the AR process. This is followed by a discussion of the participant sample, the ethical considerations arising when carrying out AR and the limitations of the study.

4.2 The elephant in the room: Academic challenges faced by minority students on the top-up programme in Health and Social Care

Two years into the programme, the attrition rate was at a high, with only 16 out of about 60 students completing it (University of Cumbria, 2020). This outcome left the H&SC top-up programme in London with a conundrum; a serious challenge that the programme leads felt powerless to rectify. It became apparent that the students were going to require an extensive level of support; one the university was not expecting, or prepared, to

provide, because of the assumption that with a level 5 qualification, extensive academic support was not needed at level 6. Trying to address the students' needs required direct support for IT and English. However, as I explained in Chapter 3, I had also reached the conclusion that a change could only come about if, as suggested by Healey *et al.* (2014), agency was forged, so that students took control of their learning through active involvement. The use of skills audits, learning logs and feedback sheets (presented below) facilitated this involvement and enabled the students to view the various interventions as a partnership, rather than a directive that dominant powers were attempting to thrust upon them (Shor, 1999). This approach, it is argued in the relevant literature, fosters an effective learning environment where learners and instructors work together through shared values and beliefs, leading to empowerment and promotion of individual growth and development. (Healey *et al.,* 2014; Race, 2015; Sambell, 2013). At the same time, the use of the skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs not only ensured that there was continuous dialogue between the tutor and the students, it gave the students a say in the teaching and learning (T&L) process. Furthermore, keeping a reflective diary has enabled me to develop myself as a practitioner and ensured that I have a successful practice. This is because critical reflection forces me constantly to consider what is missing in my classroom and how I can bring about positive change (Finlay, 2008).

My commitment to exposing the hidden academic problems endemic among the top-up students continued to drive my quest for change. I use the word 'hidden' because both the institution and the students themselves were not aware of the skills they were lacking for degree-level study, nor appreciative of the level of the support that would be needed (Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Pawar, 2014). Furthermore, the continuous high attrition and fail rates on the top-up programme in London prompted a serious intervention and it had become apparent that the institution was unable to discover a solution. The pragmatic step would have been to phase out the H&SC top-up programme in London, but given the profile of the learners, caution had to be taken so as not to present a discriminatory approach. I was also cognisant of the fact that pushing for redress for these historically disadvantaged learners could put my job at risk as I attempted to shift the established order of an institution that was over a century old. However, as Forman and McCormick (1995) argue, irrespective of the age of an institution, a system is flawed when it refuses to adapt to change and instead, tries to coerce learners into a prescribed methodology and ascribes labels for those who do not conform.

4.3 Raising student awareness of inequalities and unfairness of structure in the delivery of higher education

Having already identified the problem, I began to ask myself the following questions:

“Why is learning not taking place?”

“Why should this be of concern to me?”

“How could I do things differently?”

“What might be the professional and personal implications of my actions?”

These questions resulted in a dialectic (Moss, Grealish and Lake, 2010) − an intellectual exchange of ideas − that necessitated a research approach that offered tools that would complement one another and bring to the fore the differing needs of the students arising from the various social dimensions within which they operate. The appropriate tools would also facilitate ongoing dialogue between the tutor and the students, giving the students a say in the T&L process. In addition, the right tools would encourage reflection and foster critical thought in the students. An interpretive standpoint (Costley *et al.,* 2010; Gibbs *et al.,* 2007) that attempts to understand social phenomena from the perspective of individual understanding has been used in this study to highlight the correlation between the perceptions and experiences of both the students and tutors in the T&L process. Most importantly, the research method I adopted also enabled me to address the main research questions of this study, as the various research tools provided an insight into the academic experiences of the students.

Critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2005; Shor, 1992) affords us the following insight; that empowering education works when students can self-direct their own learning. In that context, the T&L process should be one that is not static but rather, dynamic, flexible and open to negotiation. My professional experience in higher education (HE) is the antithesis of this; the power dynamics in operation seem, actually, to promulgate fear and shame as a motivator for student success (Cokley, 2000; Crawford, 2014), especially when students, like mine, see their educators as belonging to a different world, with a culture that is unsympathetic to their circumstances (Davis and Harrison, 2013). I, therefore, wanted to help students reach their fullest potential by encouraging them to develop a level of consciousness that enabled them to question and challenge this preconception of dominance with regard to their learning (Kincheloe, 2002). Additionally, even though universities are generally perceived as beacons of opportunity and liberal thought, this is

not the experience of most minorities in HE in the United Kingdom (UK) (Croxford and Raffe, 2015). I had to be prepared for the possibility of being a lone voice for change, given the fact that individuals from minority groups make up less than 3% of the 485 teaching staff at the university (UoC, 2017). In addition, although I had, hitherto, not experienced any overt discriminatory practices as a minority, mid-career, female academic, I was conscious of the consequences my actions could have on my job. I, therefore, had to be prepared to don the many hats of the roles that I would have to play, as I navigated my way through the challenges I might encounter in my quest.

4.4 Action research

The origin of action research (AR) is often attributed to Kurt Lewin, in connection with his attempts to redress the social inequalities experienced by minority ethnic groups. Educational researchers have since adopted this research method because it closes the gap that often exists between research, theory and practice (Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis *et al.,* 2014). In AR, emphasis is placed on the involvement and perspective of the researcher who maintains a continuously interpretative standpoint as they attempt to explain issues within the learning environment (Wood, 2017). It compels an evaluation of existing pedagogical practices and a commitment to addressing educational inequalities through a paradigm shift in practices (Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Brookfield, 2017). Carr and Kemmis (1986) define AR as:

> *…a form of self-reflective inquiry that can be utilized by teachers in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out*. (p. 182).

Bradbury (2015) defines AR as:

> *a democratic and participative orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on, people.* (p. 1).

The above definitions show that AR allows for engagement in both theoretical and practical knowledge of the study and provides a seamless movement between the two (Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Elliot, 1991; Stringer, 2014). It also ensures the adoption of an evaluative standpoint with a view to developing and effecting change in practice (Carr

and Kemmis, 1986; Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Kamler and Thomson, 2014). Kemmis *et al.* (2013) and Car and Kemmis (1986) maintain that it is not possible for the researcher to be removed from the focus of study and simply be a neutral observer. They reason that the researcher plays a salient role within the research and so would need to respond to issues as they unfold. It would, therefore, be considered a flawed approach to place the onus of educational inquiry in the hands of a 'non-native' researcher, who has no links with the education sector (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Kamler and Thomson, 2014; Kemmis *et al.*, 2013).

4.5 Research design and rationale

There are different ways of carrying out AR and they include collaborative AR (Newton and Burgess, 2008), in which teachers and institutions investigate instructional practices in a bid to bring about improvements. In participatory AR (Lawson, 2015), all stakeholders are involved in the research and work together to achieve a common goal. Institution-wide research (Calhoun, 1993) has its basis in reform, with the goal of transforming existing processes or situations. I have taken an individual approach, which focuses on a problem with the aim of developing solutions to mitigate that problem (Calhoun, 1993). The problem, in this instance, was a very palpable lack of academic skills on the part of the students, coupled with a corresponding attitude of resistance to acquiring those skills. I chose the individual approach for its explorative nature, which enabled me to investigate the effects of the various interventions implemented. This form of AR also enabled the active involvement of the students − through feedback − throughout the research process, and provided a better understanding of the academic challenges they were experiencing. All four forms of AR, however, follow a continuous, investigative/reflective cycle, which aims to bring about change and/or improvement. An AR was important because, as argued in the previous chapter, when an intersectional theoretical approach is put into practice, it provides tools and interventions for improving the students' learning experience. It also gives them an understanding of the challenges that may relate to say, gender, race, education and many other things. In designing this AR, which involved eight student participants and two tutors, my priorities were:

a) to promote student agency by ensuring active participation of the students and active reflection on learning and identity throughout the year-long programme;

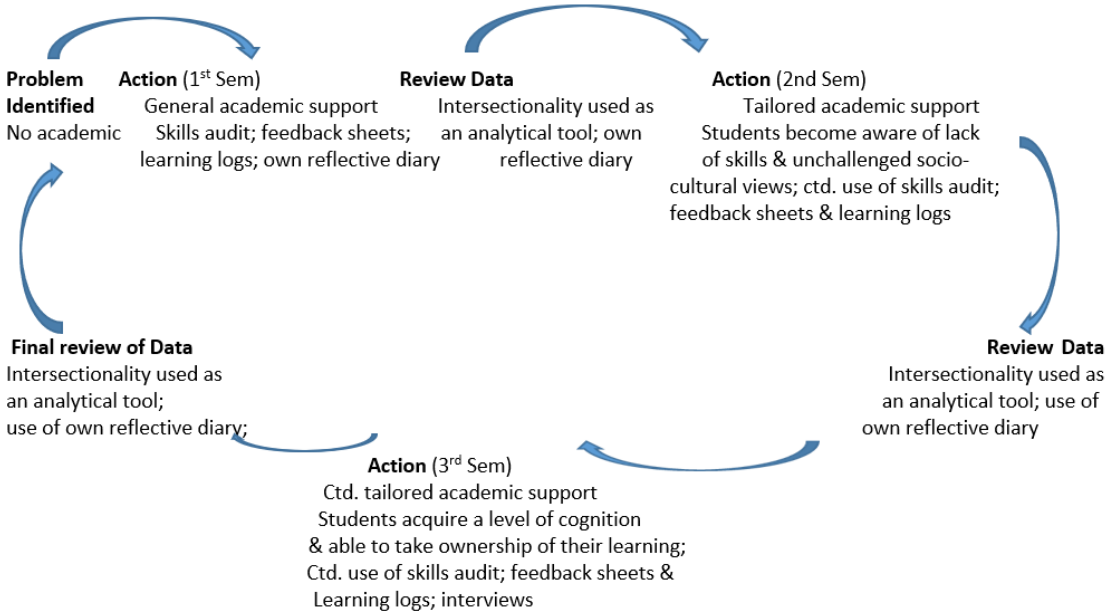
b) to encourage systematic critical reflection to enable them to appreciate the complex demands of their learning environment, the reasons for the academic challenges they face and the intersected pressures of their personal lives;

c) to provide students with an appreciation of their inner potential and challenge internalised prejudices.

4.6 The intervention process

For AR to be an effective process, regular and systematic reflection on action must take place, resulting in a cyclical process of action and change (Noffke and Somekh, 2013). The process, as it occurred within this research, is depicted in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2 Cycle of action



There were three cycles of interventions carried out over the three semesters of the year-long programme. The same research tools were used for each cycle to develop the students' cognitive skills through critical reflection. Results collected from each cycle determined the actions for the following cycle of intervention.

4.7 Research tools

In this section, I explain how, inspired by intersectionality, I tailored the AR tools to the needs of the students. As implied earlier, AR is a broad term, and the process is versatile and refers to varied investigative, evaluative and analytical methods aimed at identifying

problems (academic or organisational) and developing practical solutions to address them. Rather than one method of data collection, AR adopts a holistic approach to finding solutions to problems. What this means is that issues are viewed within the context of the study and consider all the complex factors and inter-relations involved (Campbell, 2013). These could include age, gender, racial and cultural considerations. The use of varied tools is in keeping with the qualitative research paradigm, and could include questionnaires, case studies, surveys, research journal, observations and interviews (Kemmis, 2009; Coghlan, 2019; Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). For this study, I chose to use skills audits, feedback sheets, learning logs and interviews. I used multiple tools with different properties; some were numeric, like the skills audit, and others, like the learning logs, feedback sheets and interviews, were reflective. Each of the tools complemented the others in that where the audits and feedback sheets provided a quick overview of the progress of the students, the learning logs encouraged critical self-appraisal and self-awareness over the year-long period of the programme and provided the students with an evaluative tool with which to assess their progress. The interviews, which were conducted at the end of the programme, enabled both the students and staff to engage in critical reflection and provide a detailed verbal evaluation of the T&L process.

The research method, therefore, had to be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) (Aghera *et al.,* 2018). The tools used had to be specific to the student group, most of whom did not have English as a first language. Due to the lack of higher-level literacy skills in many of the students, the tools had to be written in a language simple enough to understand, as language complexity could result in misinformation or incomplete data, which could, in turn, render the data invalid (Aghera *et al*., 2018). Furthermore, experience had taught me that older adult students juggling multiple expectations on them can switch off easily when the challenge becomes too complex or time consuming, so, I had to ensure that the tools and tasks were concise and crystal clear, to ensure the inclusion of time-poor participants with home and family commitments.

In terms of measurability, demonstrable increases in confidence, academic skills, engagement and self-esteem, for example, would highlight the value added. These changes would come about through the students' newly developed reflective skills giving them a greater awareness of their innate potential and self-worth. These factors are considered to be 'soft' indicators of progress, that is, intangible character traits and interpersonal skills that enhance situational awareness and enable more effective social interaction (Heckman and Kautz, 2012; Tomlinson, 2012). Examples of 'hard' indicators,

on the other hand, might be *specific* abilities and capabilities, that is, a *quantifiable* skillset gained through teaching, learning or work experiences (Clarke, 2017; Balcar, 2016).

The research tools not only allowed me to measure soft indicators of progress, they also highlighted a change in the students' attitude and mindset, developed the students' reflective abilities and, gradually, gave them a better understanding of the hierarchical nature of their learning environment and reasons for their academic difficulties. This resulted in agency and empowered the students to take ownership of their learning through critical thought.

Finally, the research tools enabled me to gather information that reflected individual student's realities, as determined by the interconnecting and overlapping dimensions within which they operated. Time constraints meant that I had to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention within the year-long period of the programme, which was challenging. As holidays and student absences meant reduced contact time with the students, data collection would prove difficult. However, being able to upload the research tools electronically meant that I could still gather my data remotely. This method, proved to be a useful mechanism as the COVID-19 pandemic meant that classes had to be delivered online as physical contact was not possible.

Below, I introduce the use of each of the tools in this intervention and the intended outcomes for each one of them.

4.7.1 Skills audits

A skills audit is a systematic evaluation of knowledge and skills and identifies existing competence or developmental needs (McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Hill, Tinker and Catterall, 2010). Findings from an AR study conducted by Walser (2009) showed that self-assessment by students had aided the development of metacognitive skills in the students and enabled them to take responsibility for their own learning. The self-assessment not only enabled the students to target their improvement efforts accordingly (Walser, 2009; Tan, 2008), it also helped to project the voices of the students by highlighting that institutional structures and processes prevent inclusion and promote inequalities in learning (Crenshaw,1989; Hill Collins, 2008; Liu, 2019). The problem with skills audits is that they often involve self-assessment, which may not always be honest due to a natural reluctance to expose one's inadequacies or admit to skills deficits. Conversely, oversights can lead to the omission of skills that are relevant and important (Hill, Tinker and Catterall, 2010).

A skills audit (see Appendix 1) was deployed in this study to enable a systematic assessment of the students' academic skills and provide an indication of existing, or required, competencies. The participants in this study had already encountered a skills audit in their Evidence-Based Practice module, but it transpired that the students on the London campus had not understood the concept of an audit and found the forms complicated, lengthy and difficult to use. Some of the questions had required the students to assess their research and presentation skills and include an explanation to support their responses. Most of the students had English as a second language, so wording such as 'reflect on your skills' and 'evidence gathering' was difficult to comprehend.

I, therefore, modified the existing template with simpler words that would be easy for the students to understand. For example, I replaced 'gather evidence' with 'look for information' and removed 'academic writing' and instead, listed what academic writing involves (structure, punctuation, grammar and understanding of plagiarism). Modifications also included reducing the number of questions so that a three-page document went to just one page. Furthermore, I changed the open response lines to tick boxes, which made it cleaner and easier for the students to use.

The audits were completed at the beginning of each semester and because this appraisal was carried out by the students and not the tutors, it enabled each student to engage in a critical self-analysis of the skills and knowledge they were in possession of, identify those they were yet to acquire, and make a record of these (Walser, 2009; Tan, 2008). The audits were incorporated into all the modules on the programme so that the students would be able to monitor their own progress throughout the year-long programme. This had the additional advantage of enabling me to tailor support as needed so that skills support tutors could provide informed and targeted assistance. The audit also allowed me to plan the class sessions for the semester. For instance, noticeable improvement in time management and study skills meant referrals were no longer needed in study support. This meant more time could be given to other areas that needed developing, especially in academic language development and writing.

4.7.2 Feedback sheets

'Feedback' is information collected from individuals about their experiences (Driscoll and Cadden, 2010; Bell and Aldridge, 2014). Feedback can be verbal, gestural or written and is often used in education to improve the T&L process. Feedback was used in this study not just as an end of term generic evaluation but tailored specifically to an evolving,

ongoing investigation. Feedback was, therefore, useful for tutors as it provided information on the T&L process after the completion of each module, giving greater insight into how best to support the students. It was also a way of providing tutors with the information that would enable them to improve their teaching, respond to the needs of the students and make the necessary adjustments to their instructional methods (Driscoll and Cadden, 2010; Bell and Aldridge, 2014; Pan *et al.,* 2021). For the students, feedback pinpointed their subject areas of strength and those areas they needed to improve.

As part of an AR process, Bell and Aldridge (2014) investigated the use of students' feedback on the T&L process and found that inviting students to assess their learning experiences encouraged teacher development and brought about a more positive attitude to learning (Cresswell, 2014; Driscoll and Cadden, 2010). They report that when tutors review feedback from students, they develop their own reflective practice and often uncover areas that would benefit from some additional focus. Moreover, because the students get to know their teachers over time, they acquire a comprehensive view of their teachers' instructional style (Brookfield, 2015; 2017; Pan *et al.,* 2021). In effect, student feedback allows the teacher to gain an understanding of the learning preferences of their students. One main disadvantage with feedback sheets, however, is the possibility that students may not respond as candidly as one might hope, for fear of possible reprisals.

There was, already in existence, an electronic module evaluation form that students were meant to complete at the end of every semester. However, most of the students on the H&SC top-up programme did not fill these in as they found the questions lengthy and the language difficult to comprehend. Also, as most lacked the required IT skills, they needed support to gain access to the relevant online portal. Wanting feedback to be a part of the students' active involvement, I modified the existing template using simple English that was easy for the students to understand (see Appendix 2). I also included tick boxes, which made it quick and easy for the students to provide the much needed feedback in class and helped me to fine-tune the next stage of the AR. The feedback sheets also exposed the variations that existed between the students, an element which intersectionality, in essence, tries to bring to the fore.

4.7.3 Learning logs

Students use learning logs to record their thoughts, feelings and questions about their learning (Gibbs, 1991; Schön, 2016). They help students to deepen their learning as they encourage reflection on how and what has been learned. A learning log can also facilitate

a continuous dialogue between students and tutors. In a study by Stephens and Winterbottom (2010) it was found that learning logs developed metacognition, as students were using them, effectively, to synthesise knowledge gained in the classroom and personal experience.

However, many students have not yet acquired the skill of reflective writing because reflection itself has not been a part of their lives (Brookfield, 2015; McCarthy, 2011). In addition, the pressure to write regularly may be regarded as an added burden by students with busy lives (Kheng and June, 2015; Thorpe, 2004). A learning log must, therefore, be designed in such a way that it encourages and facilitates students to assess their learning (knowledge/skills) and its value for their future (Gibbs, 1991).

The learning log was the most powerful tool used for this study. The incorporation of a reflective log into the learning process not only actively involved the learners, it also enabled the students to document their progress on the course. Initially, participants were given notebooks to record their experiences, but most of them did not use these, as reflection was not an activity they were used to. Two of the participants who did, wrote in their native language, which I could not comprehend. Not wanting to miss the opportunity to collect valuable data, I devised a template (see Figure 3) that enabled the students to record their experiences in the course of their study and was easy for me to analyse. The log was a shared electronic document, which meant I was able to access each student's logs and monitor the frequency of the entries. I could, then, prompt those yet to make entries or assist them on how and when to make entries around their busy personal lives. I could also read the log entries as they were made and note down issues that were common to all the students, which helped me to plan the interventions. In addition, having access to the logs enabled me to respond immediately to issues a student may raise that were impacting on their learning. So, should a student note their difficulty with accessing online resources, for instance, the learning support tutors could be notified. Also, the template contained questions that served as prompts to aid the students' responses. This proved valuable, as the participants found the template easy to use and made regular entries. Moreover, having to respond to questions like; 'What was the issue?'; 'What did I learn?' and 'What were my thoughts and feelings?', encouraged the students to think critically about their learning experiences and their own actions/responses to those experiences. Developing some level of criticality increased the students' self-awareness, self-identity and personal growth (Gibbs, 1991; Schön, 2016). Additionally, engaging in self-enquiry effectively developed the students' self-direction and improved their self-

efficacy, as the students reflected upon their actions and came up with solutions to the problems they identified (Bandura, 1993; 1999; Stephens and Winterbottom; 2010; Wain, 2017).

Figure 3 Students' reflective log

REFLECTIVE LOG **NAME:**

This is a reflective log to help you keep a record on your learning experiences. Reflection is a way of assessing yourself, your ways of working and study practices. Reflecting helps you to get rid of skills and practices that are not effective and helps you to maintain current skills and develop new skills and review their effectiveness.

This log is for the duration of your top up programme and covers three semesters. Adding lines as required, you need to write down your experiences and reflect on how to improve on future actions.
At the end of the semester, you will provide a short summary of your learning experience for that semester and your future development plans.

Semester One **Weeks Commencing**	**The issue(s) /event(s)**	**Why did the situation/event occur?**	**What did I learn?**	**What was my thought, feeling and action?**	**Were my actions appropriate to the situation/event and could I have done things differently?**	**Could I have accessed support?** **Yes/No**
	Summary			**Future Developmental Plans**		

Semester Two **Weeks Commencing**	**The issue(s) /event(s)**	**Why did the situation/event occur?**	**What did I learn?**	**What was my thought, feeling and action?**	**Were my actions appropriate to the situation/event and could I have done things differently?**	**Could I have accessed support?** **Yes/No**
	Summary			**Future Developmental Plans**		

Semester Two **Weeks Commencing**	**The issue(s)/event(s)**	**Why did the situation/event occur?**	**What did I learn?**	**What was my thought, feeling and action?**	**Were my actions appropriate to the situation/event and could I have done things differently?**	**Could I have accessed support?** **Yes/No**
	Summary			**Future Developmental Plans**		

My response to the students' inability to independently make reflective notes, reinforces the need to ensure that research tools are fit for purpose (Kemmis, 2009; Coghlan, 2019). Consequently, the learning logs extended the scope of the students reflections as this was a continuous exercise that lasted for the duration of their programme. This provided me with rich and authentic data as the information provided was from the students and a true account of their lived experiences.

4.7.4 Interviews

Interviewing is a method in qualitative research that involves questioning in order to collect information. Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013) and Creswell (2014) see interviews as useful tools for data collection in qualitative research. This is because interviews allow for the exploration of issues through dialogue. Two or more people could be involved in interviews with one asking the questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Interview types vary and differ in the level of structure. Interviews could be either structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Noffke and Somekh, 2013). In structured interviews, questions are predetermined and are often 'closed', requiring 'yes' or 'no' responses. Sometimes, open-ended questions are used but this can lead to deviations in the discussion and so are less common (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Silverman, 2021). Unstructured interviews are more flexible as there are no set questions. Instead, the interview takes the form of unconstrained conversation and would usually proceed based on previous answers (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Silverman, 2021). A semi-structured interview combines open questions with pre-determined ones that often prompt the discussion and allow the interviewer to explore particular issues in greater depth (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Silverman, 2021). A major problem with interviews as a source of research data is the 'interviewer effect' (Fischer and Bayham, 2019; Van Bochove *et al.,* 2015), which is a form of bias that occurs when the responses of the interviewee are influenced by the interviewer's own characteristics (such as race, age, gender identity). Also, interview questions take time to prepare and the analysis of the data can be time consuming (Silverman, 2021).

For this study, semi-structured interviews were adopted for their exploratory nature. The aim of the interviews was, therefore, to extend the AR process by giving the students further opportunity to engage in a critical, retrospective account of their subjective experiences as they journeyed through their study. I had some predetermined questions

(see Figure 4) that allowed the students to express themselves freely, resulting in the collection of rich and authentic data (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Noffke and Somekh, 2013). Furthermore, being so involved in the T&L process, and working closely alongside the students, afforded me a level of rapport with them, so, a degree of familiarity and trust had developed over the course of the year. As such, the interviews provided an opportunity for both staff and students to voice their opinions on not only the T&L process, but also about my role within the teaching and intervention processes, especially in terms of my identity and social and cultural connections. Lastly, the staff and students were able to provide a subjective evaluation of the policies and processes in operation at the university to determine the extent to which they promote inclusivity for minority groups.

A graphic illustration of the interview rationale is presented in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4 Interview questions and rationale

Student interview questions	Related tutor interview questions	Related sub-research questions	Rationale
1. Why did you decide to undertake degree level study? What steps (if any) did you take to prepare yourself to undertake this top-up programme?	1. In your opinion, how well do older adult female students returning to higher education cope with higher-level study?	1. How can we support mature female students from BAME groups when they return to HE?	This allows me to gain both student and tutor perspective of how prepared the mature female students were for degree-level study.
2. Based on your response on the feedback sheets, why did you find it difficult/easy to express yourself verbally/in writing?		1. How can we support mature female students from BAME groups when they return to HE?	This not only encourages the student participants to engage in a critical self-appraisal of their academic skills, it also allows for a deeper exploration of why they lacked or possessed these particular skills.
3. How effective did you think the skills audit, feedback sheets and logs were in monitoring your progress in the programme? Could you share some of the issues that came to light? Especially as you had to complete the latter part of your programme online (due to the Coronavirus pandemic).		2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences? 3. What kind of interventions do we need to consider and put in place and how do they impact the students, both in terms of academic and personal development?	This allows the students to reflect on their IT skills (or lack thereof) and the importance of these skills in light of the changes happening globally. It also allows for an in-depth analysis of their study skills in the absence of face-to-face support, and also the impact of online learning on their academic performance. In addition, it allows participants to engage in a critical reflection and explanation of their academic development at the different stages of their programme.
4. In the learning logs, you expressed		1. How can we support mature female students	This gives participants the

fears/anxieties about studying at university; why was this?		from BAME groups when they return to HE? 2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences?	opportunity to provide explicit insight into their thoughts, feelings and experiences as older adult learners and how they were able to deal with the various emotions.
5. How effective do you think the various support strategies utilised on the programme were? Which of these did you find most useful (or not useful) and why?	2. What do you think of the various support strategies introduced into the H&SC programme? If you had been in my shoes, what (if anything) would you do differently?	2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences? 3. What kind of interventions do we need to consider and put in place and how do they impact the students both in terms of academic and personal development?	An evaluation of the interventions from both staff and students will provide insight from student, staff and institutional perspectives on the impact of these various interventions.
6. What impact do you think that your personal circumstances (gender, age, marital status, family commitments etc.) had on your studies?	3.What impact do you think the students' individual circumstances (gender, age, marital status, family commitments etc.) had on their studies?	1. How can we support mature female students from BAME groups when they return to HE? 2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences?	The expressions of both the students and the staff would allow me to gain an appreciation of how the personal circumstances of the students directly impacts on their learning.
7. In your opinion, what difference (if any) did having me as your main tutor make to your learning?	4.What difference (if any) did having me as the main tutor on the programme, have on the students' learning?	2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences? 3. What kind of interventions do we need to consider and put in place and how do they impact the students both in terms of academic and personal development?	This would provide an opportunity for both staff and students to voice their opinion about my role within the T&L process on the programme, especially in terms of my identity and social and cultural connections.
8. How far do you think your experiences during the programme reflect the university's ethos as a WP institution that values and actively supports diversity?	5. To what extent do you think the WP ethos of the university actively supports diversity?	2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences?	Staff and students are able to provide a subjective evaluation of the policies and process in operation at the university to determine the

			extent to which they promote inclusivity of minority groups.
9. How would you summarise the overall impact of this course on your personal and professional development? Talk about your progress, your learning experiences, your likes and dislikes and the effect it had on your future plans etc.		1. How can we support mature female students from BAME groups when they return to HE? 2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences? 3. What kind of interventions do we need to consider and put in place and how do they impact the students both in terms of academic and personal development?	This allows the participants to critically reflect on their experiences and provide a summary of their learning journey over the year-long programme
10. Based on your personal experiences, what advice would you give to older female adults who are considering degree-level study?		1. How can we support mature female students from BAME groups when they return to HE? 2. Given the multiple components of the identities of mature female students, how do these impact on their academic experiences? 3. What kind of interventions do we need to consider and put in place and how do they impact the students both in terms of academic and personal development?	Students would be able to express whether the pursuit of an HE qualification is a worthwhile endeavour despite the complexities of experiences of most older, adult, female learners.

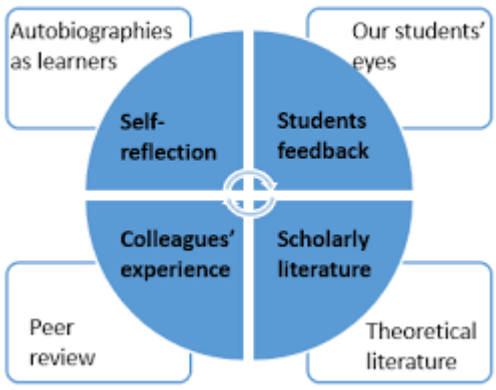
4.7.5 My reflective diary

Reflection is a stipulation laid out in the Lifelong Learning UK Standards (2007) as it ensures effective continuing professional development (CPD). Reflection enabled me to think about my teaching practice and evaluate my effectiveness in the classroom. Using Brookfield's reflective framework (2017) (Figure 5), fostered a close student/tutor relationship, as I was forced to listen to the students' voice and respond accordingly.

It should be noted that this is not a standard method of AR; the introduction of two elements – interviews and my reflective diary – provided greater scope for data collection. The viewpoint of the participants provided insights that I could not have envisaged, thus allowing for new understanding, information and directions for my practice. The diary not only forced me to reflect, it ensured that any relevant information was captured and recorded and could later be used as a reference point for my study. Hence, I was able to keep abreast of, and address, the many issues that emerged relating to the academic challenges experienced by the students. I could, then, immediately note down potentially useful strategies that might be used to bring about an improvement on the programme. Most importantly, the interviews and diary entries enabled me to establish congruence and incongruence between the participants' viewpoints and mine, which, again, ensured continuous dialogue between the research tools (Moss *et al*., 2010; Given, 2008; Liu, 2019).

With constant reflection, I also began to see myself as an agent of change for the programme, even though I was unsure what form the changes would take. I had already established that many of the students struggled with degree-level study, so, the next logical step was to come up with a solution; a task that, I had come to realise, would have to be mine. Having a record of events allowed me to monitor the various interventions and evaluate their impact, then, take the next steps, based on my evaluations.

Figure 5 Brookfield's reflective model (2017)



Additionally, I was able to acknowledge the views of my colleagues as this is important for professional development. Using the four lenses of Brookfield's reflective framework ensured that theory was effected in my practice and meant that I had to examine my own assumptions and assume a holistic viewpoint. This was important

because very often, we are blind to our own preconceptions, which determine how we view phenomena. I was, therefore, able to gain an understanding of the learning needs of my mature female learners and adapt the process to suit their needs (Finlay, 2008). Though the majority of the students on the H&SC programme were female, the diverse nature of the students forced me to think about what was missing in my classroom and necessitated the adoption of varied pedagogical approaches to accommodate these variations (Bondie *et al.,* 2019).

Furthermore, my reflections allowed me to develop my interpersonal skills, including a more patient approach to my teaching. Emotional intelligence (EI) (Gobinder, 2017; Landau and Meirovich, 2013) was one of the most important skills I had to develop as it made me aware of the learning needs of my students, especially with regard to their learning environment and learning styles. Since experience had shown me that if older adult learners feel threatened in their learning environment, they easily become disengaged from the learning process (Kember *et al*., 2010), I actively adopted a nurturing approach to try to connect with my students and show that I cared about their wellbeing and success (Pratt and Ross-Gordon, 2002).

I was mindful of the possibility that my position as their main tutor could present an impediment to the research process (Egharevba, 2001) (despite that being a Black woman meant that I shared with them some commonality of experiences). I, therefore, chose to use data collection tools that were independent of researcher input. This consideration was crucial, as the information provided by the students would infuse a high level of authenticity and validity that could not be conferred upon them had only one method of data collection been used.

4.8 Researcher positionality: reflections of an 'other'

In this section, I present a reflective account of my experiences as an agent of change, and the documented evidence of progress and development that occurred in the course of the intervention. I aim to validate my approach to the study by combining the information obtained from the multiple research tools. I highlight how my actions facilitated the harmonies that emerged and solved the tensions. Since I played an active role in this experience and was not an 'invisible' observer, I have included relevant entries from my own reflective diary. In addition, excerpts from the interview transcripts of two of the tutors have been included in the discussion.

I have presented this account as a journey that was embarked upon not only by me, but also by the students and the institution where it took place. For clarity and fluidity, this account is chronological – beginning from a state of complete ignorance and travelling to a position in which knowledge and understanding is gained by all parties involved. I emphasise that I cannot lay claim to neutrality as my viewpoint is grounded in a position that reflects the pluralism of my role within the research context (Eilertson *et al.,* 2008; Quicke, 2010).

4.8.1 The challenge

4.8.1.1 Professional progression or professional risk?

As a Black female professional, I am aware of the potential difficulties that exist in terms of career advancement. This is because research shows that race still greatly impacts on professional progression (Coghill, 2017; McGregor-Smith, 2017; Matchett, 2013; Pilkington, 2013; Ruiz and Holvino, 2016). McGregor-Smith (2017) noted that people from minority groups are less likely to be given promotions and more likely to be disciplined or judged harshly. She goes on to say that individuals from Black and minority ethnic groups often face discrimination and bias at every stage of their career, meaning that they are less likely to reach their full potential. Aware of this phenomenon, when the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care was to commence in London in January of 2018, I was astounded when I was approached to take on the lead role. Seeing this as a rare chance to advance my career, I accepted the position, as it promised to be a challenging, yet rewarding, experience. I recognised that the diverse body of mature learners on the programme would provide a wealth of experiences that would enhance my practice. It was also an opportunity to put all my knowledge and skills into good use. That said, I was not blind to the fact that the racial profile of the students meant that I was considered the right fit for the position. I was also mindful of the fact that should the programme be considered unviable, I was at risk of being out of a job. What I could not have foreseen was the emotional upheaval that would follow as a result of months (and years) of self-doubt, frustrations and anger. My reflections below record these different emotions:

> ***25/05/18 –*** *I accepted this job knowing the challenges, yet professional benefits, it could bring. Seeing that the students on the top-up programme are all from minority ethnic groups makes me wonder if I was assigned the position because I was Black. This particular detail has proven to be a hindrance rather than an advantage as the students see me as the enemy. This has made the past five months extremely difficult. I can choose to quit or soldier on…*

The decision to provide a more positive learning experience for the students on the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care (H&SC) was born out of professional duty and the desire to give the learners a voice. Without having a full appreciation of the personal and professional implications of my decision, I took up the challenge, viewing it as an opportunity to advance my career and, perhaps, contribute to the world of academia. On this trajectory, I, like the students, became transformed by my experiences. The students came to acquire skills and knowledge that helped raise their cognition and brought about empowerment; and I, through reflection, gained an understanding of the complex nature of individual identities and how these must be considered to gain a holistic understanding of the individual. In my quest to gain a better appreciation of these nuances, I uncovered the intersections between the experiences of the students and mine (Brookfield, 2017), which completely changed my professional viewpoint.

4.8.1.2 Enduring 'friendly fire'

Practice experience, together with critical reflection and extensive engagement with literature on mature learners, exposed the academic challenges this student body experienced in higher education (HE). These challenges are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. The fact that the institution and the students themselves had no appreciation of the extent of these challenges only compounded the problem. As a critical practitioner, I took decisive actions to address these challenges that might be considered as progressive and anti-hegemonic (Archer *et al.,* 2007; Cooper, 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015; Mullen, 2011). At first, many of the students considered me 'culturally suspect' as the initial tasks I set exposed their inadequacies. In the students' view, my actions were not supportive of minority learners but instead, akin to the discriminatory practices expected of the White tutors. The students took it for

granted that as a Black tutor, I would have a better understanding of their lived experiences and ensure that the university responded appropriately to their unique learning needs. The reality, however, was that the university was not expecting to invest a huge amount of resources in order to do this.

In the face of meagre financial resources, I found that critical engagement with intersectionality provided a multi-dimensional perspective to better understand the students' challenges, as well as some innovative ways to mitigate them. I, therefore, adopted a teaching approach that considered the numerous social dimensions within which each female student operated (Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011; 2015). I noted my thoughts:

> ***20/03/20 –*** *I have been reading a lot about intersectionality in the context of not only my research but my practice as a whole. It has provided me with a really useful theoretical and analytical tool as I am now able to think from a much broader perspective. Older adults bring a wealth of experience into the classroom but also come laden with a multitude of individual baggage, which has a direct impact on their learning experience. Intersectionality has forced me to consider these issues so that I am able to not only improve my practice but also provide guidance to each student so that she/he can have the appropriate support that meets their learning needs. The female students, especially, need this tailored support as many have really heavy family commitments and other personal issues that impact on their ability to engage. My considerations must, therefore, include not only their gender but their age, race, socio-economic status and much more.*

Taking on the role, I soon realised that all the students on the top-up programme were of low socio-economic status (SES) (Reay *et al.,* 2005; 2009; 2010) and lacked the necessary cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) needed to successfully manoeuvre their way within the highly stratified HE environment. It was, therefore, important that I tailored support in such a way that these considerations were factored in.

4.8.1.3 Assumptions of knowledge – knowing, yet not knowing

Believing that they were prepared for university, the students enrolled on the top-up programme wanting to achieve professional and personal advancement and self-fulfilment. The university had accepted the students at face value as they had met the entry requirement, which was a qualification at level 5 (or the equivalent) in Health and Social Care (H&SC) or a relevant field. This assumption of preparedness was very quickly dispelled as many of the students came to realise that degree-level study required commitment and total engagement. Also, that it would entail the use of skills and knowledge that many of them did not possess. In addition, the students would need to adopt the culture and language of academia, which Commins and Miramontes (1989) and Forman and McCormick (1995) concede would be an impossible endeavour as most would not be accustomed to such culture and language. This intangible form of capital has to do with the values, dispositions and ideologies passed on within families from generation to generation. This sometimes results in low expectations on the part of tutors and, ultimately, internalised prejudice (Adams, 2008; Byrd, 2015; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Kohli *et al.,* 2006; Shaunessy *et al.,* 2007). As negative self-worth emerges, inferiority complex develops and this weakened belief in self-efficacy produces self-doubt and self-devaluation, resulting in poor academic performance (Clarke and McCall, 2013; Shaunessy *et al.,* 2007).

> ***10/10/19 –*** *I don't know whether to see Nokulu as hilarious or frustrating. She sure brings some laughter into the classroom. She fits the profile of the typical older adult learner because EVERYTHING is too difficult. It is four weeks into the semester, and she told me at the end of today's class that she does not understand anything that has been taught. "Everything is sounding like you are speaking in a language I can't understand" she says. I referred her to Learning Support and advised her to seek help from any of her peers, who may be able to explain the module contents better. I will see how she gets on after the reading week and arrange a one-to-one tutorial session with her.*

Effectively, for these mature learners, the learning environment, with all its ramifications, posed a threat to not only their personal advancement, but also, their

respective identities as they knew them. As already highlighted in this study, this alien system, combined with the realisation of not knowing, brought out fears and anxieties. Intersectionality brings to the fore these numerous considerations and necessitates pedagogical practices that adopt more complex approaches. Approaches that take into account the subjective, psychological dispositions of the older female learners from a minority group, for instance, and the different, individual social dimensions within which each one operates. My reflections note these complexities in particular students.

Their lack of skills resulted in frustration and, in some instances, anger, as my students began to experience academic difficulties at every turn. Academic language aside, most found it difficult to effectively accommodate their personal, academic and, in some cases, professional obligations. In the view of Hall (2017) and Hammonds (2017), in situations such as these, the sense of being out of depth soon sets in and leads some to walk out on their dreams altogether. I witnessed the frustrations of the students but believed that with the right support, these mature learners could effectively call upon their wealth of experiences and translate them towards academic success. I, again, note down my thoughts:

> ***28/09/18*** *– The Sept 18 group have started, which is the third intake this year! One female student came up to me after sitting through the, quite technical, Evidence-Based Practice module, and said, "I don't think I can do this… I just don't understand what is being said". It is the same issues that keep repeating and I just can't stop thinking about my role as a tutor and how to improve the students' learning experience. I sense the fear and anxiety in many of them and I know some are not going to complete the course. I really want to do something to, at least, give them a positive experience.*

Davis and Harrison (2013) believe that when educational policies effectively negate other beliefs and cultures, treating them as less important, the students from those backgrounds see themselves as less worthy than those from the mainstream. They go on to say that these dominant ideologies aid the justification of a deficit viewpoint, hence, perpetuating social injustice. For others (Kohli, 2014; Perez *et al.,* 2006; Stuart *et al.*, 2011), if HE institutions throw open their doors and give access to students who

lack the necessary skills to succeed academically, they are duty-bound to provide the necessary support. With the top-up programme, the university was not expecting to provide a high level of academic support, on the assumption that having achieved a level 5 qualification, the students would not require extensive support of this type at level 6. This, invariably, negates the university's widening participation (WP) ethos, as it not only demonstrates the disparity between policy and practice, it also exposes the lack of parity between the expectations of the students and those of the institution. Moreover, when compared with other HE institutions, the University of Cumbria had less than 2% minority ethnic groups within their geographic footprint (UoC, 2018) and this only helped to reinforce the dominant narrative. It was clear that changes were essential to accommodate the needs of the students but it was difficult to convince the programme managers that modifications were necessary. My diary entries capture some of my reflections:

> ***17/05/19 –*** *The London-based top up programme in H&SC has become a serious challenge and the university does not know what to do with it. Cumbria wants to be seen as a 'champion of the widening participation agenda' with values that underscore this philosophy but it appears that age is the only consideration on the top-up degree programme, whereas it is much more than that in London. But London is not familiar territory (Cumbria is a northern-based institution) and so has not much knowledge or understanding of minority ethnic issues.*

My frustrations were later endorsed in my interview with Tutor A:

> *…It's out of ignorance in some respects, I suppose, because we don't have experience up here of a diverse population that you do in London, so I know that I've approached the London cohorts in the same way that I approach any other cohort, and it's not the same. But I have gained some knowledge in that respect.*

Ignorant of the existence of other cultural realities, the university had no appreciation of the needs of these learners, hence, unconsciously relegating these learners to the margins in which, historically, they have been placed.

It is important to note that this battle to reconcile conflicting realities was not experienced by the students alone. I experienced internal turmoil because the students looked to me to alleviate their challenges, but I felt constrained within my role. As a member of a minority group, I was in opposition to a structure upheld by the dominant White class; one that purports to promote inclusive practices but, in reality, maintains systems, policies and spaces that are alienating to marginal groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Patton *et al*., 2016; Webb and Sepúlveda, 2020; Yosso, 2005). The inner turmoil of this colossal undertaking is captured in my diary entry below:

> ***10/07/19*** *– Yet another term is coming to an end and the whole programme has become an 'elephant in the room' and I am not under any illusions that the buck does not stop with me. Let's hope that some of my support requests are approved as, surely, this state of affairs can't continue. (IT JUST CANNOT!!!) It has become the baby I have to tirelessly nurture so that it grows, or I gently lay to rest.*

My sensitivity to these complexities allowed me to connect with each of the students so that I could identify their individual learning needs and provide the appropriate support (Cole, 2020; Cooper, 2016; Jonsson, 2016; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015). Unconsciously, I had assumed the maternal figure determined to ensure the survival of her charges. In Egharevba's (2001) view, I was a familiar and familial embodiment of their respective racial and cultural proclivities, and so, there was an unspoken assumption, by both the students and the institution, and probably by myself, that I was suitably placed to address the situation. Additionally, intersectionality fostered in me the need to rid the students of internalised prejudices by developing their self-worth and also critical thought, so that they had a better understanding of their individual identities and were able to challenge the hegemonic ideologies that enable the dominant class to maintain its power (Egharevba, 2001; McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Stuart *et al.*, 2011). These principles guided my actions and provided a starting point to addressing the problems, even though I did not have all the solutions. Having to put up with challenges from other minorities resulted in self-doubt as to my ability to undertake a project of this magnitude. In addition, as an individual from the minority group, I had to operate within a seemingly hegemonic system that gave little or no consideration to my cultural or racial values. Ignoring personal and professional

ramifications, I strove to ensure a better learning experience for this historically marginalised group of learners. It would have been easier to endorse the (erroneous) deficit narrative, which attributes academic under-achievement to factors inherent in the individual and not the prevailing systems and structures that nurture this deficit thinking. However, I wanted to expose the failures and limitations of existing socio-economic structures that perpetuate injustices (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Webb and Sepúlveda, 2020; Yosso, 2005). In an institution with a predominantly White staff, it was difficult to get the programme management to see things from my perspective. In my interview with Tutor A, she validates this point when she states:

> *It's out of ignorance in some respects, I suppose, because we don't have experience up here of a diverse population that you do in London so I know that I've approached the London cohorts in the same way that I approach any other cohort, and it's not the same.*

4.8.1.4 Managing emotions

As a Black woman, I may not have experienced the same level of internalised prejudices as my students, given my level of education and middle-class background, however, I, too, have experienced educational systems that gave little or no consideration to my cultural beliefs and values, as these were considered of less value. Having experienced HE in Nigeria, the difference was noticeably clear; there, I was never made to feel inadequate or inferior in my learning environment. So also, intersectionality gave me a deeper appreciation of the students' internalised struggles and, therefore, ensured that in my teaching practice, I constantly reflected on my actions and always looked for what was missing in my classroom. In addition, I adopted the partnership approach (Caruana, 2011; McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Simpson, 2012), which is a process whereby learners and instructors work together to ensure that teaching and learning (T&L) is an effective process. This ensured that there was on-going discussion between the students and tutors throughout the year-long top-up programme. The research tools (learning logs, skills audits and feedback sheets) facilitated this discourse as they provided them with a voice and an authentic account of their lived experiences.

Unfortunately, many of the students did not, immediately, see the value of these strategies because they found it hard to accept that my actions were based on good

intentions. In addition, I was considered ‘not Black enough’ and deemed ‘culturally suspect’ as I was not acting in solidarity with other minorities, hence, not true to my minority roots (Egharevba; 2001; McGrady and Reynolds, 2012). At every turn, I faced obstacles to my reform efforts. No matter how often I tried to explain the benefits of my strategies, some of the students considered them to be either inadequate, or even obstructive, to their desired method of learning. This resentment was particularly directed to the in-house tasks, which prevented them from using assignment mills (Ellis *et al.,* 2020; Lancaster, 2020; Molinari, 2014). To them, I was, in fact, upholding the oppressive policies of the dominant class, which has no appreciation of their life experiences. It was the expectation of these students that I would turn a blind eye to their fraudulent practices and even assist them to acquire a degree without much effort on their part. I accommodated their misguided mind-set and lack of co-operation and reasoned that their actions were born of ignorance and the desperation to achieve a higher-level qualification. These negative feelings were recorded in some of the students’ log entries and are discussed in Chapter 5. I noted the attitudes of two of the participants in particular:

> ***11/10/19 –*** *Beanie is a bit aloof, but I think this is just a defence mechanism so that people don’t get too close to her.*
>
> ***27/1/20 –*** *Mariam is not a speaker at all. She will offer her voice only when prompted. All she does is take down notes. When I try to engage with her, I sense her reluctance. She always gives me funny looks, which appear to me to be disapproving. Her attitude/ demeanour makes me think that she doesn’t like me. I hope to get through to her in the coming one-to-one session.*

Beanie and Mariam were, initially, reluctant to relate with me and so put up invisible barriers, which I viewed as a self-preserving reaction to perceived threats (Blakesley, 2016; Hollway and Jefferson, 2009; Trieu and Lee, 2018). To connect effectively with the students, I tried various forms of interpersonal skills such as emotional intelligence, active listening, patience and motivation. By Bourdieu’s (1984) reasoning, my position bestowed a level of cultural capital and superiority, which, in the view of McGrady and Reynolds (2012), was likely to cause resentment. Despite the negativity from some quarters, like a mother, I needed to feed my offspring, to provide the nutrition that

would enable them to grow and thrive. Some found my feeding beneficial; some did not even attempt to eat at all, wanting to be fed by someone else; and some ate but rejected the food because they did not like the taste. This latter group of students struggled throughout the programme and ended up either dropping out or completing the course without achieving a qualification. For some students, my actions highlighted their inadequacies and so justified their numerous antagonistic outbursts during class sessions: “Why are you working like the White lecturers and not standing up for us?”; “I think you look down on us… I don’t think you really care about us or our education.”; “If you were not our tutor, we will pass our assignments as the other tutors will not care how we do our assignments as long as we submit. We were fine on the HND programme!”.

> ***31/10/19*** *– The Sept ’19 students did their first in-class formative task today in evidence-based practice. Many came up with every excuse under the sun as to why they could not do the task in class. I expected this reaction as most of the students cannot use a computer nor string together a coherent sentence in English! I knew that most of them often use the services of third parties for their assignments and so never see the need to use the computer to process their work. But I wanted them to develop their English and IT skills so that they would be able to do their assignments without having to seek help from other people. It is really unfortunate that I was viewed as not being supportive; they felt that I was highlighting their lack of skills by exposing their inadequacies instead of covering up for them and ignoring their use of third parties.*

Philip *et al.* (2017) would surmise that being seen as culturally suspect was an inevitable consequence of my strategies, as these were not only exposing, but also took my students out of their comfort zone. My thoughts are noted in my diary:

4/4/20 – *I really have bitten off more than I can chew. I am so tired of the never-ending complaints from some of these ungrateful students. They just don't get it!! That they have been given a golden opportunity to advance themselves is lost to them. I feel that I am fighting a losing battle. But then the likes of Joy, Susie, Orode and Zizi make this all worthwhile. I just hope I can last till the end of their programme because I am completely drained.*

The result of the first formative assignment generated ill-feelings and heightened antagonism in some of the students, which left me feeling frustrated and despondent. The enormity of the charge I had ascribed myself eventually dawned on me and this responsibility proved to be a lonely one. My diary entry captures one of the lowest points of my journey:

> ***22/11/19*** *– The Sept '19 students received their formative assessment results today. High fail rate as usual. Those that failed were quite vocal in their resentment, which was wholly directed at me. The men felt insulted by the fact that women were the main players in their learning and determined their academic fate! Of course, some aspects of their respective African and Asian cultures would frown at that given the view these cultures sometimes have of women. Surprising that they are ignorant of the fact that H&SC is a female dominated profession. Duh!!! Some of the unsuccessful female students were equally hostile. The general consensus seems to be that I was a privileged Black woman from an affluent background who cannot appreciate what they were going through I was accused of not being true to my 'minority roots' (whatever that means!!!)*
>
> *I was also accused of favouring the more able female students who appeared to be coping with their studies. One particular female participant said to me that I do not act like an African and that I was too British.*

The programme management was keen to be seen as upholding inclusive policies but was not always welcoming of the suggested reforms and the dichotomy of policies that would likely ensue between the northern and London-based programmes. The irony

of the *status quo* on the top-up programme was not lost on me; I likened the attitude of the institution to the relationship that exists between the western world and the, so-called, developing nations. In this association, the aid extended by the richer nations ensures there are little or no adverse effects on them and little or no advantages to the poorer nations (Lordemus, 2019; Ume, 2017; Girvan, 2007). Even when some leeway was given, this was to the extent to which it upheld the WP agenda but not to a level that made a significant impact in the lives of these marginalised students.

At times, during this frustrating and laborious journey, I confess to upholding Hall's (2017) belief that the difficulties experienced by the participants were inherent in the profile of the students themselves. I often reasoned that I was fighting a losing battle because studies have found that the personal circumstances of this student profile (such as family responsibilities, demanding jobs, financial constraints, health issues and language barriers) make the pursuit of an HE qualification a difficult, not to say impossible, endeavour (Burton *et al.,* 2011; Swain and Hammond, 2011). These factors manifested in varying degrees in the individual lives of these students with each assuming a plurality of roles and responsibilities that competed for precedence in their lives. These factors resulted in blockages in their educational journey, and for some, ultimate disengagement (Swain and Hammond, 2011). It is the appreciation of these variations that intersectionality brings to the fore, illuminating, as it does, that students are not homogeneous in nature.

The onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 made an already difficult situation even worse as classes had to be moved online. This method of learning was unacceptable to most of the students, especially as most lacked the needed IT skills. As a result, that particular summer semester was a deeply traumatising period for the students, and for me. Believing that the decision to move classes online was contrived by me, some of the disgruntled students attempted a revolt, putting forward a petition to have me removed as their main tutor. These dark moments were captured in my reflections:

> ***3/4/20*** *– The Coronavirus has made a difficult situation even worse. The university has had to move lecture delivery online, which has been resisted by many of the top-up students in HSC. (NO surprises there!) I have been anonymously informed by a student that a revolt is being planned to remove me as their lecturer. I know I am viewed with some degree of reservation by*

some students as I have been told that I am not 'the typical Black or minority'. Not really sure what 'typical' really means but I can guess what their perspective is. I make no apologies for my background or social circumstances. It was, however, comforting that management were dismissive of the views of these narrow-minded students as they saw me as ***THE HSC Department****. Hearing the London campus director saying that the university was lucky to have me and that my efforts were very much acknowledged by the university was comforting to an extent. However, I can't help but wonder if the extent of my value is determined simply by the nature of the existing problem. I am very much aware that my ethnicity is an asset to the HSC London programme, as without a doubt, a White tutor would find it difficult to assume the responsibility I currently assume. I am confident in my ability to perform my job role.*

The students failed to appreciate the frontline battle I was fighting for their cause, and even more importantly, the implications of a pandemic. That these were H&SC students, calls to question their professional knowledge. I had to assume that their attitudes were a result of the challenges from the pandemic that they were facing in their own lives. It was, therefore, mildly gratifying that management was dismissive of the exploits of these ignorant students, as they saw me as 'The H&SC department'. Speaking on behalf of the university, the director on the London campus acknowledged my efforts, adding that the university was 'lucky to have me'. Irrespective of this, however, I could not help but wonder if the extent of my value was determined by my ethnicity and the nature of the existing problem. I felt used in some respect as it was obvious that I was a perfect fit for the job role. Only an individual from a minority could assume the position and responsibility I had taken on. Indeed, for an institution with an all-White management, it was difficult for them to appreciate experiences of prejudice, especially when they emanated from other minorities (Egharevba, 2001; Philip *et al.,* 2017). The assumption was that as a minority, I would have a better understanding of the nuances at play in the varied and multifaceted experiences of these marginalised students. The reality negated this assumption as mentally, physically and emotionally, I was exhausted and sank into the lowest ebb of despair and frustration. Intersectionality had given me a profound understanding of the diverse needs of my students, but I felt powerless in many ways. In the views of Achinstein and Aguirre (2008), Egharevba (2001) and Philip *et al.* (2017), being a

minority did not automatically translate to knowledge of other minorities or, as Egherevba (2001) says, 'the acceptance of an 'other' (p. 228) by another other'. Kohli (2014) explains that the cultural and linguistic variations between groups come into play, creating barriers to interaction. Nevertheless, enduring 'friendly fire' (Philip *et al.*, 2017), I continued to assume the maternal role that I had taken up because like a caring mother, I felt it was my duty to provide for the needs of my 'children' even though some of the students were not deserving of this consideration, given their attitudes. Not having the knowledge and skills of a psychologist, it was extremely difficult to manage the various emotions competing for my attention. I felt totally drained and it was a mental and physical struggle to carry on. I noted in my diary:

> ***4/4/20 –*** *I really have bitten off more than I can chew. I am so tired of the never-ending complaints from some of these ungrateful students. They just don't get it!! That they have been given a golden opportunity to advance themselves is lost to them. I feel that I am fighting a losing battle. But then the likes of Joy, Susie, Orode and Zizi make this all worthwhile. I just hope I can last till the end of their programme because I am completely drained.*

However, the determination of those students who strove to succeed drove my resolve to see the project through and bring about some form of change that would resonate positively in the lives of the students far beyond my classroom. The whole of the intervention process played out in what I came to see as a concordance of conflicting realities. My tenacity eventually paid off, as most of the students were able to acquire the necessary skills to successfully manage their studies while still fulfilling the obligations of their various roles. This is explained in greater detail in the proceeding section.

4.8.1.5 Trust and breakthrough

Using the feedback sheets, skills audits and learning logs throughout the year-long period of the programme enabled the students to engage in continuous, critical self-appraisal, giving them a better understanding of the reasons for their academic difficulties. The gradual change of tone of their log entries indicated increased self-awareness and lessening inclination to externalise their problems. They gained a deeper insight that gave them a different perspective so that they saw themselves not

as victims, but as capable individuals, able to utilise their intrinsic abilities to achieve academic success. In addition, I believe that our shared ethno-racial identity aided my understanding of the students' social and cultural experiences, putting me in a better position to respond successfully to their learning needs (Crosnoe *et al*., 2004; Johnson *et al.,* 2001). Furthermore, a professionally successful Black woman, who appears to have overcome numerous social obstacles, is a source of inspiration to the female students (Egharevba, 2001; McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Stuart *et al.*, 2011). It is for this reason that Maylor (2009) stresses the importance for learners, at any level, to identify with their instructors. Maylor adds that racial parity enables instructors and learners to connect, with learners seeing their instructors as role models to emulate.

For one particular participant (Susie), even though the ethno-racial connection was missing, there was the commonality of gender and, to some degree, age. We also shared the same goal for success. Initially, she came across as an extremely shy and insecure individual and I had to use all the interpersonal skills at my disposal to gently draw her out of her shell and make her comfortable within her learning environment. As I got to know her more, I realised that she was quite an intelligent woman whose insecurity was the result of the language barrier. Unlike the other students, she understood from the start that my motives were genuine; born of my desire for the students to succeed. I noted my observations in my diary entries:

> ***5/10/19 –*** *Susie has always been very quiet in class. Initially, she was reluctant to take part in any of the group activities but, with some encouragement from me and the class, she has begun to engage more. I did not interview her for the programme, but I knew straight away that there was a language barrier. She has been able to respond to my carefully worded closed questions. I will try to draw her out of her shell as she appears to be quite intelligent.*

Over time, Susie trusted me enough to share her past experiences with me, which had had a negative impact on her as an individual. Emotional intelligence (Gobinder, 2017) ensured I was patient and encouraging so that Susie developed a greater sense of self-esteem and self-worth. In addition, intersectionality gave me an understanding of the nature of her challenges and enabled me to support her in the best possible way. I reflected:

> ***6/4/20 –*** *Susie's confidence has really grown as she now volunteers to give answers even without prompting. She is now quick to negate her peers if she thinks they are completely off the mark with their responses. In a one-to-one tutorial session, she stated that all through her life she had always suffered psychological abuse and that she had never had anyone say anything positive to her. She said she had gained so much confidence in such a short time. She brought tears to my eyes when said, "Now Jumie I know I can do everything I want".*

It soon became apparent that Susie expressed herself better in writing than verbally. My elation at Susie's steady progress was palpable in my diary entry.

Susie successfully completed the programme and fulfilled her life's ambition to become a graduate. Being able to connect with her meant that we were able to share an understanding of the instructional goal. With support, Susie took charge of her learning by overcoming her insecurities and internalised prejudices (Gobinder, 2017; Kohli, 2014). Susie's continued growth in confidence, and her development throughout the year-long programme, highlights the importance of tailored instructional approaches that promote individual growth and wellbeing (Hine, 2013; Knowles *et al*., 2012; McCall *et al*., 2018). Her driving force was her ambition to fulfil her dream, and so, welcomed and utilised all available support, resulting in her success.

The efforts of all the students made my own worthwhile. Susie, however, was deeply appreciative of my efforts and I do feel a sense of pride at her achievements. Susie's accomplishments made me realise, yet again, the pivotal role I played in hers and the other students' learning process. As was evident in Susie, the students had been able to take responsibility for their learning and, with guidance, many successfully coped with the demands of their multiple roles. So also, most of the participants acquired a level of cognition that enabled them to dispel their internalised prejudices in favour of values and beliefs founded on self-belief and self-motivation (Gilar-Corbi *et al*., 2020; Lau and Chan, 2001). The positive impact of the intervention is acknowledged by the tutors.

Tutor A:

> *Tweaking and personalising aspects of the program is what makes it, doable and bearable, in some respects, and that ability to be flexible with the teaching, because it's all in the students' interests. It's not about just delivering the program and what works for us but the students' interest.*

Tutor B:

> *You always try to do what will work for the students and not necessarily what the usual process is and you justify your actions. You put the students first always, which is commendable and so they have come to trust you because you are on their side.*

The tutors' comments show that they recognise the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to teaching and that 'one size' does *not* 'fit all'. They also acknowledge that it is important to put the students first by tweaking and personalising the T&L process, as necessary. In addition, their remarks validate my decision to take up the mantle as an agent of change. The university now had a viable programme that had achieved a marked increase in student satisfaction (UoC, 2020). As a result of the positive results, the programme lead for H&SC submitted a really positive feedback to the head of academic quality and development (AQD):

> *Jumie has a wealth of experience, having worked for a number of years in HE and she utilises this knowledge to both support and inspire students. She has worked hard to ensure that students from a variety of backgrounds are provided with supportive and engaging learning environments, offering additional guidance and input where needed. Having observed classroom teaching sessions, it is clear that the environment for learning is relaxed and actively encourages student interaction and expression. Jumie is able to utilise the full range of resources available and adapt these resources/information to fit the profile of students attending her sessions. Professional interest around WP and her own personal standards and values ensure that she is aware and respectful of the diversity of the student cohort. Inclusion and engagement are essential factors, and these are considered for each student in an effort to help them achieve their goals. This passion is evident in the programmes that she teaches*

and in her continued passion and enthusiasm for promoting opportunities for learning with students.

Consequently, I was asked, by the head of AQD, to conduct a continuous professional development training session for staff members within the university's Institute of Health. It is ironic that, as a Black teacher, I was asked to share my practice experience in a White institution. This, again, refutes the flawed assumptions that people from communities of colour have little to offer in terms cognitive or communication skills (Davies *et al*., 2002; Reay, 2002; Shanahan, 2000). The institution's confidence and appreciation increased my resolve to always strive to ensure that my teaching practice continues to be student-focused. The various social dimensions within which the students operated meant that they had differing needs and an intersectional approach enabled me to successfully embrace their individuality. My final diary entry sums up my experiences over the year-long intervention process:

> ***5/12/20 –*** *It's the end of another semester and the end of this research project. I am drained and tired, but I know the 'trauma' I experienced was worth it. My 'children' are going to fly the nest laden with new knowledge and skills and certainly a new mindset. But another set of children will take their place and the process starts all over again. In fact, as I write, another cohort has started and a new one will begin yet again in January. At least now, I feel better equipped, as I have definitely acquired new knowledge and skills. It would be interesting to see what the data collected generates. I already know the answer to that because I was in the middle of it all.*

The success of the research is not only evident in the tutor comments but also in the breakthroughs achieved by the students which would serve them far beyond the walls of the classroom. The evidence also justifies the research approach.

4.9 Participant sample

A total number of ten participants were used for the study and these were made up of eight students and two tutors. Twelve student participants were initially recruited as all consented to participate in the research. I recruited more participants than needed as a pilot study had shown that participants tend to drop out of the research. This

possibility was confirmed as two students pulled out within three weeks, complaining that the reflective logs added to their workload. Two other participants had to be withdrawn due to non-engagement.

4.9.1 Participant profile

The student participants varied in their academic capabilities, and I could have used 'purposeful sampling' (Patton, 2002, p. 230) to target my sample. This would have allowed me to gather specific information that the research set out to examine and, in turn, provide expected results (Patton, 2002; Palinkas *et al*., 2013). However, the high drop-out rate led to low student numbers, hence, I did not have the luxury of a huge number from which to choose my participants. I, therefore, had to accept those who had consented to take part in the research, and who had a reasonable level of engagement. The common factors with the participants were their gender, mature age, socio-economic background and the fact that they were all from minority ethnic groups. The participants brought 'characteristical variation' into the study, which provided a higher level of authenticity, as each individual contributed a unique perspective to the study. These disparities validate my use of intersectionality, which highlights the way individual social identities sometimes endorse systemic oppression and discrimination. Intersectionality also allowed for the exploration of the power dynamics within an HE context (Crenshaw, 1989; Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Reay *et al.,* 2005; 2009; 2010). It was my hope that the data generated from the unique standpoint of each participant would enable me to answer my research questions. Furthermore, to give a balanced viewpoint on the impact of my interventions, it was important to gain an insight into the perspective of the tutors, who provided a subjective evaluation of these. They were also able to assess the extent to which the policies and processes in operation at the university promoted inclusivity. The profile of participants, who have been anonymised, is presented in Figure 6 overleaf:

Figure 6 Participant profile

Student **(Names anonymised)**	**Profile**
Joy	Is Asian and married with four children. Was born and raised in the UK and is 35 years old. Before her Higher National Diploma (HND) programme, had been out of education for over 15 years since completing her GCSEs. Fluent enough in spoken English but needs a lot of support in written English and has some IT skills.
Mona	Is Asian and married with two children. Was born and raised in the UK and is 35 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 15 years since completing her GCSEs. Fluent enough in spoken English but needs a lot of support in written English and has some IT skills.
Susie	Is Eastern European and married with a grown up child. Was born and raised in Eastern Europe and is 45 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 20 years since completing her GCSEs. Not very fluent in English but writes better than she speaks. Has some IT skills.
Beanie	Is African and single with adult children. Was born and raised in Africa and is over 62 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 40 years since completing her GCSEs. Fluent enough in spoken English but needs a lot of support in written English and has no IT skills.
Nokulu	Is African and single with teenage children who live in Africa. Was born and raised in Africa and is 42 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 20 years since completing her GCSEs. Not very fluent in spoken English, needs a lot of support in written English and has no IT skills.
Zizi	Is Asian and single with no children. Was born and raised in the UK and is 35 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 15 years since completing her GCSEs. Fluent enough in spoken English but needs a lot of support in written English. Has some IT skills.
Orode	Is French African and married with four children. Is the main a carer to her disabled spouse. Was born and raised in Africa and is 45 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 20 years since completing her GCSEs. Fluent enough in spoken English but needs a lot of support in written English. Has no IT skills.
Mariam	Is West Indian and married with young children. Was born and raised in the West Indies and is 42 years old. Before her HND programme, had been out of education for over 20 years since completing her GCSEs. Fluent enough in spoken English but needs a lot of support in written English. Has some IT skills.
Tutor	**Profile**
Tutor 1	Is the programme lead and is responsible for the running of the top-up programme in Health and Social Care. Has a nursing background and has been teaching at degree level for over ten years.
Tutor 2	Is a tutor on the programme but also provides academic support for the students in English and IT.

4.10 Making sense of the data

In this section, I discuss how the learning logs and interviews contributed to the thematic analysis. Triangulation (see Figure 7) has been used to bring out the convergence of the information generated from the logs and interviews. Triangulation is a method used in qualitative research to increase the validity and credibility of findings. It involves the use of various methods, or numerous sources of data, to develop a thorough understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999; Noble, 2015). Triangulation, therefore, helps to reduce the bias that could emerge from the use of a single method, single source of information or researcher. According to Patton (1999) triangulation could be (a) method triangulation, (b) theory triangulation, (c) investigator triangulation and (d) data source triangulation. Method triangulation uses multiple methods to collect data about a particular phenomenon (Polit and Beck, 2018). With theory triangulation, the researcher uses different theories, or hypotheses, to analyse and interpret data, which can aid in the support or repudiation of findings (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). In investigator triangulation, two or more researchers are involved in a study and provide different perspectives and conclusions, generating a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Denzin, 1978). With data source triangulation, interviews are often used to collect data from different groups of people or individuals to gather multiple perspectives of a particular phenomenon (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). For this research, method triangulation was adopted, using multiple methods of data collection − skills audits, feedback sheets, learning logs and interviews − to gather information on the learning experiences of the students.

The logs offer written expressions of the students' thoughts, feelings and attitudes while the interviews infuse vocalised expressions of these same feelings and attitudes, thus providing a more rounded understanding of the students' academic experiences. Triangulation was again used for the skills audits and feedback sheets by combining the data from the logs and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the students' learning experiences. I also ensured that the dialogic element – that is, the continuous interaction – remained consistent between the various tools. I used 'thematic analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2019) – a method developed for the analysis of qualitative data – to extrapolate from the learning logs and interviews. Thematic analysis involves the close examination of text, and the identification of common themes, which could be in the form of topics, ideas and/or patterns of meaning that appear repetitively. The

precise definition of theme is not possible but some scholars (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Castleberry, 2018) refer to as it as patterns that are common across pieces of data, underpinned by a particular unifying concept, and which are significant to the understanding of the research enquiry. For others, themes are purely précises of information associated with a particular topic that allow for clear and logical integration of the various pieces of information contained within the research findings (Saldana, 2009; Sandelowski and Leeman, 2012). For Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme captures significant aspects within the data that relate to the research question and present emerging patterns. This absence of an exact definition of the meaning of theme in research data has generated controversy among scholars. Braun and Clarke (2006), however, dispel any reservation that may arise with the use of the word by arguing that themes should not be viewed as entities that exist within data, detached from the researcher. Instead, themes should be seen as constructs by the researcher, generated to capture emerging concepts. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), coding is the main process used to develop these themes, which are then tagged using a coding label (Braun and Clarke, 2019). I chose to use thematic analysis on my data because it is compatible with the adopted phenomenological approach of my study, which aims to interpret the subjective learning experiences of my participants.

Using thematic analysis to make meaning of the collected data, I used a deductive approach, as suggested by Clarke and Braun (2017). The themes identified focused on the experiences of the female students on the top-up programme and the impact of the support strategies on their learning. Given my knowledge and practice experience, and the fact that I cannot lay claim to complete neutrality, I had some preconceived themes that I constructed because they were ones I expected to resonate in the participants' reflections. An inductive approach (Clarke and Braun, 2017), that allows the data to determine the theme might, otherwise, have been used, but this might have been construed as disingenuous on my part, as one of the advantages of AR, as stated by Wood (2017) and Kamler and Thomson (2014) is 'insider knowledge'.

The use of intersectionality as my theoretical framework gave me a strong idea of the themes I expected to find as the logs enabled the participants to voice their personal experience of HE. For instance, their log entries highlighted the impact of personal, socio-economic and institutional factors on their academic achievement and academic

efficacy (Davies *et al*., 2002; Reay, 2002). Bourdieu's (1986) theory on cultural capital provided an analytical framework that was used to gain an understanding of how these various factors resulted in inequality and disadvantage. Intersectionality allowed for an appreciation of how the structure of the top-up degree programme inadvertently promoted multiple and overlapping instances of oppression and disadvantage.

Additionally, in making sense of the data, I have used 'latent' codes as opposed to 'semantic' codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) because latent codes and themes allowed me to identify the explicit meanings of the data by capturing the underlying meaning of the participants' written expressions and assumptions. This, therefore, required an interpretative and conceptual orientation of the data. Semantic codes and themes, on the other hand, recognise only the surface meanings of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I was, then, able to use descriptive phrases to group these latent codes to come up with initial themes before generating the final themes.

4.11 Ethical considerations in research

In contemporary educational research, ethical principles dictate the need to respect autonomy, minimise harm and protect the privacy of participants (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). However, the main purpose of research is to generate findings that could inform practice, so, deciding what data should be made public and what should be kept confidential, potentially, posed dilemmas (Mercer, 2007; Mason, 2002). For example, anonymising settings and participants is not always possible (Mercer, 2007; Mason, 2002). In addition, ensuring the principle of autonomy meant that participants were fully informed about the nature of the research (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018). Conversely, giving participants more information than necessary could have meant that the research would be contaminated by bias or preconceptions as participants might alter their behaviour to suit perceived expectations, rendering the research findings invalid (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). It was, therefore, essential that, as with any form of research, I recognised and understood the importance of ethical practice and ensured that I familiarised myself with the ethical codes and practices that operated within the context of my research (Darley *et al.,* 2001).

Another important consideration in research, especially one conducted as an insider, is the notion of power (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990). Power relations are multi-

dimensional within institutions, especially given the hierarchical nature of higher educational environments themselves. It could therefore exist between the researcher and the participant (Costley *et al.,* 2010). These power relations exist because of the various interests in operation. As a lecturer, I am in a position of authority over the students and as a result, known or expected responses and perceptions were a risk factor (Costley *et al*., 2010). My participants could have said what they thought I expected them to say or what they thought I wanted to hear (Mercer, 2007; Mitchell, 2010; Gibbs *et al*., 2007). They may also have felt obliged to participate in my research, so as not to let me down (Gibbs et al., 2007; Mercer 2007). The pilot study revealed this issue so I was careful to inform my participants, before and during the research, that regardless of our respective positions or roles, they were not under any obligation to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with, or, indeed, participate at all in the research (BERA, 2018). It was, therefore, important that I obtained the formal consent of all the participants (BERA, 2018). I had to request permission to have access to the institution's management information system in order to collect numerical data to generate 'quasi-statistics' (Becker, 1990, p. 233) on student profiles, progress levels and drop-out rates. This data was needed to determine the success rate of the academic progress of the neo-traditional learners on the H&SC programme. I was, therefore, able to make an internal generalisation within the institution in which the study took place by establishing that the nature of the findings were characteristic of that particular institution (Maxwell, 1992).

Furthermore, in my interpretation of the collected data, it could have been difficult to maintain a balance between my two perspectives of 'researcher' and 'tutor'. Concerns could be raised in terms of reliability and validity because my personal beliefs and values, together with the need to achieve desired outcomes, could have prevented rigorous reflexivity and infused some element of bias (Cresswell, 2009). It was, therefore, imperative that as a researcher (especially as an insider), I not only adhered to the ethical guidelines of the authorising institution but also ensured that ethical approval was granted before the commencement of my study (BERA, 2018). Ethical guidelines compelled reflexivity in me, thereby mitigating my own biases. Ethical approval necessitated that I obtained informed consent from my participants and also from the organisation in which my research was to take place. This included information about the nature of the research and also a statement declaring that

participants had the right to withdraw at any time from the research should they wish to do so (BERA, 2018). All participants' details have been anonymised and all data collected was securely stored in lockable storage. Any data stored electronically was password-protected in accordance with the ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018).

Additionally, participants were given a debriefing sheet that thanked them for their participation in the interviews. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns at the end of the interview (BERA, 2018). They were reassured about how their interview responses were to be used and it was double-checked that they were comfortable with their participation (BERA, 2018). My name, telephone number and institution address were also provided. Information about who to contact, should they have any questions about the research, was also provided on the debriefing sheet (BERA, 2018).

4.12 Limitations of the research

Though AR is now increasingly common in qualitative studies, one must acknowledge its limitations. Generalisability of findings is one of the main problems of AR as the findings of such studies tend to be relevant only in the context of the researched institution. The characteristics of the institution and students are unique to that institution and, as such, the problems identified may be, too (Coghlan, 2019). As this study was based in one institution with ten participants in total, the small-scale nature of the research meant that generalisability might not be possible. With eight female students and two tutors, the participant sample cannot, therefore, reflect the entire female student population on top-up degree programmes or tutors in HE. Notwithstanding, applicability of findings within institutions with similar characteristics cannot be ruled out. This is because insider research like this, provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the setting in which the research takes place. However, the involvement of the researcher warrants a degree of critical reflexivity (Morely, 2015) so that subjectivity does not come into question. It was, therefore, important to ensure that whatever personal preconceptions I had of adult learners from minority groups were dispensed with from the outset. In addition, an intersectional approach, together with the tools selected for the data gathering (skills audit, feedback sheets, logs and interviews), provided multiple framings of reality, thus generating

multiple standpoints from which to understand the academic experiences of the students.

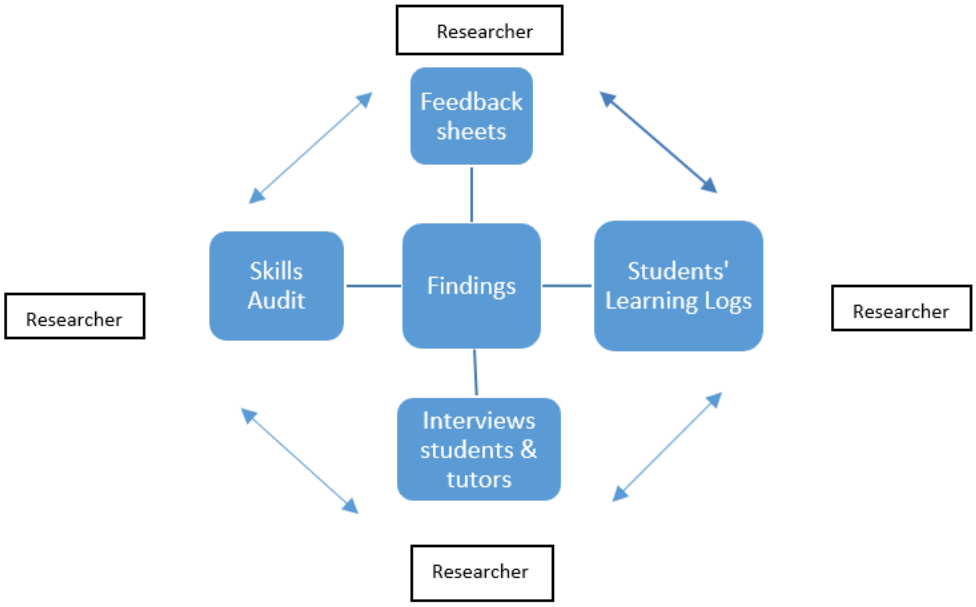
It is undeniable that the power relations that exist in institutions can put the researcher in a subordinate position, which, potentially, makes them vulnerable to pressure. Researchers may be forced to present findings that conform to the institution's objectives (Noffke and Somekh, 2013; Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis *et al.,* 2014). This was an issue for me because carrying out research on the lived experiences of mature minority students meant highlighting the extent to which the university lived up to its ethos as an institution that upholds the doctrines of inclusivity and widening participation (WP). In addition, as an insider within the research, I must acknowledge the possibility of my position impacting on the participants' responses which could potentially skew the data. Furthermore, with some of the students seeing me as 'a traitor to my race' could result in me yielding to their expectations and interpreting my findings to suit. However, my position within the research also conferred upon me some level of trust (eventually) which gave the students the confidence to question their learning experience and take charge of their learning. How I came to gain this trust has been discussed in section 4.8 above. Nonetheless, the rigour of data collection has ensured authenticity and aided the validation of the research. In addition, extensive engagement with literature and the use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework have helped to address the research questions and validate the need for a comprehensive approach.

4.13 Conclusion

In this chapter, a detailed explanation of the need for an AR study and a justification, has been given, based on the research questions detailed in the first chapter of this thesis. Using entries from my reflective diary, I have also narrated my experiences as an agent of change. I have explained how, through partnership and dialogue, students acquired a deeper understanding of their challenges and developed skills that enabled them to take responsibility for their learning. The adoption of an intersectional approach in my strategic response to mitigate the academic difficulties experienced by the students, exposed the intersecting and overlapping identities that result in inequalities, disadvantage, exclusion and oppression. This approach also facilitated an appreciation of the conflicting, yet interconnected, realities at play. The systematic

approach used in the research process has also been presented as each phase of the intervention process is described. This approach was necessary as the aim of the intervention was to bring about a more positive learning experience for the students. The method deployed, with the use of the skills audits, feedback sheets, learning logs and interviews, ensured that data collected was rich in content and authentic as it originated from the students and articulated the students' lived experiences. These various methods of data collection ensured that students were active participants in the T&L process. This was important as their involvement brought about a noticeable change in their attitude to learning. Also, students felt empowered to vocalise their thoughts without fear of reprisals and they also developed a greater sense of ownership of their learning. Additionally, tutor perspective, together with my personal reflective logs, allowed for the triangulation (Patton, 1999; Heesen *et al.,* 2019; Ma and Norwich, 2007) of the multiple data sources, so that I was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. The triangulation of the various research tools (as depicted in Figure 7, below), enabled the exploration and explanation of composite realities, resulting in a richer and more balanced perspective of the various players within the research. It also allowed for the repudiation or endorsement of any dataset, assumption or hypothesis (Ma and Norwich, 2007). A depiction of the triangulation process is presented in Figure 7 below:

Figure 7 Triangulation process of data (my depiction)



Throughout the research process, ethical, along with ontological and epistemological considerations, continued to be of paramount concern, given the potential problems associated with insider research. I have, therefore, acknowledged the possibility of my perspective as a tutor and a female researcher from a minority group, influencing my interpretation of the collected data. I, however, ensured that the research was conducted according to the guidelines given by BERA (2018). The following chapter presents an analysis of the data collected and discusses the research findings.

Chapter 5: Analysis and findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter details the analysis and findings of the research and expresses the perception of both the students and tutors. This study, inspired by action research (AR), aimed to develop the students' academic skills and also provide them with an understanding of the reasons for their academic challenges through critical reflection. The intention was for the students to take ownership of their learning by gradually beginning to embrace their lack of skills in a safe environment, regularly reflecting on their learning process and coming to recognise the enormous challenges they faced instead of simply finding themselves overwhelmed by their shortcomings. This way, the students gained an understanding of their identity, valued their individuality and were able to dispel their internalised prejudices. Below, I discuss the analysis and findings from the skills audits, feedback sheets, learning logs and interviews. First, I present an analysis of the skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs, followed by an analysis of the interview transcripts and the resulting themes that were generated. The data presented was obtained from eight students. Included in this analysis are entries from the students' learning logs and statements from the interviews.

5.2 Analysis and findings

5.2.1 Skills audits

At the start of the first semester, a skills audit was completed by participants, which allowed them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and allowed me to focus support on specific areas of individual needs.

Figure 8 First semester skills audit

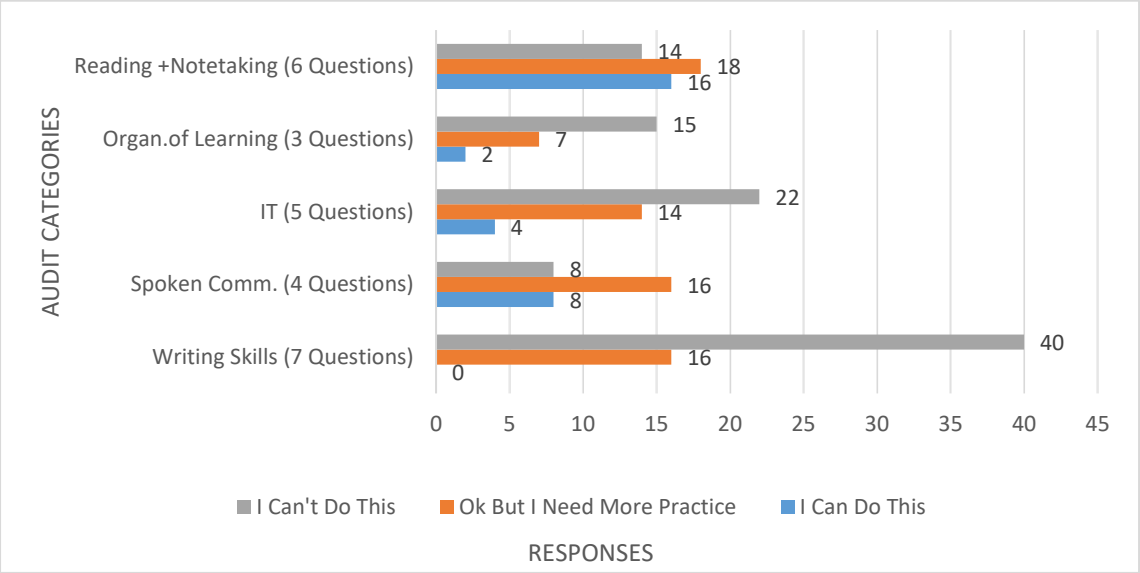


Figure 9 Second semester skills audit

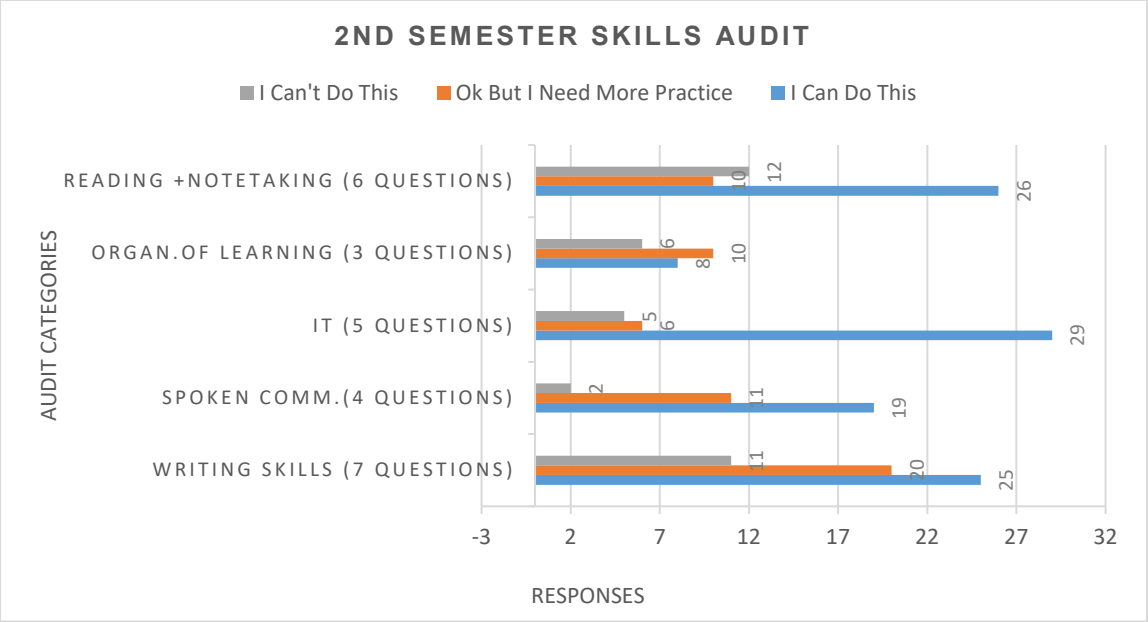
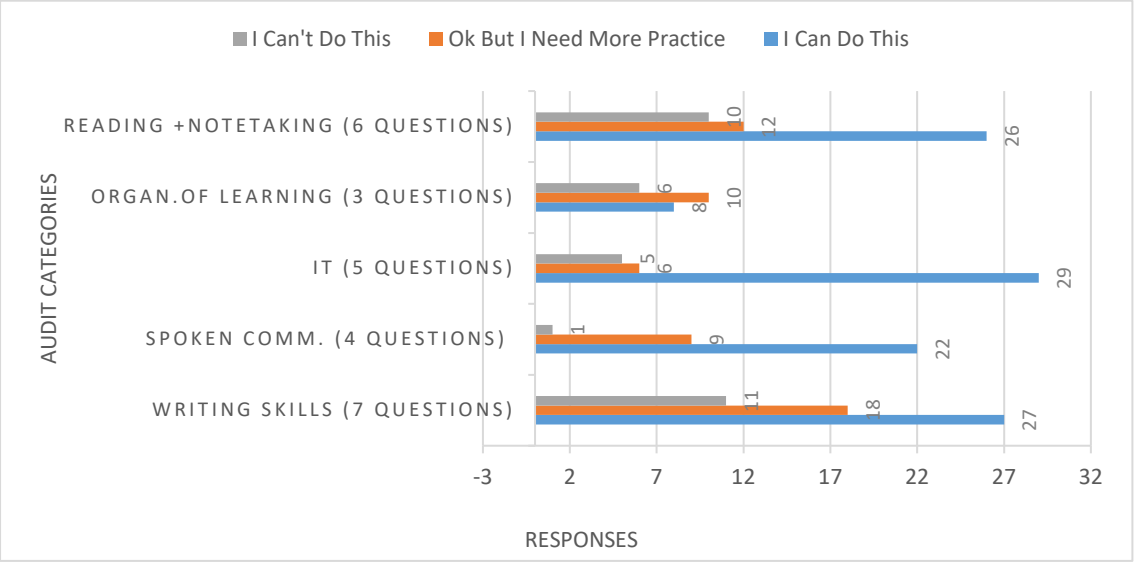


Figure 10 Third semester skills audit



The first audit (see Figure 8) showed the lack of academics skills, especially in regard to IT and writing, which included note taking. This was not surprising as this was a fundamental issue in this profile of learners. In addition, most admitted to finding it difficult to express themselves verbally, which again, was predictable as English was not the first language for most of them. This result was not surprising as research (Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017; Murphy, 2017; Shanahan, 2000) shows that many older adult learners especially from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, lack these essential academic skills. Never having to critically self-evaluate in this way, the skills audit forced the students to confront their lack of academic skills, which was not a welcomed strategy. Through critical self-appraisal, the students had to find their own solutions to their challenges, forcing them to be drivers of their own destiny. This approach proved effective, as the students gradually increased their cognitive skills, resulting in a better understanding of the reasons for their academic difficulties. The audits also provided documented evidence, by the students themselves, of the extent of these difficulties and enabled me to tailor the necessary support. The second skills audit (see Figure 9) showed an overall marked improvement of the participants' academics skills; most of the students had improved their writing, IT, organisational and note taking skills. Compulsory engagement with the support classes resulted in increased participation as the students not only gained awareness of the level of support available but also the fact that it could be tailored to suit their individual needs.

Particularly noticeable was the students' ability to access and search electronic resources, which was a skill they all lacked at the start of the course. They also developed time management strategies, which was another area they struggled with, given the demands of their multifarious roles. Consequently, attendance rose to 100% and assignment deadlines were met (UoC, 2020). Analysis of the third and final skills audit (see Figure 10) showed a further, albeit slight, improvement in spoken communication from the second semester, which meant that some of the participants had improved their verbal communication skills. This was evident in the level of verbal engagement during class activities. Note taking, writing and IT showed no marked increase but remained at the same relatively high level as the results from the previous semester. That there was no further improvement was not surprising as, by this time, classes had moved online due to the pandemic. As concluded by National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) (2009) and the European Commission (EC) (2013) one could therefore argue that the motivation that comes with physical interaction/teaching might have been hindered by the online mode of instruction. For students who were just beginning to develop their IT skills, they needed extensive face-to-face support, which the pandemic prevented. Besides their multiple familial obligations meant less time was available to dedicated to their studies and hone in on their IT skills (Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017; Harris, 2008). The intervention tools like the learning log encouraged the students to document their challenges. As this was electronic, I had remote access and I was able to discuss the challenges with the students and help them to come up with suitable and realistic ways to overcome these challenges. For instance, pointing them to online support services and also developing study plans that fitted around their domestic duties.

Another thing the study revealed was that the move to online classes, even though necessary, greatly highlighted the prevailing societal disparities. As explained earlier in the literature review chapter, most of the female students on the top-up degree programme had low economic status (Martin, 2015; Reay *et al.,* 2005; 2009; 2010) hence online study – which required the use of a computer and unrestricted access to the internet – proved a challenge. For those students with children who also needed to attend online learning sessions, it meant additional computers together with costly internet subscriptions many could not afford (Blundell *et al.,* 2021; Brachtl *et al.,* 2023). Not only that, most of the students belonged to communities where social and cultural

expectations of women meant they had to shoulder the challenges imposed by the pandemic on the home front (Davies *et al., 2002*; Reay, 2002; 2003; Burke, 2012). So looking after the children and keeping them entertained, cleaning, cooking and shopping left the students with little or no bandwidth to engage in academic activities. It was therefore apparent that even though the university tried to operate within the socially 'just' framework of widening participation (WP), these mature female students were in danger of not achieving to their fullest potential. Their higher educational structure was still not wide enough to accommodate the overlapping, multi-dimensional realities of these group of students that resulted in disadvantage and inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2007; Harris and Leonardo, 2018).

Notwithstanding, the result of the audits showed the impact of the extensive support in place for the students. Without this, many of the students would not have been able to develop or acquire the academic skills needed to cope with degree-level study. The skills audit, however, forced a critical self-evaluation that enabled the students to become aware of their lack of skills and take the necessary steps to address it.

5.2.2 Feedback sheets

The students provided an evaluation of their learning experiences in all the six modules of study. These modules were: Communication, Evidence-based Practice, Collaborative Working, Safeguarding, Management and Negotiated Learning. Each semester, feedback was given in two modules (see Figures 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16) and this highlighted the areas in which additional support was needed.

Figure 11 Communication module feedback (First semester)

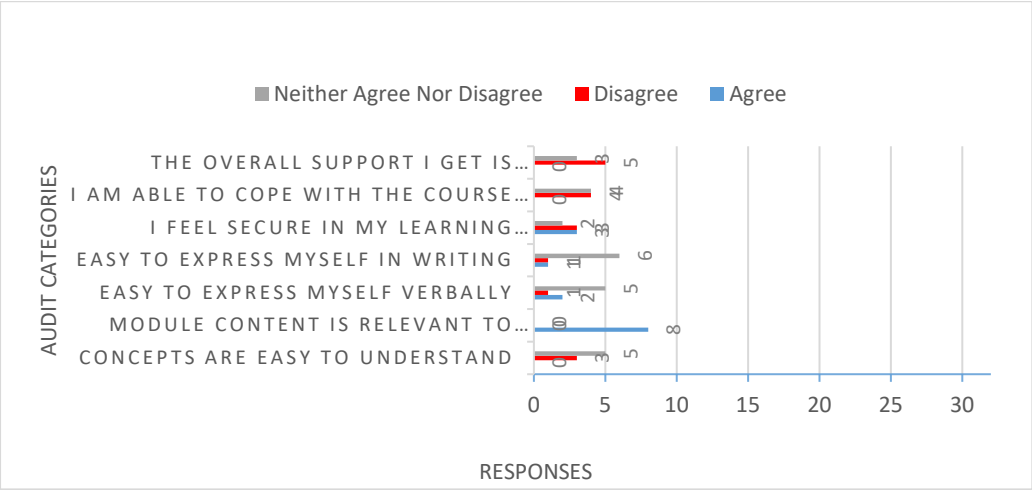


Figure 12 Evidence-Based Practice module feedback (First semester)

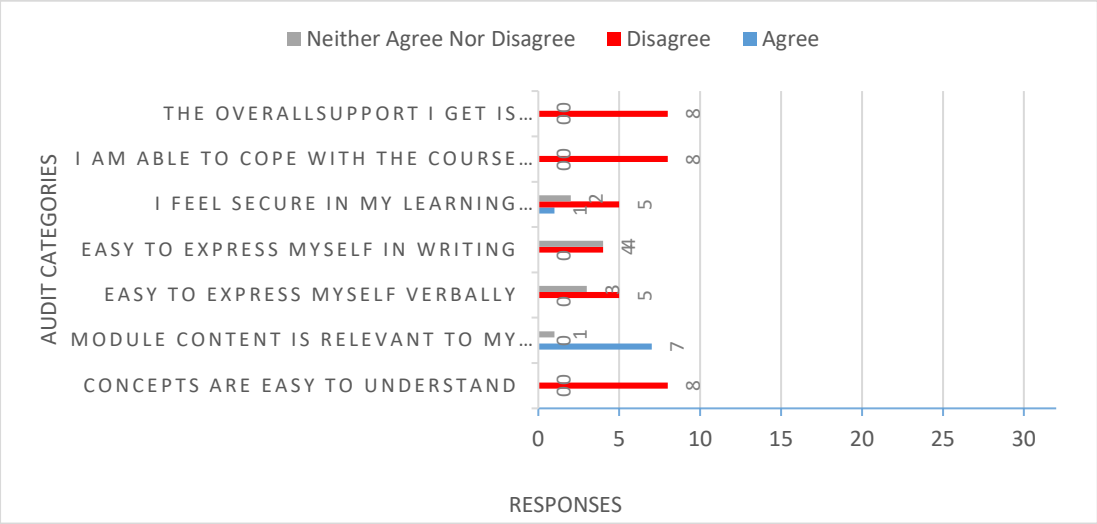


Figure 13 Collaborative Working module feedback (Second semester)

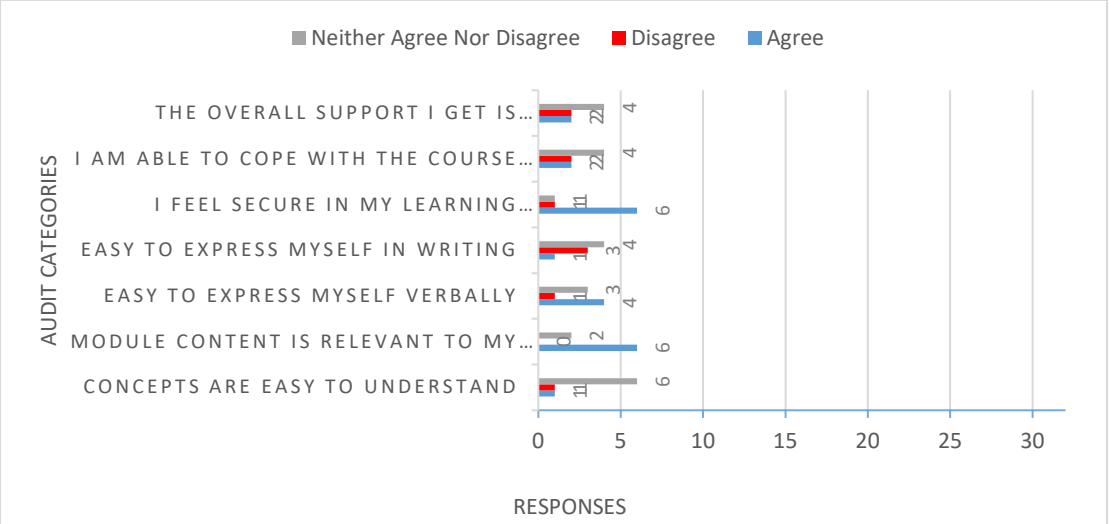


Figure 14 Safeguarding module feedback (Second semester)

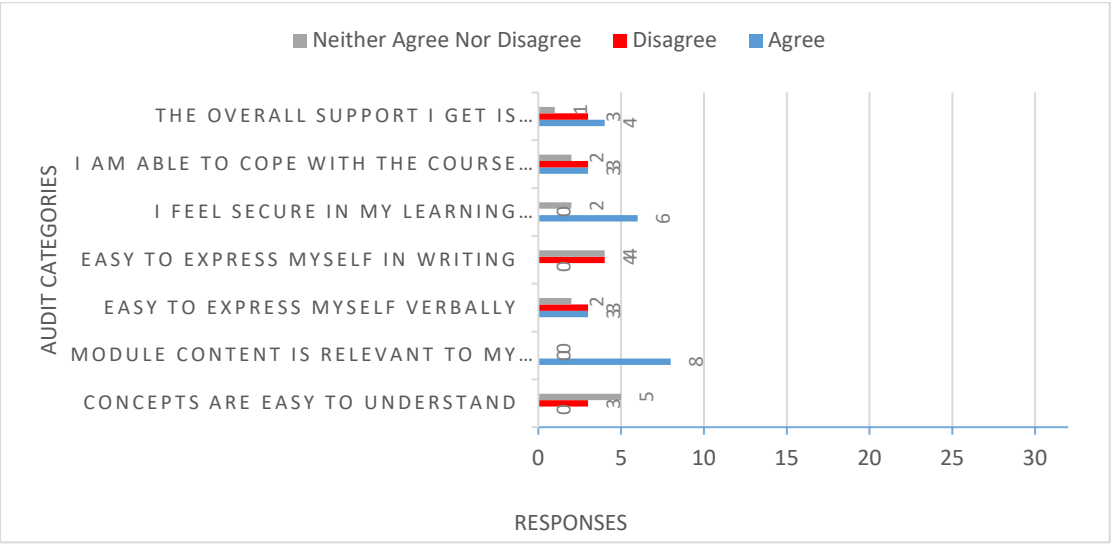


Figure 15 Management module feedback (Third semester)

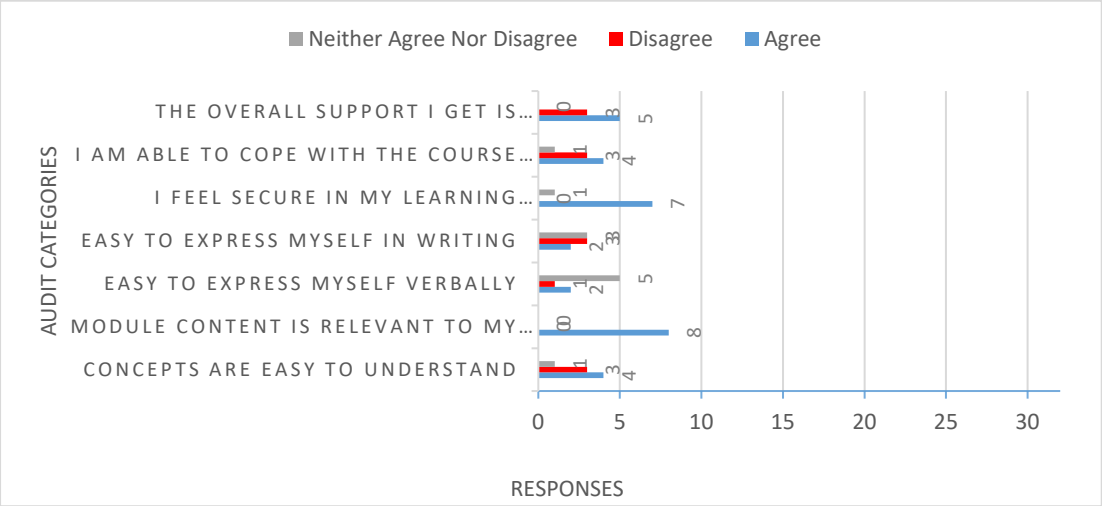
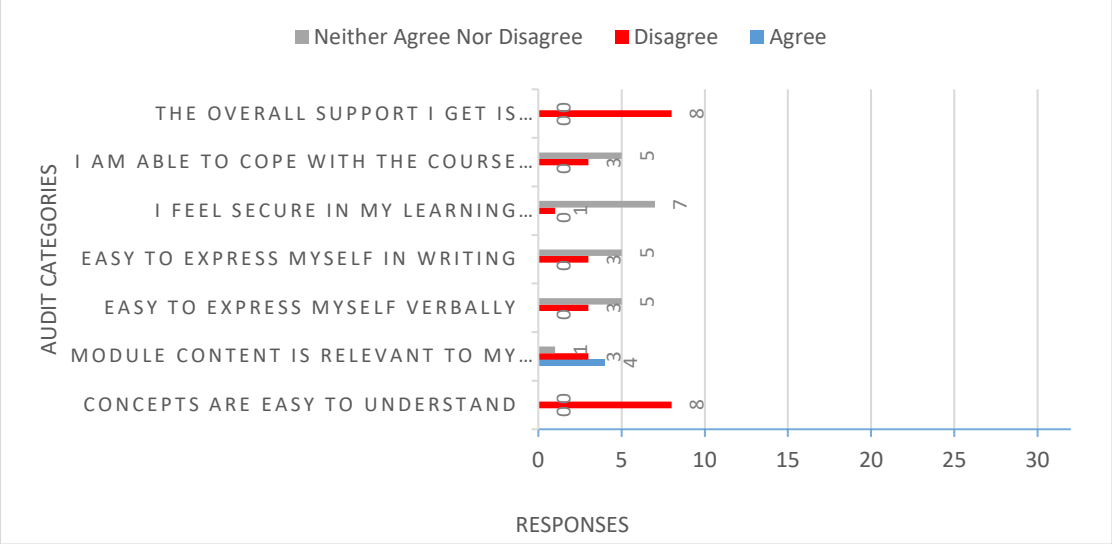


Figure 16 Negotiated Learning module feedback (Third semester)



The feedback sheets provided another source of authentic information that justified the need for extensive academic support. As with the skills audits, the feedback sheets for the first semester (Figures 11 and 12) showed that most of the participants struggled with study at level 6 and needed more academic support. It also showed that most of the students felt insecure within their learning environment. The unfamiliar system in place and the awareness of their lack of skills meant that they feared judgement and failure. This would, later, become more evident in the analysis of the learning logs. The participants found the Evidence-Based Practice module particularly difficult to grasp because it required IT skills to gather relevant data from online

sources. Also, the terminologies were not easy to comprehend, making the module even more difficult. The Communication module, on the other hand, was a familiar subject to them, having previously studied most of the module content on their Higher National Diploma (HND) programme. The great challenge, however, was the concept of criticality in writing, which, for the students, was an intangible notion that proved impossible to comprehend.

As indicated in the skills audit for the second semester (Figures 13 and 14), the students' attitudes and feelings were more positive and optimistic. Feeling less threatened in their learning environment, they were more inclined to access the support available. This enabled them to develop academic language, a necessary skill for HE. This positive change could be attributed to developing a greater self-awareness and a level of cognition that enabled the students to take ownership of their learning. This appears to confirm the initial assumptions of the study, the choices of research method and the adoption of an intersectional stance that maintains a holistic approach considering the emotional, psychological, physical and numerous social dimensions within which each female student operated (Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011; 2015).

Feedback in the third semester was mixed, in that it was quite positive in the Management module (see Figure 15) but more negative with the Negotiated Learning module (see Figure 16). This was not surprising as tutor contact time was limited to just five hours. The pandemic also meant that face-to-face teaching was no longer possible, which further isolated the students. For those who needed extensive support, this proved an additional challenge; hence, the feedback, which indicated that support was inadequate. Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, mature female learners were, statistically, less likely to develop strong IT skills, and one reason is that they were not considered necessary (Harris, 2008). This viewpoint will be discussed in greater detail in the analysis of the participants' learning logs.

5.2.3 Learning logs

As explained in Chapter 4, the participants used learning logs to record their experience and progress over the year-long period of the programme. To provide focus, the logs were created on proformas containing questions that allowed the students to evaluate their personal and academic progress through critical reflection.

In addition, the logs had to be a repetitive exercise, with specific focal points that encouraged thinking about tasks at hand and pointed to a clear logic of priorities, facts and motivations. So, also, the logs produced an illuminating account of the process of learning, the ups and downs, the challenges and changes, the emotions and the sheer courage the students showed. Most importantly, the logs showed change; change not necessarily only related to academic progress but that accounts for, separates and keeps apart the various experiences. Change that is measured by shifts in the discourse; vertically and horizontally, and also, at the three end-of-term points stated. To give a vivid account of the type of reflection encouraged by the log, I will focus on one participant's entries (Susie's). Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) I go on to present evidence of the progress, negotiation and development of the other participants.

5.2.3.1 Susie's log: progress, negotiation and development

The first semester of Susie's log starts with the challenges of the new course and the novelty of the tasks involved. The *Issues and events* and *Why did the event occur?* columns paint a picture of a competent adult balancing study with the ongoing demands of life, coping with her mother's illness, which necessitated travelling, staying away from university because of 'flu, missing another class because of mandatory training at work or being 'really tired' because of a new job. In this context, the entry 'I was in class' or 'present in class' does not only signify commitment to the course but is a statement of the effort it takes for some neo-traditional students simply to make it to class.

By the same token, the rationale for, or account of, staying away (*Appropriateness of actions and doing things differently* column) speaks of a pragmatic attitude towards external events one cannot influence; 'I done what I thought was right'; this was the best way to do things for me'; or in this case, 'I made the best [I could]; or 'made [the best] of what I feel I could in this situation]' against, literally, creating the space for study in a systematic way. Here, the early language is of missed opportunities and room for a rigorous approach: 'my actions could always improve'; or 'I could do more, read more'; 'exercise [practice] at home'; 'practice makes perfect'; 'always can do things differently'.

It is evident that HE study is being carved out and recognised as something vital, important for oneself and absolutely dependent upon oneself, as opposed to being subject to immovable forces. What is key is that students were encouraged to think of their studies as discreet tasks that one could address in their specificity, rather than in the impersonal enormity of not knowing enough. Significantly, this attitude produced positive results as Susie, towards the end of the first semester, stated 'yes, I could do things differently, for example, writing parts of the assessment along with the things I learn every time…'. In my view, this 'for example' is even more revealing than learning to handle an assessment in a piecemeal function because it indicates progression; she can now be specific and strategic in her approach, and concrete in conceptualising both the task ahead and the necessary action in the wider context of her real situation.

The fact that learning in this context is both academic and 'existential' is evidenced in the *What did I learn?* column, where Susie, at times, refers to the concrete skills (ways of researching a database; types of communication; how to prepare for final submission; formative assessment) and at times, to finding out about oneself. Here, realisation plays a vital role: 'I must improve my time management skills'; 'I must try to recover missed lesson'; 'not missing classes helps me understand'; 'I learned that if I do not [practice] at home it is very hard for [to follow] the task in class'; 'I learned why it was hard for me to find the subject I needed for my assignment: because I did not use the materials on *Blackboard*'. These 'lessons' accumulate and grow. The final entry for the first semester is both insightful and funny: 'An extremely hard lesson but a good one: never let [leave] for the last week the assignments and do it in a panic mode. Never again.' And next to it, in the *Emotional reflection* column: 'I thought I would never finish on time'. Here, we see the value of the subtle negotiation of factual and experiential learning, which is ongoing and supported by the log task. More will be said about the value of reflexivity and the mode of engagement in the next chapter.

The reflection on the emotional response affords us an insight into the emotional labour that HE learning often involves and the enormity of the task; here, the prevalent words are 'anxiety', 'frustration' and 'regret'. ('I regret I missed…'; or 'it was hard for me to understand…' or 'I was frustrated because I feel I did not find the right resources'). Gradually, a language or relative resilience, or hope, emerges, in this case, after the sixth week: 'my action was to free more time'; 'I feel overwhelmed… but at the end, I win, I done it, even if I don't, was happy with the work'; and then,

frustration again: ‘I start to believe I have a chance to do it’; and the following week: ‘I am wondering if I can do it’.

What this shows, as a minimum, is that the fear is not constant, and this ‘something’, which one glimpses on a good day, is an ideal worth attaining; ‘something’ that is related both to the degree and to the student’s self-worth and value. I am not talking, of course, about some kind of ‘magic’ transformation but about a constant negotiation and reflection, which allows the student to take into account the good as well as the bad. It is for that reason that I argue that the intervention, as well as the cultivating of a reflective approach, play important roles; the former, creating a safety net able to contain the anxieties and offer tangible solutions to local problems. Susie’s entries in the column *Could I access support?* offer solid evidence of the beneficial effects of knowing that support is available for the academic tasks, so that it allows for personal worth and management of the learning task to emerge as an aspiration. The language here is simple and to the point: ‘my teacher saved the situation because she gave us the indication [information] we need’; ‘…when I don’t understand, I ask them, and I have support’; ‘once I am in class, I have support’. Key here, is the steady cultivation of an attitude of seeking support, which creates an atmosphere of trust. Towards the end of the term, Susie needs to update her CV. She writes ‘I asked for help, even if it have nothing to do with my lessons because I feel I need it. Now I learn which are the request [requirements] for a professional CV’. For me, in this quote, the positive attitude to learning, often non-existent in neo-traditional students, is beginning to emerge; it is being created, and that is very important. It is little surprise then, that despite the challenges of the term, Susie’s summative statement is positive, almost jubilant: ‘my first semester…feel lucky…proud…looking for evidence…improved myself in many aspects’.

I now turn to Susie’s account of the second and third semesters. My aim is to show how the negotiation of the task progressed, changed and evolved. What is evidenced is the continued ‘refinement’ of thinking/reflecting when it comes to tasks and learning and the emergence of new concepts such as ‘attention’ and ‘note taking’, which did not figure in the accounts of the previous semester. Again, life’s challenges stand in the way of the HE course. Here, the mother’s illness forces Susie to travel to her home country, breaking a streak of consistent attendance and forcing her to experience feelings of helplessness and worry.

Returning to university after the Christmas break is seen as a positive event. Learning subjects like safeguarding is enjoyed and found useful, along with concentrating on new skills, like note taking and preparing early for an assignment. Now, Susie loves being a student. Upon learning of her mother's illness, she writes in the *Learning* column 'to choose my priorities'; 'I really love to be a student…' and in the following week, 'I learn we never know what will happen…', on the occasion of missing the formative assessment when out of the country. What is important here is that Susie continues to build specific skills, even in the face of adversity, and/or when her student identity is put at risk: 'I am really scared because I do not know what will happen'. It is in moments of crisis like this, that neo-traditional students also need solid support from the system. Indeed, in the *Support* column, Susie documents the unfailing and reassuring presence of her tutor, which allows her to keep up with the degree. Again, external hardship often threatens education. Susie loses her job because she went away. The development is reported as a matter of priorities in a factual manner: 'I done what I thought is the right thing…I lost my job too in this situation'.

The continuous fluctuation of the mixed emotions in which the educational experience is enveloped, is not surprising: happiness at passing an assessment and apprehension about the difficulty of the new topics; being scared of what is further down the line; but also, thinking on the same day 'maybe could do things differently but sometimes I don't know [how] to choose what is the best'. This lack of knowledge, which sums up the whole experience of many HE students, is a key point. At times, it represents a huge challenge, at other times it is broken down into little pieces. Tutors help with the latter so that the students can balance 'the right thing', as Susie calls it, with her growing aspirations. This choice is 'moral' in the case of family and easily recognised as such, but interestingly, 'learning' also moves into that category as the year goes by.

Looking through the development of her vocabulary in the second and third semesters, one can discern that the building of skills and persevering, with the help of tutors, allows Susie to articulate an important insight: 'my plans and my action are two different things'; 'because of being in class, I learned so many things'. Clearly, there is a heightened critical skill of differentiating between what is and is not choice, and its importance in the academic context. Yes, anxiety is there ('everyone is anxious' she writes) but having, thus, separated the spheres in which one can and cannot do things

leads to greater freedom of action, determination and focus. Being able to reflect, and the constant reassuring support, embraces and allows the student to enjoy that vital link with what has been gained so far. It also puts into perspective what could be jeopardised, hence, allowing her to name it as important.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Susie concludes her second semester reflections speaking of adaptability 'at whatever is coming in my life'. The end of term assessment is pragmatic and, to a certain extent, harsh, focusing on 'the anxious waiting for feedback' and expressing some frustration that learning has not become easier. But to this is added 'I want to do better…because my expectancy is higher now with all the support'. One can watch the trajectory from utter confusion to rising expectations. Again, the pivotal role played by consistent support needs to be highlighted.

The challenges of Covid take over the third semester. Susie responds with a desire to adapt and enjoy: 'I must find a way to enjoy the way of learning'. With technical challenges now being the major frame of reference in the new term, the IT training offered as part of the intervention allows Susie a margin of confidence ('online course… know I can do it') in a situation which is now beyond anyone's control. Interestingly, it is the online solidarity with other students ('I am not the only one struggling') and the support of the tutors ('the tutors give us all the support we need') that continues to provide the stable frame of reference in these unusual times. Feelings of anger at IT failure ('I am angry….') are tempered by the satisfaction of getting assignments in and the anticipation of doing better with improved organisation and consistent work. Consequently, several entries in the third semester are laconic compared to the language of the second semester. Susie's closing reflection sums up a difficult year ('was hard, challenging') with positive outcomes ('I will continue to learn and improve myself. I am richer in knowledge, experience, skills'). The newly gained confidence mixed with realism and ambition are evident in the words that were not used before**.**

Overall, Susie's logs show an illuminating account of the process of learning, the ups and downs, the challenges and changes, the emotions and sheer courage. It also showed change; not only related to academic progress but transformative change. A change born out of confidence and a mixture of realism and ambition, yet, without final outcomes but rather, that which results in the desire to continuously improve and develop oneself, irrespective of life events. I now discuss evidence of progress,

negotiation and development of other students using the following themes: apprehension, awareness of the lack of academic skills, blaming self and system, life commitments, development, transformation and self-actualisation.

5.2.3.2 Progress, negotiation and development of the other participants

5.2.3.2.1 Apprehension

As with Susie's learning log, those of the other students in the first semester conveyed the trepidation of embarking on a degree-level programme. The entries also echo her emotional struggle and sense of the immensity of the task. The prevailing feelings are fear, anxiety, panic, doubt and unfamiliarity with the learning system and environment. These feelings manifested differently, and in varying degrees, with each student as they brought with them differing mindsets and realities. Responding to the questions on *Issues and events* and *Why did the event occur?*, Joy's entries, that she was 'excited as well as nervous' at being 'given the opportunity' to study at a higher level, convey deep gratitude but, at the same time, fear and anxiety that she may fail this colossal challenge, given her family commitments. Being a mother to four young children was challenging enough without the added demands of study. Joy, however, refuses to entertain these fears, setting goals for herself ('to be better organised'; 'ensuring that timings are set and known'). In Mona's case, her apprehension was so profound that it resulted in total distraction. She noted, 'I suffer in panics which makes me lost in concentrate [lose concentration]'. She adds 'this is very difference [different] for me to learn; I feel stressed all the time'. The unfamiliar system and learning environment was so threatening that her response to the question *What did you learn and what was your response?* was 'it is going to be harder than college; I think I will fail'. She was so panicked by the strangeness of her experience that even though she acknowledged that support was available, her fear crippled all thoughts of the possibility of success. Similarly, also fuelled by fear, Beanie's attitude was negative from the start. She stated unequivocally 'I know I am going to fail anyway' because 'everything is hard'. Her incisive expressions expose the doubts she harboured about her ability, as her entry reads 'I am too old' (being over 60); 'maybe I should not have done the course'. Beanie's responses to the questions in the columns were always evasive, choosing instead, to give excuses like 'I have to work because I need money' and 'I did not know work will disturb me so much'. The real reason for her fear was summed up in the entry 'I want to ask the teacher for support but I don't want to look

stupid'. Her fear of being judged prevented her from immersing herself into the programme and hindered her progress. Nokulu's attitude mirrors Beanie's as she, too, doubted her own abilities and seemed to give up before starting. Her feelings 'were at first good' to be embarking on this journey of a lifetime but were soon quashed: 'my moods started to change to bad ones', adding 'I don't think I can do this level 6 work and what they want me to do'. Orode, though, adopts a different attitude to that of her peers and exudes resilience while still nursing fears of learning in a foreign language ('I felt scared as it looks so hard and…English is not my first language). She is also pragmatic: 'It was only normal as it was a new environment…as an adult learner with other responsibilities, you fear new adventure'. To add to this, even in the face of adverse personal circumstances (husband in hospital), Orode decided from the start that nothing was going to get in the way of her achieving her goal. Like Susie, Orode shows commitment and tenacity. At the end of the first semester, she sums up her experience as 'bittersweet' signifying that all was not always well on this journey she had embarked upon. The language used by each of the participants shows the variations in their attitudes but highlights the challenges experienced by mature learners in higher education (HE). This variation justifies my approach and theoretical framework, as intersectionality recognises the multilateral nature of each learner's reality. In addition, it highlights the importance of effective support that lessens apprehension and ensures that mature learners have a successful transition into HE.

5.2.3.2.2 Awareness of the lack of academic skills

Finding themselves in an alien and unfriendly learning environment was, as has been established, a source of fear and anxiety for the students, and having to confront their lack of academic skills added to these anxieties. Areas for concern were not uniform across the participants; some lacked IT and academic writing skills; others struggled more with time management; and for some, understanding the concepts in the programme content was the biggest challenge. In answer to the question, under *Issues/events*, Nokulu states 'the teacher keep saying critical of thinking'; 'people use big big words to talk'; 'I am confused and don't understand'. In response to the *Learning* question, she responds 'I see I don't know anything for [about] university'. About her feelings, she admits 'I think university will be hard for me'. She is also self-deprecating, coming to the conclusion 'I think you need to be very intelligent to pass

this work'. Her words exude internalised prejudice; of 'not being clever enough' for university.

Though Beanie's attitude mirrors that of Nokulu's, she invokes the emotive 'we are older people and it is not easy to learn'. She is also evasive in her response to events and issues: 'everything is about computer in this university' but admits her lack of skills 'to use computer to write…that is hard for me to do'. She does not seem prepared to entertain alternative possibilities and concludes 'I am too old'. Kang (2016) stresses the importance of digital skills in today's classroom as these skills enhance students' ability to obtain useful information outside of their learning environment. In the opinion of other scholars (Gordon, 2014; Kirkwood and Price, 2014), technology allows for flexibility of learning that can revolve around an individual's life because it is not restricted by time or space and puts the learners in control of their study. It was, therefore, not surprising that their lack of IT skills made for a frustrating learning experience for Beanie and Nokulu. Taylor *et al.* (2014) surmise that students like beanie and Nokulu proceed to HE ill-prepared for the demands of degree-level study having developed learned helplessness, believing that they do not have any cognitive capabilities to learn new things. This attitude, in turn, they conclude, leads to under-performance in the classroom, which can go on to manifest in 'willed not learning' (Kohl,1992 p. 27). In Harris's (2008) view, older, adult, female learners are more predisposed to develop what she terms 'learned technological helplessness' (p. 10) due to the impact of socialisation into traditional gender roles, modelling and age. Beanie and Nokulu's attitude resulted in missed learning opportunities as they failed to adopt a rigorous approach to their learning.

Mariam's attitude is quite different to that of Nokulu and Beanie. Even though she, too, is aware of her lack of skills: 'I am slow with using the computer; 'it's difficult to do intext citation'. Her solution to her challenges is 'to discipline myself and read a lot more' and 'access all the support'. Mariam, unlike Beanie and Nokulu, has a strong internal locus of control and accepts that the onus of her success lies with her and no one else. Likewise, Orode, who had only ever studied in French ('it was my first academic piece of work in English'), was determined to succeed, having a positive attitude from the start ('access the learning support, ask questions'). She, too, was driven and was not going to let anything prevent her from reaching her goal ('I decided to pay full attention and put 100% effort to my studies').

5.2.3.2.3 Blaming self and system

Confronting their lack of skills was an alien experience for these students, who had never had to engage in any form of self-evaluation. Indeed, they had gone through an HND programme unaware of their lack of skills, adding to their bemusement. The natural inclination was, therefore, to apportion blame. Most of the participants conceded that the blame lay firmly on their own shoulders and took ownership of this predicament (Joy: 'my error…should have practice [d]; Zizi: 'should make use more of resources available'; 'Mariam: 'I need to learn to adjust to different method of learning'). These students recognised the importance of HE on the self and the outcome as being solely dependent on that same self and not external. By encouraging critical thought, these students saw their academic challenges not as an abstract phenomenon but something that they had control over and could address. The attitude of these students was to accept the situation and then find ways to overcome the problem, which, they realised, could hinder their academic success.

Some blamed the university (Nokulu: 'I think the teacher is discriminating from low learners like us'; Beanie: 'they do not give us much time to do assignments') and, with a strong external locus of control, were unable to adopt a strategic approach to overcome their academic challenges. With a weakened sense of self-efficacy, Nokulu and Beanie believed they lacked the cognitive capabilities to learn new things, resulting in learned helplessness (Taylor *et al*., 2014). Hence, these students were ill-prepared for the demands of degree level study. It is little wonder that in response to the column on *Appropriateness of actions*, the perception of both students was that HE study was an intangible task, thrusted upon them by a biased system (Nokulu: '…discriminating from low learners like us'; Beanie: 'did not come to class because no point'). It is important to highlight that this need to blame is the result of the unfortunate reality of these students'. As wives, mothers, carers, workers, many had little or no opportunity to acquire the skills that would enable them to cope with degree-level study. It was, therefore, inevitable that 'blaming' occurred, whether it was directed at self or others. Making the students confront, understand and find solutions to their academic challenges is the focus of this research.

5.2.3.2.4 Life commitments

Studies have found that the personal circumstances of older adult students, such as family responsibilities, demanding jobs, financial constraints and health issues, make the pursuit of an HE qualification a frustrating endeavour (Bowl, 2001; Burton *et al.,* 2011; Swain & Hammond, 2011). These different factors manifested in varying ways in the learning experiences of the mature female students in this study. There were, also, the continuous mental negotiations as each female student attempted to justify her presence in an environment that threatened her individuality and self-worth. Most were frustrated, some harboured guilt, while some focused doggedly on completing their studies.

This research considered these variations because adult female students are not a homogeneous group. They each assumed a plurality of roles and responsibilities that competed for precedence in their lives (Joy: 'everyone in my household depends on me'; Orode: 'not easy to work, be a carer and study'). Swain and Hammond (2011) state that these factors result in blockages in their educational journey, and ultimately, disengagement and marginalisation for some of the students (Nokulu: 'I was stressed, angry and frustrated as always I struggled to catch up with others; Beanie: 'I am not really sure I want to do this'; 'I have to work because I need money'). Intersectionality recognises the experiences of the female learners because their realities do not consist of choices of either/or but both/and (Crenshaw, 2010). In the *Issues/events* column: 'school pickups'; 'child's hospital appointment'; 'stressful…as a mother and also a student'; 'preoccupied with other things at home'; 'my health is disturbing me', were all log entries that depict the Herculean task the women have undertaken. These external influences (Orode: 'not been able to write much'; 'husband in hospital'; Mona: 'I have to try to balance my study with my family') often threaten their aspirations to develop themselves and redefine their identities as not just wives and/or mothers but role models to their children. These identities cannot be taken in isolation as they interrelate and interlock and are what make up the core of the individual (Crenshaw, 2010; Hill Collins, 2000). Intersectionality recognises these various dimensions and provides a better understanding of the educational experiences of mature women. However, although their life commitments posed a real threat to their education and generated mixed emotions (Mona: 'the boys need me today'; 'need to help my mum with caring for my disabled brother), with support, all the participants persevered,

continuously engaging in mental negotiations between their moral obligations – the family ('had to pick up children from school') and their aspirational goals – their higher education (Mariam: 'it is important to have a good education; Zizi: '…I need to continue in order to succeed').

5.2.3.2.5 Development

As the students continued to grapple with the 'new' and 'unfamiliar', by the latter part of the second semester, development was noticeable, though this was not a unified phenomenon, but rather, a process that was unique to each individual. This change is evident in skills (Nokulu: 'I am now able to use computer'; Zizi: 'after further revision at home I was able to understand it more in depth'), in confidence (Joy: 'feeling more confident with myself'; Orode: 'accessing *Blackboard* more often than before'), enjoyment of learning (Orode: 'Enjoying my work and began to see my previous mistakes') and determination (Beanie: 'I am trying. But I will try harder'; Joy: 'I will ensure that I make use of all available resources'). As with Susie, there is an obvious change in their thinking and attitude. New subjects are being studied (safeguarding and collaborative working), but this experience is approached with less unease. In the *Learning* column, the vocabulary is more pragmatic and matter-of-fact (Mona: 'I need to get more support so that I can get more explanation'; Mariam: 'no point in panicking I will just stay focus [ed]'). Noting down their response to what was learnt, there is a shift from external blame to owning their situation (Mariam: 'this is the new way to learn so I have to get used to it'; Beanie: 'I need to use support more to help me understand').

Even Joy, who from the start, maintained a more positive attitude than her peers was a lot more self-critical: 'should have managed my time more effectively'; 'learning from mistakes made from the first semester'. With increased cognitive ability, the students are able to self-determine their own course of action as is evident in Beanie's: 'I need to use support more to help me understand'. However, fear and anxiety, apprehension and life commitment are still ever-present realities in the second and third semesters (Mariam: 'how am I going to get use to this?; Beanie: 'the work is hard and I don't think I can do it'; 'ongoing issues at home'). But the assurance of support from their tutors enables them to transcend the realm of fear and forge ahead. The importance of this support is highlighted in the concluding log remarks at the end of the second semester (Orode: 'I have grown so much from the previous semester in terms of learning'; Zizi: 'all the support is there and should not complain it's me; Nokulu: 'use more support').

The log entries justify my research approach and support the view of scholars who advocate the need for HE institutions to ensure that support is made available for mature female learners who, as a result of their multiplicity of roles, need to be supported to succeed in HE (Carbado *et al*., 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011; 2015).

5.2.3.2.6 Transformation

The pandemic threatened to destabilise the learning process and the newly acquired confidence of the students. The move to online classes meant that many had to get used to yet another new way of learning (Mariam: 'finding it difficult to use the internet to get information'; Beanie: 'I don't like this way of learning over the internet'; Mona: 'it was hard without being with my teacher'). The lack of IT skills challenged many but I was confident that the extensive online support, together with the increased level of agency, would keep them on track. Moreover, continuous reflection enabled the students to engage in critical self-appraisal, giving them an awareness of how far they had come and what could be lost if they were to give up. No longer were they victims of an insensitive system; they had become empowered and capable learners that could be intentional and deliberate in facing the challenges of Covid and take responsibility for their learning. Responding to the question on *Appropriateness of action*, entries like: 'I have to manage' (Orode); 'I have adjusted' (Mona); 'I have to be disciplined' (Zizi), evidence the transformation of attitude and mindset as words like, 'they' or 'the tutor' or 'my family' or 'my children', no longer feature in their entries. Rather, 'I' is often used, depicting greater self-dependency. Furthermore, as with Susie, learning is no longer an intangible phenomenon to be endured, but rather, something to look forward to in anticipation, 'knowing what is expected' (as Joy puts it). This expectation also fuels the desire to learn more. The reassuring presence of support ('always reassures me'; 'I try to cope') is what gives Zizi the confidence to say, 'everything will be fine'.

Worthy of note is that even though life events are still ever-present realities (Orode: 'husband in hospital'; Joy: 'no support at home with children'; Zizi: 'I can't concentrate'), transformation should not be perceived purely in terms of academic achievement and progress, but also, in light of a change in attitude: 'I feel a lot more confident for [about] life' (Mariam) and cognition (critical thought): 'I feel I have learned a lot of things… I feel I have really progressed' (Joy). This transformation is most evident in Beanie, who though, initially, averse to learning, changes tone to '…try, even

though it is hard'. In her summary statement at the end of the semester, she noted 'I like coming to the class…'.

5.2.3.2.7 Self-actualisation

By the third and final semester, the participants had a good understanding of what HE study entails. The evidence shows an acceptance of it as an absolute in itself, viewed in comparison with nothing else. It is recognised as something fundamental that has the capability to transform one's life (Zizi: 'I have to complete my work'; Orode: 'I have to be strong and finish…this is a chance in my life to do something for my future'; Mariam: 'now I know it is important to have a good education'). This understanding results in an attitude that yields a positive result for all of the students. They are now pilots of their own lives; resolute, despite the challenges presented by online learning (Joy: 'try to manage the situation'; Mona: 'I have adjusted myself to online lesson'; Beanie: 'I will try even though it is hard'; Orode: 'I have to manage'). When the final assignments are submitted, their sense of achievement and relief is intense and absolute (Mariam: 'with support from Jumie, I got through'; Joy: 'gave in my final work'). The entries in the *Learning* column show pride in what has been achieved (Orode: 'all I know I finish now'; Nokulu: 'I have done everything I can'). They have all run the race and their perseverance has paid off. The language in the summary of their learning experience denotes pride and increased self-esteem (Orode: I am now a graduant [graduate] too and can hold my shoulder high; Zizi: 'Felt very accomplished'; Mariam: 'I will now have a degree and get a better job'; Mona: 'I got to the end'). Crucially, their words are devoid of internalised prejudice. It has been replaced by a sense of self-worth. Achieving graduate status means they can take their rightful place within society as people worthy of note and recognition (Orode: Je suis maintenant quelqu'un aussi [I am now somebody also]').

For students like Beanie and Nokulu, achievement has not come with a degree qualification but a new sense of self born from pride; they not only saw the course through, they gained new knowledge and skills that they had, hitherto, lacked. Beanie summarised her year-long experience thus, 'I have learned a lot of new things that I did not know before…. I am over 60 years and I think I am too old to learn even though I want to learn'. Nokulu's summarised: '. I am happy I have learnt a lot and I can manage to upload the office apps on my devices…. I have [am] now able to use computer and have many good experense [experience]'. Both Beanie and Nokulu

acquired a pragmatism through critical reflection. That is why their responses to the question on *Appropriateness of action*: ‘I have done everything I can’ (Nokulu); ‘I try but I can’t; ‘We are older people and it is not easy to learn’ (Beanie), are not surprising.

5.2.4 The interviews

The use of the skills audit, feedback sheets and learning logs enabled the students to engage in critical self-reflection, which developed their cognitive skills. The interviews, however, provided a vivid account of their respective journeys and their utterances show a shift from a state of near-paralysis, evident at the start of the programme, to a heightened level of cognition by the end of the programme. Their expressions also showed that transformation was not the same for all and did not come about with a ‘magic bullet’, but as a result of the concerted effort, on the part of their educators, to help the students to flourish. With extensive support, the students gained a better understanding of the reasons for their academic difficulties and, over time, developed agency. As with the logs, thematic analysis has been used to analyse the interview transcripts and highlight the change that took place. The themes generated are: critical thought, appreciation of self, positivity and life-long learners. Using relevant quotes from the interviews, each theme is discussed in greater detail below.

5.2.4.1 Critical thought

In responding to the very first question on the preparedness for degree-level study, the students needed to engage in an honest self-appraisal that included the consideration of their individual skills and personal circumstances. This self-assessment required critical reflection and resulted in an awareness of their academic challenges and the reasons for these. This heightened level of critical thought is evident in the language of the students. Joy, for instance, stated:

> *When I look back I don't think they prepared us properly for uni and so we knew nothing. I thought I was, but to be honest when we started it was completely different and not what we expected. Everything was different, especially 'cause with the HND they were very lenient on how they marked the work and there were times when the lecturers weren’t really focusing on what you were doing, they just sort of scan through your assignments so they didn't pick up on a lot of things 'cause the way I wrote in HND and the way you were pushing me to write is completely different.*

By looking back, Joy engaged in self-evaluation, leading her to recognise (a) what good teaching and learning (T&L) entails, (b) what quality feedback and attention to detail involves and (c) what a good essay is, based on the change in her perspective. In effect, with constant encouragement, together with the ever-present, reassuring support, Joy was able to improve herself academically. Her later responses are a far cry from her initial thoughts of fear and anxiety (noted in her learning logs at the start of the programme). By reflecting, Joy was able to come to the conclusion that when she embarked on the Health and Social Care (H&SC) programme, she was definitely not ready to undertake study at degree level. Clearly, Joy had developed her thinking enough over the year to realise that she was not solely at fault for her academic shortcomings. She had been let down by an educational system whose responsibility it was to provide her with the skills and knowledge that would enable her to succeed at university. Nevertheless, our extensive support on this programme enabled her to develop her academic writing skills.

Beanie's assessment of the T&L process on the HND resonates with that of Joy's:

> *That HND program just took our money. The teachers were rubbish. They just used to pass us even when they didn't teach us. So everything was hard for us and that is why we struggled and could not do many things.*

Upon reflection, Beanie, too, concluded that the absence of good quality teaching on the HND programme explained the reasons for her own academic challenges. She went on to add that her age was also an obstacle to her learning;

> *…for someone like me who is too old because I am over 60 it is difficult. For instance, I do not know how to use computer, and everything is computer and online and so is different to what I am used to.*

She made several references to her age in her log entries, believing that being a much older student was a barrier to learning. This belief was unwavering throughout, and it highlights the fact that despite the constant support, this mindset could not be altered. The reason for this is discussed later in this section. What one can discern, in both Joy and Beanie's words, is their candour and sense of realism as they engage in this reflective exercise. There is an acknowledgement that they were completely ignorant of what was needed to ensure academic success in HE. However, in a supportive environment, over time, the students were able to accept their shortcomings with less

evidence of anger. Furthermore, being able to critically reflect meant that the students were also able to link their learning difficulties to their personal circumstances. The retrospective responses enabled them to make a connection between their fears and anxieties, academic difficulties and the numerous roles they had to play while taking up the added role of a student. Susie for instance, states:

> *If you are a woman, you have more responsibilities and more duty to do…. If you have children and a husband, you have more things to do, less time for studying. Also, age is the same way because for older peoples learning is more difficult.*

By making this connection, Susie was able to understand that the challenges she faced as a mature learner were not always within the realm of her control. Susie had often had to interrupt her studies to travel home to Romania to look after her ailing mother. Her experience is not unique and reflects that of many women who often have to cope with the numerous responsibilities and demands of family, making the pursuit of a degree qualification arduous. As a consequence, Susie's initial thinking, that she was incapable of study or unworthy of membership of a higher institution, was eventually dispelled. Increased cognition and a pragmatic understanding of the challenges in her life, led her to consider herself courageous in daring to take up an enormous challenge, despite her demanding priorities, and which, ultimately, resulted in her development. A development brought about by the various strategies put in place and ones Susie extols as empowering in nature. She remarks on the use of the skills audit, which was one of the tools used for the intervention:

> *Because most of the time, we don't think where we are good or what we need to improve; we just done the things and this is all. But with the skills audit you must think where you are good, what you need to improve, what you can do in a different way, in a better way. It force you to think and judge.*

Where previously, Susie's thinking had been limited by the constraints of socially prescribed roles, reflection had forced her to examine herself so that she became aware of her strengths and weaknesses. With the aid of the audits, Susie was able to carry out periodic self-appraisals which, over time, developed her thought processes. This gave her a better understanding of herself and her learning experiences and enabled her to come up with solutions independently. Moreover, intersectionality

necessitated the consideration of the complex identities of these mature female learners so that social exclusions are disadvantaged and every individual is able to achieve to their fullest potential. So for example, even though Susie was initially hindered by the language barrier ("I was before run away from speaking with peoples because I don't speak English good") with appropriate support, she was able to confront this reality and overcome this impediment.

Furthermore, this heightened cognitive state gave the students a better understanding of the hierarchical nature of their learning environment. For instance, in explaining the reasons for their fears and anxiety, individual socio-economic status (SES) was given, by many of the students, as a major factor. Beanie, for example, believed that her lack of education was as a result of her poor background:

> *My parents were poor and could not send me to school and so it would be difficult to do well in university. Until I did my HND I did not go to school for over forty years and I did not get my 'O'-levels. I just started work then married…The language spoken in university is different and you need to be well educated to understand the kind of grammar. So I will say if you have a background like my own, don't even bother to go to university.*

Having developed her thinking considerably, Beanie had further insight into her academic challenges, enabling her to consider the impact of her SES on her learning. In her view, poverty resulted in missed opportunities and lack of access to meaningful education or skills, making the pursuit of HE an unattainable aspiration. Beanie was saying that because she was poor, she could not engage in any meaningful form of education. She, therefore, could not acquire the knowledge or skills that would enable her to succeed at university. She adds that her low SES prevented her from acquiring the language of academia, which, she believed, only the rich and privileged few were acquainted with. Her inability to understand this exclusive language, therefore, denies her membership of the highly stratified environment.

Beanie's perceptions are not entirely inaccurate. HE is often portrayed as hierarchical in nature (Burke *et al*., 2016; Threadgold, Burke and Bunn, 2018). For those with low SES, there is little or no opportunity available to build a strong academic register that would ensure their success in university (McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Tudor, 2012). I believe, however, that her academic progress was hindered by her fixed mindset ("I

am too old to learn") and her negativity, which was evident in her advice to mature learners wanting to pursue an HE qualification: 'If her situation is like me, no chance…she will be fooling herself''. As far as Beanie was concerned, people from the lower classes had little or no chance at succeeding in HE. Yet, Beanie failed to have a deeper appreciation of the impact the various forms of support had had on her as an individual. She began the course completely devoid of even the most basic academic skills; yet, by the end of the programme, she had acquired new knowledge, some computer skills and research skills.

Contrary to Beanie's view, the intersectional approach of this intervention set out to nullify hierarchical categorisations by ensuring that the historically marginalised (like Beanie) are not disadvantaged as a result of their SES and are able to participate more equitably in HE. So, though Beanie later acknowledged the extensive support provided, she failed to mention that she had developed a higher level of cognition, which, in my view, was perhaps her most noticeable development. Making the link between academic success and SES shows her understanding of how life circumstances directly impact on academic achievement. This awareness did not generate anger, but rather, a pragmatic attitude; one that focuses on the 'here and now', and adopts a more realistic viewpoint. Beanie understood that it was pointless dwelling on personal circumstances that were beyond her control as it served no purpose.

5.2.4.2 Appreciation of self

Another noticeable change was the students' increased sense of confidence and self-worth, which was absent at the start of the programme. Continuous reflection altered their thinking, and this phenomenon was best captured by Zizi. For instance, when asked about the effectiveness of the research tools (learning logs, audits and feedback sheets), Zizi stated:

> *When I was writing the logs, I felt I was pouring ma self out and it was like, you know, talking to someone. Every time I wrote in it yeah, I get to know ma self innit? I know I ain't dumb and I just needed help to be able to do things miss.*

Zizi's words are thought-provoking and compelling as she invites her listener into her innermost thoughts. She says that putting down her thoughts made them more

tangible and real because it felt like she had an audience who was listening ("It was like…talking to someone"). She had never before spoken about her innermost thoughts, and by 'pouring' her thoughts out, they were legitimised and made more concrete. So also, writing her thoughts down meant that she had 'put them out there' for others to hear, and this validated her as a person. Additionally, voicing these thoughts aloud provided the opportunity to vocally unburden herself, so that she could talk to herself, and at the same time, to me, her tutor. It was like she was saying "listen to me, I get it now and I will not back down!".

The point here is that by verbalising her personal experiences, she implores the listener to take a closer look at her person, thereby revealing her intrinsic abilities and 'worth'. When Zizi says "I ain't dumb", she is actually saying "look at me properly!". Having realised her potential as a graduate, Zizi has broken the glass ceiling and can now reach towards greater heights. It is, therefore, not surprising that her response to the *Personal impact* question is evident of this newfound discovery:

> *Miss, you really showed me that a woman can be more than just a wife or mother, because in my culture, the expectation is for a woman to get married and have children and look after her family and home, nothing else.*

Zizi has acquired some insight into how cultural restrictions prevent women from progressing, thus, restricting their growth. She grasps that she need not succumb to social and cultural dictates or limitations and understands that being a mother or wife is not the extent of a woman's potential or worth. Most significant, however, was the phrase; "Miss, you really showed me…". Her words reveal the significance of my own role in the learning experiences of the students. As a Black woman, I gave her (and the other female students) the belief that she, too, can achieve to her fullest potential, irrespective of societal barriers. As their main tutor, I am the embodiment of these aspirations, having, hitherto, accepted the limiting and repressive ideologies that have relegated them to the lower echelons of society. The message Zizi was trying to convey was that my relationship with the students went beyond my tutor role. I helped each student to see beyond her race, gender and class – and that their ascribed social identities need not translate into experiences of oppression and discrimination, but rather, of opportunities and possibilities. Furthermore, as one who shared with them the commonality of race and gender, my actions demonstrated that I appreciated their minority status and understood their struggles. When asked what impact she felt that

I, as her main tutor, had had on her learning, Zizi's answer was blunt, yet insightful, and gives credence to my value:

> *Miss, you did not look down on us if we don't know stuff. You just explain it. You cared about your students…The other teachers were ok I guess but because they were, you know, White and not Black like you. I don't mean nothing by that but sometimes we don't understand what they say 'cause they talk funny and they too definitely don't understand us sometimes. Also, I know they try but they just stick to the rules exactly even when it don't suit us 'cause we are different from the type students they are used to innit?.*

Zizi depicted me as a caring 'Black mother' who wants the best for her 'children'. Had I been White, I would not have understood the totality of their needs (language, culture and socio-economic circumstances) and would not think to 'alter' the *status quo* to suit their unique learning requirements. The racial correlation meant that I saw them for who they were; and, utilising an intersectional approach, I made a concerted effort to effect changes that suited them. This view was certainly a shift in the students' perceptions as, initially (as documented in their earlier logs), I was considered culturally 'suspect' because my support strategies exposed their inadequacies. Intersectionality was a powerfully effectual tool that enabled my deeper understanding of the students' internalised struggles, ensuring that I constantly sought to foster a deeper sense of self-appreciation and worth. With increased confidence and value of self, Zizi was able to give this advice to other mature female learners returning to education:

> *I guess if they want a degree badly, they will have to cope because it will make you value yourself more. When I look at the older women in the class, I think of my mum who I know cannot do it because she does not know any other way.*

As explained earlier, Zizi had 'broken the mould', and if she could do it, so could any other woman. Culture and tradition should no longer be an excuse for not developing oneself. She knew, first-hand (with her mother) the stifling impact of culture on women, and therefore, implored all women to choose to value themselves by seizing every available opportunity for self-advancement, regardless of the obstacles. It is my conviction that, with critical reflection, Zizi was able to make the link between the

reassuring support given, and her personal development. She no longer harboured internalised prejudice, but rather, an appreciation of self. One that has the confidence to face whatever challenges life throws at her. Most importantly, Zizi no longer sees herself as subservient to the dominant values and culture within her learning environment, but as an individual of great of worth, deserving of recognition and acceptance.

5.2.4.3 Positivity

The continuous refinement of language, thought and attitude remains evident in the students' discussion of their individual realities. This constant improvement fosters a positivity in the students that instils a hopefulness and confidence that was missing at the start of the programme. 'Family', 'children', 'parents', 'work', 'school runs' and 'health' remain constant and generate stress and frustration, as they each vie for prominence in the order of priorities. However, an optimistic attitude with less tangible pessimism about life emerges and is evident in Orode's remark on the impact of the course on self:

> *Je suis quelqu'un maintenant! [I am somebody now!] not just wife and mother and housekeeper. I think differently now because you have really empowered me with a lot of skills, knowledge, and behaviour, made me to understand that you can also become learned and still be whatever you want to be and not limit yourself to house or family or be looked down on.*

Orode's statement brings to the fore how many women have had to adhere to the requirements of social and cultural norms, unaware of the existence of choices, or reluctant (fearing repercussion) to venture beyond these prescribed boundaries. An obvious consequence of the empowering nature of the support is that for these mature female students, culture or social norms will no longer determine the course of their lives. Greater awareness has steered the women into a different thought process and a realisation that regardless of personal circumstances, the pursuit of knowledge and personal advancement need not be a moral choice and should, instead, be embraced as a human right. Therefore, having developed the spirit of making progress, personal development should be desired and pursued at all costs and should no longer be an abstract concept that should not be entertained. This is the 'can do' spirit, which was definitely lacking in the students at the start. It is my reasoning, therefore, that the

intervention, as well as the cultivation of a reflective approach, cannot be over emphasised. The former provides a safety net able to contain the ever-present anxieties, and the latter aids the resolution of problems. This approach certainly does not mask the anxiety that accompanies the multiplicity of roles; rather, the women have developed an adaptability (to whatever life brings) that transports their mindset from the default realm of negativity to one that is more positive.

Also emerging from the reflective approach in this study was a developed awareness of the participants' innate coping mechanism. Most of the students had evolved into competent 'managers', more confident in their ability to negotiate the hurdles and challenges of life, and an acceptance that personal responsibilities and commitments are not going to disappear, but instead, there is a confidence (acquired from new knowledge and skills) that will enable them to cope.

It should be understood that the students' commitments continue to pose a potential barrier to personal advancement, but, with a difference in their attitudes to their demanding personal obligations. So that even for those who did not manage to attain a degree qualification, their personal circumstances will no longer hinder or limit their potential. Nokulu, for instance, extols the effectiveness of the intervention:

> *Even though I did not pass all the modules, I try my best. It is good I have gone university to learn. I am happy I have learnt things and skills that will help me in life like to manage myself, my family issues and even for my job. Before I don't understand why many things are that way but I must to think to know why. So now nobody can tell me something about me or my life I will be able give them an answer.*

With this gradual change of perspective, Nokulu developed an increased sense of self-worth and independence, enabling her to produce answers by herself ("now nobody can tell me something about me or my life I will be able to give them answer") rather than deferring to external perceptions/opinions. Nokulu's positive statement above shows that she is able to express her views openly and points to the fact that she knows what it takes for students like her to succeed. That is why, in response to whether the university upheld its widening participation (WP) status, Nokulu replied;

I think this is still injustice for people like me who need to learn more… Why they tell us to come if they don't help us more than that? We are different people. There must to be arrangement for equal opportunities for all people.

She goes on to add: "I feel angry that some people have understanding better than other people". Nokulu is not afraid to voice her view that the university's policies and practices are discriminatory as they fail to acknowledge the differences. It is clear that even though she finds it difficult to wholeheartedly admit to the effectiveness of the intervention, her statement concedes to its efficacy. The point is that though Nokulu finds it difficult to understand why she struggled throughout the programme, there is a veiled acceptance of her limitations in her advice to other mature women desiring a degree-level qualification: "I will advise them to be intelligent before they start because if not they can't manage it"*.*

Irrespective of the ambiguities of the students' emotions, their positivism is palpable as their language highlights their altered state of mind. The students have transformed into individuals who desire knowledge for knowledge's sake, having broken the constraints with which, for so long, they have been shackled. I will expand on this point in the following section.

5.2.4.4 Lifelong learners

At the start of the programme, the students felt disadvantaged. I would compare their condition with a paralysis of the mind (as labelled in the first semester learning logs). What is striking is that by the end of the programme, the intervention had led to an increase in the students' desire to better themselves and grow their knowledge. Susie's thrust for knowledge, for instance, is unmistakable:

…it's changed me a lot. Now I need more and just want to go on and learn more and more. OK, so when I started, I don't know a lot of things…I don't have so many trust in me…now everything it was better after now I start to speak out…I can I see it, I can do it even though it was not easy…I have really nice memories for this year. I have really enjoyed coming to uni and I don't have enough learning I must carry on".

Having mentally shattered all impediments and acquired new skills, Susie is noticeably clear in what she wants: *"*I need more*".* She is no longer prepared to settle for less. She can do a lot more than she ever considered possible and she intends to continue

to strive to gain more. Susie is unequivocal about her lack of skills at the start of the programme (“I don’t know a lot of things”) and her lack of confidence in herself or her abilities. Nevertheless, secure in the presence of support, Susie developed her self-confidence and began to enjoy learning. A fact that must not be overlooked is the connection between the assuring and comforting help at hand and the desire to learn. It was only when this connection happened that Susie’s mindset undertook a transformation and learning commenced. The point is that when Susie realised that she had a tutor who understood her learning needs, she developed the conviction to venture out of her comfort zone and explore new things. So much so that she acquired a thirst for more knowledge that would only be sated by continuous learning.

I must add that not all the participants desired to engage in formal learning beyond the length of the programme. The reason for this is contained in Mona’s comments:

> *I will not be going to school anymore because it’s very hard if you have a family ‘cause they will be demanding of your time and everything, yeah? But now I know I will not stop asking questions and doing my own research about things because this course has taught me to always ask for evidence yeah and not accept what you see or what people tell you.*

Mona’s personal circumstances (as single mother of two young boys) may deter her from pursuing further studies but she has acquired an enquiring mind (‘will always ask questions and carry out research’). This does not mean that Mona is less academically able than someone like Susie; rather, individual circumstances together with individual coping mechanisms have a direct impact on one’s ability to navigate HE. That is, when one views through the lens of intersectionality, one is able to appreciate how the multiple identities of an individual (marital status, motherhood, age, race, class, gender and much more) intersect and overlap, resulting in marginalisation or preventing the pursuit of personal advancement. Notwithstanding, this transformation in the students is born of the fact that learning became something that was no longer an unobtainable or intangible concept; it had become a comprehensible and obvious notion that needed to recognised as a part of life. The language of the students expresses the desire to continue learning (“I must carry on’’; “I will not stop asking questions”). It shows that the students have evolved into independent, lifelong learners who will no longer be satisfied with what they consider ‘less than’, which unfortunately, is sometimes an assumption conferred upon neo-traditional learners.

5.3 Empowering ‘other’ students with the right support

It is important to note that all the students began the top up degree programme in Health and Social Care ignorant and defensive of their lack of knowledge and academic skills. Notwithstanding, I certainly was not going to adopt the deficit mindset that the students were incapable of developing those skills hence were a lost cause. An important consideration was the fact that the programme was developed by the northwest body of the university in a region with a demographic footprint of over 98% Whites. As a result, the programme did not suit the student body in London who were all from minority ethnic groups. A key consideration missing was how the multiple identities assumed by the students resulted in intersecting and overlapping instances of disadvantage. This omission was of great significance and needed to be addressed. Firstly, some adaptations had to be made to the programme, one of which included the injection of a higher level of targeted support that would give the students a better chance of success. In addition, as a Black woman, I too have experienced – and will no doubt still experience – systems that pay little or no regard to my individuality or think me ‘less than’ my White counterparts. This shared lived experience definitely instilled in me a moral obligation to ‘champion’ their cause and try to mitigate their academic challenges. Moreover, as a woman and mother myself, I believed that the student were not incapable but rather competent individuals who assumed multiple identities with components that enabled them to cope with life challenges (Burke, 2012; Petersen, 2006). I just needed to tap into and effectively utilise these latent resources the students were already in possession of so that it translates to academic success. I therefore had to rid the students of their ‘victim mindset’ so they took control of their own learning and come up with solutions to their problems.

Besides, the tenets of feminism aligned my thinking to the importance of helping women, irrespective of colour, creed or social standing, raise their consciousness so that they have a deeper appreciation of themselves and how society is structured in such a way as to perpetuate oppression (hooks, 2000; McCarthy and Grosser, 2023). Consciousness raising involves a (re)orientation of one’s mindset which requires one to ‘unlearn’ taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world (Cook and Fonow, 1986; Firth and Robinson, 2016). Consequently, the various tools utilised – especially the learning log – encouraged critical reflection and significantly developed their level of cognition to a point that these hitherto marginalised students acquired a better understanding of

the hierarchical nature of their learning environment and the reasons for their academic challenges. These students were now equipped to overcome life's obstacles and become drivers of their own destiny. The intersectional approached utilised in this study enabled the students to develop the knowledge and skills that transformed these neo-traditional students into self-motivated individuals, capable of pursuing knowledge simply for personal development or professional advancement. This new state of being ensured that each of the mature female students was able to confidently situate herself within a challenging job market and compete on equal footing with others.

As I had managed to win their trust, having me as an ever-present familiar and familial source of support gave the students the confidence to take charge of their learning. Consequently, at the end of their programme, these students emerged as confident individuals unafraid to take on new challenges. Yes, they were still wives, mothers, daughters and homemakers but over time, they became firmly rooted in the realism of their individual capabilities and how these can be employed to achieve favourable goals. Yes, many still lived under the restraints of cultural dictates and societal prejudices but no longer did they focus on these limitations.

5.4 Conclusion

The skills audit, feedback sheets and learning logs were effective research tools that enabled the students to gradually confront their lack of academic skills and develop themselves as reflective practitioners. So also, the research tools aided an intersectional approach that allowed for the varied academic challenges to be exposed and addressed through continuous dialogue between the tutors and students throughout the programme. The interviews provided an opportunity for the students to reflect on their learning experiences over the year. The interviews also revealed how the students were able to relate their experiences with the multiple roles they upheld, and how they were able to place themselves (successfully) within their learning context.

With the assuring and constant support, one noticeable development was in the students' language. With this, I was able to measure change; change that was not instant but gradual (over time), and incremental (with heightened cognition). A change that shifted with the discourse, in what I would label as vertical and horizontal.

Vertically, in that the students began from a position of ignorance (of their lack of knowledge and skills) to a leap into a state where everything is still the same but different. That is, the students' challenges remained, but they developed a different perspective to these problems. So vertically, they were starting from the position of, 'I don't know', and having shed their assumptions, were able to move to one of 'I need to know'. This state of mind is what prepares them for the leap into having the insight that there is a need to make a change. This leap is evolutionary and involuntary as it happens almost automatically, having realised that there is the need for change. With a horizontal change, the students were able to take stock (through critical reflection) of where they were up to in their learning, and subsequently, make the effort to improve upon their experiences by developing strategy and taking the necessary steps to bring about change. Effectively, with the right support, the students made a conscious change to their thinking, enabling them to develop agency so that they might adopt a different mindset that would transform them into individuals who continuously seek knowledge. The next, and final, chapter offers conclusions that can be derived from the study along with recommendations for educational policy, especially on widening participation.

Chapter 6: Discussion, recommendations and conclusions

6.1 Introduction

The findings from this research highlight the multi-dimensional realities of mature female learners from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in higher education (HE). They stress the importance of acknowledging those realities and bringing their variety of experience into the learning environment to help create a more positive learning experience for this profile of learners. The study, which deployed the concept of intersectionality as a framework with which to view a cohort of participants with the above profile, demanded a consideration of the multi-dimensional spheres within which each of the female students operated, whether from the perspective of race, colour, age or socio-economic circumstances. In this chapter, I present a detailed discussion of what this study set out to do, what was achieved and the challenges faced. I also explain how this study resulted in a change, not only in the students, but in me as well. I go on to suggest ways in which teaching and learning (T&L) environments can be shaped into spaces that are representative of all the players within.

6.2 The Problem

The top-up degree in Health and Social Care (H&SC) was a year-long programme, which was a problem in itself; given the academic difficulties of the students, the length of the programme needed to be at least two years. Without the extra time, mitigating the academic difficulties likely to be experienced by the students would require an injection of a huge amount of human and financial resources. In addition, most of the students had English as a second language, presenting a further formidable challenge, yet my request for English language support was dismissed on the grounds that the students had already achieved level 5 qualifications in English from institutions in the United Kingdom and, therefore, from the university's perspective, there was no justification for language support. Instead, some support was, initially, approved for English for academic purposes (EAP), but as student numbers decreased, this support was withdrawn. When the top-up programme was originally approved, the university had not foreseen the high level of support the students would need, and the additional expense of providing it, coupled with diminishing recruitment, put the programme at

risk of cancellation. My remit, therefore, included the extremely challenging task of finding inexpensive ways to support these students. As already highlighted in chapter 2, the students had been admitted into an educational system that had little or no appreciation of how their intersecting and overlapping identities resulted in discrimination and academic disadvantage (Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Keohane and Petrie, 2017; Sanders-McDonagh and Davis, 2018). Consequently, rather than higher educational institutions focussing solely on recruitment to raise student numbers, consideration needs to also include effective academic support, differentiation of teaching and learning, and career progression (Shanahan, 2000; Tudor, 2012). So even though one can acknowledge the strides taken to widen participation in higher education, some groups of students continue to experience academic challenges. The simple fact is that widening participation can only be deemed successful if educational policies and practices consider the nuanced dimensions that deny those already marginalised groups fair and total access (Forman and McCormick, 1995; McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Shanahan, 2000; Tudor, 2012). The success of the intersectional approach adopted by this intervention has demonstrated that strategies can be developed to actively promote inclusion.

6.2.1 Assumptions of knowledge – knowing, yet not knowing

Believing that they were ready for degree-level study, these mature female students had enrolled onto the H&SC degree programme. Extensive engagement with literature on neo-traditional students highlighted the fact that many of them lacked the knowledge and skills needed for degree-level study and also required the use of academic language to which they were not socially acculturated. (Foushée and Sleigh, 2013; Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Murphy, 2017; Webb *et al.,* 2017). , knowledge were not aware This inability to assimilate the culture of the HE environment impacted on the students academically and also on their psychological wellbeing. This was a major challenge that this study set out to mitigate through a skills intervention. This research considers these issues through the lens of intersectionality, which exposes and unpicks the multiple ways in which a lack of acculturation disadvantages students with a certain profile. Lea and Street (2006), McWilliams and Allan (2014) and Tudor (2012) all explain that the socio-economic circumstances of the students do not expose them to customs and activities that develop their cognitive skills or language to a level that would enable them to adequately engage in subject-

based discourses. Added to this, the personal responsibilities of family, demanding jobs and financial constraints make the pursuit of an HE qualification a near-impossible undertaking. However, unaware of the extent of their shortfall in fundamental study skills and having little concept of the level of commitment that HE demands, the students proceed to higher-level study gravely ill-equipped.

Intersectionality also uncovers a further common issue associated with the profile of student discussed in this study, that of the added guilt of going against social and cultural dictates and the potential risk of alienation from their communities (Reay, 2002; 2003; Swain and Hammond, 2011; Shanahan, 2000). Once embarked on the programme, the exercises in critical self-reflection lead to an awareness that results in changed perceptions and, ultimately, decisions about their social realities that could be resisted by their own networks. Consequently, the women were constantly engaged in an attempt to justify their presence in an environment that was, by not considering these factors, threatening to their individuality and self-worth whilst, apparently, ignoring their roles as mothers, wives, etc. (Webb and Sepúlveda, 2020; Shanahan, 2000). One could argue that it would be unreasonable to expect that this profile of students could quickly develop academic skills that pre-suppose a high level of linguistic proficiency while dismissing the existence of their considerable commitments outside studying (Shanahan, 2000; Fyfe, 2020). It would also be reasonable to assume that such expectations might lead to alienation from the learning environment, with the student, eventually, dropping out altogether. It is for this reason that an intersectional approach was adopted for this study, so as to consider the realities of each individual student, because they are not a homogeneous group but unique in their experiences. Also, importantly, an intersectional approach also addresses the disadvantages conferred by the discrimination that structural oppression often generates.

I set out under the erroneous assumption that the students would welcome my support efforts and embrace all the various strategies I tried to put in place. Instead, my efforts were met with some degree of derision and resentment as the students felt exposed for their lack of skills. The skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs forced the students to confront their academic challenges, which was an alien concept that generated fear and anxiety. This resulted in internalised prejudice and a negative sense of self-worth leading to developed inferiority complex (Clarke and McCall, 2013; Shaunessy *et al.,* 2007). The natural reaction was, therefore, to adopt a defensive

attitude and, being their main tutor, I bore the brunt of their anger. For Philip *et al.* (2017), this onslaught of 'friendly fire' might have been predicted because, as a Black woman, I was expected to be sympathetic to their plight. The resentment was palpable in the atmosphere of the classroom and, often, the hostility manifested in retorts like: *"Why are you not acting like Black people?"* or *"You think we are stupid because we don't know these things".* There were many more, similar outbursts like these from students, so, frustrated, angry and bewildered, I often doubted my abilities and harboured thoughts of giving up on the whole project. At times, I felt inadequate and a failure, nursed feelings of insecurity and inferiority and felt that I was not capable, or competent enough, to bring about the much-needed change. At one point, I even viewed the various intervention tools as nonsensical garbage and thought myself a fraud for daring to assume the position of someone capable of making a positive impact on the students' learning experiences.

This study set out to mitigate the academic challenges experienced by the mature female students on the top-up degree programme in H&SC. However, the aim of the study was not to bring about immense changes at once, but rather, to effect a gradual change of mindset and skills, so that, ultimately, a whole new way of thinking and acting was established. The adoption of an intersectional approach in this study ensured the use of multilateral lenses with which to view these challenges and allowed for the recognition of the diverse nature of the student body. How this problem was dealt with is discussed in the proceeding section.

6.3 Dealing with the problem

6.3.1 A skills intervention

Critical reflection, together with engagement with relevant literature, is vital for any successful practice as it ensures psychological and political survival (Brookfield, 2017). This applies to teachers and students alike by allowing them to understand their own personal predilections and inner struggles and, politically, the context in which they teach or learn. Moreover, critical engagement with intersectionality gave me an appreciation of the students' realities and enabled me to view the problem from a multi-dimensional perspective. The participants in this study were all women, but each had unique life experiences (as wife, mother, carer, worker, daughter, with health challenges), which interacted and overlapped to impact negatively on their learning

experiences. In chapter two, I explained the importance of student-tutor relationship and my awareness of this importance enabled me to connect with the students and develop an appreciation of their multiple identities. Ignoring these different dimensions risked omitting the very essence of each individual's lived experience, leading to an incomplete understanding of the nature of the academic challenges for this group of students. An intersectional approach would preclude this omission by acknowledging the mental negotiations in play as each woman decided to take on the additional role of 'student' along with their other pressing responsibilities. This was especially significant as the choice to study would, for most, mean doing so without the support of their family and other social networks. These considerations, therefore, ensured a more holistic standpoint for my research. Consequently, given the deep-rooted nature of the problem, I was realistic in my expectations and knew that not all of the students would achieve a degree-level qualification. Nevertheless, I believed that with the targeted support, all of them would, at least, have the chance to develop skills that would enhance them personally and professionally. As surmised in the literature review chapter, the relationship between the tutor and the student was of utmost importance as tutors play a significant role in the learning process (Guskey and Passaro, 1994; Harris and Sass, 2007; Ivey, 2011; Tormey, 2021). Developing a connection with my students gave me an appreciation of each student's need and allowed me to respond appropriately (Harris and Sass , 2007; Ivey , 2011; Tormey, 2021).

Furthermore, with an intersectional approach, the aim was for the students to develop a greater sense of self-worth and level of agency that enabled them to take charge of their own learning. I, therefore, needed to call upon all my knowledge of mature female learners and make use of interpersonal skills such as emotional intelligence, patience and active listening to effect these changes. I knew that the students felt threatened, insecure and alienated within their learning environment and so found it difficult to acquire any sense of belonging. I knew that a skills development strategy was needed because, as discussed in Chapter 2, to facilitate this intervention, the tutors and students had to work in partnership enabling continuous dialogue (McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Simpson, 2012). I had to be cautious, yet deliberate, in my approach so as not to generate further resentment but, at the same time, effect the necessary change. The research tools (skills audits, feedback sheets and learning logs) facilitated this dialogue as they gave the students a voice in the T&L process.

The skills audit, for instance, enabled a critical self-appraisal. The very first audit (see Figure 8) showed the students' lack of academic skills, especially in writing, IT and organisation of learning. However, with extensive support, by the second semester, these skills, along with others, had increased considerably (see Figure 9) and this upward trend carried on to the third semester (see Figure 10). As with the audits, the very first feedback given by the students (Figures 11 and 12) showed their lack of understanding of concepts and inability to properly express themselves, both verbally and in writing. The feedback also included a request for more support. Most importantly, the initial feedback indicated the students felt insecure in their learning environment. Like the audits, the feedback was more positive in the second and third semesters (Figures 13, 14 and 15, 16). The final module required the students to undertake independent learning, which proved to be the biggest struggle as they needed a great deal of academic support. Also, the pandemic meant that any support had to be remotely delivered, which presented a further challenge to this group of learners. Notwithstanding, and as documented in their learning logs, the success of the intervention was most evident in the transformed attitudes and thought processes of the students. Noticeable was their language, which had evolved by the second and third semester, as the students' thinking developed and became more refined. I believe that having to engage in constant reflection gave the students an awareness of their innate abilities – that they were not stupid, but capable individuals who had never been encouraged to think positively of themselves or believe themselves capable of much more. The students' expressions in the interviews further attest to the effectiveness of the intervention (see Chapter 5).

The students still harboured fears and anxieties, of course − never before had they been made to confront their lack of skills − but, with the ever-present and reassuring support, the students engaged in a more meaningful and relevant way. They developed agency and were able to self-determine the course of their learning with the belief that it was within their power to effect a change to their learning experiences. The fact that the students felt that they had a say in the way they learnt gave them a sense of ownership and empowerment, resulting in a more positive learning experience. As explained in the previous chapter, this whole process was not without its difficulties, but the students were not demoralised, because the whole process was perceived as a partnership – *for* them and *with* them.

The use of the various tools endorses the intersectional approach as it allows each student to express themself and convey information from their individual perspective and in their own way. Through continuous reflection, the students attained a level of consciousness that gave them an understanding of the reasons for these academic difficulties. Furthermore, with heightened cognition, the internalised prejudice harboured by the students reduced over the course of the year as the students came to understand how their negative sense of self had had a direct impact on their learning experiences.

It entailed an enormous amount of time and effort to come up with tools that were fit for purpose. It also involved repeatedly having to remind the students to make entries in their logs. Thankfully, this was not the case with the audits and feedback sheets as they were filled in at the start and end of each semester, respectively. Again, we see how intersectionality forces one to acknowledge and value the unique ability of each individual. With developed thinking capacity, together with the constant support, the students were able to self-regulate and eventually, began to enjoy their learning. Having been given this unique opportunity to develop themselves, no longer did the students see themselves as unworthy of membership within their learning environment, but rather, as deserving individuals with the right to develop themselves academically. This is why it is important to ensure that HE studies are carried out from broader perspectives that encompass the multiple standpoints from which individual students exist and operate, so that each student has a fairer chance of achieving to the best of their ability.

6.3.2 Success of the intervention

Moreover, this change in the students refutes the deficit thinking that often emerges from a superficial application of the term, habitus, (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) which suggests that it cannot be changed. I refer to Gaskell and Lingwood's (2017) argument that the socio-economic status (SES) of students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups impedes the acquisition of any meaningful form of capital, making it impossible for them to adopt psychological dispositions that will enable them to succeed in HE. These female students showed that, irrespective of the systems and structures that were prejudicial to them as individuals, they were able to draw on innate strengths derived from their cultures; cultures that have, historically, been disparaged and demeaned, yet have forged the very spirit of resilience and

endurance in them that led to their success. Resilience fostered their belief that all cultures – theirs included – are deserving of recognition and equal membership in the HE arena (Patton *et al.,* 2016; Yosso, 2005). Resilience and endurance has enabled them to fulfil their multiple obligations as mothers, wives, daughters, homemakers and workers, and ultimately, to take charge of their learning. Thus, the consideration of multiple factors and influences on the lives of these female students is what made an intersectional approach necessary in this study.

Furthermore, the present study, again, negates Bourdieu's (1990) androcentric view that women are mostly capital-bearing and not capital-acquiring by virtue of the social group to which their spouses or family belong. The intersectional nature of this study acknowledges and brings to the fore the following: (a) some of the female students hold down jobs and carry equal, if not a higher proportion of the familial financial responsibilities (Carbado *et al.,* 2013; Clarke and McCall, 2013; Collins; 2015); (b) having to juggle these numerous roles impacts on their learning experiences as most have little or no time to engage meaningfully with their studies or develop the skills that will enable them to cope with degree-level study (Reay, 2002; 2003; Swain and Hammond, 2011; Shanahan, 2000) and (c) it is imperative that the multi-dimensional realities in which mature female students operate become entrenched in HE policies and practices (Burke, 2013; Doddington, 2017).

Looking at intersectionality from my interactions with the students as a Black woman and academic, the students did not, initially, welcome my attempts to change the *status quo*. I was perceived as a traitor to my race and not representative of the social class of many minorities. I think this initial resentment was simply transference (Arundale and Bellman, 2018; Mitrani, 2018) as the students were projecting their frustration onto someone, and being their main tutor, I was a suitable target. Although it was not easy to do, I took their feelings on board, viewing their attitudes as a manifestation of their frustrations and the fact that they had never had to critically self-evaluate and confront or acknowledge their lack of academic skills. I, therefore, effectively utilised the students' emotions as tools that gave me a deeper insight into their innermost thoughts and feelings, and so respond appropriately. These very feelings justified an intersectional approach as they exposed the connections between the students' state of mind and their learning experiences. I, therefore, needed to be consistent and unwavering in my support, which eventually, earned me a level of

respect and acceptance as ‘one of us’ (Egharevba, 2001, p. 236). This changed perception enabled the students to embrace the support on offer and utilise it to develop their much-needed skills.

In addition, critical reflection gave me an understanding that, though as a Black woman, I was, at times, considered by the students as culturally suspect, the reality was that, like the students, I am also a ‘defended subject’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). I often have to overcome prejudice, and in many instances, prove myself as being on a par with my White counterparts. It was probably this commonality of experience with the students that compelled me to bring about a change. Intersectionality gave me a deeper understanding of how social categorisations such as race, class, gender and age, among others, interconnect to create interdependent and overlapping systems of discrimination, oppression or disadvantage. Without an intersectional lens, my efforts to bring about improvement on the top-up degree programme in H&SC would have been a futile endeavour. Most probably, I would have approached this research from a singular dimension (of race, gender, age or class) without considering how these all interconnect and overlap to result in discrimination and disadvantage in the learning experiences of the students. Through partnership (Caruana, 2011; McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Simpson, 2012), there was continuous dialogue between myself and the students. The introduction of the various tools of dialogue allowed the students to engage actively in critical thought, giving them an awareness of the hierarchical nature of the learning environment and the society in which they live and operate.

All things considered, I believe that the changes in the students’ dispositions were the result of increased awareness of their identity over time, and which, in turn, resulted in a more positive sense of self. For instance, no longer did they feel inferior within their learning environment. With the ever-present support, the students were able to effect change by breaking the confines of prescribed boundaries and rising above limitations. The students were able to reason beyond class identification and develop a level of consciousness that gave them a clearer understanding of the hierarchical nature of society. Yet again, this study’s intersectional approach highlights the importance of adopting a multi-dimensional perspective as the students no longer struggled to navigate their way through their learning environment; they had acquired a new sense of self-worth that enabled them to see themselves as equal players, not

only within the classroom but in society as a whole. Empowered, they had become key holders of their own destiny.

Not all the students achieved a degree qualification but the success of this intervention should be measured by the students' heightened level of cognition as they developed an appreciation of their individual values and cultures. Additionally, as they acquired new skills, the students developed a level of confidence that rid them of self-doubt and internalised prejudices. In evidence was the increased sense of self-worth that enabled them to see themselves as worthy members of not only their institution but their individual communities as well.

The decision to provide a more positive learning experience for the students on the top-up degree programme in H&SC was born out of professional duty and the desire to give the learners a voice. Without a full appreciation of the personal and professional implications of my decision, I took up the challenge, viewing it as an opportunity to advance my career and, perhaps, contribute to the world of academia. On this trajectory, I too, like the students, became transformed by my experiences and gained a broader perspective on the academic experiences of mature students from minority ethnic groups. The students, for their part, came to acquire skills and knowledge that helped raise their cognition, which brought about empowerment. Through reflection, I gained an understanding of the complex nature of individual identities and how these needed to be considered to gain a holistic understanding of the individual. Having a better appreciation of these nuances, I uncovered the intersections between the experiences of the students and mine (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013; Brookfield, 2017), which afforded me a newfound understanding of their difficulties and enabled me to respond appropriately.

As already expounded in section 3.9 of this thesis, I again acknowledge, as surmised by some scholars (Harris and Leonardo, 2018; Hearty, 2016; Strayhorn, 2017; Vaughns and Eibach, 2008), that an intersectional approach cannot incorporate every nuanced aspect of an individual's identity that could result in instances of discrimination or disadvantage. Intersectionality does however allow one to develop specific sets of tools relevant to particular areas of research interest rather than utilising tools from existing toolboxes.

6.4 Recommendations

6.4.1 For future research

The method adopted in this study is a shift from the traditional T&L framework that portrays the teacher as the sole executor of knowledge (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Pratt and Ross-Gordon, 2002). My guiding premise in this research was that HE institutions need to create a sense of belonging by ensuring that students are able to connect not only with their peers, but also their learning environment. I felt that this could be achieved by adopting an intersectional approach to T&L, as students are not homogeneous in nature but come with unique individual characteristics. With the mature female students in this study, this approach proved vital, given the multiple social dimensions in which they operated. As wives, mothers, daughters, and in some cases, workers, for most of the women, the added role of student would need to be juggled with other competing obligations with little or no help from their families. Additionally, it is important that there is dialogue in the T&L process so that it is appropriate and effective. This consideration is of great importance with mature female students as their multiple identities impact on their learning experiences. This approach can be fostered by ensuring that HE policies and processes are considered from multiple axes of social dimensions to create a more just and equitable society (McBride *et al.* (2015; Mallman and Lee, 2014). This way these historically marginalised groups have a deeper sense of worth and belonging within the HE arena and are not made to feel inferior or unwelcome.

Equally important, tutors in HE need to have a connection with their learners because the tutor plays a vital role in student performance (McGrady and Reynolds, 2012; Simpson, 2012). By being emotionally intelligent, the tutor can develop an awareness of the various cultural and emotional nuances at play in the classroom, thereby creating a safe and nurturing learning environment (Kember *et al.,* 2010; Gobinder, 2017). If a student believes that he or she has nothing in common with the teacher, what results is disengagement or what Kohl (1992) terms ‘willed not learning’ (p. 27), that is, if a learner experiences anything that threatens their individuality, what results is a disconnection from the source of threat. The concern of tutors should be, therefore, to facilitate, and not to take control of, the T&L process so that students are able to devise their own individual constructs of their learning experiences.

Furthermore, it is important that students are able to learn in a way that is congruent with their capabilities, so as not to alienate or generate feelings of inadequacy (Kohli, 2008; 2014; Ravnbol, 2009). For Kohli, commonly held, unrealistic expectations perpetuate social injustice and overlook the plight of women who struggle to uphold multiple and conflicting identities. Ravnbol advocates for the adoption of intersectional approaches that consider, for instance, race, gender, age, class, culture and religion. Maintaining varied perspectives highlights the inter-relatedness of multiple identities that overlap to cause inequalities and injustice. The intersectional approach of this research upholds both Kohli's and Ravnbol's philosophies as I have taken into consideration the intersecting and overlapping dimensions of my students' lived experiences. Failure to adopt multifarious approaches when it comes to HE research is simplistic at best and inappropriate as it ignores the intersecting identities that make up individual realities (Burke, 2013; 2017; Davies *et al.,* 2002; Espenschied-Reilly, 2016; Fielden and Middlehurst, 2017). Additionally, as surmised in the literature review chapter and as the study design demonstrates in chapter 4, ensuring inclusive practices rids institutions of the 'othering*'* (Gulley, 2021) mindset which leads to a duality of the student body (Gulley, 2021; Iloh, 2018; Gulley, 2016; 2021).

6.4.2 For my professional practice

This study has certainly given me a deeper insight into the educational experiences of neo-traditional student, particularly on mature female students from BAME groups. It has also revealed the fact that I have only just 'scratched the surface' when it comes to ensuring inclusive and equitable practices in higher education. As an educationist, it is therefore imperative that I engage in a deeper exploration of how educational policies and practices reinforce or mitigate societal injustice. This exploration needs to be one that adopts an intersectional approach to give an understanding of how intersecting social identities impact on students' educational experiences. However, the depth of exploration must also examine how the cultural capital students possess has a direct influence on their engagement and performance. It will also ensure a deeper understanding of how my own positionality and social background impacts on my interactions with students and my teaching practice. Maintaining this holistic approach safeguards the individuality of students by ensuring that the T&L process is humanistic in nature, comprehensive in scope and complementary in nature (Nweke, 2015).

6.5 Conclusion

The HE environment is hierarchical and for this reason, the multiple dimensions in which mature female students from minority groups operate, result in instances of discrimination and/or disadvantage. So also, the power struggles between the various stakeholders, driven by policy and performance agendas, means that academic support ultimately gets embroiled into these struggles. This generates gaps and cracks, which, ultimately, lead to social injustices of advantage or disadvantage. These deficits can be minimised with effective academic support that adopts a holistic approach to the development of the individual learner. Support that holistically values a person's identity and promotes autonomy rather than diminishing it. An intersectional approach acknowledges the differences between individuals and accepts that students have varying life experiences (habitus), which impacts on how they position themselves socially and also on their educational experiences. This study, therefore, sought to create a learning environment that stimulated the students' intellect to a level that enabled them to move beyond beliefs that were self-limiting to those that would not accommodate any internalised prejudice.

Using an intersectional framework, this research took the form of a skills intervention that sought to alleviate the academic challenges of the students and bring about a more positive learning experience on the top-up degree programme in H&SC. The success of the intervention is evident in the changed habitus of the students, which allowed them to take control of their learning. Furthermore, this study has shown that with an intersectional approach, there is effective dialogue between the tutor and students, providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the students. This project has not only secured and solidified my position within the institution, it has also provided me with invaluable knowledge and skills that would serve me well personally and professionally. I liken this intervention to the prevailing global situation in which social injustice is continuously being exposed and addressed. This study can, therefore, be considered a small (but significant) part of a wider effort that aims to bring about a more equitable and just society.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Skills audit

Skills Audit Tick (✓) appropriate boxes

SKILLS AREA	I can do this well	Ok, but I need more practice	I can't do this
WRITING SKILLS			
I can analyse assignment (essay, report etc) questions to determine what is expected			
I understand the difference between an essay and report			
I can produce a written plan to answer an assignment question			
I can punctuate, use grammar and spelling correctly			
I am confident I can express my ideas clearly in written form			
I am able to adapt my writing styles to suit the appropriate media/audience			
I understand the need to reference my work to avoid plagiarism			
SPOKEN COMMUNICATION			
I am able to express my views verbally			
I am confident speaking in front of a group of people			
I can prepare, plan and deliver a presentation			
I work well as a member of a group or team			
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY			
I am able to use a word processing software package to produce my assignments			
I can use a variety of different computer software (for example, Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Access)			
I am able to find a specific book or journal in the library using the online catalogue (One Search)			

I am able to use a variety of different sources to find information (for example, journals. books, electronic resources)			
I am able to access and search electronic resources (online databases, electronic journals CD-ROMs)			
ORGANISATION OF LEARNING			
I have strategies to help me to plan and manage my time			
I am able to effectively prioritise my tasks and activities			
I am able to work to deadlines			
READING AND NOTEMAKING			
I can decide which parts of a book I need to read			
I have a system for recording where I find information (for example, book, author, date)			
I can select and use different reading strategies (for example, skim, scan, in-depth)			
I can make effective notes when reading			
I can make effective notes when listening (for example, during lectures)			
I have a system for recording and storing my notes			

Appendix 2: Feedback sheet

Feedback Sheet Name:

Tick (✓) appropriate boxes

No	Question	Agree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree
1	Topics are easy to understand			
2	The module content is relevant to my personal and professional development			
3	It is easy for me to express my thought orally			
4	It is easy for me to express my thought in writing			
5	I feel secure in my learning environment			
6	I am able to cope with the course level			
7	The overall support I get is sufficient for me			

Appendix 3: Interview questions − students

1. Why did you decided to undertake a degree level study? What steps (if any) did you take to prepare yourself to undertake this top-up programme?
2. Based on your response on the feedback sheets why did you find it difficult/easy to express yourself verbally/in writing?
3. How effective did you think the skills audit, feedback sheets and logs were in monitoring your progress in the programme? Could you share some of the issues that came to light? Especially as you had to complete the latter part of your programme online (due to the corona virus pandemic)
4. In the learning logs, you expressed fears/anxieties about studying at university; why was this?
5. How effective do you think the various support strategies utilised on the programme were? Which of these did you find most useful (or not useful) and why?
6. What impact do you think that your personal circumstances (gender, age, marital status, family commitments etc.) had on your studies?
7. In your opinion, what difference (if any) did having me as your main tutor make to your learning?
8. How far do you think your experiences during the programme reflect the university's ethos as a widening participation institution that values and actively supports diversity?
9. How would you summarise the overall impact of this course on your personal and professional development? Talk about your progress, your learning experiences, your likes and dislikes, effect on future plans etc.
10. Based on your personal experiences, what advice would you give to older female adults who are considering a degree level study?

Appendix 4: Interview questions − staff

1. In your opinion, why do you think older adult female students return to Higher education?
2. What do you think of the various support strategies introduced into the H&SC programme? If you had been in my shoes, what (if anything) would you do differently?
3. What impact do you think the students' individual circumstances (gender, age, marital status, family commitments etc.) had on their studies?
4. What difference (if any) do you think having me as the main tutor on the programme, had on the students' learning?
5. To what extent do you think the widening participation ethos of the university actively supports diversity?

Appendix 5: Research Documentation

a) Student consent form

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in a Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants.

Full title of the programme: Academic underachievement of mature female students in Higher Education: An academic skills intervention focusing on a top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care.

Name of researcher: Olajumoke Orebamjo

Please tick as appropriate:

	YES	NO
I have read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purpose of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.		
If participation is to be audio or video recorded, please state this and ask participants to confirm they consent.		
I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential as far as possible. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data. *(Please see below).*		
I understand that maintaining strict confidentiality is subject to the following limitations: If the sample size is small, or focus groups are used state that that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity, if applicable		

A clear statement that, where possible, participants' confidentiality will be maintained unless a disclosure is made that indicates that the participant or someone else is at serious risk of harm. Such disclosures may be reported to the relevant authority.		
Specify if anonymised quotes will be used in publications.		
Specify if participant has the option to be named in publications.		
Give proposed method(s) of publication dissemination of research finding.		
If applicable, obtain participants' permission to use the data in future research by your team.		
If applicable, obtain participants' permission to be contacted for future research studies by your team.		
It has been explained to me what will happen once the programme has been completed.		
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time during the research without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I understand that my data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis and that after this point it may not be possible.		
I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me and for the information obtained to be used in relevant research publications.		

Student's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……..

Participant's Signature……

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

OLAJUMOKE OREBAMJO

Investigator's

Signature …….

Date: ……

b) Student participant information sheet

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

School of Education and Communities

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

The Principal Investigator

Olajumoke Orebamjo

Email address: u1149340@uel.ac.uk

[redacted]

Project Title

Academic underachievement of non-traditional female students in higher education: *a focus on the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care in London*

Project Description

My research intends to gain an insight into the reasons why non-traditional mature female students on the Health and Social Care (H&SC) top-up degree programme, experience academic difficulties. The research will consider the opinions of students and staff with regards to the delivery of the programme. Students will be asked to take part in an informal interview which will be semi-structured in nature. This will give me an insight into their subjective perceptions of the academic structure provided by the university. The research poses little or no risk as the participants will all be adults who are not considered vulnerable. However, the university has a welfare officer on site who will be available to offer support if needed. Participants are unlikely to experience any after effects, discomfort or distress after the research as they will be fully informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Honesty and transparency will be maintained as much as possible throughout the research.

Location

The study will take place on the university premises preferably in a quiet and private space not within earshot of other students or tutors. Interviews will be carried out outside lecture hours at times that will suit participants and researcher.

The data is stored anonymously in a locked room and all digital data will be password protected

Remuneration

Students will not be paid to take part in this research

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study and should not feel coerced. You are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the study you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason. Should you withdraw, you can ask for your data to be removed from the study and any further analysis that may be conducted by the researcher.

Please feel free to ask me any questions. If you are happy to continue you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to your participation. Please retain this information sheet for reference.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the study's director:

Dr Angie Voela

Reader in Social Sciences

University of East London

EB 1.32, Docklands Campus
School of Law and Social Sciences
Docklands Campus
London E16 2RD

[redacted]

Email: a.voela@uel.ac.uk

c) De-briefing form

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

School of Education and Communities

DE-BRIEFING FORM

Title of study: Academic underachievement of non-traditional female students in higher education: a focus on the top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care in London.

Thank you for taking part in the interviews. The purpose of my research was to carry out an empirical study on the reasons behind academic underachievement of non-traditional female learners in higher education. My focus was on the Health and Social Care top-up degree programme.

Your interview responses will be analysed and anonymity of participants will be maintained. Remember that you have a right to withdraw from the research. If however you do not wish for the information given during the interview to be used, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can contact me at the Cass School of Education and Communities, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ. Or by telephone on 020 8223 6683.

My email address is u1149340@uel.ac.uk

Should you have any concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the director of studies Dr Angie Voela EB 1.32 University of East London, Docklands Campus, School of Law and Social Sciences, London E16 2RD.

Email address: a.voela@uel.ac.uk

[redacted]

Thank you once again for your participation.

d) Tutor consent form

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

TUTOR CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in a Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants.

Full title of the programme: Academic underachievement of mature female students in Higher Education: An academic skills intervention focusing on a top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care

Name of researcher: Olajumoke Orebamjo

Please tick as appropriate:

	YES	NO
I have read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purpose of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.		
If participation is to be audio or video recorded, please state this and ask participants to confirm they consent.		
I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential as far as possible. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data *(Please see below).*		
I understand that maintaining strict confidentiality is subject to the following limitations: If the sample size is small, or focus groups are used state that that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity, if applicable A clear statement that, where possible, participants' confidentiality will be maintained unless a disclosure is made that indicates that the participant or someone else is at serious risk of harm. Such disclosures may be reported to the relevant authority.		

Specify if anonymised quotes will be used in publications.		
Specify if participant has the option to be named in publications.		
Give proposed method(s) of publication dissemination of research finding.		
If applicable, obtain participants' permission to use the data in future research by your team.		
If applicable, obtain participants' permission to be contacted for future research studies by your team.		
It has been explained to me what will happen once the programme has been completed.		
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time during the research without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I understand that my data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis and that after this point it may not be possible.		
I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me and for the information obtained to be used in relevant research publications.		

Tutor's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) ……

Tutor's Signature……..

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

OLAJUMOKE OREBAMJO

Investigator's Signature ……

Date: ……

e) Tutor information sheet

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

School of Education and Communities

TUTOR INFORMATION SHEET

The Principal Investigator
Olajumoke Orebamjo
Email address: u1149340@uel.ac.uk
[redacted]

Project Title

Academic underachievement of mature female students in Higher Education: An academic skills intervention focusing on a top-up degree programme in Health and Social Care.

Project description

My research intends to gain an insight into the reasons why non-traditional mature female students on the Health and Social Care (H&SC) top-up degree programme, experience academic difficulties. The research will consider the opinions of students and staff with regards to the delivery of the programme. Tutors will be asked to take part in an informal interview which will be semi-structured in nature. This will give me an insight into their subjective perceptions of the academic structure provided by the university. The research poses little or no risk as the participants will all be adults who are not considered vulnerable. However, the university has a welfare officer on site who will be available to offer support if needed. Participants are unlikely to experience any aftereffects, discomfort or distress after the research as they will be fully informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Honesty and transparency will be maintained as much as possible throughout the research.

Location

The study will take place on the university premises preferably in a quiet and private space not within earshot of students or other staff members. Interviews will be carried out outside lecture hours at times that will suit support tutor and researcher.

Confidentiality of the data

The data is stored anonymously in a locked room and all digital data will be password protected

Remuneration

Support tutors will not be paid to take part in this research

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study and should not feel coerced. You are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the study you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason. Should you withdraw, you can ask for your data to be removed from the study and any further analysis that may be conducted by the researcher.

Please feel free to ask me any questions. If you are happy to continue you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to your participation. Please retain this information sheet for reference.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the study's director:

Dr Angie Voela

Reader in Social Sciences

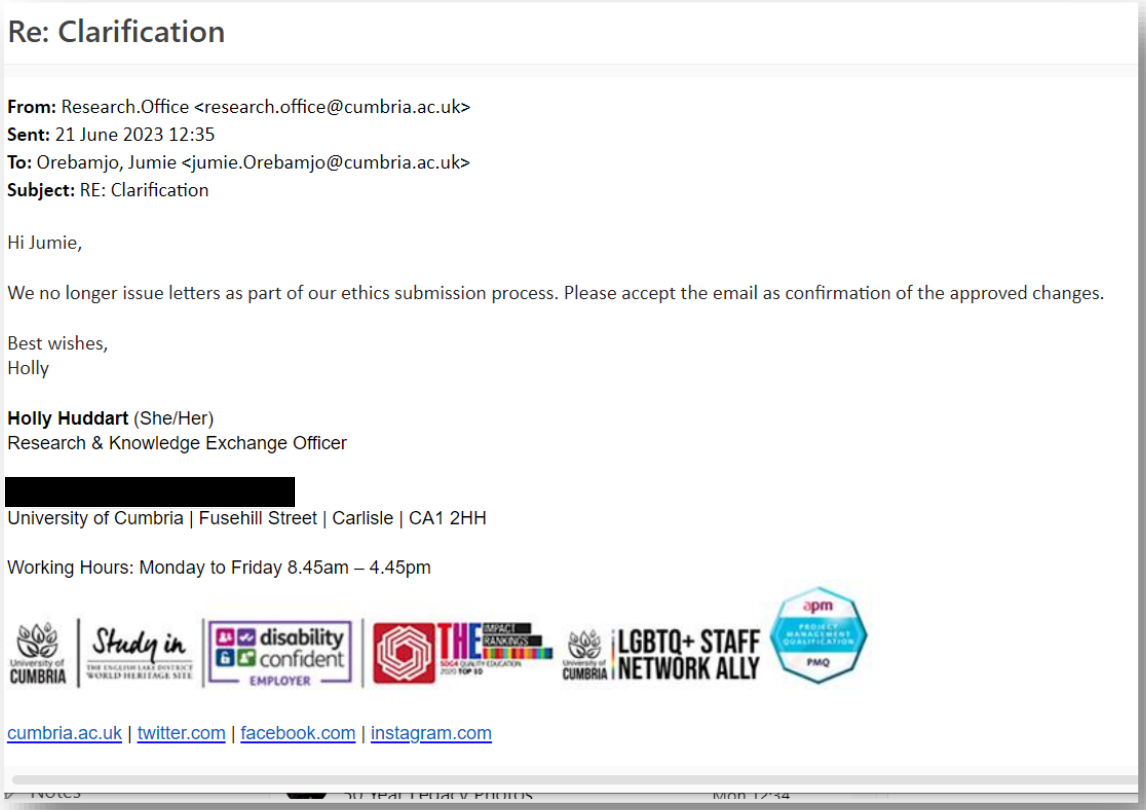
University of East London

EB 1.32, Docklands Campus
School of Law and Social Sciences
Docklands Campus
London E16 2RD

[redacted]

Email: a.voela@uel.ac.uk

Appendix 6: Ethics approval documentation (University of Cumbria)



Re: Clarification

From: Research.Office <research.office@cumbria.ac.uk>
Sent: 21 June 2023 12:35
To: Orebamjo, Jumie <jumie.Orebamjo@cumbria.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: Clarification

Hi Jumie,

We no longer issue letters as part of our ethics submission process. Please accept the email as confirmation of the approved changes.

Best wishes,
Holly

Holly Huddart (She/Her)
Research & Knowledge Exchange Officer

[redacted]
University of Cumbria | Fusehill Street | Carlisle | CA1 2HH

Working Hours: Monday to Friday 8.45am – 4.45pm

cumbria.ac.uk | twitter.com | facebook.com | instagram.com

Re: Clarification

From: Research.Office <research.office@cumbria.ac.uk>
Sent: 21 June 2023 12:23
To: Orebamjo, Jumie <jumie.Orebamjo@cumbria.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: Clarification

Dear Jumie,

Your requested amendments to ethics application ref. 18/52 have now been reviewed by the Research Ethics Panel Chair, and have been **approved**.

Best wishes,
Holly

Holly Huddart (She/Her)
Research & Knowledge Exchange Officer

[redacted]
University of Cumbria | Fusehill Street | Carlisle | CA1 2HH

Working Hours: Monday to Friday 8.45am – 4.45pm

cumbria.ac.uk | twitter.com | facebook.com | instagram.com

University of Cumbria

Olajumoke Fawole
NHPP
London

University of Cumbria, Research Office,
Lancaster Campus, Bowerham Road,
Lancaster, LA1 3JD

01524 590804
Research.office@cumbria.ac.uk
www.cumbria.ac.uk

8 May 2019

Request for Ethical Clearance – Our Ref: 18/52
Project: Academic underachievement of non-traditional female students in higher education: a focus on the top up degree programme in health and social care in London

Dear Olajumoke

Thank you for your revised application regarding the issues that required a response.

Approval is granted with no further changes or amendments required.

Kind regards

[redacted]

Professor Diane Cox
Chair
Research Ethics Panel

Appendix 7: Ethics approval documentation (University of East London)

University of East London

Pioneering Futures Since 1898

Dear Olajumoke,

Application ID: ETH2223-0272

Original application ID: ETH1819-0133

Project title: Empowering 'other' students: a skills intervention to increase the academic and cognitive abilities of mature female students from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups in higher education

Lead researcher: Miss Olajumoke Orebamjo

Your application to Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee (EISC) was considered on the 10th July 2023.

The decision is: **Approved**

The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation.

Your project has received ethical approval for 4 years from the approval date.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact your supervisor or the administrator for the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee.

Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly.

Should you wish to make any changes in connection with this research/consultancy project you must complete 'An application for approval of an amendment to an existing application'.

The approval of the proposed research/consultancy project applies to the following site.

Project site: **At the University of Cumbria in London**

Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator: Miss Olajumoke Orebamjo

Approval is given on the understanding that the UEL Code of Practice for Research and the Code of Practice for Research Ethics is adhered to.□□

Any adverse events or reactions that occur in connection with this research/consultancy project should be reported using the University's form for Reporting an Adverse/Serious Adverse Event/Reaction.

The University will periodically audit a random sample of approved applications for ethical approval, to ensure that the projects are conducted in compliance with the consent given by the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee and to the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

Please note, it is your responsibility to retain this letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of the project.

Yours sincerely,

Fernanda Pereira Da Silva

Administrative Officer for Research Governance

Docklands Campus
University Way
London E16 2RD

Stratford Campus
Water Lane
London E15 4LZ

University Square Stratford
Gibbs Hall
London E15 1NF

[redacted]