This item was submitted to Loughborough's Research Repository by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

Private higher education in the UK: a contribution to an analysis of the commodification of knowledge in the information society

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

PUBLISHER

© Sarah Barnard

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Barnard, Sarah. 2019. “Private Higher Education in the UK: A Contribution to an Analysis of the Commodification of Knowledge in the Information Society”. figshare. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/14895.

Loughborough University

This item was submitted to Loughborough University as a PhD thesis by the author and is made available in the Institutional Repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/) under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

creative commons

COMMONS DEED

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the Legal Code (the full license).

Disclaimer

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/

‘PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK: A CONTRIBUTION TO AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMMODIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY’

By

Sarah Barnard

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

September 2013

© by Sarah Barnard 2013

Contents Page

Contents Page 2
Abstract..... 5
Introduction 6
Part 1..... 19
1 – Knowledge Society..... 19
1.1 Information/Knowledge Society/Economy – some definitional nuances 22
1.2 Theoretical perspectives 26
1.3 Information as a public good..... 32
1.4 The commodification of information 37
2 – Higher Education in the Knowledge Society 41
2.1 What is a university? 42
2.2 Education as credentials, training and a commodity..... 45
2.3 Higher Education Policy and Governance 48
2.3.1 Historical review 48
2.3.2 Description of current structure..... 49
2.3.3 University status and degree awarding powers 55
2.3.4 Approaches to policy..... 57
2.3.5 Higher education policy and the education commodity..... 59
2.4 Critiques of the commodification of education..... 63
3 – Private Higher Education 66
3.1 What is private higher education? 66
3.2 Policy approaches to private higher education..... 69
3.3 Online higher education 75
3.4 Debates around private higher education in the UK and the Campaign for the Public University..... 79
Part 2..... 85
4 – The Growth of Private Higher Education..... 85
4.1 International data on private higher education 87
4.1.1 Growth in the number of private higher education institutions and the numbers of students enrolled..... 87
4.1.2 Student tuition fees..... 92
4.1.3 Public and private expenditure on higher education 92
4.1.4 Global rankings and evaluation of private provider performance..... 96
4.2 Private higher education in the UK 97
4.2.1 HESA data..... 97
4.2.2 BIS data 101
4.2.4 Top ten private providers in the UK by student enrolments 105
4.2.5 Tuition fees at private providers..... 110
4.3 Distance Learning and Online higher education 111
4.3.1 Distance learning in the UK 113
4.4 ICTs in Higher Education..... 115
4.5 Three examples of American virtual universities..... 117
5 – Management at Private Providers..... 121
5.1 Interviews with senior management personnel – executives and entrepreneurs 121
5.1.1. Common data on sample providers 125
5.1.2. Thematic analysis of interviews with executives 134

6 – Interviews with staff and students at case study providers 176
6.1 Case Study Providers 176
6.2 Interviews with staff and tutors 177
6.3 Interviews with students 212
6.4 Summary of qualitative research findings 231
6.4.1 Overview of interviews with executives 231
6.4.2 Overview of interviews with staff 232
6.4.3 Overview of interviews with students 233
6.4.4 Analysis of interview data across all groups 234
6.4.5 Limitations of the interview data 236
7 - Discussion 238
7.1 Growth in the private HE sector: students, mode of delivery 238
7.2 Private providers and 'non-traditional' students 241
7.4 Private sector academics and the student-consumer 250
7.5 Private sector perceptions of higher education policy and governance 251
7.6 The public private divide in UK higher education 253
8 - Conclusions 258
8.1 How far can we say that private higher education is growing in the UK? 258
8.2 What is the nature of private HE provision? 261
8.3 What are the impacts of the privatisation agenda on UK higher education? 266
8.4 What is the relevance of private higher education to information/knowledge society theories? 269
8.5 What is the original contribution to knowledge of the thesis? 271
References 273
List of Abbreviations 295
Appendices 297

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Different modes of educational services trade according to the GATS classification 9
Table 2: Relationship of research questions to methods utilised 12
Table 3: An Analysis of the Transformation of Universities and Research 41
Table 4: The university and modernity 43
Table 5: Policy approaches to private higher education 69
Table 6: PROPHE data by Region 88
Table 7: Number of students enrolled at HEIs by type (1999, 2009) 89
Table 8: Estimated annual average tuition fees charged by type of institution 2008-09 92
Table 9: Annual Public Expenditure (USD) on Tertiary Level Educational Institutions per student, by type of institution (2008) 93
Table 10: Relative proportion of public and private expenditure on tertiary education level institutions as a percentage (2000, 2008) 95
Table 11: Education Services Databook. March 2011. 97
Table 12: Student registrations at Private HE providers 2009/10 by level and mode 98
Table 13: All student enrolments by mode and level of study 2009/10 99
Table 14: Student registrations at Private HE providers 2009/10 by level and Subject area 100
Table 15: Student enrolments by subject area and level of study 2009/10 100

Table 16: Student Numbers at private providers by Mode, Level and Type..... 101
Table 17: Details of institution type 102
Table 18: Number of years trading..... 102
Table 19: Number of institutions sites..... 103
Table 20: Regional breakdown of institutions sites 103
Table 21: Total number of students registered with these providers..... 104
Table 22: Student domicile..... 104
Table 23: Course subject area..... 104
Table 24: Course mode..... 104
Table 25: Survey data on students and level 105
Table 26: Survey data on students and mode of study 105
Table 27: Top ten private higher education providers in the UK by mode and level .. 105
Table 28: Examples of tuition fees charged by private providers 110
Table 29: UNESCO Virtual University Models and Case Studies 111
Table 30: Numbers of students enrolled in UK HEIs by mode of study for 2006/07 – 2010/11 113
Table 31: Top ten distance learning institutions in the UK 2010/11 by student enrolments 113
Table 32: Distance learning by subject area in the UK 2010/11..... 114
Table 33: Distance learning by level of study in the UK 2010/11 114
Table 34: Distance learning by location of study 2010/11..... 114
Table 35: Comparison of ICT use by a traditional and virtual university in the delivery of an undergraduate business programme. 116
Table 36: Executive participants' information 123
Table 37: Sample providers' establishment, development and perceived competition 127
Table 38: Sample providers' formal contact with QAA, traditional universities and DAP/university title status..... 128
Table 39: Sample providers' staff information 130
Table 40: Sample providers' programme information and disclosed future plans..... 131
Table 41: Sample providers' student data and trends..... 133
Table 42: Overview of institutions where interviews have been conducted with staff and students 176
Table 43: Information on staff interview respondents..... 178
Table 44: Student participants' information..... 213
Table 45: Some common themes in interviews with executives, staff and students.... 235

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule for Head person at provider 297
Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet 299
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form..... 300
Appendix D: Interview Schedule for Staff..... 301
Appendix E: Interview Schedule for students 303

Statement

The research conducted has not been commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the analysis presented here does not in any way reflect the views of the department.

Abstract

The UK higher education (HE) sector is currently undergoing changes that will impact on the way students learn in the future. National, European and global education policy discourses underline the importance of higher education to the development of an active citizenry and as a way of sustaining economic growth. Corresponding to the rise of higher education on the political agenda there have been huge increases in the numbers of students going on to university education in the UK and further afield. These two aspects have placed a brighter spotlight on the problems the sector faces and change is stated to be necessary and desirable in order for higher education to fulfil its role in society. The growing political will to devise clear linkages between those individuals who benefit from a university education and those who pay for it, advances in information communication technologies, and the related requirements of the knowledge society, form the receptive landscape for moves towards private higher education in the UK.

This thesis focuses on the particular phenomenon of corporate or private enterprise providing higher education in competition with government funding-dependent, so called 'public' universities. The activities of private HE, or independently-funded, non-state dependent higher education providers in the UK suggest that as the relationship between state and the academy goes through significant changes, these providers have become a sensitive issue. Different parties view the activities of private providers in very different ways; however they are viewed, the activities of these providers are a hot topic in higher education at present. Despite this interest, there are only small amounts of information available about this subsector of HE provision, or about the experiences of staff and students working at these companies. This thesis attempts to address this point by offering an overview of the current situation, referring to quantitative data and with a qualitative investigation. Whilst the concept of 'private' versus 'public' in the higher education sector in the UK is increasingly complex, and the context of a speeding up in the transformation of the sector means it is difficult to paint an accurate picture of such a fast moving object of enquiry, the thesis will attempt to shed some light on the activities of corporations in the HE sector in the UK within the global context.

Introduction

The UK higher education (HE) sector is currently undergoing changes that will impact on the way students learn in the future. National, European and global education policy discourses underline the importance of higher education to the development of an active citizenry and as a way of sustaining economic growth. Corresponding to the rise of higher education on the political agenda there have been huge increases in the numbers of students going on to university education in the UK and further afield. These two aspects have placed a brighter spotlight on the problems the sector faces and change is stated to be necessary and desirable in order for higher education to fulfil its role in society. The growing political will to devise clear linkages between those individuals who benefit from a university education and those who pay for it, advances in information communication technologies, and the related requirements of the knowledge society, form the receptive landscape for moves towards private higher education in the UK.

This thesis focuses on the particular phenomenon of corporate or private enterprise providing higher education in competition with government funding-dependent institutions, so called 'public' universities. The activities of private HE, or independently funded, non-state dependent higher education providers in the UK suggest that as the relationship between state and the academy goes through significant changes, these providers have become a sensitive issue. Different parties view the activities of private providers, or 'alternative providers', in very different ways: however they are viewed, the activities of these providers are a hot topic in higher education at present. Despite this interest, there are only small amounts of information available about this subsector of HE provision, or about the experiences of staff and students working at these companies. This thesis attempts to address this point, by offering an overview of the current situation, referring to quantitative data and with a qualitative investigation. Whilst the concept of 'private' versus 'public' in the higher education sector in the UK is increasingly complex, and the context of a speeding up in the transformation of the sector means it is difficult to paint an accurate picture of such a fast moving object of enquiry, the thesis will attempt to shed some light on the activities of corporations in the HE sector in the UK within the global context.

Changes in higher education in the UK are increasingly linked to a wider social context that places communication technologies at the centre of social life. Universities are expected to follow wider societal trends, which push for bureaucratisation, an audit-culture, and accountability measures, whilst also 'leading' in intellectual endeavours. As has been noted by White and Weathersby (2005), universities as large organisations are not quick to change, but it seems change they must. A key driver for many initiatives is the commercialisation of education – the need to maximise profits, save costs, sell the 'product' (marketing), maintain a good relationship with the 'customer' (the student) and offer clear benefits to those buying into your goods (branding, work with employers). The underlining of the commodification of education is undeniable. This is not to say that there once existed a golden age of education, where students studied for the joy of learning without any concern for their families' financial investment or their long term goals, but that there now exists a powerful education industry that relies upon political and commercial backing in order to legitimise the selling of their product, the process of which has been rationalised more completely due to the characteristics of new communication technologies.

It is often asserted that the dawn of the 'information society' has brought forth a new era of information- and technology- savvy consumers, equalised by the democratising effects of the new digital networks that provide access to an ever-evolving archive of information. The apparent authority of this idea is underpinned by the ideological assertions of national governments, global organisations and commerce. Proponents of this thesis also include social theorists, such as Castells (1996, 2001), Lévy (1997), McNair and Norris (2000). Here, advancements in technology are entrenched in the concepts of modernisation and postmaterialism; new technologies provide new (read – more efficient and productive) ways of interacting, consuming and of 'being'. It is, however, difficult to maintain the democratic benefits, whilst increasing marketisation prices people out of access to information, either through the 'digital divide' or the development of the 'pay-per society' – where the development of technology allows greater monitoring, measurement and charging for access to services or information - and the goals of commerce are prioritised over the needs of citizens (Mosco, 1989).

The commodification of public information and higher education provision is in line with the recent reiteration of the dominance of commerce in the sphere of information

and knowledge, and provides an example of the relentless force of marketization in society via new media and communications technology. The information society thesis suggests that the adoption of new technology provides the basis of a new postmaterialist era that democratises access to information and the means to produce and consume information and knowledge in the new media environment. The idea of the information society is at the same time deeply intertwined with the process of commodification, for it is in the information economy that faith lies for economic growth and prosperity, and it is the adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) across all organisations that is used as evidence of a new information age. Though, as we will see, it is argued that the 'information' discussed represents, rather, a move towards service economies and the rationalisation of business practices via digital communication technologies.

The problem of access remains – around one fifth of households in the UK and the EU more widely, does not have access to the internet (Eurostat, 2013; ONS, 2013). Further, there are difficulties in a discussion of the problem of access to the internet. The micro- and macro digital divide is criticised for excluding people from accessing the information that may be required for a functioning public sphere, and cultural forms of expression, but if the internet provides a simulacrum of a real social interaction that is based upon commercial imperatives that seek to reinforce capitalist notions of existence, then exclusion from this is surely not a problem. Ritzer (1998) notes this problem in his discussion of McDonaldization, which describes how the principles of the fast food industry have become dominant: core principles such as efficiency; calculability; predictability; and technology as a controlling mechanism. Ritzer highlights that developing countries *want* to be McDonaldized, in much the same way as people without access to the internet or the skills to fully benefit from access feel excluded: for those who are excluded it is indeed a problem. What are challenging to the concept of a virtual public sphere is the commodification of information and the dominance of business imperatives in the development of online communities (or, more appropriately, markets) and the actual or economic restriction of access to publicly-gathered information.

Until recently, education was considered a non-traded service by global governance policy but now, with its inclusion in General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)

commitments, the tradable aspect of educational services is widely accepted. It is argued that developments in ICTs facilitate the trade in educational services across borders, adding to the already established international education active in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States (Larsen et al., 2002).

Table 1: Different modes of educational services trade according to the GATS classification

Mode	*Description*	*Applied to higher education*
1. Cross-border supply	Normal form of trade in goods: only the service itself crosses the border	Use of ICTs for distance learning
2. Consumption abroad	Service consumer moves to another country to obtain the service in question	Student who travels abroad to study. Currently largest share of global market for education services
3. Commercial presence	Commercial establishment of facilities abroad	Local branch campuses or partnerships with domestic education institutions
4. Presence of natural persons	Person travelling to another country to provide service	Visiting professor, researcher, teacher

Source: Derived from Larsen et al. (2002: 4-5)

In 2000, exports of educational services, corresponding to mode 2 in table 1, demonstrate a huge increase in students studying abroad to the major 'exporters' of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada who all experience a 'trade surplus' in educational services (Larsen et al., 2002). However, it is anticipated that the calculation of the importing and exporting in educational services will be further complicated with the rise of cross-border e-learning activities (corresponding to mode 1, table 1).

Increasingly, large companies, publishers, ICT companies and educational institutions are working together to develop online learning but there is little data on the scale and nature of these activities available, in contrast with the information available globally on mode 2 trade in education services (Larsen et al., 2002). Part of this thesis will look at distance learning in higher education, as some private provision of HE in the UK is focused upon distance learning as a mode of delivery. Online delivery of higher education is an interesting development as, whilst distance learning itself has a long history, the incorporation of new technologies into that process and the broader context of ICTs being embedded into everyday life suggests that this development in the delivery of education is worthy of further investigation. Thus far there has been little research on the distance learning provision of the private higher education sector in the UK. The empirical research conducted for this thesis seeks to deal with a gap in the literature on online education, as Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) suggest that: 'Because

online instruction and learning still constitute a relatively new frontier in education, informative theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence addressing some research questions are scarce' (117).

The aim to develop knowledge of private provision in UK higher education may be contextualised by wider trends towards privatisation in society (communications, health, postal services and utilities) (Parker, 2004). It is important to understand what privatisation, or commodification means 'on the ground', for higher education as well as other sectors facing the same trajectory. The empirical research outlined in this thesis will, it is hoped, advance discussions around the privatisation of higher education in the UK and offers a more nuanced description of private providers than is available at this time.

Research Questions, aims and objectives

The study proposes to explore the growth and impact of private higher education in the UK and how this relates to wider commoditising trends in society. In doing so, the research is grounded in theoretical debates on the information and knowledge society. There are three main reasons for this approach. (1) There is a lack of academic research on private higher education in the UK. The research proposed also seeks, in a small way, to redress the balance in sociology of education research, as higher education research forms only a minority of all research on education conducted in the UK (Brennan and Teichler, 2008). (2) An analysis of aspects of higher education reform in the UK may be considered topical in that government publications and debate have increased over the last decade, as has the intensity of media and public interest. An increase in government intervention in the business of universities and the acceleration of sector reform that is currently in process suggests that the higher education landscape in the UK is undergoing major changes that will have impacts on how young people in the future consider and undertake higher education. An overview of current developments is needed to be able to understand the implications for the future. In doing so, the research attempts to provide a snapshot of how things stand in what is a fast moving sector and relate this to potential future impacts. This aspect is important as 'a research agenda which does not contemplate issues just over the horizon can be perceived as limited' (Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008: 282). (3) There is a need to foreground theories of the

information and knowledge society in research in the field. It is argued that the weaknesses of research in the field lack theory of the knowledge society (Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008).

In Välimaa and Hoffman's (2008) discussion of research topics and themes in this field, they highlight that:

> Higher education researchers and policy makers are often seduced by Zeitdiagnose, because they are elegant, intuitive and appear to be easily adopted or adapted, whether or not there is an empirical or theoretical basis for the juxtaposition of an idea from one context onto (or into) another. In the knowledge society discourse, these abstractions (re)define the role of knowledge, science and universities in society. However, realities in higher education institutions are more complex and conflicted than many of these banners suggest. There is continuous need for theoretically-based empirical studies in and on higher education. (Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008: 281)

The lack of research into private higher education, and also online provision in terms of how it fits into the broader UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) landscape and the need to foreground theory in an empirical study of trends in UK higher education, is the key motivator for the research conducted here. Thus, the thesis will attempt to develop an understanding of the interrelationship between theory, method and research design.

The research questions the thesis seeks to explicitly address include:

1. How far can we say that private higher education is growing in the UK?
2. What is the nature of private HE provision?
3. What is the relevance of private higher education to information/knowledge society theories?

Table 2 shows how the research questions relate to the research methods utilised and what kind of research data will be generated in the research process.

Table 2: Relationship of research questions to methods utilised

Broad research questions	Sub question(s)	How will this be investigated?	Research data generated	Thesis section
How far can we say that private higher education is growing in the UK?	How prevalent is higher education via private providers, globally and in the UK, and how has this changed over time?	Secondary data analysis of international statistics available and synthesis of data on private higher education in the UK	Comparative overview of student numbers, by discipline and level of study over time	Chapter 4
What is the nature of private HE provision?	What do we already know about private higher education and what is the current context in the UK?	Analysis of policy documents and relevant literature	Literature review	Chapter 3
	How is education delivered by private providers?	Interviews with providers and interviews with tutors	Qualitative data: interviews	Chapter 5 and 6
	How is learning achieved at private HE providers?	Interviews with students	Qualitative interview data	Chapter 6
What is the relevance of private higher education to information/knowledge society theories?	How does the concept of the information/knowledge society contribute to the opening up of the higher education market to private providers?	An analysis of theoretical approaches to information society thesis and government policy discourse	Theoretical discussion	Chapters 1, 2 and 8

Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis advances understanding of alternative provision of higher education in the UK. There has been relatively little data publication and analysis of this field to date, though there are signs of an expansion of research in this area (see for example, CFE, 2012; Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011; HESA, 2011; BIS, 2013; and also UNIKE, 2012)[1]. The work presented here offers a synthesis of existing research findings, analysis of existing data and the generation of original data. It may be argued that the data collected by HESA and BIS has a particular position in that the data is generated without a theoretical basis for the enquiry over and above the need to find out what is happening in the sector. No other research study to date has interviewed CEOs/principals and staff at these institutions. The relatively little data and research on private higher education in the UK does not however indicate a subject of little interest in academia, in higher education policy or elsewhere – rather, there is a strong debate about private provision in the UK, which may be evidenced in media coverage (The *Times Higher Education*

[1] Recent reports from the Higher Education Policy Institute, by Middlehurst and Fielden (2011) and the Institute for Public Policy Research by Barber et al. (2013), demonstrate an interest in this field from think tanks, which has not been matched in academic publications/research so far in the UK.

[2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c] for example). Tierney (2012) argues that, in response to discussions about the failings of for-profit higher education, more research should be done: 'we need a more convincing understanding of how the sector functions' (151). This thesis attempts to deal with this aspect – the generation of quantitative and qualitative data on private provision – in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the sector operates.

Limitations

The limitations of the thesis may be identified as follows: the secondary analysis of quantitative data on private provision in the UK and overseas relies upon the availability of good quality data. In the UK there is limited data available on private higher education provision. This fact led the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills to commission a research project to collect data on private providers of higher education in the UK whilst this thesis was being researched and written. The subsequent data generated by BIS (2013) and an earlier HESA survey (2011) is important in the sense that there is no previous data available, but is still incomplete due to the fact that these surveys relied upon the voluntary sharing of information. So we know that the data on private providers is not as complete as similar information collected on publicly-funded higher education institutions collected by HESA and HEFCE for example. It was not within the remit of this thesis to attempt to collect national data on private provision of higher education due to the resources needed for such an endeavour. Instead the main bulk of the original empirical data generated in the study is qualitative in nature. The in-depth interviews conducted with executives, staff and students are meant to offer an indication of experiences and views and it is not argued that these represent the views of all who work or study in the sector, despite the relative representativeness of the samples chosen.

Key concepts

The private providers referred to in this thesis can be defined as those institutions in the UK who offer higher education but are not in a contract with HEFCE and therefore do not receive any public money directly from government for the higher education they deliver. Tierney and Hentschke (2007), in their discussion of for-profit colleges and universities in the US, raise the difficulties faced in conceptualising change in the sector, for the private HE sector can appear to be very different from traditional colleges and

universities (in scope, size, focus, student recruitment and staff employment strategies), but research in this area should attempt to increase understanding across and between the alternative and traditional sectors in HE; sectors that may at times be at odds with each other. It may also be acknowledged that putting forward the concepts of alternative and difference with regard to the private HE sector may result in a homogeneous and out-of-date understanding of the 'traditional' HE sector in the UK. The rise of private providers is but one aspect of the acceleration of change in HE in the UK. An investigation of the private HE sector will make reference to the 'public' HE sector in the UK that receives HEFCE funding, as this is necessary to be able to understand the context in which private providers operate and what impact this aspect of change may have on the sector as a whole.

The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of the private providers is centred on a perceived process of commodification of knowledge that is occurring in the UK and elsewhere, at the same time as proponents of the information society suggest that increasing access to information moves us towards a postmaterialist society with expanding possibilities for information sharing. The concepts of the information society and the knowledge economy, whereby information and knowledge are commodified, used and developed in accordance with their perceived exchange value, are significant in this respect. This theoretical framework is relevant to higher education as we can see that the university is a key actor in how the knowledge economy plays out and how individuals can accrue greater capital for their disposal in the marketplace. The increasing utilitarianism of higher education as described by Morley (2001) is an important aspect of how private providers develop their curriculum, manage their staff and in how students interact with the education delivered. This is by no means exclusively relevant for private providers, as this theoretical framework would also be applicable to an investigation of education provided in the publicly-funded higher education sector in the UK. However, this thesis will look at how these theories can offer a way of looking at private higher education provision in the UK.

Methodology

This study will utilise a mixed method approach – combining an analysis of theory, meta-analysis, quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to explore the impact and growth of private higher education in the UK. Bryman (2006) argues that

quantitative and qualitative research are increasingly seen as compatible because they allow the researcher to gain from the advantages each method can offer. Additionally, it is argued that multiple methods can reveal varying aspects of the same symbolic reality (Berg, 2007). Greene et al. (1989) suggest that there are five reasons for mixing methods in research: (1) Triangulation: to seek corroboration of results by applying different methods to the study of the same phenomenon; (2) Complementarity: to elaborate, enhance and clarify findings; (3) Development: to use the results from one method to help inform other methods; (4) Initiation: to discover paradoxes that may highlight the need to reframe the research question(s); (5) Expansion: to extend the breadth and range of the research using different methods to investigate different aspects of the research. Hammersley (1996) also adds facilitation to this list, suggesting that one research method may be employed in order to aid research using another strategy. Morse (2003) argues that by combining and increasing the number of research strategies used the scope of the research can be more comprehensive and it is, therefore, possible to construct a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

A collation of data on international growth of private higher education provision using secondary source data analysis is outlined in Chapter 4. This is a key part of the thesis, as it is argued that 'secondary analysis is an important feature of the research and evaluation exercise' (Glass, 1976: 3). Drawing on data available via HESA (2006; 2011; 2013), UNESCO (2006; 2009a; 2009b), OECD (2011; 2012), EUROSTAT (2013), PROPHE (2012), this section of the thesis outlines a secondary analysis of international data and UK data, also exploring data on online provision as a subset of private higher education. There are a number of advantages to using this method. Bryman (2008) suggests the advantages of secondary analysis, particularly in relation to quantitative data as analysed in this chapter, as reducing the cost and time associated with large scale data collection; data is often of high quality in that sampling procedures are rigorous and have been collected by organisations experienced in research; it opens up the opportunity for longitudinal analysis, subgroup analysis and cross-cultural analysis; it gives more time for data analysis; reanalysis may offer new interpretations; and full use of original data. It is argued that a key advantage is that secondary data analysis saves time that would otherwise be spent gathering data and, particularly in the case of quantitative data, offers the opportunity to analyse bigger and higher-quality databases that would be impractical for any individual researcher or individual higher education

institution (HEI) to collect on their own (Vartanian, 2011). In addition, researchers in the social sciences consider secondary data crucial, since it is impossible to conduct research that may sufficiently capture earlier trends and developments.

However, there are issues with secondary data analysis that are taken into account in the research conducted, these include: variable access; questions about how representative the data is (coverage); difficulties in utilising advanced analysis techniques (Vartanian, 2011); problems with definitions (with regard to private/public, online/distance learning); and inadequate data collection. Further, 'secondary data may subvert the research process by "driving the question", or only looking at questions that can be answered by the available data' (Vartanian, 2011: 17). Further, Bryman (2008: 304) adds issues around lack of familiarity with data; complexity of data; no control of data quality; and absence of key variables. Therefore, whilst accessing secondary data offers benefits to researchers these benefits to a certain extent are offset by a lack of control in how the data is collected, which may have a major impact on the kinds of analysis that can be performed. Official statistics can offer data that is based on the whole, not just a sample, though these are not without issues around reliability and validity, and, as such, the requirements for inclusion in official statistics should be taken into account. Official statistics, often criticised for issues around reliability and validity, can be used as a form of unobtrusive method that may enable triangulation (Bryman, 2008) with empirical research data collected.

The quantitative data analysis brings to the fore a number of aspects that require further investigation. One way of delving deeper to develop a greater understanding of the varying factors that come to bear on the decisions young people make with regard to the university programme, and clarify and illustrate meanings to the statistical indicators outlined above, is through a qualitative enquiry (Robson, 2002). The qualitative data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews in order to uncover in their own words students' thoughts and feelings about their educational decisions and experiences. Interviews also provide the opportunity to follow up interesting ideas and unforeseen avenues of enquiry (Murphy et al., 1998).

The data generated in interviews with executives, staff and students has been transcribed and analysed using a dual approach: first, using the data as a source of *information* that

may be understood to ‘represent reality’ in that, especially for the executives, we can use responses as a source of directly comparable and sometimes quantitative material; second, a thematic analysis identifies *attitudes, experiences* and *perceptions* that are to some extent shared between the sample under analysis. Accessing and analysing quantitative and qualitative data using these approaches allows for a two-pronged immersion in the phenomenon in question and helps to ‘open up’, confirm and corroborate the data and concepts generated.

Access to teaching staff and students at case-study organisations has been facilitated via the initial interviews with chief executives/owners/principals; in this way, the qualitative element of the study has been an ‘iterative process’ (Saunders et al., 2009: 170); the accumulation of access to interview participants a result of repeated and negotiated communications with senior management. Approaching the top person in the organisation may appear to raise difficulties about ‘getting in’ but may actually be the most fruitful route as, once that person has shown an interest in taking part, it is much easier to put in place the second and third stages of interviews with staff and students. The reasons for interviewing the top person in the institution (termed ‘executive’ for the purpose of the thesis) were multiple: to enable a better understanding of the person who is driving the business; to find out about their history; what their perceptions of the HE sector are; and what they anticipate in the future for the business. In-depth interviews provided an interesting insight into the perceptions and experiences of people who exert large amounts of power in their organisation.

A second crucial element in building up a picture of private providers was explored in interviews with academics and teaching staff. Again this provided the opportunity to discover more about the kinds of people who end up working in the private HE sector and what their experiences are; not only in terms of their contact with students, but also their experiences as employees in the private sector. Many staff interviewed had experience working in the ‘public’ HE sector, which meant the interviews also explored their perceptions of the differences and similarities between the public and private sector.

The student interviewees were accessed through liaison initiated in the earlier phase of the research with the contact at the private provider. The interview questions are

designed to cover the widest possible range of students' experiences – from their decisions to study with that HE provider, their experiences on the programme, reflections on the curriculum taught and the learning experience – and be open so that interviewees could elaborate according to their own experiences. In order to meet requirements of ethical guidelines for research with participants in the UK, particular forms had to be completed and signed off before approaching institutions, and participant information sheets and informed consent forms were circulated to participants prior to interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and brief notes were made by the researcher during the interview. Responses in interviews with students and staff are read as both representing an external reality (realism) and as stories that people use to describe their world (narrative). This approach follows the work of Glassner and Loughlin (1987) that treats interview responses as 'both culturally defined narratives and possibly factually correct statements' (Silverman, 2000: 125).

Thesis Structure

Part one of the thesis consists of three chapters that outline the theoretical framework of the empirical work presented in part two. Chapter 1 focuses specifically on broad concepts related to the knowledge society thesis; Chapter 2 narrows this theoretical discussion to elaborate on how the knowledge society relates to higher education more specifically. Chapter 3, on private higher education, offers an examination of concepts of the public and private and relates this to policy developments and debates in the UK.

Part two consists of three chapters that outline the empirical research of the thesis. Chapter 4 details global and UK-specific data on private higher education and also data on distance learning provision. Chapter 5 introduces the management of private providers outlining common data and also key themes that came out of the interviews with executives. Chapter 6 presents the qualitative data from interviews with staff and students at case study private providers.

Chapters 7 (Discussion) and 8 (Conclusion) analyse the main findings of the empirical research and relate these to the theoretical framework outlined in part one of the thesis. In particular the conclusion will address how the research conducted has answered the research questions developed in the introduction of the thesis (on page 11).

Part 1

This part of the thesis outlines the theoretical basis for the empirical work outlined in part two. Chapter 1 focuses on a critical discussion of the 'information society' to assess related concepts and their strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 2 offers an assessment of policy aims and empirical growth of higher education in the UK. Chapter 3 looks at the claims made and demand for as well as explanation of what the purpose of the empirical work will be. These form the context and reasoning for the methodology utilised in part two.

1 – Knowledge Society

The knowledge society thesis is the key conceptual device that underpins research that attempts to uncover dynamics in higher education. Academic research has developed the concept in order to explore trends in education and society. More widely, politicians and policy makers have also identified the concept (or closely related concepts such as the learning society, the information society, the knowledge economy) as a key driver for reform in the sector. The importance of higher education for the knowledge society discourse seems to be obvious (Marginson, 2006), which means that higher education is facing closer scrutiny than ever before. However, greater government interest in the higher education sector is occurring alongside a withdrawal of financial support from the public purse for both research and teaching. It is commonly stated that the market offers a solution to the problems higher education faces (greater numbers of students, shrinking budgets, the requirements for greater flexibility due to lifelong learning). The apparent contradiction of marketisation and privatisation of higher education *and* greater government scrutiny and bureaucratic control, Middleton (2000) notes, bears a greater resemblance to empirical evidence than abstract arguments that tend to focus on one or the other as the key feature of change in the sector.

As we will see in this chapter, the knowledge society thesis and the information society thesis are closely intertwined, though each foregrounds a slightly different aspect in its consideration of change. The knowledge society foregrounds education in its description of current trends, and the information society foregrounds ICTs; there are areas in which the two concepts overlap. Overall, advances in education (massification, specialisation) and ICTs are combined with changes in the economy that are mainly concerned with, or

are closely managed by, electronic data. Despite the resilience of unskilled work in the economy, the knowledge/information society refers in the main to the work done by (and the lived experiences of) a socio-economic elite. The knowledge and information society concepts are mutually dependent because knowledge and information as terms are closely linked (problems with the terminology are discussed in more detail in section 1.1). Technological advancements have a key relationship with the transformation of education, but this is not to assert a technological determinist account of social change. It is important to note how technology is developed and used to extend existing practices and trends, and how communications themselves are shaped by this agenda. The interrelationship between the development of knowledge and communications technologies are key concerns of scholars investigating changes in society and higher education in the UK.

The relationship between communications technology and society is complex and historically rooted. Since the development of communication technologies, such as the telegraph, the telephone, and more recently the Internet, human communication has been removed from time and place in ways that was not previously experienced. However, the more recent developments in ICTs have provoked new conceptualisations of communication and social relationships which often assert that the dawn of the 'information society' has brought forth a new era of information- and technology-savvy consumers, equalized by the democratising effects of the new digital networks. Proponents of this thesis include social theorists such as Castells (1996, 2001), Lévy (1997), McNair (2000) and Norris (2000). For these theorists, advancements in technology are entrenched in the concept of modernization and postmaterialism; new technologies provide new (read – more efficient and productive) ways of interacting, consuming and of 'being'. Further, Barber et al. (2013) argue that the proliferation of freely-available information on the internet undermines the university's position as a gatekeeper and producer of knowledge. Postmaterialist approaches argue that much of human experience is now occurring beyond a mere material/structural existence; we may still eat food and work to pay the bills but we are no longer preoccupied with our biological and economic survival. This movement beyond the material *appears* to be epitomised in evolutions in communication technology that seemingly allow for a true mastery of time and space and the democratisation of production and consumption practices.

The digitalisation of content or data has allowed the duplication of information across a range of platforms and the development of the World Wide Web has provided an instant and global transportation network for the transportation of digitalized information. The dominance of this notion is underpinned by the ideological assertions of national governments, global organisations and commerce that tend to focus upon utopian conceptualisations of the advent of new communications technologies. In the development and maintenance of these ideologies, it is argued that international organisations play a crucial hegemonic role (Cox, 1993; for example the World Trade Organisation and World Intellectual Policy Organisation). At the level of pan-European governance, the EU has been wholly supportive of the development of free market e-commerce. As part of the scheme to promote the development of the information society, the European Commission launched the i2010 strategy: the digitally-focused plan for economic growth and the EU's policy strategy to advance the digital economy by merging research, regulatory tools and public-private partnerships, a strategy adopted by the European Commission in June 2005 (see Europa [2014] for more information). The emphasis on economic factors in the EU discourse on the information society demonstrates the ways in which future developments will be assessed as (economic) success or failure. There is the expectation that the full realisation of an electronic marketplace and the digitalisation of existing processes and practices will automatically mark key progress into an information age.

The rhetoric surrounding the development of the Internet and the ideological dominance of the information society thesis does not, however, tell the full story. The evolution of communications technologies is very much tied to the material; initial innovation was brought about by the science community and government interests in state defence; further development has focused upon the economic sphere pushing the Internet as a means of reaching wider markets more efficiently and reducing costs; and individual access to communications technology relies upon having the funds to pay for the hardware, software, and on-going costs of being online, or accessing the Internet via organisational affiliation, as a student or library member, for instance. Thus, whilst dominant rhetoric emphasises opportunity, these opportunities are in varying degrees restricted by economic, social and cultural constraints. Rather than representing a fundamental move, new communications technologies may merely be a tool to extend

marketising trends that already existed in modern societies. In particular, it is argued, the Internet is a crucial feature of capitalist societies over the last twenty years (S. Simpson, 2004) rather than a departure from existing trends, and it is the IT systems themselves that have played a crucial role in the increase in the marketisation of knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994) and in new modes of consumption (Ritzer, 1998). Thus, rather than being a new phenomenon resulting in a new 'information society', the Internet is tightly linked to existing capitalist structures and markets that seek to extend commercialisation practices further still.

This chapter outlines a theoretical consideration of the role of information and knowledge in modern societies and the related concepts of information as commodity and 'public good'. Marketization is signalled as a key trend in the shift from manufacturing to the production of information goods, described as cultural capitalism (Murdock and Wasko, 2007), which follows Herbert I. Schiller's thesis that critiques the corporate takeover of public expression (see Schiller, 1989; 1996). The relationship between the 'information society', new technology and information/knowledge is an important one to consider, particularly when taking into account the dominance of the market across the globe. The key themes of the commodification of information and education are also explored: how does it manifest itself and what are the consequences of commodification? Here it is argued that the increasing commodification of public information and higher education provision is in line with the recent reiteration of the dominance of commerce in the sphere of information and knowledge, and provides an example of the relentless force of marketization in society via new media and communications technology.

1.1 Information/Knowledge Society/Economy – some definitional nuances

Attempts to describe developments in societies has brought forth a number of different, yet related, concepts. The knowledge society, the information society, the knowledge economy, the learning society, are all terms that have been used to describe developments; in societies; in education; in information communication technologies; and in employment. The knowledge society/economy and learning society has particular resonance for higher education and employment (Faber et al., 2012), the information society for ICTs. Yet all these terms appear to have implications for all that concerns this thesis – changes in higher education towards privatisation and developments in new

communication technologies. Perhaps a good way of understanding the terminology is to understand who came up with the concepts? Välimaa and Hoffman (2008) state that: 'The Knowledge Society has been developed by sociologists, Knowledge Economy by economists and Learning Society by educators. These concepts—or their developers—do not, however, normally communicate much with each other in the academic world' (Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008: 265 – this paper has a full discussion of the origins of the knowledge society and its use in public policy arenas). This quotation highlights an issue around the related concepts of the knowledge society in that different actors take up different terms and run with them. So we can see that another way of understanding the terminology is to look at who is using them and for what purpose? For example, the term 'knowledge society' is argued to form a tool in political discourse that is part of a performance of ideology. Peters (2007) highlights the differences between the uses of the concept of the knowledge society in how it can be used as performative ideologies in policy discourse rather than the academic theories themselves. The knowledge society as a concept is used as a political goal in national, regional and global political arenas (Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008). In the UK, Välimaa and Hoffman (2008) identify the use of the term 'learning society' in the Dearing Report (1997) that fits into wider knowledge society discourses. This demonstrates how concepts developed in the academy can be utilised and moulded to wider socio-political aims.

The varying usage of these terms points up some key areas of emphasis, difference and ambiguity in the literature. Generally, the term 'information society' incorporates a range of developments in societies, including evolutions in communication technology, mass higher education, and changes in employment. Thus, it is asserted that 'the information society is a large-scale theoretical and political effort to integrate all progressive elements of modernization' (Häyrinen-Alestalo, 2001: 207). The ideological value in this aim is clear. If the information society is linked to all elements of progress, how can you argue against its existence or against its worth? To critique the information society is to appear backward and conservative. Furthermore, the 'information society' itself remains difficult to pin down, as it is always, ideologically, one step ahead, residing in future trends and social change. But as Häyrinen-Alestalo (2001) highlights, the idea that social change derives from the growth of information technologies is a form of technological determinism. The vagueness and ability to incorporate a range of developments in an 'information society' is, at once, accommodating yet evasive.

A second issue for the concept of the information society is that the difficult characteristics of the terminology perhaps reflect the varying meanings of 'information' in current usage (for an in depth discussion of the terms information and knowledge, see Hill, 1999: 11-14 and 23-26) and how popular usage often considers information and knowledge as synonymous terms. However, they are not one and the same and some theorists have acknowledged this. For instance it has been highlighted that there has been a recent reduction of 'knowledge' to 'information' in the literature (Fuller, 2001: 188), perhaps suggesting a change in conceptualisations of current trends. The idea that information is in some way inferior to knowledge, and is thus different and not an interchangeable term, is an important point. Newman (1999) argues that there is an important conceptual difference between 'information' and 'knowledge' in that 'information is the answer to a question (classically, information "destroys uncertainty") whereas knowledge is the framework that enables the question to be asked' (Newman, 1999: 83; see also Newman and Newman, 1985).

Häyrinen-Alestalo (2001: 206) makes a distinction between the ideas of a knowledge based society and an information society. A knowledge-based society highlights the social importance of knowledge, such as that produced in academia, which is assigned a cultural status of value and objectivity (expertise). Here, information is conceptualised as raw data, or knowledge that lacks academic rigour or cultural context; as Robins argues 'the kind of knowledge we now relate to in the form of "information" is a knowledge that has become characterized by its "dereferentialization"' (Robins, 1999: 23). The decontextualisation of information, removed from the context assumed by knowledge, is at odds with some of the proponents of the information society thesis, in particular Lévy (1997). A further useful distinction between information and knowledge is made by Hill (1999); 'the realization that information is what is actually being conveyed when one person tries to impart knowledge to another is important' (Hill, 1999: 13). Therefore knowledge is the result of an individual's acquisition, assimilation, and rationalisation of information that is available. Through these various discussions we can develop an understanding of the nuances of the terminology utilised in the literature and how these are used (accurately or inaccurately) more widely.

Regardless of the terminology specified, some critics voice dissatisfaction with any of these conceptualisations of current trends that place emphasis on the idea of new forms

of interaction based upon technological advancements. A general critique of the application of information/knowledge society/economy terms to current trends includes an acknowledgement of the theoretical redundancy of the terms. Fuller (2001), in particular, makes an important criticism of the term 'knowledge society':

> To those innocent of social theory, it should be perfectly obvious that knowledge has always played an important role in the organization and advancement of society. In that sense, saying that we live in a 'knowledge society' would seem to be no more informative than saying we live in a 'power society' or a 'money society' or a 'culture society'. (Fuller, 2001: 177)

Thus, we need to be careful in holding up information or knowledge as a key defining characteristic of societies, especially when they are so difficult to pin down and often used for ideological gain.

Another key critique of the terminology – where it helps to mask, rather than uncover social change – is how it is used to describe occurrences that are nothing to do with the rather grand notions of the power of information and knowledge, but rather regarding material changes in employment and the economy. Crucially, we should try to unpick the idea of a knowledge society from the wider move from manufacturing to service economies (Garnham, 2000). A service economy does not necessarily equate to an information economy, even though handling and exploiting information is the main focus of activity. Thus the ever-increasing transfer and storage of digital information in the service economies and the rationalisation of business practices across all organisations (both private and public) does not correlate to an information or knowledge society, as extolled by utopianists.

How useful are these terms in explaining social phenomena, when they evade clear definition or take the credit for changes that depend upon a plethora of sources (social, economic, political)? Indeed, this seems to offer an explanation to the persuasiveness and ubiquity of these terms that can be moulded to fit a range of trends and ideas and perhaps mask some others. How useful the concepts of information/knowledge society/economy are in the description and exploration of recent trends is now discussed in more detail.

1.2 Theoretical perspectives

In Held et al.'s (1999) discussion of reactions to hyper-globalization they develop a classification that divides actors in the following categories: sceptics, who identify nothing new which cannot be explained by existing theory, and transformationalists, who recognise social transformation. This section will begin by focusing on those theorists who highlight the transformative and novel characteristics of the information/knowledge society, then turning to the sceptics and others who would offer a different view on the current condition of societies.

The information society thesis follows a theoretical arc that focuses upon the novelty of society's emphasis on and value attributed to information. Many theorists have argued that we have moved into a new era, usually prefixed with a 'post', where the role of information and knowledge has swept away the material, capitalist basis of society: postindustrial society (Bell, 1974; Touraine, 1974), postcapitalist (Dahrendorf, 1959), postmodern (Bauman, 1992), the programmed society (Touraine 1995) and postmaterialist (Inglehart, 1999). More recently theorists have developed other terms, such as the information society (Masuda, 1990), the Electronic Age (Hill, 1999), network society (Castells, 1996), cyberculture (Lévy, 1997) and the post-information age (Negroponte, 1995). Broadly these theorists emphasise discontinuity by suggesting that we are living in a new age, one that is distinct from that which has been lived before, and one of the central characteristics is our relationship to information communication technologies (ICTs). In Negroponte's (1995) discussion on the postmodern condition of 'being digital' he describes how 'the change from atoms to bits is irrevocable and unstoppable' (4), with the real digital divide being generational, not based upon social inequalities. Inglehart's (1999) World Values Survey supports this by highlighting the gradual development of 'postmaterialist values' over long periods of time as intergenerational value shifts occur in the context of greater economic and physical security in developed nations. Characteristic of these postmaterialist societies is younger generations giving precedence to self-expression and quality of life (Inglehart, 1999). Thus, the development of postmaterialist values coincides conveniently with a growth in ICTs that predominantly function and evolve to meet the lifestyle requirements of the young and the wealthy that also filter out to the wider population.

Following this, Lévy (1997) argues that in the new cyberculture there is a new relationship to knowledge due to the development of global networks. He links the growth of cyberculture to an 'international movement of young people' (Lévy, 1997: ix), described as having similar characteristics to a social movement where there will be a development of free services via universities, governments and non-profit organisations. Two of the key characteristics of the new cyberculture for Lévy (1997) are the speed of change and the increase in the transaction of knowledge. His vision, he argues, is neither utopian, nor dystopian but, rather, accepts the conditions and constraints that new communications technology provides for societies. Thus, whilst the internet provides an information 'deluge' that may be sometimes difficult to navigate, chaotic in nature, and all-accepting in content (he uses the term universal), he argues that it re-establishes communication that is similar to that which existed in oral societies, which re-contextualizes the written text within virtual communities (this idea is at odds with Robins [1999] as noted earlier). Despite arguing that his vision is not utopian, his discussion of the rise of the internet seemingly falls into this category, for example he states that 'it is impossible to burn this library of babel' (Lévy, 1997: xv), thus suggesting that the internet offers the possibility of ultimate security against cultural-revolution or tyrannical censorship. How this stacks up against state control of access to information on the internet, as experienced in China or Tunisia for example, is unclear. Also he does not acknowledge the deepening problem of navigating the massive amounts of sometimes disorganised information – the danger of a disorganized bulk of information, or misinformation, is highlighted by Jeanneney (2007). A more direct critique of Lévy's 'cyber-utopian vision' is offered by Robins (1999) who describes it as a 'radical techno-rhetoric with a social and political vision that is actually quite conventional and conservative' (Robins, 1999: 19). Thus, whilst appearing to offer a progressive, postmodern perspective on social development of new communications technology that acknowledges many positive aspects of current trends, the ability to mask the manipulation of technology for economic gain at the expense of more egalitarian practices ultimately roots this perspective in an approach that fails to challenge the status quo. The link between technological determinism and the idea of the information society is key, and one that should be at the fore when assessing academic, popular and policy literature (Garnham, 2000). In fact Robins (1999) argues that the utopian ideal works in the interests of corporations and governments, which should not be underestimated in the circulation of the information society thesis ideology.

Gates et al.'s (1995) utopianism is more openly linked to capitalism, as he asserts that the information revolution will provide the circumstances for 'friction-free capitalism', eventually producing the 'ultimate market' (6). Here, citizens are conceptualised as consumers, and the new global information market provides consumers with all the information they need to make the appropriate choices – whether this be investing money or purchasing jeans, making the internet the 'world's central department store' (Gates et al., 1995: 6). This raises questions about the *quality* of information and the *ability* of individuals or institutions to use that information wisely, especially as these networks and systems become more complex. However, despite these issues, his vision for the future holds resonance as the Internet does meet our individual/consumer needs more fully than our community/citizen ones. Following Gates et al (1995), Castells' (1996) in-depth analysis of the network society describes the advent of an information technology revolution, likening ICT to the role electricity played in the industrial revolution (as does Gates at el., 1995). He also follows the line of the postmaterialists in asserting that there has been a transformation of material culture, asserting that 'the internet is the fabric of our lives' (Castells, 2001: 1). The primacy of ICTs in societies across the developed world for the spheres of work, home and personal relationships can be seen in the 'need' for smartphones that act as a communicating and organising device that are accessible wherever we are. New technologies such as these are constantly being developed, improved, replaced, requiring an on-going investment in order to be part of this postmaterialist culture – placing them firmly in the realms of the material. The democratic imperatives of these technologies are raised – all can take part, as long as you can afford it.

The idea that the internet is open to all is an alluring one. There are a multitude of outlets and platforms for different voices that can be easily accessed, as long as people know about them of course. The internet can be used as a mechanism for voicing anti-establishment messages or campaigns, such as those via the wikileaks website. Castells (1996) has scrutinized the global network society and describes how information is exchanged via the global network, bypassing the state. Despite the ability to bypass the state, Castells admits the importance of the role of the state in bringing in ICTs. It can be understood that the national context impinges upon the potential of ICTs in that country, for example in China there is strict policing of the internet according to political and

cultural guidelines. In order to develop a greater understanding of how global trends play out at a national level (with regard to information and knowledge priorities) Castells and Himanen (2002) have devised a typology of knowledge societies; Silicon Valley – open and market driven; Singapore – an authoritarian model and; the Finnish model – open, welfare-state-based, which can help deconstruct and contextualise general statements about knowledge societies and highlights the importance of national and regional contexts in understanding change.

There is also the idea that the democratic and innovative characteristics of ICTs can actually compensate for those lacking relative economic or political power. For example, it is argued that developments in communication technology provide a platform for developing nations to compete with developed nations and reduce inequalities (Gates, 1995; Lévy, 1997) and the internet is crucial for the development of the third world (Castells, 2001). However, constant innovation in ICTs means that developing nations (as is also the case for those economically or culturally excluded from access in developed countries) require repeated investment in hardware or skills to be considered on the same level as developed countries. The necessary telecommunications infrastructure may also be missing, involving a massive financial investment, even with technological improvements that will reduce the costs of the material infrastructure (as suggested by Lévy [1997]), for example the 'straight to mobile' internet market where it is argued that the 'Mobile phone boom in developing world could boost e-learning' (The Guardian, 2012b; see also GSMA, 2012). Further problems can be identified in the utopian dream of ICTs for all, as 'all' includes those who wish to make use the internet to extend the possibility for criminality. The appropriation of the internet by criminal organisations and individuals has been noted: Castells (2001) discusses the use of the internet in Columbia for extortion and blackmail and also goes on to acknowledge that the rise of the network society results in uneven development, with increasing poverty alongside increasing wealth, affecting different social groups and countries differently. Häyrinen-Alestalo (2001) identifies a sharpening of inequalities and goes on to say that it is 'absurd to speak of the information society as a project for increasing equality and inclusion' (214). Rather than levelling the field, it can be argued that the true benefactors of developing nations' access to the Internet are in fact transnational corporations (TNCs) from developed states (S. Simpson, 2004).

Critics of Castell's network society thesis focus upon the persistent structural and deeply capitalist basis of these network societies. For example, it is argued that the idea that the new knowledge society is organised on the basis of networks rather than hierarchies loses sight of the continued stratification (of credential requirements[2]) of the knowledge society (Fuller, 2001). Overall it is found that Castells does not give enough emphasis to the political economy of new technology or the dominance of traditional capitalism at the base of neoliberal ideology (Häyrinen-Alestalo, 2001).

Arguments that emphasize *continuation* are also levelled in response to discourses around *change* that are found in the literature. Arguing against a technologically deterministic account of new developments in communications technology, Robins and Webster (1989) suggest that the information society is in fact the result of emerging social, economic and political factors over a number or decades, rather than the result of remarkable technological innovations. Critiques of the information society thesis suggest that the emphasis on newness in fact obscures real social trends and is unhelpful in explaining current phenomena. Webster (1995) questions whether the 'knowledge society' does represent a real change to the capitalist order. The growth of e-commerce is used as an indicator of a thriving knowledge economy, but 'what we see is the application of Internet based communication technologies either to, somewhat, enhance the efficiency of the business-to-business supply chain or to shift the nature of the information search and transaction mode within the retailing of goods and services' (Garnham, 2000: 143). In making the distinction between 'technology one' and 'technology two', Golding (2000) suggests that most recent technological developments associated with the information society have simply facilitated existing processes to occur more speedily, more efficiently or more conveniently, rather than creating completely new forms of activity. There are also questions raised about the idea of material efficiency as it is argued there has been a low level increase in productivity, if any at all (Garnham, 2000). Some go further, questioning the common-sense discourses around communications technologies and suggest that ICTs have negatively impacted on society in the same terms that are used to argue for the benefits of ICTs:

[2] This refers to the necessity for not only the acquisition of knowledge but credentials that represent the acquisition of a specific body of knowledge that is verified by a body with the power to do so (in higher education this is an institution with degree awarding powers). Therefore, credentials are used a 'proof' of educational attainment.

> The most significant analytical task for contemporary critics is to disrupt the dual ideologies punctuating the now: inevitable technological change, and progress. The notion that technology may actually make our lives worse - less productive, less political, less potent - seems beyond the discursive pale. (Brabazon, 2002: 20).

Focusing more closely on the concept of the knowledge society, some have found that it lacks any resemblance to an empirical reality; 'Information or knowledge society […] has become largely meaningless and the vision bears very little, if any relation, to any concretely graspable reality' (Garnham, 2000: 140). Because of this we can understand how these concepts are utilised to evoke ideas and ideals in political discourse, which are rooted in the concept of change and lack a focus on the reality of economic and power dimensions that structure society.

A focus on continuation rather than change can be understood to be rooted in the desire to highlight power relations in our understanding of the information society. In a critique of research into new media Mansell (2004) reiterates the importance of power relations in exploring the relationship between society and technology; 'There are many assertions that implicitly assume that the construction and use of the internet automatically involve a major change in social and economic relationships' (100). Seamus Simpson (2004) argues for the application of a neo-Gramscian perspective in an analysis of the dominance of commercial interests in the development of the internet. Gramsci's 'consensus' and 'hegemony', are thought to have particular significance in understanding how new technologies are developed and implemented in modern societies. The internet as liberal-marketplace has reached a consensus across most spheres of ideology formation. Within this perspective, tensions are understood as part of the complex relationships developed, which do not ultimately undermine the overall dominance of global capitalism. He describes the approach thus:

> A neo-Gramscian account broadly contends that governmental interests act in ways that respond to the changing requirements of capitalist production (thereby maintaining the dominant position of its leading economic interests) by […] aiming to promote a consensual acceptance of particular courses of action and modes of behaviour related to the internet. By contrast and in tandem, governmental interests act to create a new set of enforceable rules (e.g. laws and regulations) that aim to effect and cement required changes to facilitate the evolving needs of commerce here. (S. Simpson, 2004: 53-54)

The application of this neo-Gramscian perspective to the internet helps to avoid analysis that ignores the power structures that come to bare on current internet usages and

practices. The acknowledgement of the key role of state and commerce in ICT developments is crucial in understanding how new technologies are used to reinforce and extend marketisation still further, and how divergent voices and the democratisation of access to production and consumption, often lauded as markers of the information society, are encouraged and are *necessary* as part of the maintenance of hegemonic ideologies that work (on the whole) in the favour of established centres of power (i.e. state and commerce).

A further critique is developed by Schiller; sceptical of the utopian ideas surrounding the information society, Schiller's (1999) *digital capitalism* explores the relationship between new digital networks and an intensification of the market in all spheres of life. Whilst questioning the democratic potentials of the internet, he acknowledges that 'the arrival of digital capitalism has involved radical social, as well as technological, changes' (Schiller, 1999: xiv), which may go some way to explain the basis of many technological determinist accounts of social change. Similarly to Seamus Simpson (2004), Schiller's (1999) key concern is with regard to the commercialisation of the internet and the subsequent consequences. The application of neoliberal policies on telecommunications systems, which allowed for the creation and dominance of internet technologies, actually 'empowers transnational corporations and concurrently aggravates existing social inequalities' (Schiller, 1999: xiv). The dual aspect of the dominance of capital and the continuation of inequalities are key in critiques of the information society thesis. As Graham (1999) argues; 'we must be careful not to confuse the power of the internet as a form of communication with its value as a conveyor of (epistemologically significant) information' (90).

1.3 Information as a public good

A key theme of the information society thesis is the idea that information is a 'public good', or a 'right' that is necessary for the functioning of a democratic society (Nilsen, 2001). The idea of information as a public good requires the existence of democratic structures that encourage production of materials, free to access, circulating in a manner that counters commercialising trends. Resistance to commercial enterprise does not, however, result in information that is necessarily in the public interest – a key distinction – particularly with regard to the promise of virtual participatory democracy. Also notable is the key relationship between the democratic ideals of the information society

thesis and the development of communications technologies, which requires careful analysis: many critiques of the notion of the information society highlight the technological determinism that underpins the rhetoric. The democratic ideals of the information society are most clearly demonstrated in alternative production models on the internet and these are often held up as examples of where the ICTs can enable the underrepresented or disenfranchised to have a voice.

Examples of alternative production models across the Internet are cited in the literature: for example, free to use sources of information such as Google, or Wikipedia or the idea that there is the possibility of public communication zones, working in a similar way to public parks, offering a space for the community to come together. Costanza-Chock (2007) outlines the globalization of resistance to capitalist communication through a proliferation of free materials online via file-sharing programs which, she argues, undermines the dominance of intellectual property rights (IPR), and the development of resistance networks such as autonomous media network Indymedia and more progressive ideologies in existing knowledge organisations. However, there is a precarious balancing act at various levels for these alternative production models: 'on the one hand, movements must attempt to work with the state in order to check the rise of corporate conglomerate control, while at the same time they must fight the tendency of the state to centralize media control in its own hands' (Costanza-Chock, 2007: 241). It seems alternative production online must fight on two fronts to carve out a space that works with counter-commercialisation and freedom of speech as its main aim. We can see problems arise regarding free to use sources, such as Facebook or Google, in the power they hold as *gatekeepers* between individual users and other individuals, the state and businesses. Jeanneney's (2007) journalistic account of recent developments of Google in terms of the digitisation of information implores caution in the evolution of the global knowledge society. Google and those who control the search and filter mechanisms on the internet are increasingly influencing the future availability of information. Other critiques of the information society associated to these particular claims around the proliferation of free information raise questions about the reality of information availability and possibilities for working outside the commercial mainstream: for example, Stafford (1999) discusses what she calls 'troubling myths about online information' (142, see also Miller, 1997); that all information is, or will be in the future, available free online. She highlights that this is not the case and that much

information is out of date or not from a reliable source; and the open source software movement, whilst extolled as a legitimate alternative to the dominance of mainstream commodifying practices, requires further research to uncover the power relations implicit in the values and systems around which the open source community is organised (Mansell, 2004). Indeed, further research is required on all alternative production models outlined here to assess how far they meet the promises of the 'information revolution'.

Alongside these alternative movements, governments have set themselves a task in developing democracy online, surely the ultimate expression of the information society ideal – where informed citizens can take stock of a variety of political sources and have their voices heard through direct-democracy. Indeed, as Norris describes, a 'virtual democracy' where new technologies mobilise the electorate into participation in a virtual community of information exchange and communication (Norris, 2000). Contrary to some theorists who argue that ICTs continue and strengthen existing social structures and inequalities, Norris (2000) states that 'by sharply reducing the barriers to civic engagement, levelling some of the financial hurdles, and widening the opportunities for political debate, for dissemination of information, and for group interaction, it is said that the Net may reduce social inequalities in life' (Norris, 2000: 121). The promise of the virtual community and its access to information, particularly government information, is a key issue in developing civic engagement. There are of course problems with this argument: dwindling voter turnout, more general political apathy and distrust of 'spin' and the recurrent problem of inequality of access undermines the ideal. Brabazon (2002) critiques the idea of 'netizens'. Returning to the issue of the democratic, utopian conceptualisation of information, information as a public good is intrinsically linked to the notion of universal access. Fuller (2001) notes, 'the maintenance of public goods requires considerable work to ensure that everyone potentially has access to the goods' (Fuller, 2001: 191). The operative word here is *potentially*, as individuals have varying levels of access, varying abilities in information processing, and varying levels of need or desire for that information; and in government approaches to public information the juxtaposition of various legislation in the UK and elsewhere is witness to the diverging interests of the state, citizens and commerce.

Government policies can affect access to information either directly or indirectly. In the UK, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 affirms the right of public access to

information held by public authorities or central government. However, the Freedom of Information Act contains exemptions to the right of access in order to protect legitimate interests and sensitivities (Department of Constitutional Affairs, 2008). The 23 listed exemptions include: if the information is accessible to the applicant by other means; or will be published in the future; for reasons of security or defence; the economy; law enforcement and for commercial interests (for the full list see the website). The *Guardian* began a campaign in 2004 to 'Free our Data', where they focus upon the implementation of Freedom of Information legislation, arguing that it has been watered down, and criticise the pricing of access to information (The Guardian, 2004). More recently, Freedom of Information legislation came under scrutiny by MPs who were critical of curbs to access that were put in place (The Guardian, 2007). Alongside government legislation of freedom of information are the various intellectual property rights, including copyright that may seem to undermine public access to information. Copyright is one of the intellectual property rights intended to provide individuals and organisations with the protection necessary to be able to profit from their creative output and this aim takes precedence over the secondary aim of copyright that seeks to support the publication of information for the greater public good (Moore and Steele, 1991). British governmental information is also protected by Crown copyright, which protects all material produced by employees of the crown in the course of their duties (Office of Public Sector Information, 2008). Copyright, alongside the control of access to information via new technology, forms a scale of 'scarcity' in terms of production and consumption that reinforces structural inequalities that are rarely explored in the dominant ideology surrounding the 'information society' (Mansell, 2004).

Crown copyright and intellectual property rights (IPR) more generally can offer a key insight into how information and knowledge are protected and utilised for economic gain. Recent political battles in the US around the issue of copyright have resulted in various internet giants (Wikipedia) to operate website 'blackouts' on 18 January 2012 to protest against proposed measures to strengthen IPR – Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and Protect IP Act (PIPA). Here we can understand how IPR is in conflict with the basis of these free-to-use websites, as Välimaa and Hoffman (2008) explain; 'the idea of intellectual property rights is challenged by the ethical basis of the open (source) development process, which envisions information and communication technologies as public goods, in which anyone is welcome to participate and all are invited to benefit'

(270). These are no small political issues; huge amounts of money are at stake and associated power on the global arena. Scott (1998) suggests intellectual property is now the weapon of international rivalry, used as a way of exerting dominance on the virtual stage and underlining existing structures that enable the powerful to accrue more power. In Marginson's (2006) discussion about knowledge as a private and public good he raises important questions about the ownership of knowledge and issues around IPR. Some commentators attempt to make distinctions between information and knowledge and acknowledge differences between the two with regard to IPR. For example, it is argued that the commodification of knowledge is critical in university research and teaching, as Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) argue that 'attempts at the commodification of information are probably less problematic than attempts to commodify knowledge, pedagogy and assessment' (45). The commodification of knowledge is particularly resonant for higher education institutions and how they interact with commerce, and for the increasing privatisation of higher education. Fuller (2001) suggests that knowledge is now a private rather than public good: 'the knowledge management movement can be seen as the final stage in the retreat of knowledge's status in the economy from a public good in the tertiary sector to a natural resource in the primary sector' (Fuller, 2001: 190). The idea that both the commodification of knowledge is happening to such an extent that it has changed character and that this trend is more worrying than commodification of information is interesting. It could be argued that both are closely linked and interrelated – that information and knowledge as public goods are both being undermined is explored in section 1.4 and throughout the thesis. Broadly the notion of information as a public good is dependent upon the *availability* of information and the *pricing* of information; the varying levels of access that exists undermines this idea. Furthermore some argue that communication technologies are intertwined with commercial imperatives to the point that 'information society policy both anticipates and celebrates the privatisation of information, and the incorporation of ICT developments into the expansion of the free market' (Golding, 2000: 170). The political and economic context impact on the potential for a free and open ICT movement, despite attempts to ensure the availability of information and knowledge for the public good or to utilise the internet for alternative modes of production; the domination of the market on all spheres of life has made privatisation of information and knowledge seemingly unavoidable. The commodification of information will be discussed in more detail below.

1.4 The commodification of information

A key issue for the information society thesis and conceptualisations of information as a public good is the commodification of information. This commodification manifests itself in a concentration of online media ownership by commercial enterprise, the preoccupation with the development of an online marketplace, over and above other possibilities, and the re-appropriation of public information into a commodity to be sold to individuals and/or the commercial sector. In his discussion of the commercialisation of the internet, Seamus Simpson (2004) describes an 'internationalizing electronic marketplace' (p.50) where 'the interests and requirements of business […] have predominated' (p. 51). Reasons for this include the fact that the internet practices 'possess vital characteristic elements of the market process' (p. 55). The general move towards information commodification is made easier by the digitalisation of content and in the context of commercial dominance this has defined information as data to be moulded into a product to be sold for profit. Hall and Stahl (2012) suggest that technological innovation nurtured inside the University is commodified and fetishized under capitalism. Thus, as is argued by Mosco (1989), new technology is 'mainly employed to measure and monitor information transactions and to package and repackage information products many times over, thereby bringing us ever closer to the Pay-per society' (11-12). The commodification of information is closely tied to the idea of the information society, as EU and state government rhetoric on the issue makes clear: for it is only as a commodity that information (and knowledge) is valued and the increasing commercialisation of information is held up as evidence of a thriving information society. The relationship of developments in ICTs to globalising economies and the dominance of management practices and bureaucratic ideals demonstrate that many factors influence and constrain evolutions in communications technology; for what purpose are new technologies developed? What value is placed on information and why? How do governments regulate information transactions and in whose favour is legislation developed? Thus, it is argued that, 'with its growing commodification, information acquired the status of a "key strategic resource" in the international economy and its distribution, regulation, marketing and management became increasingly important' (Thussu, 2005: 53). The commercialisation of information is particularly evident in the public sector due to an increasing pressure on government

departments to generate income from data and a more general trend of favouring corporate practice at the expense of public information-culture (Schiller, 1989).

Public sector data is particularly attractive to the information market as it is comprehensive and usually considerable resources have been used in its compilation and analysis (Abd Hadi and McBride, 2000). Whilst, Abd Hadi and McBride (2000) suggest that more could be made from the great commercial value that public sector information holds, 'the trading of information may be seen as a by-product of core governmental activities, rather than an end in itself' (556). The 1999 White Paper on *The Future Management of Crown Copyright* (HMSO, 1999) does suggest distinctions should be made between public and commercial reuse of public-sector information in establishing fees. However, not all government information has economic value; information may have no commercial value at all and some information may be required to be distributed at no cost to schools and libraries. The multifaceted processes of accumulating quality information, the assessment of value, free distribution to associated institutions, and the sale of information to individuals and the commercial sector are complex and contradictory. As Abd Hadi and McBride (2000) suggest 'there may be some incompatibility between information distribution as a public service and information trading' (557). As is also highlighted by the *Guardian* 'Free Our Data' Campaign (See www.freeourdata.org.uk) and articles 'Give us our crown jewels back' (The Guardian, 2006a; 2006b). Further, the *Guardian* suggests that the UK's closed approach to data management is damaging to commercial (for example in the start-up of new businesses) and research activities (relating, for example, to climate change). Ultimately suggesting that government should not be involved in information trading but, mainly, with the collection of data (The Guardian, 2006a). However, there is pressure on government departments to generate income from data. Nilsen (2001) argues that in the UK, US and Canada in the 1980s, government ideologies pushed forward the role of the market solutions such as commercialisation and privatisation in dealing with social problems, and 'within this framework, government information becomes a corporate resource, a commodity to be exploited' (Nilsen, 2001: 194, see also Schiller, 1989; Stafford, 1999). It is important to note that the pressure to commodify public sector information has occurred without a clear information trading policy, also the case in most other EU countries (Abd Hadi and McBride, 2000), which has led to some confusion about the role governments play in this process. Despite the lack of any clear information policy,

political discourses continue to ascribe to the information society thesis and concerns about information and knowledge are high on the political agenda.

It is possible to identify intersections of political, societal, and economic interests and where they converge in the foregrounding of the importance of information. Government departments may collect data and use this data to monitor performance and attempt to improve services, but also sell data to private companies who use this information to market their goods more effectively. As the data is used to apply efficiency criteria to public expenditure and also generate income, activity around information generation and quality assurance may become a primary concern. Abd Hadi and McBride (2000) conceptualise this as an 'information aware culture', where an 'awareness of the value of the information asset to the public and to commercial concerns may lead to an improved culture which values information quality' (566). This conceptualisation focuses on how the intersections of societal and economic interests can ensure improvements in quality of information. Gibbons et al. (1994) highlight a different impact – not on the quality of information but on the kind of information that is generated. They argue that there has been an integration of knowledge discovery, application and its marketisation. The intensification of competition in business and industry has placed a greater emphasis on 'marketable knowledge', where knowledge is created within the context of its application - in order to service commercial markets more effectively. This might mean that in the 'information aware culture' marketable knowledge creation is given precedence over knowledge that may be in the public interest.

Another recurring issue in the trading of information is the difficulty in placing a monetary value on it (Abd Hadi and McBride, 2000: 557) and, in particular, the pricing of intellectual property is problematic due to the redundancy of existing economic models that are based upon the products of the manufacturing process (Gates et al., 1995). The requirement of new conceptualisations of commercial transactions due to the nature of the information product has been extrapolated more widely by Lévy (1997) who highlights that 'intellectual technologies promote […] new forms of access to information [… and] new forms of reasoning and understanding such as simulation, an industrialization of thought that is based neither on logical deduction nor on experience-based induction' (Lévy, 1997: 137). The necessity to place a price on information or knowledge has a knock-on effect as the placing of economic value provides a ready-

made sorting/ranking mechanism for information and knowledge, despite that fact that the value placed may be either entirely arbitrary or based upon ‘market’ value itself rather than any inherent characteristics in the make-up or production of that good.

As economic value is placed on information products that are increasingly easy to replicate it becomes a priority to protect the assets of information providers. In these cases, the policing of infringements falls to the government. In Europe, the EU Parliament and Council have implemented directives to combat intellectual property offences. Digital rights management is a crucial concern for the publishing sector, especially for sound and video recordings, whether online or offline. Digital Rights Management Systems (DRMs) are technologies that describe and recognize digital content protected by intellectual property rights, and impose usage rules set by rights holders or prescribed by law for digital content. Similarly in the US there have been attempts to combat intellectual property infringements, with some difficulty in some cases due to what is described by Bott (1998) as key weaknesses in intellectual property law that is geared to protect traditional print media, particularly with regard to the protection of digital data and information. Thus, there is a drive at state level, underlined by commercial interests, that seeks to protect information commodities and conceptualise intellectual property infringements as a direct attack on social and technological progress: ‘this type of free-riding threatens to undermine the commercial success of electronic technologies’ (Bott, 1998: 245). However, to counter this it is argued that the development of intellectual property is an anti-enlightenment project (Fuller, 2001), which more specifically encloses the knowledge commons (Costanza-Chock, 2007). Garnham (2000a) suggests that the availability of common knowledge is now threatened, despite its basis in the market system, which now undermines it.

2 – Higher Education in the Knowledge Society

This chapter focuses on theoretical and policy discourses on higher education in the knowledge society and provides the foundation for later chapters on the growth and impact of higher education in the UK. Ideas around the knowledge society and information society have particular resonance for higher education and the corresponding importance of universities in knowledge society discourse is widely accepted (Marginson, 2006; Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008). Theoretical approaches to the knowledge society have been developed to try to make sense of change in societies, often related very closely to the information society thesis that documents major advancements in line with progress in ICTs. Looking specifically at the knowledge society, some researchers have developed an analysis of the transformation of universities and academic research (see table 3).

Table 3: An Analysis of the Transformation of Universities and Research

Gibbons et al. (1994)		**Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000); Etzkowitz et al. (2000)**
Mode 1	**Mode 2**	**"Triple Helix" thesis**
Knowledge is produced within autonomous disciplinary contexts governed mainly by academic interests of a specific community.	Knowledge is produced within the context of its application. Includes interdisciplinary research, characterized by heterogeneity and reflexivity.	Formerly isolated institutional actors, such as university, government and industry become increasingly entwined.

Source: Välimaa and Hoffman (2008: 271)

Gibbons et al. (1994) argue that the new form 'Mode 2' is now replacing 'Mode 1'. As outlined in section 1.2, we would need to be careful in supporting the idea that change is the foremost trend as we also need to be attentive to the continuation of ideologies and practices. Following this, it could be argued that Mode 2 knowledge is occurring alongside the continuation of Mode 1 knowledge rather than replacing it, and that Mode 2 is not necessary a new way of producing knowledge and is in fact something that has always occurred. Alternatively, the thesis developed by Etzkowitz and colleagues uses the metaphor of a 'triple helix' to try to represent the complex relationships and connections between different actors. Again, it can be questioned how new these interrelationships are and whether it is the complexity of the relationships that is more interesting to explore than the fact that they exist at all.

The theoretical approaches above try to make sense of perceived transformations occurring in higher education and how these relate to the production of knowledge – a

key role for universities. In order to place these debates in context, this chapter will explore in more detail, the purpose of the university and theoretical descriptions of higher education models and relations to society; the concept of education as credentials, training and a commodity; higher education policy and governance; and the commodification of education.

2.1 What is a university?

Ideas about the purpose of the university and what a university is or should be have been debated since the advent of higher education. This is relevant to recent discussions of the transformation of higher education, questions about the proper role of universities in society (Zomer and Benneworth, 2011) and the changes in the character of the knowledge or information society we now live in. Historical sociology of the university links higher education to various modes of modernity (Delanty, 1998, 2001, 2002, see Delanty, 2002: 33 for more on a historical framework). He names four academic revolutions (see table 4): the Humboltian University; the civic university; the mass university; and the virtual university (Delanty, 2002). Graham (2008) also discusses the academic cultures prevalent in previous time periods, including German – Humboldt, American – Civic traditions. The Humboltian University is closely tied to the enlightenment project and the advancement of modernity. This model is sometimes held up as the ideal of the university, where universities produce knowledge autonomously and academics follow their research interests without constraints from institutional or state bodies. The second model, the civic university, has close links to the industrialisation of society. During this period of development academic disciplines became more apparent and academics became specialists in their respective field. The third model, the mass university, is characterised by huge increases in student numbers and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education (in particular, women, but also those from working class backgrounds and ethnic minorities). The final model, the virtual university, is suggested by Delanty (2002) to represent postmodernity in higher education: universities must be reflexive; there is a breaking down of disciplinary boundaries established during the Civic period; and increasing globalisation and with the application of market values to higher education.

Table 4: The university and modernity

Four Academic Revolutions	*Model of modernity*	*Cognitive model*	*Social transformations of modernity*
The Humboltian university (late eighteenth and nineteenth century)	The enlightenment and the cultural project of modernity	Universal knowledge and the unity of teaching and research, autonomy of knowledge/academic freedom	Cultural rationalisation, secularisation, cultural nationalism
The civic university (late nineteenth century to 1960s)	Industrial modernity and the social project of modernity	Disciplinary specialisation, separation of basic and applied research	Societal differentiation/ modernisation, rise of the national 'governmental' state
The mass university (late twentieth century)	Late/advanced modernity and the political project of modernity	Knowledge as transformative, entry of the cognitive structures of the life-world	Democratisation, radical politics, multiculturalism, post-industrial society
The virtual university (twenty-first century)	Postmodernity and the technological and economic projects	Multidisciplinarity, reflexivity, uncertainty, diversity, market values	Globalisation, decline of the national state, post-Fordism, neoliberalism

Source: Delanty (2002: 33)

Delanty's (2002) review of developments in higher education and the relation to changes in society allow a historical lens to be held up to the current situation and may be of assistance in developing an understanding of how universities are *perceived* and how they interact with society. Often perceptions of the ideals of the university refer to the Humboltian model, a model that according to Delanty (2002) ceased to exist past the late nineteenth century. Foundations in the Humboltian model have allowed the university system to introduce the civic, mass and virtual systems at the same time as some academics continue to adhere to the idea of a university free from external influence (state, market) to investigate and research for the public good and teach students accordingly. In order to fully appreciate what a university is for, Välimaa and Hoffman (2008: 280) ask the question: what are the main roles of higher education in civic society? Highlighting the key roles universities play in the development and maintenance of the knowledge society may help answer questions about the purpose of the university. Schlesinger (2013) argues that universities and academics play a key role in the development of public policy, as they can offer a 'disinterested' contribution to debates as persons or institutions not directly or indirectly benefiting from the outcomes of policy decisions.

The relationship between universities and society has been explored by focusing on the social role of higher education (Trow, 1974). In the UK's Dearing Report (1997) many of the social responsibilities of higher education stress the cultivation of civic qualities

that will enable a democratic and civilized society. Civic qualities would include a greater awareness of socio-political context and a well-informed citizenry, who would make better voting choices, participate fully in politics and, subsequently, hold government more accountable. Also universities are expected to contribute to the cultural development of societies that includes the generation of shared experiences and knowledge. This suggests that universities are expected to mediate and continue critical dialogue within societies. This is one of the traditional roles for intellectuals (Jacoby, 1987; Sadri, 1992). For higher education, one of the obvious challenges, following Bourdieu (1988; 2004), is the analysis of the processes through which and by whom knowledge is mediated in civil societies. Schlesinger states that:

> The normative model of autonomous intellectuality – the ideal of freedom of thought – is in increasing tension with the dominant system- and market-driven model of the knowledge class. The first model (that of freedom) is increasingly being displaced by the second (that of necessity). Indeed, the demands of necessity have become normative: they're settled in our very bones. (Schlesinger, 2013: 34)

The way knowledge is created, shared, and now increasingly audited, within the higher education sector is an area of keen contestation within the academy and the university management structures. The rise of the enterprise agenda in traditional universities shows us how far the market driven model has become the norm across the whole HE sector.

However, the identification of the social roles of higher education and how universities contribute to culture only tells part of the story. The higher education system has various relations with the economy and employers that impact on how we characterise the purpose of the university. There is a rhetorical link between higher education and economic growth and development, for example and Sadlak (1998: 101) states that 'according to data from the work bank, there is a clear correlation between the level of participation in HE and economic development'. The identification of these links has resulted in more attention from state bodies and a pushing of the higher education system up the political agenda. Differing, increasingly powerful discourses place economic and business concerns as the chief guiding light for reform in the higher education sector in the UK. Conflicting discourses around the role higher education plays in society is not unusual as the purpose of the education offered at universities is (and always has been) contested (these discourses within political discourse are

discussed in section 2.3). Before outlining higher education policy and governance in the UK, section 2.2 will briefly tell the part of this story that relates directly to the equation of education with credentials or training and the rise of the education commodity.

2.2 Education as credentials, training and a commodity

As noted above, scholars have attempted to theorise and document a perceived transformation in higher education. The current situation is perceived by Wolf (2002) as being new (and worse). Wolf (2002) argues that all levels of education are now an industrial enterprise and that in the contemporary context in the UK 'old fashioned scholarship figures almost nowhere' (x). Often the demise of the Humboltian model is correlated to a rise in liberal capitalism and trends found in the UK mirror those in the US and elsewhere. The commercialisation of higher education has been critiqued readily in the American academy, the overwhelming negativity of which some commentators find frustrating (see for example, Maher and Tetreault, 2008). To counter this tendency to view current developments as new and for the worse, some commentators provide a historical view that highlights continuation of existing phenomena. Aronowitz (2000) identifies the university-corporate complex c.1900 in the US. The relationship universities have to the economy and to employers and businesses impacts upon the students they enrol, the type of programmes they offer and the curriculum content. Higher education is increasingly seen as a hurdle that is necessary to jump in order to secure desirable employment, or a way to acquire knowledge and experience that is directly associated to employment, rather than the opportunity for developing knowledge more generally. This is how university education is conceptualised as a credential to be obtained (or bought) or as training for the world of work.

Because of its relationship to employment, training can be understood to be education that meets the needs of the market (Brabazon, 2002), therefore the disciplinary focus that students choose and the curriculum content itself are in some way defined outside of the academy. Noble (2002) argues that education is distinct from training in that training is operational information required for others' use, whilst education is the opposite – knowledge for the self. Applying this definition, we can see that when higher education is closely tied to employer requirements and students are completing their programmes in order to acquire the credentials required for their desired job, then much of what universities now offer is training rather than education. The melding of education and

training has been extended to also include postgraduate education, as the department for Business, Skills and Innovation states: ‘making postgraduate provision more responsive to employer needs and encouraging more people to train to postgraduate level will ensure that the UK has the higher level skills needed to succeed in a global knowledge economy’ (BIS, 2009: 4). The concept of education as training has implications for how universities see themselves. Francis (1999: 245) states that ‘corporations train […] universities educate’. If universities train students, then the distinction between universities and other sites of instruction become blurred. Aronowitz (2000) argues that US higher education is about offering training and skills for professional careers, and should be thought of as ‘post secondary’ rather than ‘higher’ education and that the function of the college is to ‘export credentialed workers’ (Aronowitz, 2000: 8). In this regard higher education can be conceived as a ‘sorting’ mechanism for employers (Wolf, 2002).

Student perceptions of this aspect are to a certain extent at odds with those from within the academy who criticise the assimilation of the ‘training’ and ‘credential’ discourses into higher education. In the literature, this is usually characterised by working-class or working students who have a pragmatic understanding of the purpose of higher education. Aronowitz (2000) notes with regard to working students that ‘under the circumstances, they simply don’t have the time to consider learning as anything more than the rituals necessary for obtaining credentials’ (Aronowitz, 2000: 160). Similarly, the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) found that, ‘in contrast with the more traditional view of the nature and purpose of higher education, the experience of MEG [Mixed Economy Group] colleges suggests that college-based learners may be more motivated by the prospect of a job or advancement in employment rather than the intrinsic value of study’ (CIHE, 2008: 19)[3]. Furthermore, close alignment to employer requirements is now used by universities to attract students to programmes on offer. Of course not all students follow the utilitarian approach to higher education and there are concerns voiced by students and academics against this trend (for example, the Campaign for the Public University [see section 3.4], support for the arts and humanities).

[3] Mixed Economy Group colleges are Further Education colleges providing Higher Education programmes.

The link between the types of education that higher education institutions offer and the needs of the economy and employers is of increasing political importance. Peter Mandelson, in an introduction to a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills report, states that the 'skills system needs to mesh with the university system' (BIS, Nov 2009). The report goes on to speak of the need for a 'technician class', not only highly skilled but skilled in the 'right' areas (mapped onto the economy). The report highlights the need for apprenticeships in response to business demands. Further, 'through the new skills accounts, we want learners to become well informed, active consumers who drive improvements in colleges and training institutions' (BIS, Nov 2009: 13). The ideas that bottom-up influence can improve education (consumer power) and highlighting the 'right' skills to match the economic need fit neatly into the education-as-commodity model. There are questions that need to be raised about how this model actually plays out in society. For example, it is argued that higher education must fit into the requirements and needs of existing workplaces but, if working life is changing dramatically, is this desirable or even possible? (Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008).

It is also important to briefly highlight some of the effects of the higher education as training/credentials model. This model ultimately reduces university education to a commodity to be bought and exchanged in the marketplace. In order for markets in education to work properly it is necessary for a certain amount of information about the products on offer to be made available so that potential customers can make an informed choice. Brabazon (2002) associates the consumer model of education with the increasing importance of league tables and the standardization of content. League tables allow potential students and potential employers to differentiate (programmes, job applicants) according to set criteria, making decisions about which university to attend, or which applicant to hire, according to culturally-agreed rankings. The publication of Key Information Sets (KIS) may also be considered as an indication of the desire to produce equitable information across courses that focus upon a construction of the student as consumer of a product (the credential for exchange in the workplace) rather than a student of higher education: Universities are required to collate and share on their websites fifteen pieces of information ranging from student views on quality of the course, resources, feedback, salary and destination of graduates, tuition fees, accommodation costs, 'contact' hours per week and assessment methods, though, detailed information on programme content is absent (Barnard et al., 2013). Further, the

standardization of content makes it easier for students/employers to 'know the product' and employers can more easily make comparisons by academic achievement between students who, for instance, studied civil engineering at two different universities. Other effects of the education as commodity model include, the inflation of degree marks due to the changing relationship between the university and student (customer), which in turn leads to a devaluation of university degrees (Levidow, 2002) and the subordination of the humanities and arts to science and technology disciplines.

2.3 Higher Education Policy and Governance

2.3.1 Historical review

This section will provide a brief overview of key activities in policy and governance in the UK with regard to Higher Education over the last twenty-five years.[4] Prior to the early 1990s it may be said that, excluding cursory government intervention in the business of 'Oxbridge' (Oxford University and Cambridge University), there was little attention given to higher education policy in the UK. The attention for the most part of the twentieth century was on school education. However, the 1980s and 1990s Conservative governments' treatment of education policy, in general following a marketization ideology, paved the way for reform in higher education towards the end of the twentieth century. In particular it has been noted that there was a centralising tendency in government policy on higher education that continued through the 1990s (Middleton, 2000) and beyond. The details of the higher education policies listed below will be discussed in section 2.3.5.

- 1992 Further and Higher Education Act: removed FE and sixth form colleges from LEA control and established Further Education Funding Councils (FEFCs), unified the funding of higher education under the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs), introduced competition for funding between institutions, abolished the Council for National Academic Awards. Introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)
- 1996 Education (Student Loans) Act 1996: extended the provision of student loans.
- 1997 Dearing Report: review of higher education.
- 1998 Education (Student Loans) Act 1998 transferred provision of student loans to the private sector.

[4] A key source for this section has been Gillard (2012).

- 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998: established the General Teaching Council (GTC), abolished student maintenance grants and required students to contribute towards tuition fees.
- 2001 DfES: the education department was renamed the Department for Education and Skills. The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) is published (QAA, 2008).
- 2002-3 Major review of Research Assessment
- 2004 Higher Education Act 2004: allowed universities to charge variable top-up fees.
- 2007 Education department split in two: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, Ed Balls), and Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS, John Denham).
- 2009 DIUS abolished after just two years: responsibilities transferred to new Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).
- 2009 A New Framework for Higher Education (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills): set out ten to fifteen year strategy.
- 2010 Browne Report Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education.
- 2011 Students at the Heart of the System (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills).
- 2013 International education strategy: global growth and prosperity policy document published. Also the UK government made some changes in relation to the role HEFCE plays in developing a register of HE providers, which operates within the existing legislation.

2.3.2 Description of current structure

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) allocates public money for teaching and research to universities and colleges. HEFCE was set up as a 'non-departmental public body' in 1992. As a non-departmental public body, HEFCE has some autonomy from Government but the framework in which the organisation works is set by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills. In 2010-11 the body allocated £7.4 billion to 253 different universities and colleges to support education, research and related activities, usually as 'block grants' which HEIs can decide how to spend themselves (within the constraints of the grant agreements). The Government chooses the total amount of funds that are to be distributed each year. In 2010-2011, 63 per cent of the funds were allocated to teaching (£4,675million) and 22 per cent to research (£1,603million), the remaining monies were distributed to innovation, special funding, capital and other initiatives not included in the above. According to the HEFCE website and promotional material, their five core strategic aims are concerned with: widening participation and fair access; learning and teaching; research; employer engagement and skills; and the contribution of higher education to our economy and society. Two further strategies include that they aim to: sustain a high quality higher

education sector and to operate at the highest organisational level. HEFCE along with the other UK funding bodies has a contract with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to investigate and ensure quality teaching in higher education.

Funds for higher education in Scotland and Wales are allocated by their own funding bodies: the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). There is no funding council for Northern Ireland, instead universities and higher education institutions are funded directly by the Department of Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI). SFC is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) of the Scottish Government and was established on 3 October 2005. The Council replaced the former Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and brought together funding and support for Scotland's colleges and universities under one body. HEFCW is funded by the Welsh Government to distribute funding for higher education in Wales. HEFCW was established by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. SFC and HEFCW operate have adopted a similar to HEFCE, whereas the DELNI funds HEIs in Northern Ireland directly and has responsibilities for other areas related to the economy, employment and business.

Together with the other UK funding bodies outlined above, HEFCE have assessed the quality of research in higher education by carrying out a periodic Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1992, 1996, 2002 and 2008. The Research Assessment Exercise was a peer review exercise to evaluate the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. This assessment informed the selective distribution of funds by the UK higher education funding bodies. A major review of research assessment took place in 2002-03, resulting in the Roberts Report of 2003. Concerns outlined in the report include: effect of the RAE upon the financial sustainability of research; an increased risk of HEIs' games-playing; administrative burden; the need to properly recognise collaborations and partnerships across institutions and with organisations outside HE; the need to fully recognise all aspects of excellence in research; ability to recognise, or at least not discourage, enterprise activities; concern over the disciplinary basis of the RAE and its effects upon interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity; and lack of discrimination in the current rating system, especially at the top end with a ceiling effect (Roberts, 2003). Some of these concerns continued to be debated during the following RAE (in

2008) and in the development of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The Roberts Report highlights the importance of expert peer review; the need for a clear link between assessment outcomes and funding; the need for greater transparency, especially in panel selection; the need to consider carefully the trade-off between comparability of grades and the flexibility for assessors to develop methods appropriate to their subject; the need for a continuous rating scale; the need for properly resourced administration of the RAE; and consistency of practice across panels.

The RAE has faced a variety of criticisms over the years. The results of the latest Research Assessment Exercise were published at the end of 2008, amid accusations of institutional 'game playing' (The Guardian, 2008). HEFCE's linkage of 'outputs' to funding (Middleton, 2000) means that universities tailor their activities according to the funding strategy, in some cases sourcing staff mainly on their attractiveness for the RAE. Other criticisms include the fact that it excludes researchers, explaining that they are 'not eligible to be listed as research active staff' (RAE 2008 Guidelines). Publications by research assistants/associates or other research active staff who are not 'independent' are omitted from the RAE unless those publications can be credited to a member of staff who is eligible (i.e. academic staff, Principle Investigators), even if the member of staff had little involvement in the writing of the publication.

Following this, a new assessment process has been introduced, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which will be completed in 2014. The exercise will be managed by a team based at HEFCE and overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives of the four UK funding bodies. The main purpose of the REF is to produce assessment outcomes for each institution's submission, which will inform the allocation of research funding to HEIs, with effect from 2015-16. It is envisaged that the REF will deliver accountability for public investment in research and make clear the evidence of the benefits of this investment. A focus on outcomes enables the development of benchmarking information. The new system will use biblio-metrics, in an effort to reduce the vast amount of time universities spend preparing for and carrying out the RAE. In summary:

> The REF is a process of expert review. Recent consultations about reforms to the assessment framework confirmed widespread confidence in discipline-based expert review founded upon expert judgement. To maintain confidence in the assessment process and in the credibility of the outcomes to those being assessed,

> we have appointed panels of experts who are currently or have recently been active in high quality research, or its wider use. While these experts will draw on appropriate quantitative indicators to support their professional judgement, expert review remains paramount. (REF, 2011: 5)

The REF will look at outcomes (65 per cent) pertaining to their 'originality, significance and rigour', impacts (20 per cent) with regard to 'reach and significance', and environment (15 per cent) in relation to 'vitality and sustainability'.

Governance of UK higher education includes the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which was established in 1997 as a safeguard for higher education. The QAA's main aim is to 'uphold quality and standards in UK universities and colleges' (QAA, 2012). QAA is an independent body with a charity status that is funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies. The QAA carries out institutional reviews that 'involve[s] a thorough evaluation of the institution's educational provision and result[s] in a published report that makes judgements and recommendations about academic standards and quality, as well as highlighting good practice' (QAA, 2012). The core aim of Institutional Review (England and Northern Ireland) is to examine whether universities and higher education institutions (1) provide higher education qualifications of an appropriate academic standard and a student experience of acceptable quality; and (2) exercise their legal powers to award degrees (where relevant) in a proper manner. The review team makes judgements on how the institution; sets and maintains threshold academic standards; manages the quality of students' learning opportunities; enhances its educational provision; and manages the quality of its public information (from 2012-13). Each higher education institution in England and Northern Ireland will take part in Institutional Review approximately once every six years. Reports for each institution are published on the QAA website. The QAA has no remit or powers to become involved with individual complaints by staff or students, or any other personal grievances against higher education providers. However, the QAA report to the four funding councils, outlining the findings of their assessments and, as the funding councils' remit includes responsibility for ensuring quality in the HEIs they fund, they 'reserve the right to withdraw funding where shortcomings are not adequately addressed' (UUK, 2012). There are on-going debates within the HE sector and the governance outlined above about how intrusive assessment should be, and what should be assessed. In the *Times*

Higher Education it has been suggested that the QAA should focus its attention on new providers or ones where there have been complaints (Times Higher Education, 2011).

The QAA have different levels of audit they do with institutions that provide higher education programmes depending on the type of institution. The audit conducted for most traditional HEIs is the Institutional Review (this was preceded by the Institutional Audit that ran between 2002 and 2011 and will be replaced by the Higher Education Review in 2013), which involves a detailed evaluation of the institution's educational provision, including the maintenance of academic standards; the quality of the learning opportunities for students; enhancement, which refers to the systematic improvement of learning; and the quality of public information. From 2012, the Institutional Review includes a review of how institutions with degree-awarding powers maintain the standards of their awards delivered by collaborative partners (until 2011 there was a separate report called the Audit of Collaborative Provision). Results of the Institutional Review are published in a report that makes judgements and recommendations about academic standards and quality, as well as highlighting good practice (QAA, 2012). There are also specific reviews for the provision of HE in Further Education (FE) colleges, the main one in England being the Review of College Higher Education (this was preceded by the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review between 2002 and 2011, which is still in place in Northern Ireland, and will be replaced by the Higher Education Review in 2013); in Wales this is the Development and Summative Review. The reviews performed for HE in FE have the same core foci as those conducted in HEIs outlined above. Educational Oversight Reviews are the method by which private providers of HE gain Highly Trusted Sponsor Status (HTSS) which is recognised by the UK Borders Agency (UKBA). HTSS is required in order to be able to recruit and sponsor international students’ visas. These reviews are performed annually.

Public money for research is also available from the Research Councils, which are UK wide. There are seven Research Councils, organised by discipline: Arts and Humanities Research Council; Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council; Economic and Social Research Council; Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council; Medical Research Council; Natural Environment Research Council; Science and Technology Facilities Council. The Research Councils' funding forms part of the dual

support system for research funding. The Research Councils provide funding for specific projects.

Performance indicators on the nature and performance of higher education in the UK are published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Data on key performance indicators cover widening participation indicators; non-continuation rates; module completion rates; research output and employment of graduates amongst others. The generation of comparable data develops a benchmarking process that can be applied to the HEI, to academics and to students themselves. Indeed, Middleton (2000) describes how benchmarking will focus on qualities and attributes of graduates and how this may impact on recruitment and curriculum innovation. We can see that performance indicators resulting from the activities of the QAA, RAE/REF and HESA are a key site of contention within the higher education policy discourse and governance arena. For example, it has been reported in the *Guardian* newspaper that 'the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HSA) was forced to abandon collecting data that would have highlighted universities' attempts to conceal staff in the RAE after confusion between the definitions used by Hesa and Hefce to describe who was eligible' (The Guardian, 2008). This example demonstrates how governance of HE and the benchmarking agenda is carefully managed in order to maintain established (though sometimes fraught) relationships between the HE sector and government.

Academics find themselves under closer scrutiny than ever before. The focus on outcomes (QAA, 1998; Middleton, 2000) and the standardisation of learning and teaching, where the 'national qualifications framework [is] linked to subject benchmark information defining appropriate standards within broad disciplinary areas, and institutionally generated but nationally consistent programme specifications' (Middleton, 2000: 541-2) has been criticised as an extension of government monitoring into micro-policy areas impacting on the content and style of higher education (Middleton, 2000). The standardisation agenda is underlined in the European context within the Bologna Process, which has been developed by the European Higher Education Area. Further, there are clear messages being sent from government to the HE sector about the relationship between Universities and state, as it is argued that 'performance indicators are firmly established as a tool of strategic state-managerial control and the assumption is that, if universities fail to provide public assurance of quality and standards, more

stringent government intervention can be expected' (Middleton, 2000: 542). As was noted in Chapter 1, it seems that trends towards marketization and privatisation of higher education are occurring alongside greater government scrutiny and bureaucratic control.

2.3.3 University status and degree awarding powers

The UK Government controls entry into the HE market by granting the power to award degrees and allowing an institution to use the title 'university'. These are important safeguards of standards and both the title of 'university' and degree-awarding powers are protected under law. Historically, in order to be able to award a recognised higher education degree in the UK, an organisation needs to be authorised to do so either by Royal Charter or Act of Parliament. There is stricter regulation in the UK and Australia than the US on the 'university' title. However, there are discussions going on at present to look to ease the regulations on the 'university' status, which are closely tied to wider debates about HE reform in the UK.

There have been moves internationally towards attempting to develop a global regulation and governance regime for higher education as it becomes increasingly 'borderless', whether that be through the movements of people or the education service across national borders. Larsen et al.'s (2002: 15-16) study on trade in educational services identified four major policy issues: (1) The absence of an International Framework of Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education; (2) The impact of e-learning providers on the established higher education market; (3) The regulation of foreign providers of post-secondary education; and (4) Intellectual property rights of learning material. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has also expressed concerns about the increasingly commercial nature of cross-border education and states the need for a global definition of quality (OECD, 2008). This seems a reasonable response, particularly when taking into account the various interested parties that may seek to exploit the business opportunities made available in a changing higher education market. The implementation of regulation and governance across borders extends ideas expressed within national boundaries that makes standardisation necessary for credit accumulation and transfer; however, there is the question of whether there can, or should be global regulation on this matter. At the moment there is the continued need for nation-state power on the accreditation of degrees.

Currently in England and Wales, providing the applicant institution meets particular thresholds relating to the number of enrolled full-time students, it is now possible for an organisation to have approved university title without first having its own research degrees. In Scotland and Northern Ireland an applicant institution has to secure both taught and research degree-awarding powers before it is able to apply for university title. A HEI that has taught-degree-awarding powers under the criteria outlined in 2004 can apply for university title. Up until recently, to do so it must establish 'the principles for good governance in the sector' (BIS, 2011: 52-3) and have at least 4,000 full-time higher education students, of which 3,000 are studying for a degree: recent rule changes have reduced this threshold to 1,000 full-time HE students. An HEI that does not meet the required student numbers outlined above for 'university' title may be qualified for the 'university college' title via the same process.

The current system is under reform due to criticisms about it stifling the inception of new higher education providers:

> [O]ur current regulatory system was designed with the three or four year undergraduate degree in mind. It works by observing and judging the governance, academic management, standard setting, quality assurance and pedagogical processes. It has been effective in maintaining standards and delivering confidence in English higher education abroad, but it is complicated, lacks transparency and can be slow. It can also inhibit new types of provider, who may not fit with the assumed model, from entering the sector. (BIS, 2011: 51)

Hence, there is the political desire to reform the HE sector to address these concerns. Higher education reform is based upon political ideology that perceives privatisation as the answer to problems in the public sector and public finances. The first sticking point in this debate centres on the legislation of university status and degree-awarding powers. Thus, we can see that discourses around systemic change must include reform of the legal system that underpins the HE sector. As the Council for Industry and Higher Education highlight: 'recent steps to engender a more demand responsive system include: (…) enabling private sector providers (including for-profit organisations) to have Degree Awarding Powers with the prospect that they might also be given university status in the future' (CIHE, 2008: 18). While powers continue to be granted indefinitely to publicly-funded higher education institutions in all parts of the UK, in England and Wales taught-degree-awarding powers were from September 2004 only be

granted on a six-yearly renewable basis to privately-funded organisations. The renewal of powers to privately-funded organisations is subject to a successful audit by QAA (QAA, 2012). In 2011, the political will to reform the legal process of gaining university status is evident:

> We will make it easier for new providers to enter the sector. We will simplify the regime for obtaining and renewing degree-awarding powers so that it is proportionate in all cases. We will review the use of the title 'university' so there are no artificial barriers against smaller institutions. (BIS, 2011: 5)

However, more recently, the process appears to be stalling. Reports in the press speculate that the government is toning down its championing of private providers in the UK HE sector. At the end of January 2012 the *Times Higher Education* reported that the expected higher education bill, which was planned to make it easier for private companies to become higher education providers, was delayed (THE, 2012a). The article goes on to point out that the delay may not represent as much of a blow to privatisation plans as critics desire as 'Mr Burns warns that it may allow the government to avoid much-needed parliamentary scrutiny, and private providers may actually welcome the halt, which would enable them to continue to expand and draw on student loans without a cap on numbers' (THE, 2012). Despite setbacks to the bill, this complex issue will continue to receive attention from politicians and the HE sector, as how these issues are resolved will have an impact on the future landscape of higher education in the UK.

2.3.4 Approaches to policy

Broadly we can see that the reforms to higher education outlined in the policy documents above adopt particular approaches to understanding the issues higher education faces and the ways in which government can respond. The consistency and depth of these approaches may be highlighted as areas for scrutiny, especially in such a complex field as higher education policy. Middleton (2000) offers an astute analysis of recent political discourses on higher education in the UK that enables a greater understanding of the complexity of policy discourse. The particular values that underpin state intervention in the business of higher education are linked to those of industry and business; industrialisation and managerialist discourse is evident in policy documents. These values are not just the packaging of policy but directly form the foundation of many initiatives of reform, particularly around teaching and learning. As Middleton (2000) states:

> These ‘Fordist’ principles are allied to ‘new managerialist’ strategies designed to foster a ‘culture of commitment’ enlisting academic support for the government’s quality and employability agendas through such initiatives as Enterprise in Higher Education, the Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTI), the Technology in Learning and Teaching Programme (TLTP) and the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL). (542)

Reform of teaching and curriculum is underlined by ideas about educational utility, relating higher education to the requirements of employers and the knowledge economy, and government values impact upon the way universities are funded, how universities see themselves and how society perceives the purpose of higher education.

Successive UK governments are not just using marketisation discourse and ideas to change the sector but plan to intervene in higher education via the market. A model of the market as an instrument of state policy is developed by Middleton (2000): ‘there is no suggestion here that the powers of the state have been reduced. “Steering” implies intervention in matters of substance’ (548). Thus, applying market principles to the sector has resulted in a quasi-market in higher education in the UK, where we can see evidence of centralisation and marketization in policy discourse. The translation of higher education into a commodity to be bought and sold in the market is found in recent discourses on tuition fees that are based on individualism and the student-consumer. Economic concerns about how universities fund themselves and about how students should pay for the education they receive as individuals have led to policy decisions based upon ideas about the individual student-consumer’s relationship to the educational product, rather than pure necessity. As Middleton states in reference to the funding strategies in the UK: ‘… the policy is not entirely driven by Treasury concerns […] the Dearing Committee, according to one its members, recommended student fees as a matter of educational principle rather than as one of financial expediency’ (Middleton, 2000: 544). The principle relates to the idea that those (individuals) who directly benefit from university education should be the ones who pay for it. Adjustments to the funding framework of recent years have resulted in tuition fee rises from £1,000 a year in 1998 to £9,000 a year in 2012 for most universities in the UK (The Guardian, 2011b).

The overall impact of these changes is yet to be properly understood; for example, will rising tuition fees push prospective students to studying at universities closer to home? or study part time or at more unconventional institutions, via private providers, or study

online? Research by Zumeta (1992, 1996) suggests that there is a positive statistical relationship between public higher education tuition fee levels and the enrolment share of a (US) state's private sector. This possible trend requires further investigation in the UK context. Relating these aspects to the position of policy, the application of market principles resulting in the current quasi-market raises particular problems; for instance, 'in acknowledging the compelling nature of the evidence for both political centralisation and marketisation, it is forced to interrogate the most basic assumptions regarding the operation of the market and, in particular, the belief that markets invariably promote diversity' (Middleton, 2000: 549). Changes to the funding of students and the promotion of the higher education market may lead to unintended consequences for the diversity and character of the UK HE sector.

Overall, approaches to higher education policy are complex and contradictory. Middleton (2000) gives examples of the diversity of positions on higher education policy:

> In summary, the New Right alliance embraced monetarists whose prime concern was the level of public spending, followers of the Austrian school and public choice theorists intent on minimising the role of government, supply-siders who dwelt on the importance of productivity and entrepreneurialism, and conservative authoritarians. Traces of all these positions can be found in the literature on higher education policy. (Middleton, 2000: 539)

As real policy-making is seldom a simple or consistent activity (Middleton, 2000) it is interesting to see which discourses dominate, how these are translated into policy and what the impacts of policy are on UK higher education.

2.3.5 Higher education policy and the education commodity

What do we mean by education commodity? This matter was touched upon in section 2.3.4, but this section will elaborate on this. The education commodity is linked to consumerist ideology and the development of the higher education market; where individual student-consumers can buy and exchange the qualification in the market-place.

Particular examples of changes in the HE sector reflect the commodification of university education. Middleton (2000) argues that the idea of Individual Learning

Accounts is heavily influenced by a consumerist ideology within a market-led system. These represent ways for the consumer to easily transfer to other education providers or take breaks from education. Higher education providers are urged by government to be more responsive to the consumer, to ensure their curriculum meets particular standards as set by external bodies that regulate the sector, and also meet regional (for the UK this means European) standardisation criteria. Another indicator of commodification is the proposed introduction of standardised information on university programmes. In order for the market order to work at the demand side, more information is required so students can make 'an informed choice'; though this is not necessarily an easy task, as Middleton (2000) notes:

> Quasi-market analysis gives full recognition to the empirical intricacies of state–market relations and, in particular, draws attention both to the importance of information for market efficiency and the problems associated with generating appropriate and valid information in the public sector. (Middleton, 2000: 539)

In 2012 it was made compulsory for UK universities to make available to potential students key information sets (KIS) for all university programmes: which suggests that the character, content and delivery of university degrees may be increasingly used by potential students to differentiate between degree programmes, alongside ranking, location, university facilities, tuition fees, programmes offered and student satisfaction survey results (see HEFCE, 2011; BBC, 2011 for more information). KIS have been developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in order to allow prospective students to access comparable information on full- or part-time courses (HEFCE, 2012a), which, it is argued, enables students to make an informed choice about where and what to study (BBC, 2011). Another key source of information for the education-consumer is the university rankings published by the *Times* and the *Guardian*; both are hugely influential in the choices that students make about where to study in the UK and across the globe.

The focus of indicators in the KIS are on aspects that are quantifiable and comparable, however, information on programme content is not included. Universities are expected to collect and publish on their websites fifteen pieces of information ranging from student views on quality of course, resources, feedback on work, salary and destination of graduates, tuition fees, accommodation costs, direct 'contact' hours per week and

assessment methods. KIS represent a continuation of an emphasis on higher education performance indicators (Barnard et al., 2013).

Higher Education performance indicators have been introduced in the UK for a number of reasons: to hold institutions to account for their activities; to be used by policy makers to inform their budgetary allocations and to assist in their targeting of policy initiatives; to enable potential students to make better-informed HE choices; to allow comparison between institutions; and institutional self-publicity (Pugh et al., 2005: 21, see also HEFCE 2012b). Initially HEFCE performance indicators focused on the informational needs of government, policy makers and the institutions themselves (Pugh et al., 2005: 25) but, now, it is possible to see a shift in emphasis towards providing information in relation to decisions about what and where to study. The concept of informed choice is characterised by the development of multiple sources of information for prospective higher education students (of which KIS are but one): careers guidance in schools; university data publication and the publication of league tables; teaching quality audits; national student survey (NSS); Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE survey); two web portals (DirectGov and UNISTATs); and also what may be termed 'private sector brokerage' (Davies, 2012).

The case for the development of information aimed at prospective students emphasise the impact informed choice will make on enhancing quality in higher education. In this discourse there are many assumptions made: it is assumed that it is possible to observe performance; it is assumed that visibility leads to transparency, which then leads to improvement (Strathern, 2000). The possibility that transparency is not only different from but may be at odds with enhancing quality is highlighted by Strathern (2000). Strathern (2000), utilising Tsoukas's (1997) work on the proliferation of audits and league tables, suggests that transparency of information is artificial and may actually conceal more than it reveals. Reasons for this include problems with performance indicators themselves (Strathern, 2000: 314); for example, DLHE data, which informs part of the KIS, has important data missing, small sample sizes and no control groups (Davies, 2012). In addition, indicators that students may view as pivotal in decision making, for example, earnings after graduation, may be an incorrect guide to earnings over a longer period (Davies, 2012) as it takes a snapshot of earnings in a relatively short period following graduation. This and other elements that appear in the KIS are argued

to be misleading and flawed: ‘it does not appear that data on graduate salaries or student satisfaction can, in the majority of cases, provide students with a reliable basis for choice between alternative courses’ (Davies, 2012: 272). Clearly there are issues around the validity and philosophical basis for increasing information that is aimed at prospective students in higher education in the UK, which raises questions about the ways the performance indicator agenda impacts on the choices that students make about where and what subject to study (see Barnard et al., 2013 on student choice in the engineering discipline in the UK).

Some argue that rankings, KIS and others, will rationalise the higher education market in the UK: ‘The published indicators will no longer serve as a substitute for market forces; they become instead the means whereby genuine market choices are made more informed and potentially more rational’ (Middleton, 2000: 547). As noted earlier, the rationalisation of student choice and of the higher education sector more generally may have consequences that alter the character of the higher education landscape. In a discussion of the impact of quality assurance agenda in US higher education on the status of faculty, Finkelstein (2012) states that:

> These voluntary quality assurance mechanisms have shifted accrediting standards in higher education to student outcomes and away from the traditional desiderata of faculty inputs into the educational process, including faculty credentials, achievements and involvement in governance. In effect, our own institutions who are the members of these regional associations have “voted” to recast and, ipso facto, marginalize the faculty role in matters of quality control and assurance. (465)

As marketisation principles are adopted at the same time as governments continue to hold influence over the sector, some negative consequences may be avoided (for example, maintenance of the arts and humanities via government funding is a possibility, though whilst government still has the power to intervene in the market, it may choose not to do so). Taking this into consideration we can see that ‘while competition may enhance the commercial orientation of universities, it does so in an economic environment controlled, or at least significantly influenced by government’ (Middleton, 2000: 541). Hence the continued importance of government discourses on the future of higher education to the sector. The stance governments take, particularly in view of the purpose of the university and linking performance on particular criteria to funding

schemes continues to underline higher education as a commodity. Middleton (2000) outlines this relationship here:

> When the Funding Councils, the QAA or the Department for Employment and Education develop performance indicators or offer financial incentives designed to encourage Higher Education Institutes to pay more attention to 'employability' and 'graduate skills', they are not acting as neutral referees allowing institutions to respond to market demands as and how they find them. They are promoting substantive changes to the academic curriculum whose specifics, in broad outline, are known in advance. (549)

The commodification of higher education is actively encouraged by education policy that drives the sectors towards the market and in government intervention that equates higher education as a commodity for individuals to buy and exchange in the market, and the belief that institutional autonomy can best be preserved by exposing higher education to the discipline of market forces (Barnes, 1999; Middleton, 2000).

Education policies devised in the UK are not generated in a vacuum: the wider context of the global higher education market in global and regional (European) governance regimes also has an impact on UK government strategies. Developments in the UK reflect developments across the globe. The increase in commercial practices of universities also reflects the wider trend of a greater influence of the market throughout society (Bok, 2003) and, as Fuller (2001) suggests, 'knowledge production may be capitalism's final frontier' (Fuller, 2001: 180). Commercialising practices in education can be found in most places and these practices do not necessarily represent completely new modes of education. In the US, for example, there is a long history of commercial higher education. There are also differences in the commodification of different academic disciplines (a point that is discussed further with regard to private higher education, in section 5.3). As Maher and Tetreault (2008: 739) state with regard to the US, 'the world of medicine and pharmacy are more influenced by academic capitalism than the pure sciences or the social sciences'. Therefore, we can understand that it is important to recognise historical, contextual and disciplinary aspects in a discussion of developments in higher education towards commodification.

2.4 Critiques of the commodification of education

There has been much criticism of trends in commodification of education (and of knowledge and information) in the UK and elsewhere for a variety of reasons – for

example, Wolf (2002) critiques the intellectual logic of the knowledge economy. She argues that the political rhetoric of the 'knowledge economy' links education spending to economic growth, ignoring the possibility that 'growth causes education, rather than education causing growth' (Wolf, 2002: 44). The assertion that education causes growth may be understood to form the basis of government interest in the higher education sector in the UK. As we can see from policy documents and discourse, this linkage is unquestioned in policy. Parker and Jary (1995) discuss the changes taking place in higher education, particularly in relation to an increase in managerialism – referring to increasing power and activity in management spheres - and a reduction in the autonomy of professional academics. Part of this trend is the commodification of the products of academic labour and the development of the 'student as consumer'. Fairclough (1993) suggests that the marketisation of discourse evident within HEIs is indicative of the general marketisation of universities. Brabazon (2007) describes how the proliferation of information via the Internet has affected the higher education system negatively – through a fetishisation of information, an emphasis on information accumulation and the investment in technology, rather than increasing understanding via the development of knowledge.

Ritzer's (1998) McDonaldization thesis argues that academia has been subjected to McDonaldization. In this form of employment, it is technology that watches over employees, not managers, and the customer is required to perform tasks that would otherwise need to be completed by paid employees. Examples of this include having to clear your own tables in McDonald's restaurants, to constructing your own furniture bought from Ikea. How does this apply to education? Increasingly, technology allows for functions otherwise performed by educational institutional staff to be completed by students themselves (leaving staff to check and analyse the data), in much the same way as online-form filling by customers reduces particular administration costs for companies. The one-way flow of educational information, via online lectures and teaching materials, requires students to 'teach themselves', thus the 'McUniversity will be far more concerned with reproducing existing knowledge than producing new knowledge' (Ritzer, 1998: 158).

Through the introduction of market forces in academia, the university is a 'credentials mill' and research has become 'intellectual property' (Fuller, 2001: 197). At the same

time it has been argued that there is a lowering of the value of a degree: ‘credentials are a source of real advantage only if not too many people possess them’ (Fuller, 2001: 186). Fuller (2001) goes on to state:

> The bare fact that many benefit from a public good may lower its value for a potential consumer of that good. Thus, there are two ways by which the democratic extension of higher education may erode higher education’s value as a public good: either as larger course enrolments lower the quality of instruction or as larger number of academic degree holders lowers the competitive advantage one receives from the degree. (192)

The rise of the higher education ‘credential’ can be linked to wider trends in commodification as the value attributed to it is a direct outcome of market forces. The melding of education and training in particular disciplines and the predominance of employer requirements in curriculum development may suggest that higher education for students and employers is perceived as a credential system that allows for easy sorting of potential employees from the graduate pool.

This brief summary of some of the critiques in the literature on the commodification of higher education demonstrates the broad nature of the perceived problem. There are, however, problems with the critiques themselves, as Middleton (2000) states:

> While there is general agreement on the increasing immediacy of economic influences on higher education, opinion is sharply divided on whether it is being reconstituted as an instrument of state economic policy, as a private economic activity mediated through an educational market, or as some combination of the two. Yet, at a truly fundamental level, the adherents of these different viewpoints fail to engage with each other. (537-8)

He also goes on to point out that ‘there is compelling evidence both of marketization and of political centralisation in higher education, but that the relationship between these two forces is under-theorised’(Middleton, 2000: 538). The lack of engagement between the various viewpoints and under-theorisation of the relationship between government policy and marketization of higher education require further analysis. The Campaign for the Public University attempts to address some of these concerns as it acts as a meeting point for key actors with an interest in maintaining the public character of UK higher education (see also section 3.4).

3 – Private Higher Education

This chapter will focus on conceptualising private higher education, in the UK and overseas, campus based and also via online provision. In doing so, it will seek to clarify the term 'private higher education' for the purpose of this research, the policy approaches to private higher education and the criticisms of private higher education.

3.1 What is private higher education?

For the purposes of this thesis, private higher education is broadly defined as institutions not dependent on public funds for income via the Higher Education Funding Councils in the UK. Therefore, the term 'public' university refers to those institutions in receipt of public money via HEFCE. This distinction is in line with how other researchers have outlined information about the sector (see for example, Massey and Munro, 2010) and, whilst it is not necessarily a straight forward conceptual classification, due to the particular histories and organisation of the higher education section in the UK, it is for the present a relevant distinction to make. The contract that allows HEIs to receive funding from HEFCE requires universities to carry out particular activities, for example around widening participation and outreach programmes or building relationships in the community in which they are based. Marginson (2007) suggests that the HE sector is not inherently 'public' and can very easily produce private goods. Future developments in the higher education market may reduce the saliency of these concepts: the trajectory of public/private concepts in higher education policy may represent a research project in its own right and, therefore, the thesis will utilise established terminology in the field.

The classification of a private higher education sector is a difficult exercise due to the variances, heterogeneity and changeability of the provision available (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011). It is not easy to identify elements across difference providers that would allow a description of a private higher education sector across the globe. Some countries combine FE and HE provision in the private higher education sector, which can make international comparisons more difficult (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011). The local contexts and histories impact on how the private providers manifest themselves to take advantage of the demand for higher education. For example, in Western Europe, the opportunities for private providers have been limited by the long tradition of publicly-funded higher education 'so the private sector has nibbled away at the edges of the

market offering specialist provision' (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011: 4), whereas in other regions (Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America for instance) private providers have experienced a more 'open field' to match provision to demands for the whole market (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011). This demonstrates that the character of private provision is determined by the national or regional socio-political context and the history of the HE sector.

Work has been done (see Levy 2009; 2011; Levy and Zumeta, 2011) on ways of categorizing private higher education providers globally. One way of looking at the area is by identifying the 'roles' that institutions adopt (such as promoting lifelong learning, or widening access), the mission (religious, non-profit or for-profit), or the ownership arrangements (international businesses, etc.) (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011). In applying this lens to the sector we can highlight that for-profit providers are flourishing across the globe and think about how this mission (to maximise profits) may impact on the type and quality of education offered. Related to how we conceptualise private higher education are the claims that are made about what private providers are trying to do and what the demand is for their services. An in-depth look at private providers may well result in difficulties in placing conceptual boundaries due to heterogeneity and changeability of the sector but, in providing a snap-shot of the current situation, it may be possible to advance understanding of a complex process that will impact on the higher education landscape in the UK.

Marginson (2007) defines a public good in relation to higher education thus: 'Public goods are goods that (1) have a significant element of nonrivalry and/or non-excludability, *and* (2) goods that are made broadly available across populations. Goods without attributes (1) or (2) are private goods' (Marginson 2007: 315, emphasis in original).

An alternative way of conceptualising private provision categorises them as either elite, religious or demand absorbing (Geiger, 1996; Marginson, 1997) or, more recently, identity based (religious/cultural), elite/semi-elite, or demand absorbing (Levy, 2011); more often than not, private higher education providers are considered as 'demand absorbing' (see Levy, 2009; 2011) and this accounts for the largest proportion of

providers. Demand-absorbing private higher education is argued to be directly related to not only demand, but also in how public provision is organised, as Levy states:

> The key is that the supply of higher education, mostly public, though growing, cannot match the surging demand for higher education. Government policy is largely bound by two imperatives – politically it cannot deny the enrollment pressure but financially it cannot accommodate it. Although increased private financing within public institutions is likely to continue, the major solution to the conundrum has been expansion of low-cost private higher education. (Levy, 2011: 389)

Global data on the higher education sector shows that private provision is growing more rapidly than public provision. (The international context of private/public higher education will be elaborated on more fully in section 4.1.). Reasons for this trend are argued to be straightforward, as a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011: 3) state: 'the reasons are simple; governments simply cannot afford to pay for the higher education that is required; thus, the private sector is expanding to meet the demand'. The idea that the private sector is responding to the demand for higher education and is offering a 'like for like' alternative to the education available at 'public' institutions, and is therefore providing a key 'educational service', requires further investigation. Levy (2011) does acknowledge that, whilst identifying demand absorbing to be the main type found, in certain contexts (he notes USA and Japan, but it may also apply in the UK) these providers may more accurately be described as non-elite. Again we can see how the national context influences the operations and character of privatisation in the higher education sector. The complexity of attempts to classify private providers is evident in the literature (see for example, Levy 2011).

A key problem in terms of making classifications of HE providers lies in a blurring of the boundary between 'public' and 'private' in the higher education sector (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011). Funding streams for private and public providers may at closer investigation reveal little differences (certainly, trends in the funding structure for 'public' HEIs are moving away from direct public subsidy) and both types would assert they fulfil public and private objectives – for example, in generating income for the institution, in partnerships with industry, in widening access and delivering an educational service. Further, in turning attention to the private sector in UK higher education it is important to acknowledge that most traditional universities in the UK may

be considered 'private institutions', which is reflected in the OECD categorisation of UK universities[5]. Despite the conceptual problems, it is still possible to classify and investigate private higher education, as is evident in the work of Levy (2009) and others. Keeping these classification issues in mind, it raises the question of what it is that this study is investigating, and why? This study will investigate the acceleration of privatisation in the UK's higher education sector and in particular the activities and discourses of for-profit private higher education providers. A wider objective is to outline the particular character of the UK higher education landscape and relate this to debates about the knowledge and information society theses.

3.2 Policy approaches to private higher education

Broadly, policy approaches with regard to private higher education may follow particular paths, whilst also acknowledging the complex and at times contradictory discourse and the possibility for adopting different approaches at different times and for different reasons. Zumeta (2011), in his paper on state policies and private higher education in the US, recognises definite policy postures: laissez-faire; central planning; and market competitive (summarised in table 5).

Table 5: Policy approaches to private higher education

Posture	Key Characteristic	Relationship to government	Context
Laissez-faire	Hands-off	Government overlooks private providers and leaves the sector largely to its own devices. Only minimal information is collected about the private higher education provision	Relatively small private higher education sector, especially where this sector is dominated by institutions with religious or other principles calling for minimal state involvement
Central Planning	Directive	Government policy seeks to utilise private higher education explicitly to help achieve state policy goals	A combination of a 'strong state' orientation to policymaking in general and a sizeable private sector that could actually make a substantial contribution to state policy goals.
Market Competitive	Student as HE consumer	Dominance of the notion of harnessing a substantial private sector to help achieve state policy goals. Accomplished by little direct regulation but instead signals its policy goals mainly through incentives and other measures to stimulate effective competition.	Large and influential private higher education sector alongside neo-liberal government that adopts privatisation strategies.

Note: derived from Zumeta (2011).

[5] According to the OECD (2009) a private institution is controlled and managed by a nongovernmental organisation or a governing board consisting of members not selected by a public government agency.

In the laissez-faire posture the state tends to overlook the private sector, its potential support of educational policy objectives and 'leaves the sector largely to its own devices' (Zumeta, 2011: 433). In this approach, minimal data is gathered about private provision, it is not party to the national governance of the sector or in the development of policy, and traditional HEIs pay no attention to the activities of private providers. In this approach, Zumeta (2011) suggests that private providers and their students would not receive much, if any, direct government funding. This posture is argued to be most likely to occur where 'there is a relatively small private higher education sector, […] as a small private sector may not seem worthwhile for policymakers to bother with in terms of contributions to state policy goals or, concomitantly, in regard to information or accountability' (Zumeta, 2011: 433). The central planning posture occurs when a government includes a consideration of private providers in its higher education policies and may position private provision as a desirable alternative to public HE that would solve some issues with regard to HE reform. Zumeta (2011) stipulates that in this approach,

> state policy seeks to utilize private higher education explicitly to help achieve state policy goals such as access, degree production, cost effectiveness, technology transfer, etc.[… and] would seek extensive information from private institutions in order to ensure compliance and accountability, approaching the information collection mandated from public institutions. (Zumeta, 2011: 434)

This approach can spring out of a strong state combined with a significant private HE sector. Finally, the market competitive posture aims to utilise private provision to meet demands for higher education but does so in a more indirect way: using the concept of the student/consumer as the main driver for developments in the sector. Zumeta (2011) describes how this manifests itself in policy measures; for example:

> Student aid grants that students could take to their school of choice, as compared to institutional subsidies. To make public–private competition more equal, state policy might well encourage relatively high public institution tuition, […] information and accountability policies would be as much about provision of usable information to the public and consumers of higher education services as about aiding policymaker decisions. (Zumeta, 2011: 435)

A market competitive approach would possibly flourish in national contexts with a significant private higher education sector, as they may have greater political influence

and would like to benefit from policies that open the market up and treat private and public HE providers in similar ways in terms of allowing students to have greater freedoms about where to study.

These postures can be described as fitting onto a passive-active scale, in that the laissez-faire posture is largely passive, whereas central planning and market competitive are indicative of a more active state. Using these postures to analyse government policy and discourse, we can see that approaches to the private higher education may not include a consideration of the private sector at all in the development of higher education policy (laissez-faire) or it may actively engage private providers in order to achieve public policy aims (central planning and to some extent market competitive). Where government policy discourses engage with private provision they are able to adopt either of the more 'active' postures. A central planning approach would submerge the private sectors into the same governance and regulatory structure as that which the public sector is subjected to or, as in the market planning posture, a less directive approach can be adopted that follows the apparatus of the market (in particular with regard to students as consumers) (Zumeta, 2011). Of course, as mentioned above, the complex and contradictory nature of government policy discourse allows to some extent the adoption of any and all of the above postures at any one time. As Zumeta suggests, 'an active state could go more or less distance down each of the latter paths and might even try some ''mixing and matching'' of policies from the central planning and market competitive policy ''tool boxes''' (Zumeta, 2011: 433). The identification of coherent approaches or postures in the event of a 'mixing and matching' of policies may prove to be a rather difficult exercise, but these are outlined here to demonstrate the key ideas that underpin particular approaches and how these may relate to higher education policy discourses.

A focus on policy approaches to and discourses about private higher education in the UK is an important starting point in an investigation of the private higher education sector: as noted above, the political and historical context proves to be greatly influential with regard to the possibilities and limitations of a private subsector. As higher education reform gains momentum, political discourses increasingly refer to privatisation as an inevitable and desirable alternative to strong public funding in the sector. As this discourse has developed and become mainstream, attitudes towards private providers

have altered – from being a questionable alternative to the obvious solution to the problems of higher education (funding, the ability to meet demand, to be able to respond to the needs of the economy). Changes in the political mood towards private provision are a noticeable feature, not only in the UK but across the world and this process of privatisation that has been evident in other spheres of society (for example in health services, transport, utilities) is argued to be of significance in the education sector, as Levy and Zumeta (2011) explain:

> The recent public to private reversal is particularly striking in fields like higher education where the belief was once dominant in much of the world that the subject matter in question was a natural public responsibility and that more than minimal private action was illegitimate; indeed that view remains wider and stronger than one might expect from the evident dimensions of higher education's privatization. (Levy and Zumeta, 2011: 345)

Here they highlight the resilience of the idea of 'public' higher education (see also section 3.4 on the Campaign for the Public University) and how this is at odds with the reality of privatisation in the sector. The apparent acceptance of private provision as a valid and valuable part of the higher education landscape can be identified in discourses generated by key political sites (such as the Council for Industry and Higher Education [CIHE] and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS]). According to the Council for Industry and Higher Education, the UK higher education and learning system includes 'universities, colleges, private sector providers and in-house training provision' (CIHE, 2008: 6), thus private sector providers are just another part of the (more diverse) higher education landscape. Ideas about encouraging diversity and competition in the higher education sector are dominant, particularly in the documents published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (see BIS, 2011); for example:

> We are keen to encourage diversity and competition in the sector so, as a first step, the maximum tuition loan available to first-time undergraduate students studying at designated private institutions will be increased to £6,000 for new students starting courses on or after 1 September 2012. (BIS, 2011: 47)

The opening up of finance for students to study at private providers is part of a 'privatising' phase in the opening up of the UK higher education sector to private interests.

An opening up of the sector to private interests is happening for a myriad of reasons (not least the long term advance of privatisation of all spheres of public life over the last century), but usually related to the idea that the private sector can offer solutions to the problems traditional universities face: meeting demand; efficiency; relationship to industry needs/training; reduction in public funding. It is suggested that private providers are better at developing course materials for students and in offering greater one-to-one and more responsive tuition (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011). It is also asserted that alternative providers offer education that is better tailored to the needs of the market, both in terms of the interests of students and the requirements of industry (BIS, 2011). The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills highlights the concept of private provision being focused, responsive and effective: 'Other alternative providers, including new entrants to the sector, may have different strengths. For example, they may offer particular well-honed teaching models that are especially efficient or cover niche areas.' (BIS, 2011: 46). Zumeta's (1992, 1996) research on policy makers found that they saw private providers as an alternative to public sector institutions offering courses that are costly to deliver (for example, in the sciences, medicine, or engineering).[6] The economic arguments for opening up the higher education market to privatisation and private providers are strong and this goes hand in hand with ideas about competition and cost-efficiency. The context of cost-cutting in public expenditure and strong demand offers good conditions for the advancement of private provision, as Zumeta (2011) explains:

> From a policy perspective, a state facing strong enrollment growth pressures but with limited resources to expand its public institutions might use student aid policy actively to seek to shift some student demand from the public to the private sector, which could well be cost-effective'. (430)

The salience of the economic arguments can be balanced with an empirical investigation of the operations of the private sector, including an evaluation of experiences of students and staff, which is in line with the views of Brennan and Teichler, 2008; Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008 on the development of empirical research in the higher education field.

The need for more empirical data on private providers is linked to the relatively new and peripheral nature of the UK private higher education sector. There is also an absence of

[6] However, the idea that private providers will take on these types of disciplines, especially in cases of for-profits, is uncertain. Analyses performed in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis will address questions about what kind of programmes are offered and taken up by students via these providers.

government data on private provision[7], associated with the lack of regulation the sector faces. Contrasting with institutions in receipt of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) grants, private providers do not have to adhere to regulations regarding access, price and information, which are included as a condition of HEFCE funding (BIS, 2011). Referring to 'demand-absorbing' private higher education providers, Levy (2011: 391) suggests that regulation is necessary, as '[t]he sub-sector is too shoddy to leave to the market, with obvious market failure problems including information asymmetry, and yet fulfil the public trust. Unless obligated to be otherwise, these institutions are notoriously non-transparent and many of them lack quality'. Recent reports by the *Times Higher Education* (2012b) states that the QAA has no knowledge of teaching quality at two thirds of the private institutions to benefit from state-backed, student-loans funding. The lack of information on private providers means that it is not possible to wholly understand the nature of the education provided and that it is necessary for regulation and data to be developed at the same time. In some cases, clamping down on bogus private providers has only been effective via the UK's Border Agency (UKBA) tier 4 status: 'highly trusted sponsor' (HTSS). A recent high profile case of a public institution's removal of HTSS – London Metropolitan University – also demonstrates how UKBA and QAA may enforce sanctions on higher education institutions they believe to be neglecting their responsibility towards international students (outside the EU). However, Levy (2011) goes on to highlight what he perceives as the dangers of regulation: it would stymie competition and would be costly to enforce.

In the US, private higher education is an established part of the higher education landscape. It is more established than in other countries and certainly more so than in the UK. The history and trajectory of recent education policy in the US can potentially offer an interesting comparison for UK policy makers as higher education trends in the UK move more towards the American model. It is important, however, to highlight the variances across the states of America, as is outlined by Zumeta (2011). He found that most states in the US took the 'laissez-faire' policy posture towards for-profit private providers and goes on to question at which point do policy makers move beyond this posture to for-profit providers: is it about the number of students or market share? greater political lobbying of for-profit interests? Zumeta (2011) expects that policy

[7] Recent reports on private higher education (HESA, 2011; BIS, 2013) demonstrate a move towards more government interest in the sector.

approaches to private providers would flow easily from non-profit to for-profit, with a caveat that there 'would be greater state vigilance than has typically been the case on quality assurance and consumer protection' (Zumeta, 2011: 436).

The breadth and growth of private higher education across the world's regions, together with the complexity, diversity and changeability of the sector, highlights the need for national, regional and global governance on public policy for private higher education (Levy and Zumeta, 2011). It is argued by Levy and Zumeta (2011) that public policies (or absence of) have had a major impact on the emergence, growth and nature of private higher education provision. In many countries, enrolment in private providers continues to grow at increasing rates, usually as a result of increasing demand for higher education in a global 'knowledge society', that also has a political climate where public funding has been unavailable or withdrawn from public sector HEIs. The growth of private provision within the various national contexts may reach levels where moving from a passive, laissez-faire approach to an active, central planning/market competitive is unavoidable. As Levy and Zumeta (2011) argue: 'as private provision emerges and grows and touches more of the population and the interests of employers, as well as those of public higher education, governments are impelled to act' (346). In the case of the UK, it is important to document what the situation is at present and how government policy and discourse adopt particular postures towards the development of a private higher education sector in the UK.

Massey and Munro (2010) highlight the following aspects where they consider private providers to be at a disadvantage compared to public institutions: renewal requirements for degree awarding powers that mean private providers have to reapply every six years, whereas public institutions do not need to do this; private providers are excluded from being able to automatically apply for university title; there is lack of clarity about eligibility for student financial support; lack of financial support for part-time students; and VAT rules that mean that VAT is not applied to public higher education but is applied to private higher education.

3.3 Online higher education

A subsector within private higher education that this thesis will also look at is the development of online education within the private sector. The reasons for this are two-

fold: first, the relationship between the information society, which highlights the impact of developments in communications technologies, and knowledge society theses means that the interaction of ICTs and education is a fruitful area for analysis of the empirical manifestation of these theoretical concepts; and, second, private, online higher education forms part of the wider trends in higher education towards privatisation, industrialisation and internationalisation. Sometimes termed the virtual university in the literature, the virtual university has been defined as:

> a) An institution which is involved as a direct provider of learning opportunities to students and is using information and communication technologies to deliver its programmes and courses and provide tuition support […] b) An organization that has been created through alliances/partnerships to facilitate teaching and learning to occur without itself being involved as a direct provider of instruction. (Ryan et al., 2000: 2)

Ryan et al. (2000) also include ‘hybrid’ or ‘dual-mode’ forms, where traditional campus based institutions also offer programmes online. It has been suggested that online learning is characterised by having at least 80 per cent of the course content delivered online. Blended education has between 30 and 80 per cent and Web-facilitated courses between one and 29 per cent of course content online (Allen and Seaman, 2003).

The idea of the virtual university has been used to refer to the variety of changes that are taking place in higher education (Robins and Webster, 2002): from the increasing use of technology in communicating and administrating courses; the globalisation of university brands; internationalisation in students and course content. It is argued that universities will face increasing competition from non-traditional providers (Ryan et al., 2000), these include private providers and online providers. Indicators of expansion in the e-learning market are summarised in various reports (see for example, Allen and Seaman, 2003, 2007, 2011; UNESCO, 2006; White et al., 2010). In Europe, pure online learning and blended learning account for over a quarter of European vocational and continuing professional development user's time in training (Massy et al., 2002). This report identifies an increase from 25 per cent to over 30 per cent e-learning as a share in current expenditure in European training. A study on UK online learning provision carried out by White et al. (2010) found over 2,600 HE-level online and distance learning courses offered by, or on behalf of, UK HE and FE institutions; however, only one third of these are conceptualised by HEIs as being ‘online’ as opposed to ‘distance learning’, the

majority of online programmes offered being of postgraduate level. White et al.'s (2010) study identified 28 commercial providers who work in partnership with HEIs to deliver higher education level online programmes that cover the broad undergraduate/postgraduate market more evenly, though with an overwhelming focus on 'business' discipline (accounting for 60 per cent of HE courses offered). A key problem for research into the field of online higher education provision in the UK is a lack of centrally-collected data – as White et al. (2010) found, enquiries to HESA, the Observatory of Borderless Higher Education and more general searches found no existing publication on online higher education in the UK. As the online education market grows and responds to changes in both demand and supply, the appreciation of what e-learning is and what it can achieve remains contested and typologies of distance education are continually being reformulated, more information is needed on this aspect of development in higher education provision.

In the UK, political discourses on online education draw heavily on the Information Society thesis. The Cooke report (2008) promotes the development of online learning alongside the restructuring of the sector as courses are increasingly delivered by 'non-traditional' providers, such as FE colleges, private entities and large businesses, thus it may be argued that the business model is being integrated both rhetorically and actually at the same time as the progression of communications technology. The linking of technology, progress and corporatisation means that it is difficult to conceptualise how communications technologies may be developed by higher education institutions outside of these parameters. Selwyn (2007) highlights the links between political systems and digital communications (software) manufacturing and dissemination, both hardware and associated skills, using examples of a digital curriculum such as the BBC free online learning resources (mainly aimed at school children) *Curriculum Online* and *Digital Curriculum*. The main point to be made is that political discourses with regard to online learning, whether it is at school level or higher education, are embedded in information society thesis discourse and the opening up of the education sector to private interests.

It is interesting to notice that the opening up of the higher education market is occurring alongside acceleration in progress in communication technologies. Developments in ICTs impact upon the wider context in which universities operate, sometimes leaving traditional HEIs wanting; as Urry (2002) suggests: 'information blizzards leave

universities with their relatively slow-moving curricula and traditions of scholarly work badly placed to compete with new faster-moving competitors in information-producing and handling' (Urry, 2002: 24). The ability (or lack of) of universities to respond adequately to changes in society is one of the key drivers of reform in the sector. The Council for Industry and Higher Education published a sector comparison between the UK and the US. In it, they highlight how the FE and HE sector in the US are more flexible, and in particular how virtual approaches to the acquisition of credits have been developed in response to demands for online or blended learning: 'This flexibility again contrasts with the more rigid approaches in England and suggests we have a long way to go to develop a truly holistic approach to higher level learning' (CIHE, 2008: 8). Here we can see how higher education reform discourse in the UK is tied to the information society thesis: that new ICTs can and should dramatically change (for the better) the processes and outcomes for citizens. Selwyn's (2007) account of the discursive arena on UK education and technology focuses on official policy discourse, media coverage and advertising. He found that the societal benefits of digital learning were positioned within the wider discourses of the information age/knowledge society, usually suggesting digital learning to be inevitable and desirable advancement in education.

As part of the same research Selwyn (2007) analysed the commercial construction of digital learning via a focus on advertising; his research demonstrates a quantitative increase in online learning being advertised between 2001 and 2005. The content of the advertising shows a more frequent focus on 'old' learning than the 'new' experience, and learners were regularly depicted as passive recipients of digital learning. In particular he identified contradictory discourses: 'digital learning is portrayed as a complete reassessment of educational practice but, on the other hand, as a set of benign tools that fit seamlessly into the daily drudgery of the classroom' (Selwyn, 2007: 236). He concludes that the discourses found in his research had an overwhelmingly positive outlook towards technology (Selwyn, 2007).

Despite the predominance of a positive outlook on the development of ICTs and its use in education in political discourse, there have been many voices within academia objecting to the apparent unquestioning assimilation of online learning onto the agenda of HEIs (for example, Brabazon, 2007; Newman, 1999; Noble, 2002). Whilst political discourse may focus upon the opportunity for greater efficiency in online provision,

contrary to this it has been argued that the cost of setting up and maintenance represents ‘a technological tapeworm in the guts of higher education’ (Noble, 2002: 300). Indeed, empirical evidence of the cost savings of online education is lacking. There are also those that question the ability of wholly online provision to replicate that which is available in a traditional campus-based university, going beyond the dissemination of teaching materials. For instance, Newman (1999) brings to the fore the social role of the university and how university education has traditionally provided the opportunity for acquiring cultural capital: ‘the project of a “virtual university” presupposes that the formation of cultural capital can be achieved as effectively (and more cost-effectively) in cyberspace as it can in the “real university”’ (Newman, 1999: 82). Here, Newman is highlighting how university education goes beyond a simple transmission of information and is suggesting that, for a virtual university to be a university at all, the formation of cultural capital must be taken into account. Newman (1999) also argues that there are problems with regard to the reality of higher education, particularly in the sciences and technological subjects: ‘the project of virtualising higher education exhibits a naïve empiricism which ignores the role of apprenticeship and implicit, craft knowledge in the generation of technical progress and scientific discovery’ (Newman, 1999: 80). The difficulties in incorporating all academic disciplines onto online platforms is evident in the focus of disciplines in online provision, mainly within Business and Law, found by White et al. (2010). More broadly, in a critique of Tiffin and Rajasingham’s (2003) elaboration on the global virtual university of the future, Brabazon (2007: 213) argues that ‘their new educational institution may be global, it may be virtual, but it is not a university’, referring to the wider purpose of the university and ideas about what a university is. We can see from the critiques outlined above that the development of online provision cuts into the heart of debates about the purpose of higher education and its relationship to society.

3.4 Debates around private higher education in the UK and the Campaign for the Public University

Private providers and their proponents claim that they are well placed to overcome perceived problems in the public sector, particularly in a climate of decreasing state support for higher education (see for example, Barber et al., 2013 - a report from the Institute for Public Policy Research). There are assertions made about the efficiency of the business models adopted in HEIs in that the private sector is said to provide higher

education at a lower cost as they can rely more heavily on casual or part-time teaching staff, and operate without the levels of overheads that exist in the traditional university sector due to the very narrow focus of the institutions on teaching (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011 - a report from the Higher Education Policy Institute). Private providers and their representatives also claim that they are able to meet the demand for higher education for working adults and they can increase access via flexible modes of study and two-year degree programmes. Kinser (2009) describes this as 'new access paths': 'These access paths can be the result of the sector's demand absorbing function within the system, offering second-choice options to students who would prefer the public sector if it had the interest or was prepared to serve them' (Kinser, 2009: 2). Middlehurst and Fielden (2011) outline some positive views of private providers in relation to the student experience; 'Students are also reported to be well-served by curricula that are largely vocational and focused on the professions, that draw in practitioners as teachers, that are closely integrated with industry sectors and that are designed to fit the needs of employers and employees' (9).

Economic and neo-liberal views of higher education emphasis individual benefits over and above collective benefits and place market solutions at the forefront of developments in the sector; this leads to a marginalisation of possibilities for public goods (Marginson, 2007, see also, Pusser, 2002). As with the critiques of the virtual university, criticisms of private higher education are closely tied to particular ideas about what a university is for (as outlined in section 2.1) and ideas about what should be 'public' in higher education. A broad criticism of private higher education is about how the university offers public benefits and that sites of HE actively constitute the public sphere itself. As the university is argued to be so important to the development (cultural, economic etc.) of society, it is felt that it should not be placed in the market as if it were simply another commodity (Campaign for the Public University, 2011).

Some critics (for example, the Campaign for the Public University, 2011) respond to the advocates of private higher education who offer privatisation as a solution to perceived problems in the HE system. Privatisation is put forward by a report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (Barber et al., 2013) as being more flexible, responsive, efficient, and best able to react to the needs of society (= the economy). Criticisms of private higher education question perceptions of the problems of higher education in the first

place and also question the ability of the private sector to address these problems in a way that does not erode the quality and character of the UK higher education landscape. For example, Olssen et al. (2004) highlight the possibility of negative effects of competitive neutrality in the higher education market that 'result in the private sector siphoning off educational areas that are easily marketed' (Olssen et al., 2004: 188), which is also highlighted by Middlehurst and Fielden (2011: 10), as private providers will focus on developing programmes they see as increasing student numbers. Therefore, the demand side of higher education is focused on, whereas the higher education sector as a whole focuses on supply (varying programmes in disciplines with research activity) as well as demand. Middlehurst and Fielden (2011) are worried about the consequences of a rise in private provision for the health of the whole HE sector:

> If the private providers continue to focus their offerings principally on business and other popular subjects, there is a risk that, as in the USA, this will divert students from the publicly funded institutions. Since these subjects are usually those where the best surpluses can be made, this will in time deprive publicly-funded institutions of the ability to cross-subsidise their less popular courses. The effect of this will be less choice for students. (26)

Therefore, the apparent development of 'greater choice' in the HE sector may result in less choice in the long run. The implications of private sector activity for the traditional HE sector is not yet played out in the UK context, particularly as the traditional universities in the UK have such a large share of the student market.

Kinser's (2006a) analysis of the for-profit sector in the US highlights some key areas of concern about how they operate: for-profits make excessive profits from the delivery of higher education; they are maintained by a business model that relies on the fact that almost all their students are entitled to federal government grants/loans; they may well be encouraging poorer students who cannot afford it to take up loans, as the Cohort Default Rates (CDR) for for-profits as a whole is 21 per cent compared with the equivalent of 9.7 per cent in the public sector and 6.5 per cent for all of the private sector; completion rates demonstrate a high level of drop-outs; the state sector could offer a better quality of education, if funded to do so; they 'cherry pick' profitable programmes which cannot then be offered by publicly-funded colleges, thus denying them the benefit of cross-subsidy to less popular programmes (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011).

In the UK, an Early Day Motion 1999 tabled on the 26th June 2011 stated:

> That this House is concerned by the possible expansion of for-profit providers in the higher education sector; is further concerned that the world-class teaching and research of the UK's higher education sector could be threatened by new for-profit providers; encourages Ministers to consider the Diverse Provision in Higher Education report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England; urges them to note the report's conclusion that the risks associated with expanding the role of for-profit providers `may amount to a reputational risk for UK higher education'; notes that for-profit providers in the US typically have a lower graduation rate than non-profit higher education institutions; further notes that US education authorities are investigating the recruitment and admissions practices of a number of for-profit universities, including the University of Phoenix, which is owned by the Apollo Group that also owns BPP which was granted private university college status in the UK last year; is further concerned that for-profit providers could cherry-pick the most popular and profitable courses; further notes that for-profit private providers are not required to submit enrolment data to the Government, and are not subject to the same staff employment contract obligations as existing universities; and calls on the Government to protect the quality and reputation of UK higher education. (Parliament UK, 2011b)

Related to criticisms of private higher education is a reassertion of the importance of higher education and the social roles it carries out, particularly as universities can offer a site for resistance to marketisation and commercialisation. Marginson (2006) is concerned as to why universities have seemingly been complicit in commercialisation. In order to address the reassertion of the public character of the university and offer a site of resistance to privatisation there have been campaigns organised: in particular, the Campaign for the Public University.

The UK Campaign for the Public University was initiated by two British academics, John Holmwood (University of Nottingham) and Gurminder K. Bhambra (University of Warwick), in November 2010 in response to concerns about proposed changes to UK higher education and protests by students with regard to rises in tuition fees (The Sociological Imagination, 2011). According to the website, the Campaign for the Public University

> is open to all. It is a broad-based campaign with no party or other political affiliation. It has been initiated by a group of university teachers and graduate students seeking to defend and promote the idea of the university as a public good. We believe that the public university is essential both for cultivating

> democratic public life and creating the means for individuals to find fulfilment in creative and intellectual pursuits regardless of whether or not they pursue a degree programme.

In an interview with The Sociological Imagination in May 2011, co-founder Gurminder K. Bhambra talked about how the campaign put higher education funding cuts onto the agenda (where previously the main focus was on tuition fees). She argues that the reform proposals are not just about cuts but about the privatisation of higher education: the Browne report focused on HE as human capital at the expense of the idea of university as a public good (society benefits from university system even if you do not attend university yourself). She goes on to state that the commodification of education in political discourse demeans the idea of what education is for and that 'the university is being squeezed as a site for critical thinking' (The Sociological Imagination, 2011). She also highlights the impact of rising tuition fees on how society views the purpose of the university and how this has re-orientated student thinking about higher education, as the debts will make them more focused on the benefits and how they will pay it off: the educational 'space' is being closed so it leaves only 'instrumental' objectives.

John Holmwood led the publication of an alternative white paper, in response to the government's planned education reforms, entitled 'In defence of public education'. The publication, signed by hundreds of academics, was reported in the *Guardian* (2011b): 'Higher Education White Paper is Provoking a Winter of Discontent'. The document had nine propositions: (1) that higher education has public as well as private benefits and these public benefits require financial support; (2) that public universities are necessary to build and maintain confidence in public debate; (3) that public universities have a social mission and help to ameliorate social inequality; (4) that public higher education is part of a generational contract in which an older generation invests in the wellbeing of future generations; (5) that public institutions providing similar programmes of study should be funded at a similar level; (6) that education cannot be treated as a simple consumer good; (7) that training in skills is not the same as university education – something the title of a university should recognise; (8) that a university is a community made up of different disciplines and of different activities of teaching, research and external collaboration; and finally (8) that universities are not only global institutions, but also serve their local and regional communities (Campaign for the Public University, 2011: 3).

Other related campaigns include the Brighton-based ‘re-imagining the university’; Oxford University Campaign for Higher Education (OUCHE; see Parliament, 2011a); Sussex University Defends Higher Education; Warwick University Campaign for Higher Education; Humanities Matter; No Confidence Campaign; Cambridge Academic Campaign for Higher Education (The Guardian, 2011c).

Part 2

The second part of the thesis comprises the empirical research. Chapter 4 outlines data on the growth of private higher education across the world, with a particular focus on UK data. Chapter 4 looks in more detail at the nature of private provision in the higher education sector. Chapter 5 investigates the delivery of higher education by private providers based on analysis interviews with staff (management and tutors). Chapter 6 focuses on the learning experience based on interview data. The final two chapters offer a discussion of the findings in Chapter 7 and conclusions of the thesis in Chapter 8.

4 – The Growth of Private Higher Education

This chapter will collate and discuss data on private provision in higher education across the globe. Drawing on data available through the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), European Statistics provided by the European Commission (EUROSTAT) and the Program for Research on Private Higher Education (PROPHE), this chapter will perform a secondary analysis of international and UK data, also exploring data on online provision as a subset of private higher education. Before outlining the statistics available on private higher education, it is useful to describe in more detail the sources of this information, the reasons for collecting such data, and the scope and limitations of the data available.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collates data on publicly-funded HEIs in the UK. In 2011 HESA published a press release that outlined a survey of private and for-profit providers of higher education in the UK 2009/10 (HESA, 2011). This is the first attempt by a centrally-funded organisation to take account of private higher education in the UK. The survey was undertaken in direct response to the Browne report, which includes a more extensive definition of the higher education landscape, hence the need for HESA to look into the extent of private provision in the UK. The HESA survey also builds on a report to Universities UK[8] on the growth of private and for-profit higher

[8] Universities UK is a membership organisation of 133 universities in the UK that positions itself as 'the voice of UK universities'. The organisation carries out a variety of activities around the development of

education providers in the UK, compiled by John Fielden of Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS) Consulting - a management consultancy company that specialises in Higher Education policy and management - with the help of Professor Robin Middlehurst and Steve Woodfield from Kingston University and Don Olcott and his colleagues from the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (see Universities UK, 2010). The survey conducted by HESA is not, however, being continued for the period 2010/11. According to Andy Youell, the Director of Standards and Development at HESA, the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills is focusing on the launch of a larger research project that incorporates the development of existing HESA data on private higher education provision (Youell, email correspondence 19 March 2012). Therefore, more recent data on UK higher education is available for analysis from the study 'Understanding alternative providers of higher education in the UK', funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and conducted by a research consultancy (see CFE, 2012 and also BIS, 2013). Parts of this chapter will include an analysis of the data generated over the course of this project.

The Program for Research on Private Higher Education (PROPHE), based in the US, is a global network committed to developing information and knowledge about what they call 'one of the most striking tendencies in higher education around the world—the development of large and often vibrant private sectors'. Directed by Daniel C. Levy of the State University of New York and headquartered at the University at Albany, PROPHE's mission focuses on finding, studying and disseminating information about private higher education, as well as creation of an international base of researchers working in the field. PROPHE (2012) highlights that it neither represents nor promotes private higher education, rather, the core activity is around learning about what is happening in the sector, which, in turn, aims to inform public discussion and policymaking. Since 2008, as its Ford Foundation grants have ended, PROPHE has reduced some of its undertakings.

These are some of the sources used for information in this chapter on the quantitative data on private higher education. The first section will outline international data; section

---

higher education: Analysis of policy, campaigning and attempts to influence political debates related to higher education through the All Party Parliamentary University Group (APPG).

4.2 will focus on UK data. The remaining sections in the chapter will outline data on distance learning and the use of ICTs in higher education.

4.1 International data on private higher education

This section will overview international data on private higher education as this forms an important context for developments in the UK, in the sense that we may consider the expansion of the private higher education sector in the UK as part of a global trend. Therefore, in looking at the UK situation, we must also be aware of the global state of affairs with regard to the scale of private education throughout the world. Middlehurst and Fielden (2011) suggest that it is notable that, internationally, the number of students in private institutions is rising more rapidly than in publicly-owned/funded institutions. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) published a report in 2009 entitled 'A New Dynamic: Private Higher Education' (see Bjarnason et al., 2009) that was promoted at the World Higher Education conference 2009. The Director of Higher Education at UNESCO speaking at the conference stated that 'In 20 years' time there will be no debate about public or private education as new structures that find a balance between the two are developed'. The Assistant-Director General for Education at UNESCO also outlined during the conference that there has been a rapid acceleration of trends highlighted at the first world conference on higher education in 1998, which includes a 53 per cent increase in enrolment worldwide as well as greater diversification of providers – many a mixture of public and private that offer degree and non-degree programmes (UNESCO, 2009b). The trends toward growth in terms of the number of private institutions, the number of students attending private institutions, the changes in the funding of HEI globally, the consequences of changes in funding and the placing of private HEIs in global rankings will be considered.

4.1.1 Growth in the number of private higher education institutions and the numbers of students enrolled

Table 6 shows some global region data on private higher education which gives an overview of the variances across different continents. Latin America has the largest private sector in higher education proportionally and Asia has the largest number of institutions and students in the private sector. Asian figures include several countries with significant private higher education sectors (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines), which means that, overall, 'East Asia has the largest concentration of

countries with proportionally larger private sectors' (Altbach et al., 2009: 80). Africa's private sector is relatively small when compared with these two regions, with only 0.7 million students enrolled at private institutions but, as we can see that as the private sector has a good position in terms of the number of institutions in operation, this can be accounted for by the low participation rate of people going onto higher education on the continent. Nearly two thirds of America's HEIs are private – despite this, private institutions only account for a quarter of enrolments in higher education. Europe has a small private higher education sector when compared with Asia, Latin America and America: a quarter of institutions in Europe are private which is very different from the proportions in other regions. However, because of the high percentage of the population of Europe studying in higher education, this means that there are 3.7 million students at private HEIs. For all regions the percentage of private enrolments is significantly lower than the percentage of private institutions, which suggests that private providers of higher education tend to be smaller in terms of the number of students they enrol in comparison with public institutions. Levy and Zumeta (2011) suggest that Europe's private share is mostly the result of a post-communist trend in private activity in the east and central part of the continent. Despite the comparatively small private sector in Europe, it is suggested that there is significant potential for growth in countries such as Germany and the UK (Levy and Zumeta, 2011: 346).

Table 6: PROPHE data by Region

Region	Private % of total enrolment	Numbers of students in private HEIs	Private HEIs as % of the total	Numbers of private HEIs
Africa	14.6	0.7m	59.2	434
Asia	36.4	18m	57.8	18,206
Latin America	48.6	7.6m	71.3	7,090
Europe	16.0	3.7m	25.7	2,136
USA	26.1	4.7m	61.3	2,667
World totals	**31.3**	**35m**	**55.7**	**30,555**

Sources: Middlehurst and Fielden (2011); PROPHE (2010). Public and private higher education shares for 117 countries, 2001-2009. (updated November 2010). Note: These figures are amalgams of differently defined data for different years (2001-2009) and are intended to give an approximate feel for the scale of provision.

Table 7 outlines the number of students enrolled in higher education by institutions type for the years 1999 and 2009. For most countries the growth of student numbers in the private sector outstrips the growth of student numbers in the public sector. The exceptions to this include Italy (public +18 per cent, private -31 per cent), Portugal (public +18 per cent, private -10 per cent), Spain (public +9 per cent, private -10 per cent), and the USA (public +43 per cent, private +28 per cent). Japan has seen

reductions in student numbers in both the public and private sector over the time period. Altbach et al. (2009) suggest that 'stagnation has characterized the last 10 years, and some countries have actually had declines in private enrolments. There is a demographic challenge, and as cohort numbers fall, many private higher education institutions could shrink or die off' (Altbach et al., 2009: 81).

Table 7: Number of students enrolled at HEIs by type (1999, 2009)

Country	1999			2009		
	Public institutions	Government Dependent Private institutions	Independent private institutions	Public institutions	Government Dependent Private institutions	Independent private institutions
Australia	864175	2391	NA	1129812	7964	62071
Austria	236099	16791	Negligible	256720	51429	Negligible
Belgium	72670	88292	NA	182682	242537	NA
Canada	1192570	Negligible	Negligible	1445149	Missing	Missing
Czech Republic	220346	10878	NA	356681	9883	50283
Denmark	189771	199	NA	230498	3856	220
Finland	232786	30104	NA	248298	48393	NA
France	1736373	56664	219156	1763806	60074	348975
Germany	1970750	NA	NA	2143299	NA	NA
Iceland	7949	513	Negligible	13289	3630	Negligible
Ireland	141349	NA	9788	176894	NA	5715
Italy	1574791	NA	222450	1857961	NA	153752
Japan	843584	NA	3097172	817802	NA	3056422
Korea	558744	NA	2279136	629838	NA	2589378
Mexico	1315678	NA	522206	1809407	NA	895783
Netherlands	148810	321075	NA	618502	NA	Missing
Norway	166778	NA	NA	187638	31644	NA
Poland	1058491	1429	339170	1432711	NA	717287
Portugal	238857	NA	117933	282438	NA	90564
Slovak Republic	122744	142	NA	203613	374	31010
Spain	1576509	17258	193111	1590025	36810	173999
Sweden	314548	17951	2625	384714	37866	Negligible
United Kingdom	NA	2080960	Negligible	NA	2415222	Negligible
United States	9766611	NA	4002750	13972153	NA	5130661

Source: Derived from data downloaded from OECD Online Education Database, 14th June 2012.

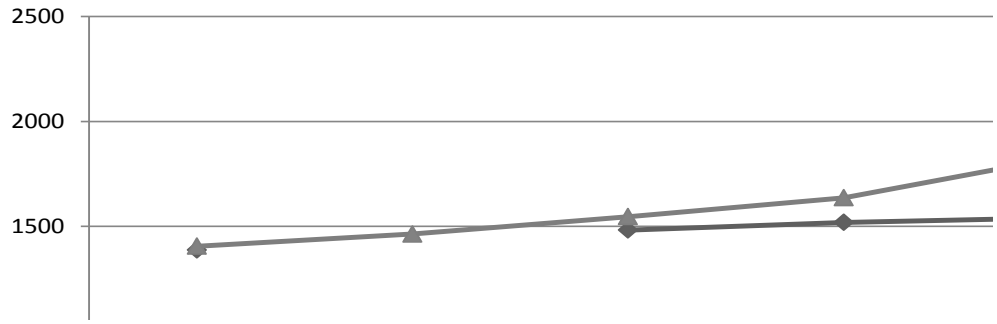
Nations that have witnessed growth in the private sector from a very low starting point include Australia and the Czech Republic. Poland's private sector growth is the highest in a country with already established private sector at +111 per cent. The change from a strong public sector to a substantial private sector is a key theme in post-communist countries in Europe (Altbach et al., 2009: 81). The OECD (2011) suggests that there has been enormous growth in private higher education institutions resulting in the fact that they now account for 30 per cent of enrolment worldwide. Pakistan has seen significant increases in enrolments at HEIs over the last ten years (Pakistan Higher Education Commission, 2012). In Japan, Korea, the Philippines and India 75-80 per cent of higher

education institutions are private. Heaney et al. (2010) state that, in 2007/08, 10 per cent of international student enrolments in Australia were in private higher education providers. In Australia there are three self-accrediting private higher education providers (Bond University, University of Notre Dame Australia and Melbourne College of Divinity) and 141 non self-accrediting institutions (Heaney et al., 2010)[9]. The South African Department of Education (see 2008, 2012) regularly updates and publishes a register of private higher education institutions active in the country that provides the public with details of the registration status of private higher education institutions, the national qualifications framework (NQF) and the regulatory necessity for private institutions offering higher education to register with the Department of Education (in accordance with the South African Higher Education Act, 1997). In 2012 there were 89 registered institutions that fulfilled the department's requirements for registration. These include institutions that provide programmes in; religion and theology, beauty, IT, marketing, business and management, natural therapies, nursing, child development, music, dance, sport, tourism, conservation, journalism, film, television and multimedia production, design, accounting, banking, psychology, hospitality, international trade. Theology figures strongly in the lists of programmes available at these private providers in South Africa. The slowest growth is in Western Europe where public universities account for the greater proportion of the higher education market (OECD, 2011).

America has a strong history of private higher education, enrolling approximately half of all higher education students in the private sector around the time of the Second World War II (Levy and Zumeta, 2011: 345). In the US the number of private HEIs has been growing steadily since 1980 (PROPHE, 2012). Since 1980 the number of private institutions has increased from 1,734 to 2,823 in 2009/10 (see Figure 1). The number of public institutions has also increased, from 1497 to 1,672 over the same period, but less markedly than private ones. Reflecting this data we can see that the percentage share of private institutions in relation to the total number of institutions has risen from 53.7 per cent in 1980 to 62.8 in 2009/10.

[9] Self-accrediting and non self-accrediting refers to the holding of degree awarding powers.

Figure 1: Number of private universities in USA 1980-2010



Note: Figure derived from data in 'Private Higher Education in the U.S.' (Data Tables updated 2010) PROPHE. Only degree granting private universities accredited by an agency recognized by the US Department of Education and offer at least a four year programme leading to a Baccalaureate or higher degree are included.

USA has over 4,500 degree granting institutions, over three fifths of which are private providers, although the sectors share of enrolments is lower at around 26 per cent (2007 figures taken from Zumeta, 2011). Providing an overview of data from 1996-2007, Zumeta (2011) describes the differences within the private higher education providers, those of non-profit and for-profit. The non-profit sector (which includes numerous elite universities and colleges), is growing in absolute terms but much more slowly than the for-profits. Over 1996-2007, autumn enrolments in private non-profit colleges and universities increased by 23.4 per cent but this sector's share of all higher education enrolments decreased slightly, to 19.7 per cent. With close to 7 per cent of all US higher education enrolments in more than 1,300 institutions in 2007 and rapid growth – from around 500 schools 11 years earlier – the for-profit sector is clearly a force to be reckoned with by policymakers as well as by its competitors among public and non-profit institutions (Pusser 2006; Tierney and Hentschke 2007). Enrolments in the for-profit sector more than tripled over 1996-2007. More than 70 per cent of this sector's enrolments are in schools that offer the baccalaureate degree (though many of these grant mostly two-year degrees), but there are nearly twice as many two-year as baccalaureate level for-profit institutions overall. In 2007, 18.4 million students enrolled in degree-granting institutions, the private non-profit sector enrolled 3.6 million and the for-profits about 1.25 million (Zumeta, 2011).

4.1.2 Student tuition fees

OECD data outlined in Table 8 makes comparisons between the annual tuition fees in US Dollars for public institutions, government dependent private institutions and independent private institutions. Annual tuition fees charged by private institutions differ noticeably within the national context and across nations. In most countries, private institutions charge higher tuition fees than public institutions. The OECD (2011) highlights that differences in fees at a national level tend to be larger in those countries in which the largest proportions of students are enrolled in independent private institutions. The presence of the private sector results in greater price differentiation, not only within the private providers themselves, but also in relation to the public sector fees. The fee level gap between public and private is less significant in the case of government-dependent private institutions than the independent private institutions. This may be the result of the government-dependent institutions having conditions of government support placed on the level of tuition fees they may charge. In addition independent private institutions have higher levels of autonomy to set fees (OECD, 2011).

Table 8: Estimated annual average tuition fees charged by type of institution 2008-09

	Annual average tuition fees in USD charged by institutions (for full-time students)		
Country	Public Institutions	Government Dependent Private Institutions	Independent Private Institutions
Australia	4140	a	8933
Austria	853	853	238-11735
France	190-1309	1127-8339	1128-8339
Iceland	No tuition fees	2311-6831	8433-12650
Italy	1281	a	4713
Japan	4602	a	7247
Korea	5315	a	9586
Norway	No tuition fees	n	5641
Portugal	1233	4991	m
Switzerland	879	m	7262
United States	6312	a	22852

Source: OECD (2011: 246)
Notes: See OECD (2011: 246) table B3.4 for details of data for each country. For the Netherlands, government dependent private institutions are included with public institutions. a=not applicable, m=missing value, n=negligible.

4.1.3 Public and private expenditure on higher education

This section will overview the public and private expenditure on higher education institutions by countries where this information is available from the OECD (2011).

Across the OECD countries, tertiary institutions are reliant upon the largest proportion of funds from private sources (31 per cent) in comparison with other levels of education (primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary) (OECD, 2011: 232).

Table 9 outlines the annual public expenditure in US Dollars on tertiary level education institutions per student for public and private institutions. In all countries except the UK public expenditure per student is higher for those attending public institutions than private institutions. The UK data is a result of the way HEIs in the UK are categorized by the OECD (all UK institutions are considered government-funded private institutions). Variances in the amount allocated per student across both public and private sector higher education may be considered a product of the wealth of the country, the history of HE funding and the size of the HE sector in terms of students numbers: wealthy countries with fewer HE students may be able to allocate higher public resources per student than poorer countries with higher number of students.

Table 9: Annual Public Expenditure (USD) on Tertiary Level Educational Institutions per student, by type of institution (2008)

Country	Public Institutions	Private Institutions	Total public and private
Australia	7337	750	7036
Belgium	14441	12139	13127
Chile	2426	493	885
Czech Republic	7330	531	6451
Denmark	16551	a	16460
Estonia	7842	3506	4207
Finland	14958	13108	14698
France	12943	3956	11469
Hungary	5425	4877	5341
Iceland	10383	6515	9612
Italy	6941	2457	6619
Korea	6749	968	2252
Mexico	7885	a	5263
Netherlands	13400	n	11996
New Zealand	8273	1371	7409
Norway	20617	3978	18353
Portugal	7397	168	5633
Slovenia	7382	2600	7078
Spain	11909	1118	10404
Sweden	17868	12483	17340
United Kingdom	a	5077	5077
United States	13448	3408	10577
OECD average	10543	3614	8526
EU21 average	10332	4730	9429

Source: OECD (2011: 266).
Notes: See OECD (2011: 266) table 5.1 for details of data for each country. Data presented here focuses on countries where comparisons can be made between public and private institutions only. a=not applicable, m=missing value, n=negligible.

Countries with significantly higher than average public expenditure on tertiary level education include Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. These Northern

European countries have strong public sectors and relatively low numbers of students in higher education. Countries with lower than average public expenditure on tertiary level education are Chile, Estonia, Hungary, Korea, Mexico, Portugal, and the UK. Many of these countries – apart from the UK - have very strong private sector activity in the HE sector, which may partially explain the low levels of public expenditure in those countries.

Table 10 presents information about the source of funding for the sector listing the relative proportion of public and private expenditure on tertiary education level institutions as a percentage for the years 2000 and 2008. The data shows that in all countries both public and private funding of educational institutions increased over the time period. However, the rise in private expenditure – payments by individuals, businesses and other private sources, including subsidised private payments and other private spending (e.g. on accommodation) that goes through the educational institution – has risen more sharply than public expenditure for most countries listed. The difference between levels of private expenditure varies greatly between countries, stretching from less than 5 per cent in Denmark, Finland and Norway to more than 40 per cent in Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, and to over 75 per cent in Chile and Korea (OECD, 2011: 236). Rates of increase over time also vary in that the increase in the share of private funding for tertiary education increased by six percentage points, on average, and by more than ten percentage points in Austria, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2011: 233).

In 2008, the top five countries who have the highest proportional private expenditure are Chile, Korea, Japan, the UK and the USA. Those with the highest proportional public expenditure are Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Belgium. The trends between 2000 and 2008 show that, for most countries, private expenditure is increasing as a proportion of all spending on higher education; those with the largest proportional increases are Austria, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and the United Kingdom. The corresponding decreases in the proportion of public expenditure on higher education can be found in Portugal, the Slovak Republic and the United Kingdom. This decrease is mainly due to a significant increase in the tuition fees charged by tertiary educational institutions over the same period (OECD, 2011: 234).

Table 10: Relative proportion of public and private expenditure on tertiary education level institutions as a percentage (2000, 2008)

Country	2000		2008		Index of change in expenditure between 2000 and 2008 (2000=100)	
	Public Sources	Private Sources	Public Sources	Private Sources	Public Sources	Private Sources
Australia	49.6	50.4	44.8	55.2	121	146
Austria	96.3	3.7	84.7	15.3	130	611
Belgium	91.5	8.5	89.8	10.2	118	144
Canada	61.0	39.0	58.7	41.3	121	133
Chile	19.5	80.5	14.6	85.4	112	158
Czech Republic	85.4	14.6	79.1	20.9	187	289
Denmark	97.6	2.4	95.5	4.5	114	218
Finland	97.2	2.8	95.4	4.6	124	209
France	84.4	15.6	81.7	18.3	116	141
Germany	88.2	11.8	85.4	14.6	117	150
Iceland	91.8	8.2	92.2	7.8	165	156
Ireland	79.2	20.8	82.6	17.4	142	114
Israel	58.5	41.5	51.3	48.7	97	130
Italy	77.5	22.5	70.7	29.3	108	155
Japan	38.5	61.5	33.3	66.7	100	125
Korea	23.3	76.7	22.3	77.7	155	164
Mexico	79.4	20.6	70.1	29.9	137	225
Netherlands	76.5	23.5	72.6	27.4	120	147
Norway	96.3	3.7	96.9	3.1	126	106
Poland	66.6	33.4	69.6	30.4	202	176
Portugal	92.5	7.5	62.1	37.9	98	739
Slovak Republic	91.2	8.8	73.1	26.9	145	557
Spain	74.4	25.6	78.9	21.1	144	112
Sweden	91.3	8.7	89.1	10.9	117	151
United Kingdom	67.7	32.3	34.5	65.5	112	278
United States	31.1	68.9	37.4	62.6	141	107
OECD average	75.1	24.9	68.9	31.1	131	217
EU21 average	85.7	14.3	78.2	21.8	132	262

Source: OECD (2011).

The OECD highlights that 'many of the OECD countries with the highest growth rates in private spending have also had the largest increases in public funding. This indicates that an increase in private spending tends not to replace public investment but to complement it' (OECD, 2011: 234). Other regions indicate a different trend whereby a decline in funding for Africa's public universities (Wangenge-Ouma, 2008) has resulted in a marketisation in public HEIs in Kenya which have been developed in order to bolster finances, these take the form of university-owned for-profit companies, commercial activity on campus, co-ventures with business, farming and full-fee paying students enrolled onto 'parallel programmes' (Wangenge-Ouma, 2008). The OECD figures alone do not tell the full story of how the privatisation of higher education may be

implemented in various ways: from the marked increase in the number of private institutions and the number of students enrolled; the changes in the proportions of public/private expenditure on higher education; to the ways the public sector develops private sector characteristics.

4.1.4 Global rankings and evaluation of private provider performance

This section will briefly outline some information about the global rankings and evaluations of private provider performance in the US context, drawing on research by Altbach et al. (2009), Levy (2009) and Middlehurst and Fielden (2011).

Looking at two global university rankings – the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings and the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities – Levy (2009) highlights that 21 of the 63 universities that appear in the top 100 for those two rankings are private institutions – all of them based in the US. Altbach et al. (2009) suggest that, with regard to global rankings, 'the private sector outside the United States hardly registers' (Altbach et al., 2009: 84). An example of a private institution that is highly ranked in medical/dental higher education by the *Times of India* is Manipal University in India. The University is the first private institution in India to have been classified as a 'deemed university [that] has over 20,000 students on its main campus' (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2011: 4).

Table 11 outlines some data on private education companies in the US produced by JP Morgan – the *Education Services Databook* – in terms of how they are arranged as businesses, their income from federal government grants, default rates and graduation completion rates. This information allows for an evaluation of the performance of some of the large for-profit companies operating in the country. There is high reliance upon government sources for funding of the companies – this, coupled with the high return on investment for some of the sample (Bridgepoint and Strayer, for example) results in a situation where public funds are channelled into private hands via the education companies. This trend, tied in with the relatively low graduation rates, has led to a negative perception of for-profit higher education companies in the US.

Table 11: Education Services Databook. March 2011.

Name	Return on Investment 2010	Bad Debt as % of revenues	Pell Grant and Title IV income as % of total 2010	Cohort Default Rates (CDR) on loans (3 years)	Graduate Completion Rate
Apollo Group	42%	5.5%	88%	12.8%	35%
Bridgepoint Education	62%	5.6%	85%	13.3%	c.40%
Capella Education	28%	2.1%	78%	3.3%	49%
Career Education	24%	5.0%	80% (FY 2009)	10.6%	42%
Devry	25%	2.6%	75% (FY 2009)	10.2%	31%
Strayer Education	65%	3.8%	78% (FY 2009)a	6.7%	40-78%

Source: JP Morgan. Education Services Databook. Middlehurst and Fielden (2011: 20-21)
Note: In the US, the Pell Grant programme awards Federal Government funds to institutions providing higher education to undergraduates of low-income families, which are referred to as 'title IV income'.

4.2 Private higher education in the UK

This section will outline data on private higher education in the UK using two main sources for the information: surveys conducted by the Higher Education and Statistics Agency that provides information for 2009/10 (published HESA, 2011) and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills that provides data for 2012 (published BIS, 2013).

4.2.1 HESA data

According to the HESA survey on private higher education for 2009/10, there were nearly 38,000 students on higher education courses and a further 18,000 studying at FE-level. The total number of students at all UK HEIs in 2009/10 was 2,493,415 (HESA, 2013), so private providers only account for just over 1.5 per cent of enrolments in the UK for 2009/10. As the private sector is argued to be a key area of growth in the UK and elsewhere, it will be important to track these figures into the future, depending on the data being collected centrally (now by BIS). It is not possible at this time to provide an analysis of changes over time due to the lack of data available on the private higher education sector in the UK.

Table 12 shows the breakdown of registrations at private HE providers by level and mode of study. Further education students were included in this survey where the provider also offers education at a higher level; therefore the figures presented here do not fully account for all students in further education in private education providers. Other avenues for data collection and analysis would need to be investigated to provide a full picture of the extent of the private sector in the FE sector, which falls outside of the focus on higher education provision outlined in this thesis.

What is interesting to note with regard to the data HESA collected is the balance between the different levels of study and the modes of study. HESA differentiate between different levels of study as follows: full-time students are those required to attend an institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of study, with periods of study, tuition or work experience that amounts to an average of 21 hours a week; part-time students are those indicated as such, or who are studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks, on block release or evenings only; distance learning students are those who do not have to be physically present at the institution, which may include those who are mainly taught over the internet. With regard to level of study, it is worth clarifying the definitions HESA use in their data collection: further education and below includes any qualifications at levels 1, 2 or 3 in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF); a first degree includes degrees validated by non-UK universities, normally equating to level 6 (QCF) and professional qualifications; other undergraduate includes sub-degree higher education for example the Diploma/certification of Higher Education, the Higher National Diploma/Certificate or foundational degrees or professional qualifications, usually equating to levels 4 and 5 (QCF); a postgraduate course is any course for which the normal entry requirement would be a first degree, including masters degrees, PhDs and postgraduate certificates and diplomas and equivalent professional qualifications. Data on registrations at private HE providers by level and mode of study outlined in table 12 reveal that 86.7 per cent of those enrolled on a first degree at private providers study full-time, 10.1 per cent part-time and 3.2 per cent by distance learning, which compares with 68.1 per cent studying full-time and 31.9 per cent part-time at public HEIs (see table 13)[10]. There are 82.3 per cent of postgraduates at private providers who study full time, 16.2 per cent part-time and 1.5 per cent by distance learning this compares with 51.5 per cent studying full-time and 48.5 per cent part-time in the data HESA collects from public universities.

Table 12: Student registrations at Private HE providers 2009/10 by level and mode

Level	Full-time	Part-time	Distance learning	Total
Further Education	1280	354	16656	18290
Other Undergraduate	4050	92	2151	6293
First Degree	13054	1523	481	15058
Postgraduate	13488	2657	242	16387
Total	31872	4626	19530	56028

Source: HESA (2011)

[10] Distance learning statistics for the UK are outlined more fully in section 4.3.

Table 13: All student enrolments by mode and level of study 2009/10

Level	Full-time	Part-time	All modes
Undergraduate	1095800	512500	1608300
Postgraduate	249865	235465	485335
Total	1345670	747965	2093635

Source: HESA online statistics. Note: I have used 2009/10 figures for comparability with available data on private providers: later figures are available on student data on the HESA website.

A notable figure in table 13 shows that a large proportion (91.1 per cent) of the students on further education level courses at these private providers are studying at a distance (most likely online). Despite the predominance of distance learning for further education students at private providers, the percentages of higher education level students studying at a distance are low: first degree = 3.2 per cent, other undergraduate = 34.2 per cent, postgraduate = 1.5 per cent. There appears to be a significant 'drop-off' in distance learning as the level of education increases. The learning mode figures for all HEIs in the UK collected by HESA does not include distance learning as a category (reporting, rather, on full-time, part-time and 'all modes') so comparisons between private and public providers are not possible. It is not a requirement for students who are based wholly overseas studying on distance learning programmes at UK HEIs to be reported to HESA, so all students reported to HESA on distance learning programmes are UK-based (there is more data on distance learning in the UK in section 4.3).

As the data on further education presented here does not include students enrolled at private providers who solely provide further education, the full extent of private involvement in further education in the UK is not outlined here.

Table 14 breaks down the numbers of students at private providers by broad subject area and shows the predominance of business, management and law in the sector: Over 80 per cent of all enrolments across all levels are in this category. The next largest subject area is 'other subjects', which encompasses all subjects that do not fall into the previous three categories (lab-based, subjects with studio, lab or fieldwork element, or business, management and law). Of particular interest is the fact that of the over seventeen thousand students on business, management and law programmes at further education level, 95.5 per cent are studying by distance learning (n=16576) – this subject area accounts for almost all distance learning at this level (99.5 per cent). In turn, business, management and law account for 98.8 per cent of distance learning programmes across all levels of study.

Table 14: Student registrations at Private HE providers 2009/10 by level and Subject area

Subject area	Further Education	Other Undergraduate	First Degree	Postgraduate	Total
Laboratory-based subjects	4	0	674	117	795
Subjects with a studio, laboratory or fieldwork element	595	852	1434	327	3208
Business, management and law	17356	4002	9810	14084	45252
Other subjects	335	1439	3140	1859	6773
Total	18290	6293	15058	16387	56028

Source: HESA (2011)

Table 15: Student enrolments by subject area and level of study 2009/10

Subject area	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
Medicine & dentistry	45885	19915	65800
Subjects allied to medicine	251770	53450	305220
Biological sciences	151225	31810	183035
Veterinary science	4415	945	5360
Agriculture & related subjects	15910	3010	18920
Physical sciences	71530	19500	91030
Mathematical sciences	33690	5435	39125
Computer science	76900	23885	100785
Engineering & technology	113365	43620	156985
Architecture, building & planning	49845	16145	65990
Total - Science subject areas	**814535**	**217715**	**1032250**
Social studies	166805	46950	213755
Law	72140	22240	94380
Business & administrative studies	236065	117845	353910
Mass communications & documentation	42265	10870	53135
Languages	120970	17120	138090
Historical & philosophical studies	79385	16910	96295
Creative arts & design	152960	20865	173825
Education	120195	106190	226385
Combined	109410	1995	111405
All Subjects	**1914730**	**578700**	**2493430**

Source: Derived from HESA data. The figures presented here include students on full-time and part-time programmes of study.

The predominance of business, management and law, whilst still evident in HESA data on public UK HEIs, is not as overwhelming as at private providers: 16.10 per cent of undergraduates and 24.21 per cent of postgraduates study either law or business and administrative studies (for all levels the figure is 17.98 per cent), as evident from the numbers in Table 15. The numbers of business and administrative studies students at undergraduate level are only surpassed by subjects allied to medicine and the numbers of students across all levels of study in this subject area is higher than any other.

Private higher education providers in the UK tend to fall within a few broad categories; those providing professional programmes that are closely linked to employers; subject specific or niche providers; or religious providers, who would usually fall within charitable status. The dominance of postgraduate programmes in private provision in

comparison with public provision is confirmed (this is the case with the College of Law and BPP University of Professional Studies) and explored further in interviews with staff and students.

Table 16: Student Numbers at private providers by Mode, Level and Type

Provider	Further Education			Other Undergraduate			First Degree			Postgraduate			Total
	FT	PT	Distance	FT	PT	Distance	FT	PT	Distance	FT	PT	Distance	
Campus of non-UK university or college	0	0	0	236	0	0	106	95	0	122	2	0	561
Private, for-profit company, wholly UK	670	0	0	2411	54	958	3307	28	51	5216	120	0	12815
Private, for profit, international	333	350	10	1002	11	60	2925	410	121	2452	756	21	8451
Private, not for profit company/charity	277	4	16646	401	27	1133	6716	990	309	5698	1779	221	34201
Total	1280	354	16656	4050	92	2151	13054	1523	481	13488	2657	242	56028

Source: HESA (2011)

Table 16 outlines the student numbers by type of private institution and shows that the majority of students are enrolled in the not-for-profit sector. The overall numbers of students enrolled in private institutions at this time are very small in comparison to the over two million in the publicly-funded HE sector; however, as the types of students that they enrol is narrower (professional, international students, mature students) it may be said that they hold significant proportions of students in those categories. For example, Middlehurst and Fielden (2011) suggest that, as many of the 50,000+ students in private institutions are international students, it makes more sense to compare them to the 230,000 international students in publicly-funded HEIs in the UK for the same time period.

4.2.2 BIS data

More recent data on UK higher education is available for analysis from a study 'Understanding alternative providers of higher education in the UK' funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), conducted by a research consultancy (see CFE, 2012 and BIS, 2013). According to the research consultants the basis of the research is as follows:

> BIS recognise that the nature of privately funded provision is complex and dynamic, and are keen to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this part of the UK HE sector. This research will incorporate a mapping exercise to compile a list of UK privately funded HE providers, along with surveys of

> institutions and students to compile a detailed understanding of these privately funded providers and the students who enrol with them. (CFE, 2012)

The data discussed in the following section draws on data generated during this project in 2012 has been published in a report on private providers of higher education in the UK by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in 2013 (BIS, 2013).

The research consultancy performing the study on behalf of BIS emailed an Excel data-return template to all providers who had confirmed they deliver privately-funded HE in the UK to approximately 600 education entities, asking for basic details of their organisation, including company and site details, type of organisation, activities undertaken and student numbers. The initial large list of approximately 600 contacts was reduced by a third during initial contact as they were either no longer operating or provided only further education level programmes of study. In total, they received 209 distinct data returns. Most of the institutions are private, for-profit (52 per cent), with 40 per cent having not-for-profit or charity status (see table 17). The mean number of years operating in the UK is 32, with a minimum of less than a year and a maximum of over 300 years (see table 18). A large proportion (around 40 per cent) has been established in the last ten years. Table 19 outlines the number of institutional sites private providers have: the majority (79 per cent, n=62) had only one UK site, with 12 per cent (24) having two sites.

Table 17: Details of institution type

Type of institution	Frequency	Percentage
Not-for-profit	97	39.0
For-profit	136	54.6
Other	16	6.4
Total	249	100

Source: BIS (2013: 45)

Table 18: Number of years trading

Number of years operating in the UK	Frequency	Percentage
5 years or less	59	23.7
6-10 years	50	20.1
11-20 years	35	14.1
21-50 years	58	23.3
51-100 years	19	7.6
101 years or above	18	7.2
Not stated	10	4.0
Total	249	100

Source: BIS (2013: 45)

Table 19: Number of institutions sites

Number of UK sites	Frequency	Percentage
0	1	0.5
1	164	78.5
2	24	11.5
3	6	2.9
4	0	0
5 or more	8	3.8
Not stated	6	2.8
TOTAL	209	100

The regional breakdown of the providers' main site shows that most (70 per cent) are based in London and the South East, with only very low numbers based outside of that region (see table 20). There are 197 providers (94 per cent) who stated that they undertake teaching of higher education; 37 only teach UK/EU domiciles, while 33 only teach non-EU domiciles. Just over half of providers surveyed - 52 per cent (n =108) - develop their own curriculum content, while 22 per cent (n = 45) undertake research activities (BIS, 2013).

The total number of FE and HE students registered at the providers is 94,772, with 78,327 HE students and 16,380 FE students (see table 21). Five providers did not register any students. Over half the students are domiciled outside the UK, either in the EU or outside the EU (see table 22). The majority of students are studying courses relating to business, management or law (see table 23). The majority of students are on full-time programmes of study (see table 24).

Table 20: Regional breakdown of institutions sites

Region	Frequency	Percentage
London	101	50.5
South East	40	20.0
North West	10	5.0
Scotland	10	5.0
East of England	9	4.5
West Midlands	8	4.0
South West	7	3.5
East Midlands	6	2.5
Yorkshire & Humberside	4	2.0
Wales	2	1.0
Northern Ireland	2	1.0
North East	1	0.5
Non-UK	1	0.5
TOTAL	200	100

Source: BIS (2013: 35)

Table 21: Total number of students registered with these providers

Student type	Frequency	Percentage
Postgraduate	29673	31.3
First degree	25498	26.9
Other HE	23156	24.4
FE or below	16380	17.3
Not stated	65	0.1
Total	94772	100

Source: BIS (2013: 35)

Table 22: Student domicile

Student domicile	Frequency	Percentage
UK	46042	48.6%
EU	9897	10.4%
Non-EU	38749	40.9%
Not stated	84	0.1%
TOTAL	94772	100

Source: BIS (2013: 37)

Table 23: Course subject area

Course subject area	Frequency	Percentage
Laboratory based subjects	1655	1.7%
Subjects with a studio, lab or fieldwork element	8051	8.5%
Business, management and law	55425	58.5%
Other subjects	29570	31.2%
Not stated	71	0.1%
TOTAL	94772	100

Source: BIS (2013: 37)

Table 24: Course mode

Course mode	Frequency	Percentage
Full time	57077	60.2%
Part time	20465	21.6%
Distance learning	17165	18.1%
Not stated	65	0.1%
TOTAL	94772	100

Source: BIS (2013: 36)

4.2.3 Overview of HESA and BIS data

The data collected by HESA (2011) and BIS (2013) demonstrate an overall increase in students enrolled at private providers from a total of 56,028 in 2009/10 to 94,772 in 2012: a growth of +69 per cent. The tables above show how this growth varies by level and mode of study. There has been significant growth in part-time students and those enrolled on higher education programmes that are not a degree – HND for example (see table 25). All areas have seen strong growth, except distance learning enrolments (see table 26). The limitations of the survey methods should also be taken into account as the data accuracy relies upon private providers voluntarily sharing the information with HESA/BIS.

Table 25: Survey data on students and level

Level	2009/2010	2012	Change
FE	18290	16380	-10%
Other HE	6293	23156	+268%
First degree	15058	25498	+69%
Postgraduate	16387	29673	+81%

Source: HESA (2011) and BIS (2013)

Table 26: Survey data on students and mode of study

Mode	2009/10	2012	Change
Full-time	31872	57077	+79%
Part-time	4626	20465	+342%
Distance learning	19530	17165	-12%

Source: HESA (2011) and BIS (2013)

4.2.4 Top ten private providers in the UK by student enrolments

The survey conducted by HESA in 2011 resulted in student enrolment data being listed for the 65 providers who responded. Table 27 outlines the top ten private higher education providers in the UK by mode and level, but this does not include those providers that did not respond to the HESA request for information.

Table 27: Top ten private higher education providers in the UK by mode and level

	Further Education			Other Undergraduate			First Degree			Post Graduate			
Provider	Full-time	Part-time	Distance learning	Full-time	Part-time	Distance learning	Full-time	Part-time	Distance learning	Full-time	Part-time	Distance learning	Total
Ifs School of Finance	0	0	16576	0	0	1133	0	0	208	0	0	0	17917
The College of Law*	0	0	0	0	0	0	1509	821	65	3740	923	73	7131
BPP University of Professional Studies	0	0	0	0	0	35	1377	394	121	2282	691	21	4921
Regents College*	237	0	0	0	0	0	2484	0	0	1264	287	0	4272
Kaplan UK	0	0	0	190	0	958	899	0	51	1181	0	0	3279
British Institute of Technology and E-Commerce	0	0	0	0	0	0	325	0	0	2058	0	0	2383
The University of Buckingham	0	0	0	0	0	0	798	47	0	453	37	0	1335
Brighton and Bristol Institutes of Modern Music	151	0	0	449	0	0	689	0	0	0	11	0	1330
Greenwich School of Management	159	0	0	19	19	0	436	0	0	498	87	0	1218
Academy of Contemporary Music	225	0	0	360	0	0	551	0	0	0	0	0	1136

Source: HESA (2011)
Note: *These providers now have university status and have changed their names accordingly.

The provider that lists the greatest number of students enrolled, the IFS (Institute of Financial Services) School of Finance, looks to be somewhat different from the other

providers listed in that it has a much greater emphasis on further education provision and on distance learning. IFS School of Finance is a not-for-profit professional body and registered charity incorporated by Royal Charter. The largest private provider that responded to HESA's information request that has a focus on the higher education market is the College of Law, with over 7,000 students registered in 2009/10. This figure may appear small in comparison with the big players in UK HE, such as the University of Manchester that enrols nearly 40,000 students (The University of Manchester, 2012); however, approximately a third of HEIs operate with student numbers below this figure.[11] The majority of students are enrolled fulltime on first degrees (21.2 per cent) or postgraduate courses (52.4 per cent). Overall, approximately a quarter of students study part-time (24.5 per cent), and only a small percentage (1.9 per cent) study by distance learning.

The University of Law (previously College of Law), founded in 1962, has charitable status and has a clear disciplinary focus, recruiting more postgraduates than undergraduates. In April 2012, the *Times Higher Education* (2012c) reported that the College of Law, previously holding charitable status, had been sold to Montagu Private Equity, a for-profit firm. The article goes on to state that '[t]he college will sell its legal education and training business, setting up a separate foundation with the proceeds – which will retain the charitable status and the Royal Charter. Montagu will hold the degree awarding powers and run the college as a for-profit entity'. It was reported in the *Guardian* that 'the University and College Union was dismayed by the news, and urged the government to legislate urgently to protect UK universities and public assets from being acquired by private equity firms' (The Guardian, 2012a).

BPP[12] University of Professional Studies shows a similar data profile to The College of Law in that the majority of students are enrolled full-time on a first degree (28.0 per cent) or postgraduate course (46.4 per cent), with some students studying for the same qualifications by part-time (22.0 per cent) or distance mode of study (2.9 per cent). BPP University of Professional Studies was originally established in 1976 specializing in accountancy courses, though it now also delivers programmes in the disciplines of law, business and health. In September 2007, BPP University College became the first

[11] Data from HESA confirms this approximation.
[12] BPP is an abbreviation of the surnames of the founders, Alan Brierley, Richard Price and Charles Prior.

publicly owned private company in the UK to obtain degree awarding powers (DAP). In 2009, BPP became part of Apollo Global Inc., which is itself a joint venture between Apollo Group Inc.[13] and private equity firm The Carlyle Group.

Unlike the previous two providers, Regent's College (now Regent's University London) has a greater percentage of students enrolled on undergraduate (58.1 per cent) than postgraduate programmes (29.6 per cent); this proportion reflects the proportion of students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across all UK HEIs. At this provider, only a very small number of students are enrolled on further education programmes (5.5 per cent) or to study part-time (6.7 per cent, only on postgraduate programmes), and there are no students enrolled to study by distance. Regent's College London is a registered charity. In 1984 the Crown lease for Bedford College (with a history dating back to 1828) was taken over by Rockford College, Illinois, which founded Regent's College primarily to provide a 'study abroad' programme. Today, Regent's College is a multi-disciplinary campus community of seven schools; European Business School London; Regent's Business School London; Regent's American College London; Webster Graduate School London; School of Psychotherapy & Counselling Psychology; London School of Film, Media and Performance; and Internexus - English Language School. In the future, Regent's College aims to operate these schools as a single University (Regent's College, 2012). The seven schools at Regent's College London offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, covering business and management, humanities, arts, media and social sciences.

Just over a third of students enrolled at Kaplan UK are on full-time postgraduate programmes (36.0 per cent). Just over a quarter of students are registered full-time, first degree (27.4 per cent). A significant proportion of students at Kaplan UK are studying other undergraduate programmes by distance learning (29.2 per cent). Kaplan UK was established in 1993 and, as a company, incorporates different educational aims: test preparation; higher education; professional training; and English language. Kaplan Higher Education is a group of specialist education businesses, including Kaplan Business School – University of London, with degrees in accounting, banking, business, finance and law taught at the central-London campus; Kaplan International Colleges –

[13] The Apollo Group Inc. own the University of Phoenix, one of the largest online higher education providers in USA. More information on The Apollo group is outlined in section 4.3.1.

preparation programmes for international students in partnership with leading UK universities; Kaplan Open Learning – online Foundation degrees in partnership with the University of Essex; Dublin Business School – Ireland's largest independent third level institution; and Holborn College – London's oldest independent law and business college. There is more information on the global business operations of Kaplan, in particular their online provision, in section 4.3.1.

The majority of students at the British Institute of Technology and E-Commerce are enrolled on fulltime postgraduate programmes (86.4 per cent), the remainder being enrolled on first degree undergraduate programmes (13.6 per cent). There are no students enrolled at this private provider to study part-time or by distance learning. The British Institute of Technology & E-Commerce (BITE) collaborates with various partners – Edexcel[14], the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), the University of Wales; and the University of East London – to deliver a range of programmes broadly within the disciplines of business and technology, but also includes Fashion Design, Architecture, and some engineering disciplines too.

The University of Buckingham enrols mainly full-time students on first degree (59.4 per cent) or postgraduate programmes (33.9 per cent), this proportion reflects that of public HEIs and has a similar profile to Regent's College. Very few students study part-time (6.3 per cent) and there are none registered to study by distance learning. In 1973 the University College at Buckingham (UCB) was incorporated, in the form of a non-profit making company registered as an educational charity. UCB was formally opened in February 1976 by the Rt. Hon. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, MP, as former Secretary of State for Education. In March 1983, the College was incorporated as The University of Buckingham by grant of a Royal Charter. It became a registered charity on 4 May 2011. It is the only independent university in the UK with a Royal Charter, and probably the smallest with around 1,000 students. Honours degrees are achieved in two intensive years of study.

[14] Edexcel is a Pearson company, is the UK's largest awarding body offering academic and vocational qualifications and testing to schools, colleges, employers and other places of learning in the UK and internationally. Edexcel was formed in 1996 by the merger of the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC), the country's leading provider of vocational qualifications, and the University of London Examinations & Assessment Council (ULEAC), one of the major exam boards for GCSEs and A levels. [more on Pearson here]

Just over half of all students at the Brighton and Bristol Institutes of Modern Music (BIMM)[15] are enrolled on a full-time first degree (51.8 per cent) with a further third (33.8 per cent) studying on 'other undergraduate programmes' full-time. An emphasis on undergraduate higher education is supplemented by a proportion of students on full-time further education programmes (11.4 per cent). A small number of students continue into part-time postgraduate education at this provider (0.8 per cent). BIMM Brighton opened in 2001, BIMM Bristol in 2008, BIMM Dublin in 2011 and BIMM Manchester in 2013. BIMM provides a wide variety of music courses from level 3 diplomas to post graduate level for guitar, bass, drums, vocals, live sound, tour management and music business (BIMM, 2014).

The largest group at the GSM London (formerly Greenwich School of Management) are full-time post graduate students (40.9 per cent), followed by full-time first degree students (35.8 per cent) and other undergraduates (1.6 per cent). 13.1 per cent of students are on full-time further education programmes. Only a small number are on part-time programmes (8.7 per cent) and there are no distance learning students. Greenwich School of Management, founded in 1973, is an independent School of higher education that delivers programmes leading to qualifications in business management, finance & accounting, law, travel & tourism, IT, HR, health services management and cognate areas, as well as awards of various professional bodies. The School offers validated degree programmes which include BSc (Hons), MBA and MSc degrees through partnerships with such institutions as the University of Plymouth, the University of Wales and Northwood University in the United States of America (GSM, 2014).

The Academy of Contemporary Music (ACM) has no postgraduate students and no students studying part-time or by distance learning. Instead the focus is on further and undergraduate education: Just under half of ACM students are studying for a first degree (48.5 per cent), just under a third are on 'other undergraduate' programmes (31.7 per cent) and 19.8 per cent are on further education programmes. ACM was established in 1995 in Guildford, UK, it focuses on vocational training in popular and rock music and music industry education. ACM commercial has developed a range of franchises that

[15] Since the survey was conducted BIMM has opened an institute in Dublin and Manchester.

deliver music education via international schools in the US, South Africa and Europe and regional franchises in the UK offering part-time tuition, workshops, and programmes aimed at children (ACM Junior and ACM Kids, see ACM, 2014).

4.2.5 Tuition fees at private providers

Table 28 lists the tuition fees for a small selection of private providers and publically-funded HEIs. It is evident that in most cases the tuition fees for studying at private providers is less than studying at a traditional university and significantly less for international students than the elite public institutions would charge. For one of the private providers they offer a two-year degree which works out significantly cheaper, which would be consolidated further by savings in living expenses over the duration of the degree programme.

Table 28: Examples of tuition fees charged by private providers

Provider	Programme	Validated or conferred by	UK/EU fee	International fee
The University of Buckingham	Applicable to all undergraduate programmes commencing September 2012, UG degree condensed to two years	NA	£11,250 per annum, total £22,500	£16,000 per annum, total £32,000
BPP University of Professional Studies	BSc(H) Banking and Finance[16] commencing September 2012		£5,000 per annum, total £15,000	£7,000 per annum, total £21,000
Greenwich School of Management	BSc(H) Business Management and Information Technology commencing October 2012	Plymouth University	£7,000 per annum, total £14,000 or £5,750 per annum, total £17,250	£12,750 per annum, total £25,500 or £8,500 per annum, total £25,500
Kaplan UK	BSc Economics and Finance	University of London	£6,000 per annum, total £18,000	£10,500 per annum, total 31,500
Examples of tuition fees charged by traditional providers				
Nottingham Trent University	Applicable to all undergraduate programmes commencing September 2012	NA	£8,500 per annum, total £25,500	£10,600 per annum, total £31,800
Cambridge University	Application to all undergraduate programmes commencing September 2012	NA	£9,000 per annum, total £27,000	£13,011-£31,494 per annum, plus college fees of around £5,000 per annum, total £54,033-£109,482
University of Liverpool	Application to all undergraduate programmes commencing September 2012	NA	£9,000 per annum, total £27,000	£11,500-£14,850 per annum, total £34,500-£44,550

Source: Institution websites, June/July 2012.

[16] Other programmes offered by BPP University of Professional Studies, such as BSc(H) Psychology or BSc(H) Professional Accounting can be studied in condensed forms that allows home/EU students to cut the overall tuition fee costs: UK or EU students on two-year degree pay £6,000 a year, International students on a two-year degree pay £10,500 a year.

Differentiation on price is a key factor in how the higher education sector may develop in the future and private providers see tuition fees as a key way of opening up the publicly-funded HEI sector to privatisation (see section 5.1.2 on interviews with executives).

4.3 Distance Learning and Online higher education

In 2001, UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning instigated research to explore the main policy, planning and management issues associated with the virtual university (UNESCO, 2006). The study was based upon case studies selected to represent the main emerging institutional models: newly created institutions; evolution of traditional universities; consortia; commercial enterprises (Middlehurst, 2006). Cases were selected from different geographic regions, as the research coordinators thought that differing contexts may give rise to different approaches and issues and, therefore, different policy and planning concerns.

Table 29: UNESCO Virtual University Models and Case Studies

Newly Created Institutions	Evolution of Existing Systems	Consortium	Commercial Enterprise
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain	Universidad Virtual de Quilmes, Argentina	L'Université Virtuelle en Pays de la Loire, France	NetVarsity, India
Campus Numérique Francophone de Dakar, Sénégal	University of Southern Queensland, Australia		
UNITAR, Malaysia	Athabasca University, Canada		
	African Virtual University Kenyatta University, Kenya		
	University of Maryland University College (UMUC), USA		

Source: UNESCO (2006)

The specifically created virtual higher education provider in Malaysia falls into the 'newly created' category outlined above. Established in 1998, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) was the region's first virtual university. 'Operating as a private enterprise with the goal of providing quality education to a global audience and promoting Malaysia's transformation into a knowledge economy. Its mission is to expand opportunity for quality education at affordable fees' (UNESCO, 2006: overview on webpage). NetVarsity was founded in 1996, has over 500,000 learners registered. It was first conceived as part of the Centre for Research in Cognitive Sciences at NIIT, a computer training and software solutions company based in India. NetVarsity is sponsored by Banco Bradesco, Brazil's largest and world's third largest private bank.

NetVarsity.com runs learning initiatives via cyber cafés in the country and also conducts virtual online learning sessions through an active eMentor support (Researching Virtual Initiative in Education Wiki, 2012). The African Virtual University (AVU) was initially launched in 1997 as a World Bank project; it is now an independent intergovernmental organization, headquartered since 2002 in Kenya. Over the last 10 years, the African Virtual University has acquired the largest network of open, distance, and e-learning institutions in Africa. It works across borders and language groups in Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone Africa, present in over 27 countries with more than 50 partner institutions.

Altbach et al. (2009) state that there is a recognized typology of institutions providing distance education. These include single-mode institutions, dual-mode institutions, consortia, and non-traditional providers. Single-mode institutions focus exclusively on providing distance education, while dual-mode institutions offer a combination of distance education and more traditional face-to-face education delivery. Consortia comprise two or more institutions working collaboratively to provide distance learning. Finally, non-traditional providers may include entities such as multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations and development partners, as well as governments. Profit-making affiliates of traditional not-for-profit educational institutions may also be considered a part of this group (Altbach et al., 2009: 130). In addition to the typology of institutions outlined by Altbach et al. (2009) it is possible to identify more recent trends in online education freely available online through Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) – an online course aimed at large-scale interactive participation and open access via the web – and other initiatives. There is the example of Khan Academy, originally set up by Sal Khan as online tutorials using youtube.com for relatives, and in 2009 set up a tutoring, mentoring and testing educational website at khanacademy.org that offers its content that is focused on secondary school maths free to anyone with internet access. There are millions of users of the website and viewers of YouTube videos and it is argued to have had a high impact in America and open source education (*Guardian*, 2013b). MOOCs have been set up by a number of universities across the world, mainly in the US.

4.3.1 Distance learning in the UK

This section will focus on the delivery of distance learning at institutions in the UK using data available through HESA (requested by the author in 2012). Whilst this data does not include non-HEFCE-funded HEIs, it does indicate the level of distance learning in the UK. Table 30 outlines the numbers of students enrolled in UK HEIs by mode of study for 2006/07-2010/11. This demonstrates that distance learning enrolments accounted for just over 10 per cent of enrolments in 2006/07 rising to 11 per cent in 2008/09 and 2009/20 and 12 per cent in 2010/11.

Table 30: Numbers of students enrolled in UK HEIs by mode of study for 2006/07 – 2010/11

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Distance learning - UK based student	238800	246065	263525	275175	270085
Distance learning - Non UK based student (funded)	0*	1105	630	650	1360
Face-to-face delivery students	2065900	2058935	2131895	2217590	2229850
Total	**2304700**	**2306105**	**2396050**	**2493415**	**2501295**

Source: HESA information services
Notes: 'Distance Learning - UK based student' identifies students that spend part or their entire course in the UK. Students that study wholly overseas will be returned in the Aggregate Offshore record; the exception to this is UK funded students overseas e.g. Crown servants or the Services overseas who are returned as 'Distance learning - Non-UK based student (funded)'. * The aggregate offshore record commenced in the academic year 2007/08, prior to this all wholly overseas students. Please note that the figures supplied have been subjected to HESA's standard rounding methodology.

Table 31: Top ten distance learning institutions in the UK 2010/11 by student enrolments

Institution	Total
The Open University	207880
The University of Dundee	3523
Heriot-Watt University	3351
The Robert Gordon University	2935
The University of Warwick	2872
The University of Leicester	2444
De Montfort University	2351
The University of Birmingham	2097
The University of Greenwich	1636
University of Derby	1603

Source: HESA data request by author, May 2012

The majority of distance learning enrolments are based in one institution – the Open University – with only very low level enrolments at other traditional HEIs (see table 31). The data in table 32 show that the subject areas that have the highest levels of distance

learning enrolments are: Business and administrative studies; Social studies; Biological sciences; and Education. To a certain extent these figures reflect the national data on all enrolments by subject at UK HEIs. Table 33 shows that 20 per cent of those studying by distance learning are postgraduates, the majority (80 per cent) are studying at undergraduate level. Table 34 shows the location of distance learning students; only a very small number of those enrolled are based outside of the UK (0.5 per cent), but these figures only account for those in receipt of some type of funding.

Table 32: Distance learning by subject area in the UK 2010/11

(1) Medicine & dentistry	2258
(2) Subjects allied to medicine	14707
(3) Biological sciences	20871
(4) Veterinary science	304
(5) Agriculture & related subjects	804
(6) Physical sciences	10686
(7) Mathematical sciences	7081
(8) Computer science	9497
(9) Engineering & technology	11007
(A) Architecture, building & planning	2080
(B) Social studies	24141
(C) Law	8351
(D) Business & administrative studies	30299
(E) Mass communications & documentation	1706
(F) Languages	13279
(G) Historical & philosophical studies	13830
(H) Creative arts & design	1673
(I) Education	20502
(J) Combined	78054
Total	271128

Source: HESA data request by author, May 2012

Table 33: Distance learning by level of study in the UK 2010/11

Level of study	Total
Postgraduate	54350
Undergraduate	216778
Total	271128

Source: HESA data request by author, May 2012

Table 34: Distance learning by location of study 2010/11

Distance learning marker	Total
Distance learning - UK based student	269769
Distance learning - Non-UK based student (funded)	1359
Total	271128

Source: HESA data request by author, May 2012

The data on distance learning at publicly-funded institutions forms an important context for the development of private providers in the UK as many of these providers are responding to gaps in the market they perceive as the result of traditional HEIs not responding to the needs of students who require greater industry-focus and flexibility in delivery of education. It appears that the Open University accounts for a huge amount of the distance learning provision in the UK HE sector, with traditional universities enrolling relatively few students on distance learning programmes.

4.4 ICTs in Higher Education

This section looks at the use of ICTs in higher education. The digitisation of content and the ability to work across a range of multimedia platforms is pivotal in enabling the rise of online study at virtual universities. At the same time all HE providers are utilising digital communications media and ICTs in the administration and delivery of HE programmes. A rudimentary survey of two universities' use of ICTs, one virtual university and one traditional campus-based university (see table 35) demonstrates not only the variety and range of ICT-use by the virtual provider but also how all HE providers increasingly rely upon ICTs in programme delivery. From this information it is clear to see that reliance upon ICTs for the delivery and administration of higher education is not only evident in the 'virtual' university-context. Therefore critiques of online provision may also be relevant to the public, campus based HEI. The idea that communication technologies can digitally enhance higher education, in line with modernisation discourses, can be linked to the 'utilitarian' model that is also present in discussions of online learning.

As table 35 demonstrates, digital technologies have infiltrated most major aspects of course delivery and assessment at the traditional university, whilst the virtual university uses technology to replace the more informal communication processes that take place on campus, for example in tutorials and common room chat. A fact useful to note is the range of ways that digital technologies operate mainly facilitate and attempt to replicate that which would have traditionally taken place with direct contact, a letter or a telephone conversation . Digital provision is particularly adaptable where it offers the same level of interaction, only with more flexibility; for example in the online lecture. In addition to this there is the electronic availability of course documents and reading materials where students would otherwise have accessed paper copies via the department

or library. The apparent ease with which higher education courses can be made virtual is one not without contradictions. Increasingly, the one-way flow of digital information requires students to teach themselves, which is a skill that one traditionally learns at university. However, it is argued that ready access to content is not matched by training in the traditional skills of finding and using information and in 'learning how to learn' in an information-rich world. All this may be reducing the level of scholarship (e.g. the increase in plagiarism, and lack of critical judgement in assessing the quality of online material) (Cooke, 2008: 11). The picture for and against digital provision is a complex one as it is clear that the internet has made some things much easier (to access some library materials, administration, instantaneous communication via email), but others harder: the building of relationships between students and between students and staff; the expanding work attached to dealing with student emails; or digitising course content.

Table 35: Comparison of ICT use by a traditional and virtual university in the delivery of an undergraduate business programme.

ICT use	Traditional university	Virtual university
Email correspondence between students and tutors	√	√
Students view lectures online		√
Course materials available electronically	√	√
Electronic library access	√	√
Virtual classrooms		√
Blogs		√
Online group tutorials		√
Complete assessment online	√	√
Submit coursework electronically	√	√
Student evaluation completed online		√
Second life presence		√
Surveillance of student activity (e.g. how often they access materials, log on to online classrooms etc.)	√	√
Discussion board	√	√
Support services provision available electronically	√	√
Syllabus information online	√	√
Students monitor administrative progress of submitted assignments		√
Tutor feedback on assignments given online	√	√
Students have electronic profile online	√	√

Note: Author's own survey conducted in 2009

As highlighted above, the majority of digital communications identified represent the transference from one mode of communication (interpersonal) to another (online), rather than resulting in new forms. There is, however, one item that has only been made possible through digital technology – the tracking of student usage of electronic resources. Historically, university administration and records were held across a range of departments – host department, registry, library, etc. and were not easily shared. It is now easy for those with access to the student record system to see exactly what the

students have (or have not) been doing, and follow up accordingly. For example, the virtual university referred to in table 35 would contact a student if they had not logged onto the student system for a set period of time. It is in this process that the virtual provider emphasises their role in supporting students, as they are able to flag-up cases where there are potential problems. The ways that distance-learning-focused providers of higher education use ICTs is a theme within this thesis and will be explored in Chapters 5 and 6. Selwyn's (2012) account that 'the distance education of the early twenty-first century is based upon a blend of high-tech and low-tech methods' (85) will also be explored.

4.5 Three examples of American virtual universities

This section outlines three examples of American virtual universities. Much recent growth in online provision has occurred as the result of new institutions coming online, both established and 'virtual universities': organisations that offer their courses wholly outside of the traditional campus-based learning institutions. Some of these new virtual universities have been set up through government initiatives or by collaborations between traditional universities. Others have a commercial basis, set up as an education company to meet specific markets that the founders believe traditional universities serve badly (for example working students). The new organisations include the University of Phoenix, Capella University Online, Kaplan University, Walden University, DeVry University and Jones International University. These commercial online higher education providers have been hugely successful in recruiting students in recent years. The University of Phoenix had over 380,000 students enrolled in November 2008 and Capella University Online has had a 25 per cent year-on-year growth rate for the last five years. Further, it is argued that the education industry is expected to expand even more in the future (Yoshimura, 2008). The success of these businesses is relevant to the wider higher education 'market', for it is the online model that governments in the US, the UK and elsewhere seek to incorporate into traditional universities' future developments. Using three examples of these businesses as case studies, it is possible to flesh out the 'virtual university' and discuss the implications their success has for other higher education providers.

The University of Phoenix is the largest private university in North America and is a leading provider in the online learning market, having offered online degrees since 1989.

- In November 2008, the University of Phoenix had over 384,900 students enrolled, over half of whom study online.
- It was the top recipient of federal aid in 2008, receiving US$2.8 billion.
- It is owned by the Apollo Group Inc. that trades on the NASDAQ (and which has specialised for over 30 years in providing commercial educational services to adult learners).
- The university runs pared-down campuses across North America that are without the usual amenities of traditional campus-based universities.

The reduction in ongoing costs that traditional universities have, for example in investment in buildings, research, support services, sports facilities, science laboratories, maintenance, etc., means that through the basic-campus or online model the University of Phoenix simplifies and concentrates on the 'core' processes of HEIs, namely the transfer of educational information and the assessment of students. It seems, as student perceptions of education in utilitarian terms become dominant, the successful model providing higher education reflects and reproduces this aim via the concentration upon those aspects of education that are most clearly defined as 'useful'. As Yoshimura explains: 'Online education institutions therefore focus on the transfer of relevant knowledge and skills, and that is the commodity exchanged in online educational markets' (Yoshimura, 2008: 298). The utilitarian approach has been developed in order to target specific groups of non-traditional students, as they state on their website: 'University of Phoenix students are hard-working wives, mothers, fathers, grandparents, executives, soldiers, nurses, and teachers all striving to better themselves'. The focus on non-traditional students is reflected in the university's student demographic, which is more diverse in age, class and race than the national student population of the US as a whole. For example, in 2008, 24.6 per cent of the University of Phoenix's students were African-American compared with 12 per cent nationally. However, there have been accusations that the university does not properly balance its commitments to its students with the desire to make profits for shareholders (Dillon, 2007). There have also been discussions in the media regarding legal matters in relation to the fraudulent acquisition of student aid (which, as demonstrated by the huge figure above, is no small matter), late repayment of loans, and payment of financial incentives to admissions representatives (Blumenstyke, 2004; Gilbertson, 2004; Yung, 2004). However, it is argued that 'Phoenix is prominent—even dominant—in the for-profit sector, but it should not be considered a representative institution' (Kinser, 2006b: 266).

Capella University Online is another successful education company that offers higher education courses online. The private, for-profit university, owned by Capella Education Company that has traded on the NASDAQ since 2006, (and had trading revenues of $272 million in 2008) was set up in 1991 by Stephen Shank, who believed that traditional campus-based universities did not meet the needs of adult learners.

- Unlike the University of Phoenix that offers a basic campus provision to some of its students, Capella University operates exclusively online.
- The University has 22,000 students registered across the US and in 56 other countries, mainly studying on graduate courses (in 2007, 84 per cent of students were enrolled on a graduate course).
- They focus on offering courses in what they term 'three attractive markets': Education, Health and Human Services and Business Management and Technology.

Similar to the University of Phoenix, the student demographics for Capella University are different from those across all universities: in 2007, 68 per cent of students were women, 42 per cent were from an ethnic minority, and the average age was 40 years old. The University manages the courses through the Blackboard Learning System in 'course rooms' that allow many-to-many communication in attempts to replicate the experience of 'real' university interaction between students and tutors. Again, there have been criticisms with regard to how the company manages its finances: in the 2006-2008 audits by the US department of education it was found that approximately US$588,000 Title IV funds were not returned for students who withdrew without providing official notification. Also there have been accounting mistakes, including the failure to return funds for students who failed to attend any online classes at all.

A third example of an education business that focuses on providing online higher education is Kaplan University, which is owned by the Washington Post Company. The financial success of Kaplan, providing nearly half of the parent company's revenue in 2007, has led to the Washington Post Company redefining itself as an education and media company (Washington Post Company Annual Report, 2007).

- The professional training arm of the business brings in huge revenues. For example, in 2005 they earned US$20 million from providing a real estate training course.

- The University had 37,000 students enrolled in 2007, mainly on business and law courses.

The focus upon a particular segment of the higher education market is similar across the three examples given here, and it seems business-related courses are seen as the most lucrative and sellable in the online market. What is interesting about Kaplan is how it works as a business; various operation 'names' all working under the umbrella of Kaplan (for example, Kaplan University is a sister company of Kaplan Higher Education Company), and building on the brand, mainly through acquisitions of smaller companies at home in the US or overseas. The Kaplan Higher Education Company has worked hard at expanding Kaplan internationally with major acquisitions of education and training companies in Australia, the UK, Ireland, New Zealand and Canada. Kaplan has also developed collaborative arrangements with universities in the UK. In 2007, Kaplan began operating Kaplan Law School in London in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University's Nottingham Law School. Kaplan Law School provides graduate diploma, legal practice and bar vocational training for UK university graduates wishing to progress into the legal profession. In addition to this, Kaplan Open Learning (Essex) Limited (KOL) has been established as an affiliate college of the University of Essex. The College provides university-level education, offering programmes of study for students who wish to obtain a university Foundation Degree or continue on to gain a full Honours Degree. These are just two examples of how an education company is developing key relationships with established providers and working towards gaining accreditation powers which mark a move within the higher education sector towards corporate-based, profit-orientated universities. Indeed, following the College of Law becoming the first private higher education institution in the UK to obtain degree-awarding powers, private sector companies, including Kaplan, are reportedly 'queuing up' to obtain university status under the government's revised guidelines (OBHE, 2006). The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) argues that the UK is a budding site for the development of public-private partnerships, especially with regard to increasing private equity buy-outs in higher education (OBHE, 2007).

5 – Management at Private Providers

This chapter will outline data gathered during interviews with a sample of senior management or owners of private providers of higher education in the UK. The first section describes the research procedure and explains the sample chosen; the second section presents common data on the sample providers; the third section develops a thematic analysis of the interviews conducted. The research outlined here complements the interviews with staff and students presented in Chapter 6. It has been acknowledged elsewhere that gaining access to private institutions for research purposes is challenging (in reference to for-profit institutions, Pusser, 2005; Kinser, 2006b); the particular challenges faced in this research will be discussed briefly in this chapter and more fully in chapters seven and eight.

5.1 Interviews with senior management personnel – executives and entrepreneurs

The qualitative interviews section of the research commenced with 'head persons' at a range of alternative providers (termed 'executives' in the remaining sections). This allowed a good starting point for a 'phased entry' into case study organisations so that subsequent interviews with staff and students at institutions could be facilitated from the 'top'. In addition to the advantage of having direct contact with the executive in order to facilitate further access to staff and students, these interviews provided new data, as there are no previous research studies published using data from interviews with executives at alternative providers in the UK, and also gave an insight into the views of the people who lead in this sub-sector of UK HE. Of course, to a certain extent it is possible to be already aware of some of their views as some of the respondents have high profile positions and have multiple opportunities for getting their voices heard. For example, some of the executives have written articles in the *Times Higher Education*, and other specialist publications. However, the interview data generated goes beyond the deliberated public communication of an argument for private HE or the response to HE policy, as the questions asked were the researcher's own and further probing questions enabled a more in-depth interrogation of the experiences and perceptions of this group of executives.

Using a list of over 200 identified alternative providers in the UK as the sampling frame, internet searches were used to draw up lists of appropriate contacts for hard-copy letters

to be sent out. Letters were sent to 38 providers explaining the purpose of the research and with a request to take part in a telephone interview, as it was anticipated with typical response rates for this kind of research that this number of invitations would result in adequate numbers of executive interviews. The letter was sent to a cross section of alternative providers that covered a range of 'types', such as distance learning specialists, large institutions, small institutions, those based in London and in other regions in the UK, those offering programmes across a broad range of subjects and those that specialise in particular disciplines. A small number of executives responded directly to the initial letter. Follow-up emails and telephone calls pushed up the number of interviews scheduled (n=14). Because of the nature of the interviews – qualitative and in-depth, covering a wide range of issues – it was felt that 14 was sufficient for the purposes of the exercise, especially as the respondents represented a good cross section of large and small providers based in difference locations in the UK. The main issue for the representativeness of the sample was non-response to the invitation to take part. As Bryman suggests, 'the problem with non-response is that those who agree to participate may differ in various ways from those who do not agree to participate' (Bryman, 2012: 188). Taking this into account, the data generated from these interviews should be viewed with caution in that these respondents form a particular subset within the population of executives of alternative providers operating in the UK and may not be 'typical', despite attempts to ensure a good cross section of respondent 'types'; further it is not possible to extrapolate from this knowledge the possibility of differences or similarities in perceptions and views from those who did not take part in the study. Nonetheless, the sample interviewed represents a good cross section of for-profit and not-for-profit providers of different sizes, locations and disciplinary focus.

Interviews were conducted with 'head' persons at 14 alternative providers, usually the CEO or principal, over an eight week period in 2012. All participants were male despite invitations being sent out to the small number of women who head alternative providers in the UK. Seven out of the top ten private providers identified in the HESA survey of 2010 are represented in the interviews with head persons. Therefore we can see that the views of larger, more established or more 'successful' providers are over- represented in the study and the views of smaller or less successful providers are underrepresented (although, as Table 41 shows, the executives interviewed come from providers of a wide range of sizes).

Table 36 lists the executive participants by provider, company status, job title, time in position and previous experience. The table also indicates the participant codes used in the reporting for quotes in later sections. The average time at the provider for the sample was 11 years: the longest time 36 years and shortest was six months. This level of experience is relevant to the quality of the responses given in that most of the executives interviewed have many years of experience working at the provider and can therefore be seen to offer in-depth information (not only from their position of seniority but also in a temporal sense).

Table 36: Executive participants' information

Company status	Job title	Time in position	Previous experience	Code
For-profit	Principal	30+ years	Education	X1
For-profit	Chief executive	10-14 years	Solicitor	X2
For-profit	Director	4 years or less	Accountant	X3
For-profit	Chief executive/Principal	5-9 years	Higher Education	X4
For-profit	Chief executive	15-29 years	Higher Education	X5
Not-for-profit	CEO	5-9 years	Higher Education	X6
Not-for-profit	Chief Executive and Principal	5-9 years	Higher Education	X7
Not-for-profit	Chief Executive	4 years or less	Education charity	X8
For-profit	CEO	15-29 years	Higher Education	X9
Not-for-profit	Principal	15-29 years	Media	X10
Not-for-profit	Vice Chancellor	10-14 years	Higher Education	X11
Not-for-profit	Director	10-14 years	Media	X12
For-profit	Principal	4 years or less	Education	X13
For-profit	Managing Director	5-9 years	Corporate	X14

Seven of the fourteen providers follow a for-profit model of operation, the remaining seven are not-for-profit (although one of these is currently in the process of moving to a for-profit model); thus, there is a 50/50 split. This proportion of for-profit and not-for-profit is representative of the sample frame of UK private providers (as outlined in Table 17 in section 4.2.2). Nine of the fourteen (64 per cent) have some experience in education previously – six of those from the HE sector. One of the respondents worked his way up the company to become CEO and principal from a lecturer position, but most executives or entrepreneurs interviewed for the study either established the education provider themselves or came in at the top position either through the recruitment process or from the purchase of the business. Three of the fourteen executives interviewed for the study wished to remain anonymous in reporting of the data, so it was decided to anonymise all respondents.

The interview schedule covered a range of aspects (see Appendix A: Interview schedule for head person), including;

- About the person (role, length of service, previous employment)
- About the organisation (years running, numbers of staff)
- About the education (development of curriculum, delivery, QA, assessment)
- About the students (how many, background data, recruitment, support)
- About relationship to other organisations (government, universities, employers)
- Gain access to further information and interviews with tutors and students.

As much information as possible was collected prior to the interview so that time could be spent focusing on gaining information that is not easily available so as to not waste time during the interviews. The schedule included in the Appendix A formed the basis of a template that could be amended according to the provider and person being interviewed. For example, in the interview with persons based at a provider that has a focus on online provision, more questions were included on this aspect. In addition to this tailoring of the interview schedule prior to interview, judgement was made during interviews on appropriate lines of questioning and probing as is appropriate in semi-structured interviews.

The data generated in these interviews and those with staff and students have been transcribed and analysed using a dual approach: first, using the data as a source of *information* that may be understood to ‘represent reality’ in that, especially for the

executives, we can use responses as a source of directly comparable and sometimes quantitative material; second, a thematic analysis identifies *attitudes, experiences* and *perceptions* that are to some extent shared between the sample under analysis. Accessing and analysing quantitative and qualitative data using these approaches allows for a two-pronged immersion in the phenomena in question and helps to 'open up', confirm and corroborate the data and concepts generated.

In detail, the analysis of the interview data was carried out on transcriptions of interviews. Initially substantive coding was performed, whereby the transcripts were read and coded 'freely', which resulted in a large number of concepts. At the same time, the collation of the comparable and/or quantifiable information was carried out (see section 6.1.1. for results). The concepts were regrouped and renamed where appropriate, which resulted in a smaller group of concepts that were utilised during the selective coding phase of the analysis. It should also be noted that during the analysis cross-sample aspects were picked up and made note of – for example, where teaching staff talked about the providers' research culture, this was cross-analysed with the executives responses with regard to the organisation's view on research. Once the selective coding had been conducted, themes were developed and analysed in the sections below.

Over the course of the interviews with head persons at the 14 providers, further access for carrying out interviews with teaching staff and students was negotiated. It was found that whilst initial responses were positive (only one person dismissed the possibility outright), once information was provided about the proposed interviews, the head people chose to withdraw from this part of the study. The providers that agreed to take part in the interviews with staff and students form the case studies described in the section 6.1.

5.1.1. Common data on sample providers

This section overviews the comparable data collecting during the interviews with executives. This includes information about: the establishment and development of the organisation; contact with QAA, universities, DAP and University title; information about staff; information about the education they provide; and student data. An analysis of this data will contextualise the thematic analysis of interview data.

Information on the participants' institutions shows that four providers were established in the last 13 years (2000-2013), two have roots going back over a hundred years and the majority (n=8) were established in the mid to late twentieth century (1950-1999). Comparing this sample with the sample frame outlined in detail in section 4.2.2., that presents the research results conducted on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (see BIS, 2013), we can see that, in this sample of providers, older institutions are slightly over-represented: providers established more than ten years ago account for just over half of the sample frame, but over two thirds of the sample.

Four of the interviewees were directly responsible for the establishment of the provider, three of which have been in operation since 2000. Six providers (X5, X6, X9, X10, X12 and X13) have origins in professions/industry (see table 37). Some of the common changes since establishment include: rebranding/name changes (including university title); acquiring DAP; development of HE; acquisitions by larger companies or private equity firms; expansion of provision and moves into the home student market from an international student base.

When asked about who they consider to be the main competition, there was a varied response. For example, some mentioned UK universities, some specifically London-based, others consider the international market more important. Six respondents mentioned other private providers and four mentioned traditional universities. One respondent suggested that his institution was unique and therefore could not specify who their competitors might be.

Table 37: Sample providers' establishment, development and perceived competition

Code	Circumstances of establishment	Major changes since establishment	Main competition
X1	Established by person interviewed	Major investment by private equity and rebranding	No information available
X2	Established by person interviewed	Name change	Kensington College of Business and Holborn College
X3	Established by person interviewed	Focus on home students rather than international students as a result of UKBA policies	Other private providers, BITE, some HEFCE funded universities in London who offer foundation level programmes
X4	Established by person interviewed	No information available	No information available
X5	Set up by the professional society who was unsatisfied with how universities taught the subject. Professional education separate from academic study of the subject.	Acquiring DAP, and enrolling students onto degree programmes and gaining university status	Other private providers
X6	Set up by UK companies who wanted to create a management school for working professionals	DAP awarded, over last five years expansion	Private providers and traditional universities
X7	Historically a study abroad site for an overseas college. The campus was the site of a number of separate colleges until they were joined together	Major upheaval with reestablishment as single charity. Established new schools. Gained university status.	College unique, no competition. There is competition for individual programmes.
X8	Established as an open distance learning college	Recent development of HE from a basis of more 'casual' programmes of learning	The Interactive Design Institute, a private sector online arts college. Or with the local HE provider that is local to the student.
X9	Accountancy training company	Movements into new disciplines and the development of HE. DAP granted. Recently became part of large global education company.	Former Polytechnics
X10	Established by a professional body	Charity status, move from examination focus, to providing education, name change. DAP and university status awarded	No specific institution mentioned. 'Everyone' and London-based institutions.
X11	Established around the concept of the independent private universities in the USA	Achieved university status	No information available
X12	Established by film technicians in London	Became educational charity.	Film schools around the world
X13	Established as provider of city and guilds and edexcel working and training programmes	The development of UG and PG HE for international market	No information available
X14	Established as a music institute	Renamed, expansion of focus.	Other private providers

Table 38 outlines the level of QAA audit, validation relationships with traditional universities, and also indicates if the providers have DAP and University title. The QAA

has performed a full institutional review for ten of the fourteen providers in the sample. Three are subjected to educational oversight and the remaining provider has only had contact with the QAA via their validation partners. Six of the providers have DAP and four have gained university title (including one where the provider has University College status). These figures show that the providers in the sample are to a certain extent fully engaged with HE in terms of auditing, being able to award their own degrees and being a university. This engagement resulted in some very interesting discussions over the course of the interviews, as will be described in more detail in the section on contact with government and views on higher education policy. Certainly the providers in this sample see the benefits of engaging fully in the sector, not least because of the perception of an 'uneven playing field' – a common theme in the interviews was that private providers are subjected to rules that are not fairly applied to them in the HE sector. This theme is outlined in detail in section 5.1.2.

Table 38: Sample providers' formal contact with QAA, traditional universities and DAP/university title status

Code	QAA report	Validation partnerships	Degree awarding powers	University title
X1	Full institutional review	With publicly-funded HEIs	no	no
X2	Educational oversight	With publicly-funded HEIs	no	no
X3	Educational oversight	With professional accreditation bodies	no	no
X4	Educational oversight	With professional accreditation bodies	no	no
X5	Full institutional review	NA	yes	yes
X6	Full institutional review	With publicly-funded HEIs and With professional accreditation bodies	yes	no
X7	Full institutional review	NA	yes	yes
X8	Indirect contact through validation partner institution	With publicly-funded HEIs	no	no
X9	Full institutional review	NA	yes	yes
X10	Full institutional review	NA	yes	University College status
X11	Full institutional review	NA	yes	yes
X12	Full institutional review	With publicly-funded HEIs	no	no
X13	Full institutional review	With publicly-funded HEIs	no	no
X14	Full institutional review	With publicly-funded HEIs	no	no

Table 39 presents data on the numbers of staff – including full-time, part-time, and temporary staff – proportions in different job families where available (academic staff, support staff) and also more qualitative information on how they foresee changes in how they arrange their staff in the future (see table 39). The numbers of staff show the huge variance in size for the providers in the sample, the smallest employing around 14 staff, the largest employing over 700. Heidi data for 2011/12 on the ratios of academic and

non-academic staff in publicly-funded HEIs show that academic staff on average account for 46 per cent of employees: the highest rate is over 58 per cent at Kings College London (Heidi, 2013)[17], which may be offered as an indication that the ratios of academic and non-academic staff at private providers indicated in table 39 are broadly in line with trends in the UK HE sector.

In some cases the number of 'staff' is misleading as the institution actually takes on many more casual teaching staff as visiting lecturers (as is the case for X12). The model of using core teaching staff and supplementing these with casual contracts is usual across the providers – this allows the providers to respond to student numbers and also get 'industry-relevant' lecturers. This final notion of teaching staff as foremost professionals in their respective industry is explored more fully in the thematic analysis below. However, it is helpful to point out now that these issues have an impact on future plans for the recruitment of staff.

Most executives talked about the relationship between the student recruitment levels and the staffing arrangements. Some executives talked about the need to take on more fulltime academics (X1, X8, X9 and X13), whereas others explicitly stated that they would continue using the model they currently use that relies on a core of teaching staff and casual appointments (X14). The desire to change the make-up of the teaching staff towards more fulltime academic posts may reflect a desire for the institution to take the next step towards 'legitimacy', as three of the four listed above do not currently have DAP and another is looking to gain full university title – the makeup of teaching staff is something that is taken into consideration by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills or the Privy Council when making decisions about DAP and university status, as is the level of education of teaching staff. One of the executives (X6) at an institution looking to gain further ground in HE is actively changing the kinds of lecturers they recruit – from purely professional people to those that have both professional and teaching experience.

[17] Authors own analysis. Ratios were calculated using FTE figures, not headcount: this should be taken into account when making a comparison with the data provided by executives on private providers.

Table 39: Sample providers' staff information

Code	no. staff	Staff proportions	Foresee changes in staffing
X1	51-200	information not provided	Yes, engaging more full-time faculty
X2	14	9 lecturers, 4 administration staff and the CEO	Increases in hours for teaching so student can have more one-to-one contact with students. Staff numbers will increase in relation to the numbers of students
X3	30	12 FT, 18 PT, 80% academic	depends on student recruitment
X4	14	10 teaching staff 4 non-academic staff	no
X5	700	400 teaching, 300 support.	no information available
X6	600	300 academic (one third full-time, two thirds part-time), 100 support staff, 200 hospitality staff	Will look for academic staff with both professional and HE experience, whereas previously the emphasis was solely on professional background
X7	500	300 academics, 200 professional and support staff	Numbers will increase in line with increases in student numbers in order to maintain the staff student ratio.
X8	144	128 part time tutors and 16 head office staff	Considering taking on more full-time staff in response to growing student numbers and also that students are studying for qualifications
X9	337 academics in the university arms of the business, another 700 tutors for test preparation courses	No numbers of support staff. 90% Full-time, 10% part-time	Moves towards more permanent academics rather than part-time temporary lecturers
X10	140	no breakdown for academic/support staff	None foreseen
X11	330	130 academics and 200 support staff	Will maintain staff student ratios
X12	39	33 full-time, 9 part-time and they also take on approx. 70 visiting lecturers	None foreseen
X13	150	90 academic staff.	Yes, will look at changing existing model that operates around small number of core faculty with larger cohort of visiting lecturers
X14	130	80 academics (majority self-employed) 50 support and management	Will probably take on more staff, but will maintain the kind of contracts available - temporary, casual.

Table 40 outlines the level of education on offer, in which disciplines and the mode of delivery. It also includes some information on future plans with regard to the subjects and modes of delivery. The majority of providers offer education in only a narrow range of subjects (11/14), with three providers offering a wider range of disciplines (two of these have DAP and university status): those that have more than four distinct disciplines on offer are defined as 'broad' in this table, however, it is acknowledged that broad in this context is still narrow in comparison to the disciplinary coverage of most

HEIs in the UK. The majority of providers in the sample offer education primarily face-to-face, however a small number have a greater emphasis on the use of ICTs as a means of delivering distance education using a blended learning or wholly online approach (X6, X8, X9, X10). Even in instances where the provider is primarily delivering education via traditional methods, many supplement this with online provision. Many also have plans to develop online learning further than their current approach. Other future developments mentioned by executives are with regard to the disciplines and level they focus on.

Table 40: Sample providers' programme information and disclosed future plans

Code	Programme levels	Disciplines/subjects	Mode of delivery	Future disciplines	future modes
X1	FE, UG, PG	Broad: Business and Management, finance and accounting, law, travel and tourism, IT, HR, health services management	mainly FT on campus	None mentioned	VLE launched 2013. Blended learning is something they are developing and also wholly online learning at a much earlier stage
X2	Foundation Degrees and UG	Narrow: Law	Face-to-face traditional teaching methods	no plans	Talked about putting lectures online, though concerned this would reduce attendance rates
X3	FE, UG	Narrow: Business. English, Media, Computing	Face-to-face traditional teaching methods	no plans	No plans to go online
X4	FE, PG	Narrow: Business Management, Human Resource Management	Face-to-face traditional teaching methods	no plans	Currently discussing options
X5	UG, PG	Narrow: Professional Legal Studies	Face-to-face and online	no plans to diversify	more developed online provision
X6	UG, PG	Narrow: Business	Online, with some face-to-face teaching	no plans, focus on expanding enrolment on existing programmes	Further development of online provision
X7	UG, PG	Broad; Business, Film and media performance, psychology,	Face-to-face with some blended learning programmes	Plans to establish a law school, possibly a design school, architecture and maybe IT.	Will continue developing online provision that will supplement traditional teaching methods
X8	FE, UG	Narrow: Art and photography	Distance learning	Developing more PG programmes, no plans to move outside of the arts	No plans to change

Code	Programme levels	Disciplines/subjects	Mode of delivery	Future disciplines	future modes
X9	FE, UG	Narrow: Accountancy, Banking and Finance, Law, Business and Management, Health, English language.	Blended learning, online, with some face-to-face teaching	Looking to set up a school of education, also possibility of profession-related doctoral degrees	More online
X10	UG, PG	Narrow: Banking, accounting, finance.	Blended learning, online, with some face-to-face teaching	Plans to add investment finance and risk and from 2014 business related subjects	No information available
X11	UG PG	Broad: Business, law, humanities, science, English, Psychology, Economics etc.	Face-to-face traditional teaching methods	A new medical school is being developed. Once this is complete other schools will be established	No plans to go into online education
X12	PG	Narrow: Film	Face-to-face and learning by doing	No plans to move into UG, or other disciplines	No plans to change
X13	UG PG	Narrow: Business, Computer science, construction management, electronic engineering	Face-to-face with online elements	Currently heavily focused on PG, will be more balanced between UG and PG	They will develop online provision that works for regular and distance learners
X14	FE UG PG	Narrow: Contemporary music performance, song-writing, music business	Face-to-face	No plans	No plans

Table 41 outlines data on students as described by chief executives at the providers. Ten of the executives outlined clear trends and future anticipation of growth in student numbers in their institution – indeed, some reported massive growth. Where the international market has been struggling in response to UKBA rules, providers have been enrolling more home students (some through direct marketing to home students to prop up the institution in light of falling international enrolments). However, some of the smaller providers, who may also be more reliant on international student enrolments, have struggled and have less optimistic views of the future of their institution – a position of survival rather than growth. This is in contrast with other larger providers talking about growth in international student numbers.

Table 41: Sample providers' student data and trends

Code	No. students	Details and Trends
X1	3500	Massive growth; was 1200 in 09/10 and 1400 in 11/12. Was mainly international students but now the majority are home students - 93%
X2	50	Used to be over 300, UKBA impact on international student recruitment. There were 95% international students, now home students account for 40% of student body.
X3	300	Currently majority international students. Trends are stable, survival rather than real growth
X4	76	Majority at FE level, only tiny percentage at PG level. Nearly all from overseas, only 3% home students. Student numbers dropped significantly due to UKBA rule changes.
X5	8000	Overall growth. Approx. 15% of students overseas
X6	6500	The majority of students are doing corporate courses; only 50 are enrolled on PG programmes. Looking to grow PG to 1000. Approx. 60% of students are non-UK
X7	4700	Mainly fulltime students. Enrolments doubled in last five years High numbers of international students from 130 countries worldwide. 10-15% UK students. Looked to increase EU and UK student numbers in response to UKBA rule changes.
X8	2000 students enrol each year.	All part-time. Low numbers of degree completions (23 in 2011) but this figure is set to increase tenfold over the next couple of years. Low percentage of EU/international students 11%. Many of these are expats. Growth in students enrolling in total, and on degree programmes too. Growth in international enrolments.
X9	Recruited 8842 in 2012.	7752 2011-12. 29% international students, 69% female, 22% ethnic minorities (excluding the international students). 73% growth in FTE students in five years. Growth in international students.
X10	Up to date data not provided. HESA data shows approx. 1300 UG level students and another 16000 at FE level, all distance learning.	Full-time numbers going up
X11	1300	60% home 40% international. Was previously much more heavily dependent on international students - in 2004 international students accounted for 70% of the total. Since 2006 growth has been 10% per annum. More postgraduates too.
X12	Around 150 students	25-30% home students, rest are from overseas. Enrolment going up
X13	2900 HE level	500 UG, 2400 PG, majority international students (90%), Home and EU 10%. Growth since 2002, slight dip in 2012 due to UKBA rules and impact on international student market
X14	800	65% UK 20% EU and 15% international. Increasing applications from EU and international students

Looking at the data presented in the tables in this section we can see a picture developing of who the providers are, how they operate and, to a small extent, what they envisage for the future. This provides a useful introduction for the thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data. Some of the topics raised in this section will echo through the following analysis and therefore the responses outlined in section 6.1.2 should be read with this background information in mind.

5.1.2. Thematic analysis of interviews with executives

The following sections will offer a thematic analysis of the interview data generated in interviews with executives.

Challenges in establishing provider: internal and external pressures

The first theme is around the ways the participants talked about the challenges in establishing the business or, if not present since the beginning, the challenges in coming into their present role. Broadly these fall into three subheadings: financial imperatives; cultural change; and challenging external perceptions. Alongside these three concepts some respondents talked about the day-to-day running of the provider, challenges getting staff, accreditation and finding suitable facilities (X2, transcript: 1; X3, transcript: 1), which is especially the case for smaller and newer operations.

For some of the executives, finance was the major challenge in the establishment of the provider. One respondent talked about the personal financial investment in the business (owner/CEO): *'I sold my house to invest back into the business, so it was a combination of personal investment and bank loans that enabled me to get through that period'* (X14, transcript: 2). Another respondent talked about the financial burden of certain requirements for operating as a HE provider in the UK: *'I had a lot of difficulties, the main one being registering with the UKBA, not a difficulty but a challenge. Finding the finance was not easy. It cost me a lot of money to set up initially but I managed to survive'* (X4, transcript: 1); these costs can account for a major portion of the initial capital available for the establishment of the provider, especially in cases where they operate at a small-scale. A usual way of dealing with costs is to get going and enrol students because these providers are reliant upon student fees as there is no other source of income from research, for example:

> *Yes, if you start any new business for the first time ever then it's one long challenge and the challenges haven't stopped […] in the beginning the challenge was getting a student body and recruiting students, we had a stroke of luck in doing that. We got a small group and that got us going and once you have students you can bide your time as there is some money coming in to pay the bills'*. (X1, transcript: 1)

However, some of the sample providers were already established businesses with stable revenue that would act as a funding stream, which meant that the financial situation was less fraught in the beginning. Corporate parent companies or capital investment in this sector tends to become relevant for those private providers who have established themselves through a period of 'entrepreneurship'. For those institutions that have significant roots in professional training bodies, the financial situation is more stable as there is an already established company that can be reshaped for different educational provision.

The second subtheme particularly relevant for participants who have assumed their role in an already-operating business is around the problems of organisational-cultural change. Some of the providers had a history of administrating professional examinations, so the move into higher education has involved a major change in focus to the provision of education (X10, transcript: 1). For example, one respondent remarked: '*you have pretty engrained culture, some of it good, some of it not good, and it takes some time to convert that into the kind of operating ethos that you want'* (X14, transcript: 2). Another, talking about the move from a professional body to being a higher education provider, talked about the major upheavals that were necessary, particularly around the employees of the organisation: '*it was a battle to change the psychology of the organisation … I would say that in the last fifteen years there is hardly anybody left that I inherited'* (X10, transcript: 3). The executives interviewed for this study have, in some cases, many years of experience in management positions in HE. The two quotations above demonstrate the omnipotence of the executives in that they have a clear idea of what the provider should be like and have the power to realise this vision. The autocracy of the executives in some cases is also highlighted in the interviews with staff in the case study providers outlined in section 6.3. At another provider, the executive interviewed was brought in to 'sort out' a problem organisation, which demonstrates a case of necessity not just in regard to moving into the HE sector but in operating correctly as a charitable education provider:

> *There was* [sic] *some difficult periods in the early part of the 2000s, the then chief executive, principal was found to have been abusing the position under the charities act, both the campus and the schools and the charities commission came in and did a fairly major review. The then trustees were then removed; most of them, and the college was re-established in 2006 as a single charity with a single board of trustees'*. (X7, transcript: 1)

Since his appointment, based upon the need to deal with problematic actions, the challenges around cultural change have become less pronounced as the respondent states that the challenges faced since 2006 have been around public engagement and communicating effectively what the college does in terms of discipline focus. Therefore we can see that challenges around cultural change represent a particular period in time and applicable to all sample providers, though this is not to say that this process cannot be ongoing and iterative. What emerges is a picture of an ethos and structure which is seen as ideal – a focused and engaged higher education provider that has a clear business model that focuses on the delivery of programmes of study to students – and that some executives interviewed construct themselves as the individuals responsible for the successful development and reestablishment of the provider.

The final subtheme around the challenges faced in establishing the providers is external perceptions of private HE. Current media and government perceptions of alternative HE provision which are also problematic for the executives interviewed are discussed in more detail later. Here the focus is on the specific challenges in the establishment of the organisation. One respondent suggested that perceptions of 'the professions' were crucial for the recognition and success of the provider and that this relationship was not necessarily 'ready-made' in the beginning but had to be worked on and honed:

> *[W]e've always sort of been fighting for a recognition and a level playing field to our approach. When I first started in the law, I had law firms telling me that they would never send their trainees to a private provider, now there is not one example of where they have done a deal with a public provider; they send exclusively their trainees to the private providers. That was in itself a big issue in the early days. I guess having the audacity to want to be a degree awarding body rather than staying with preparation for professional exams was a big issue. And then there's trying to demonstrate to the sector that we're a responsible provider and we deserve to have a chance. We're constantly having to battle.* (X9, transcript: 4)

This quotation began with the discussion of the perception of the profession (in this case law), but also touched upon 'the sector' meaning the HE sector in the UK and how they (the private providers) have to battle to be taken seriously (perception of not being taken seriously expressed in the comment on having the audacity to apply for degree awarding powers [DAP]) by the HE sector. There is not only the issue of the perception of the provider in terms of being taken seriously but also in becoming a member of the 'community', consisting of HE sector representatives and relevant government

departments. One respondent talked about an extremely unfriendly HE sector (X11, transcript: 2) and the clandestine nature of gaining access to the minister in government at the time of trying to establish the organisation as a private HE provider:

> *For example when we got our royal charter [sic] the minister who gave it to us, we had to deal with him privately, not through the ministry because letters sent to the ministry did not get to the minister, we dealt with him through his private home address, he took our application through to privy council through his own initiative rather than using papers prepared by the civil service, that was how the system was hostile to us.* (X11, transcript: 3)

He goes on to comment that this hostile environment has changed significantly over recent years.

Goals of the organisation: filling market gaps, alignment with industry, seeking legitimation in HE sector

Executives spoke about the goals of the organisation in response to direct and indirect questions on the matter. Responses include discussions of the opportunities in the market and how this feeds into the goal to provide a cheaper alternative to traditional HE or fill market niches, the close alignment with industry needs and the desire to follow particular steps – QAA full institutional review, DAP, university title – to gain legitimacy in the HE sector.

Some of the executives talked about the awareness of the market for a low cost student fees HE provider in the UK and how this knowledge corresponded to their own skills and professional network:

> *I do have experience of higher education and so do my colleagues, I was teaching in a college. We were inclined to go into the higher education industry… I was working as an operations manager of another college and I'd quite closely monitored the change that was going on in the sector… I realised there was quite a good market in the cheap private education sector. I believed I could give the sector a better service so I established my own academy along with my colleagues.* (X3, transcript: 1)

The knowledge of developments in UK HE and the belief in a market gap acted as a catalyst and goal of this provider. Another respondent also talked about cost, but this time in reference to the global HE market: *'I established the college… I wanted to provide low cost high quality education for people from third world countries that were*

unable to afford the higher fees at the mainstream higher education' (X4, transcript: 1). This executive seemed to take a moral standpoint in that he believed he was offering the opportunity to people who cannot afford to attend a traditional UK university. Another provider was established as providing completely open access, distance learning, education in the arts in response to the OU avoiding the arts in their provision. The original purpose of this organisation was something over and above a simple money-making business model of HE providers.

Some of the providers were established in direct response to the needs of industry and/or the profession (X5, X6, X9, X10) and have a clear focus on corporate courses or professional qualifications, but also provide undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) courses. One respondent talked about the interaction with traditional HE governance via QAA and applying for DAP and how the organisation is clear about the purpose of the varying arms of the business, which has a strong focus on professional qualifications: *'we don't want to lose the fact that we are rooted in the professions, that's what we serve, that's our raison d'être, we're not here to do anything other than that'* (X9, transcript: 4). Another goes on to say:

> *Our whole raison d'être is that we produce high quality professional vocational education at degree level, yes we have a strong academic overlay but our focus is to give people degree level qualifications that allow them to do the job. Yes I understand all the arguments that you hear all the time about education for its own sake and it shouldn't be focused on jobs etc. well, that's not where we are. There's an argument for that but that's not who we are.* (X10, transcript: 4)

Despite communicated dissatisfaction with the traditional HE sector these providers are looking to legitimise their UG and PG HE provision by gaining DAP and university title. In some cases there is a quick succession through key objectives; for example one provider was awarded DAP in 2012 and University title in 2013. DAP is viewed as a 'kite mark' for countries around the world in terms of the 'recommended lists', which also has a positive impact on potential partnerships with other colleges and universities around the world (X7, transcript: 6). Furthermore, one provider wishes to go beyond seeking legitimacy in the HE sector to emulate elite universities in student recruitment: '*We have aspirations to become a selecting rather than a recruiting institution'* (X7, transcript: 6). However, this level of aspiration may not be representative of what might

be expected of the sample frame of 200 alternative providers, taking into account the sample bias discussed earlier, as the higher recruiters are over represented in this study.

Establishment and development of curriculum: dual influences of industry requirements and the student market

When asked about curriculum establishment and development in their institutions, the executives talked about the alignment with industry/professional requirements, which is consistent with the previous section on the goals of the organisation and how these are aligned with industry: *'the original curriculum was developed in combination with industry and looking at the availability of programmes and the opportunity in the market... What we try to do is look at the international market, rather than the domestic market and we try and tailor our postgraduate programmes to that particular space'* (X13, transcript: 3). One provider continues a strong tie to industry requirements and sees this as a defining attribute of the education they provide:

> *We have industry advisory groups across all the departments, through freelancers and contacts in the industry. We have a relationship with creative skillset[18], which in some way represents the industry's training priorities, so we try and have a good fit with their strategies.* (X12, transcript: 3)

Another respondent talked about the changes in how curriculum is developed as the provider transforms from a professional education provider to operating in the HE sector: *'Initially we followed the syllabus of the professional bodies… Now we have an academic committee'* (X1, transcript: 2-3).

Despite the response above around the relationship with industry requirements, another element was more crucial: the student market. Many providers are wholly guided by market forces (X11, transcript: 4), and in this objective marketing departments steer the direction of the organisation. As one respondent states:

> *We have to involve marketing, as there's no point developing a course that no-one's interested in… you've got to determine there is a market, you don't want to do development and incur huge costs and find no one want to do the courses. So you got to ascertain there is a market there. The marketing team have processes they go through to research it. Then of course you've got to get the expertise in the area, and potential faculty, so you've got to start engaging with them. When*

[18] Skillset is the name of the relevant Sector Skills Council

> *you're moving into an area you're not used to it's a bit like starting from afresh. It does obviously cost a lot more to do that.* (X1, transcript: 3)

Another goes on in a similar vein:

> *We have an outstanding marketing team here and they clearly monitor the development of the market in this country but also internationally… and we look to see where the probably increases in requirement are going to take place. And we work very closely with employers to see what they want both in terms of the particular curriculum for any individual programme but also where there are gaps and this feeds into our course development process.* (X7, transcript: 2)

Another talks about how they can make some significant changes in the curriculum that is developed and the disciplines they offer or do not offer to potential students:

> *We used to teach sciences, but the market fell out of that, towards the humanities. My view is that it is coming back. You see it in schools that more people are studying physics than years ago […] science at degree level, it would be very difficult to get into that, though I wouldn't rule it out.* (X1, transcript: 3)

Hence the provision offered by this provider can be seen as a kind of barometer of trends in school-leaver qualifications and student interest in pursuing degrees. For some providers, the local student market can represent a smaller microcosm that may differ from the national and global market. For example, in an interview with a member of teaching staff at one of the providers, it was mentioned that there was a key influence of the student market in the local area on the professional part-time courses they provide (A2, transcript: 2-3).

Perceptions of teaching staff as primarily professionals

The main themes with regard to teaching staff at the sample providers was around the perception that teaching staff are primarily professionals in their respective industry, the contract-types available to existing and potential employees and the impact of student numbers on the recruitment of academic staff. A common response to questions about how the executives manage staffing is that staff levels are dependent on student numbers (X3, transcript: 2), referring to the need to maintain staff student ratios (X7, transcript 3), this is also supported by the information outlined in table 39 in section 5.1.1.

Quantitative data on student staff ratios have not been published for private providers in the UK[19].

Another common theme communicated was the concept of teaching staff as primarily professionals in their respective field rather than higher education lecturers, as is the case in the majority of HE, and this was often wrapped up in discussions about the contractual arrangements for staff: the justification for low levels of FT teaching staff is because they are professionals who need more open working arrangements. The emphasis was thus firmly on the experiential contribution of the teaching staff rather than their expertise or credentials as educators. One respondent, talking about the high levels of part-time tutors, explains that staff can increase the number of students they tutor to work full-time hours but many choose not to because, for example, they are practising artists/photographers or they may be working in HE elsewhere (X8, transcript: 2). Another respondent highlighted the switching between industry and teaching his staff members are expected to do and how this directly relates to the education provided: '*We do it so that everyone who comes here are taught by someone who has practised law… people go backwards and forwards as visiting lecturers and practicing'* (X5, transcript: 2). Another states:

> *There is the argument of whether you should have teaching staff on employment contracts, but frankly the benefits that they bring to the classroom because they are engaged in industry work, don't get me wrong they have to go through qualifications and training like any other teachers, but the values that they bring as self-employed contractors are very significant in our particular sector.* (X14, transcript: 3)

For these providers the contracts available to staff are a direct result of executives' perceptions of educational requirements and also views of what make a good member of teaching staff. However, we may also see that the way the contracts are arranged gives teaching staff little choice, as they must piece together a portfolio career in order to remain attractive to the alternative provider as an employer (keep their professional experience up to date) and also to have enough money to live (staff members interviewed for this study talk about professional identity and financial struggles, which are outlined in section 6.2.).

[19] Heidi (2013) data for 2011/12 shows that the average student:staff ratio in UK HEIs is around 20:1.

In contrast to some of the responses above that bring to the fore professional experience of teaching staff and how this links to contractual arrangements; some respondents have acknowledged the issues these types of contracts raise:

> *I personally am not a big fan of using freelance temporary lecturers, so I am fighting a battle to make sure that our permanent faculty number is high 'cause my view is that that extra work you need to do as a personal tutor, setting an exam or writing course materials always gets dumped on full-time faculty, so if you end up with an imbalance with freelancers it's not fair for those of us who are permanent employees. I suspect over time we'll end up with more and more freelancers, but I'm not a big fan of that.* (X9, transcript: 5)

This view relates directly to his own experience when he worked as a lecturer. Another respondent talks about changes that are planned for teaching contracts: '*We are changing our staffing, drastically. We are engaging much more full-time faculty than we did in the past, we tended to use sessional or fractional lecturers, but we are now getting a good cohort of full-timers in'* (X1, transcript: 2). The plans for these providers to increase the availability of fulltime contracts, which is present in four of the interviews, reflects a sense of optimism about the future for these companies in terms of student numbers and financial security and may also be linked to the desire to acquire DAP/University title. None of the four providers who talked about increasing the availability of fulltime contracts was 'small' in comparison with the whole sample (this group of four had on average 192 staff; 4600 students), so it may be that once providers get to a certain size they feel more confidence about offering fulltime contracts to teaching staff.

Another interesting comment about teaching staff made by one executive was the impact of DAP and university title in terms of staff recruitment:

> *A lot of staff have been reticent about stepping outside of the state-funded sector because they see it as potentially damaging to their career. I can see from application figures from staff that people are having second thoughts about that particularly in relation to the difficulties of getting good employment in the sector as a whole. A lot of institutions are reducing their academic staffing and indeed their very good professional support staff. So it makes it easier to get good staff.* (X7, transcript: 6)

This suggests that gaining legitimacy with the HE sector is a cyclical process whereby steps made with regard to governance and classification (QAA reviews, DAP and university title) make it easier to attract academic staff, whose presence feeds into the

internal and external perceptions of the provider and makes further inroads in the HE sector possible.

Even though questions about staff were asked over the course of the interviews, the subject seemed to be of less interest to the respondents than questions around students and this therefore generated much less material than that outlined in other sections. The reasons for this are not clear and cannot be logically deduced from the interview data itself. There are two potential reasons for this: firstly that the respondents elaborated less on this matter as it was something they either did not wish to talk about or had little to say (perhaps this is not something they are used to talking about, whereas questions around students, etc. are more usual); second, the questions asked by the interviewer were not probing enough and not enough follow up questions specifically on staff were asked. A focus on students rather than staff may to a certain extent reflect the demand-driven market-focused approach adopted by the private providers, whereas the traditional HE sector is more concerned with supply and professional standards.

Blended and distance learning: interest in developments, awareness of drawbacks

Elaborating on the information available in table 40 in section 5.1.1., the executives described how blended and online learning is a reality for the students they teach. For those not already operating in this way it is being seriously considered within the strategy for the provider. Some respondents talked about the impact of the OU with regard to distance learning and used their provision as a model: '*we wanted to get into the whole business of education…. We modelled the course very much along the lines of distance learning and the Open University'* (X10, transcript: 2). In fact, one of the executives had worked for the OU and used that experience to feed into decisions in their current role. Another provider was born out of the OU in the sense that the person who was responsible for the establishment also played a key role at the OU. The OU was also mentioned in the interviews with staff and students, which in a small way demonstrates the impact the OU has had on the UK HE landscape (being currently the largest in terms of student numbers by a huge margin).

Some of the providers have experience in online distance education and have their own particular approach to how they manage this process:

> *We've been doing online learning for corporate customers for a long time, there are about one hundred companies that are subscribers… we've been doing online masters in management for about four years now … the problem we have is that there is a lot of interaction… so the question becomes how we bring that atmosphere to online provision … it is hybrid programmes, the material is problem based rather than subject focused. We use Blackboard*[20] *and we have created our own learning environment, that is a little bit messier, it is a different approach from 'you must submit your work online by a certain time' etc. The QAA loves it.* (X6, transcript: 3)

Others make a distinction between online learning and distance learning and take a slightly different approach to how they administrate the programmes: there is the expectation that ICTs will be used but the programme materials are sent hardcopy to students, which is supplemented by access to an assigned tutor:

> *Our delivery is open learning, but not online learning. Essentially a student will get printed materials and a relationship with a tutor. They are required to have internet access, and a lot of communication with the tutor and research will be done online. But the actual modules aren't accessed online.* (X8, transcript: 3).

This approach is more in line with previous distance learning methods based on pre-internet modes of communication than the more innovative approach adopted at the previous provider.

Executives raised a number of perceived advantages of a blended learning approach, where online elements supplement face-to-face contact. For example, one respondent highlighted the concept of online education as a <u>resource</u>, something that can be accessed any time during the programme of study and how this might help those students who are struggling: '*if you fall behind in something there [are] systems that help you get through'* (X13, transcript: 5). Another executive perceived the development of online education as a <u>tool</u> through which student markets can be accessed regardless of location. X5 talked about how the programmes are already delivered in part online,

[20] Blackboard is an online platform developed by Blackboard Inc. that combines a virtual learning environment with programme management, usually used as a means of allowing access to educational content and a communication tool.

one-to-one tutorials, which enables them to deliver to students who are based in different countries:

> *In the long term we will probably offer more online, give incentives for people sitting at home or working around the world engaging with students. It's all about flexibility. There are countless different routes to our courses, we're got full time orthodox, part time evenings and weekends, online, two days' versions, a version, every version… my staff know they are there to deliver to the students and if we don't adapt they'll be out of jobs, so we have to adapt.* (X5, transcript: 2)

The characteristics of ICT as a tool to enable access is also supplemented by the concept of flexibility, which is particularly relevant to the students interviewed for this study (see section 7.1.). As one respondent states:

> *A significant number of our students actually start in face-to-face HE and transfer into us. [asked why] usually because of one of two reasons, although they can study part-time, it's not part-time enough, they are not finding the flexibility they need to fit it into their life. The second reason is what I would call life events, so people studying full-time they do a year, and something happens like they become ill, and when they are at a point where they want to study again, they need a more flexible option.* (X8, transcript: 2)

In both examples X8 uses, flexibility is paramount: the flexibility to fit education into your own life. It is asserted that distance and blended learning can enable those who would otherwise be unable to study in HE due to work/life commitments or geographical location. It is interesting that this respondent highlights that even part-time study in traditional HE is often not flexible enough for the students his provider recruits. We can see from the two previous quotations that it is perceived that online, distance learning is a tool through which student markets that are under-served by traditional HE can be accessed: the international student market; and the adult (professional/mature/working) student market; or a combination of the two categories – adult students overseas.

There were other comments made by executives that were more measured in their endorsement of the distance, online learning model, citing the necessity for students to have some direct contact with staff and other students over the course of study: '*we see online as a complement to face to face, as opposed to a replacement to it.'* (X7, transcript: 4). He goes on to talk about his experience as a part-time tutor at the OU and how this made him see the importance of face-to-face contact for students, not only in

terms of educational support, but also social support and the experience of mixing with people across disciplines (X7, transcript: 4-5). Another respondent reiterates this point:

> *The trend is to do more online, although our approach is more of a blended learning approach. Research that we've done indicates that even distance learning online students want to have some kind of physical face to face tuition at some point during their studies.* (X9, transcript: 6)

This provider has done their own research on online learning and found that most students want face-to-face contact, even those who were enrolled on online programmes. The respondent goes on to talk about one of their biggest selling educational 'products' across the test preparation business, 'Live online', where students can have an online appointment with a tutor, also suggesting this may impact on how the UG programmes are delivered. The definite and clear need for students to access learning support and teaching staff directly in synchronous modes suggests limits to how far education can be delivered online, thus this provider foresees how additional 'products' that allow direct access to tutors can supplement those programmes that are wholly delivered online.

The concept of innovation in the field of distance, online learning, is a matter of keen interest to the executives interviewed and the wider HE sector more generally. One of the executives interviewed also has a key role as an educational adviser and promoter for a separate online learning company. When asked about how this relates to his role he stated:

> *At the present moment I'm not being paid for that, it's a role of love really. I think my own interest in this area is I think technology and online simulations etc. have a long way to go and offer some exciting possibilities.… … there's a lot more out there for an alternative approach to learning… you've got different platforms to use… by nature not all universities will be able to make that transition quickly because of the nature of the validation processes and resource implications, whereas commercial organisation might be able to drill down investment and make it work effectively.* (X13, transcript: 1)

Thus, for this executive the development of innovative online learning may represent a golden opportunity for private providers of HE to make headway in the sector and compete with traditional universities.

Perceptions of students: recruitment, and the step-change required to educate undergraduates and home students

When talking about the students, executives highlighted a number of themes; first, with regard to recruitment, the careful selection and matching of students to courses that takes place; second, the challenges of moving into UG HE where they come from a different educational market (for example, professional PG education); and third, where the balance between international and home student enrolment swings towards the latter, this also raises particular issues for how they operate, especially for those recruiting rather than selecting institutions.

With regard to recruitment, many of the providers spoke about students being interviewed prior to enrolment (X1, transcript: 5; X3, transcript: 2) and some take part in online interviews (X9, transcript: 8). This selective recruitment is described as having a positive influence on retention and success rates: for example, one provider is very selective, has high fees (£24k per year for two years) (X12, transcript: 6), and high success rates (see table 41 in section 5.1.1.). Another respondent explains a reason for this strategy: '*We are very aware of how everybody looks at our bit of the sector and we're keen not to take on students who don't have good prospects of success'* (X9, transcript: 9). Some providers talked about a focus on matching potential students to programmes to ensure a good fit:

> *We put a lot of effort into making sure we attract people who understand what they are being attracted to. One of the major features of our blog is to bring it home to people that this is HE study and requires commitment, reflective thought – it's the same intellectual challenge as attending a face-to-face institution. In our advertising approach, we are seeking to maximise the match between people who are going to benefit with who enrols… we have a small team of people who advise, if they ring up and they're interested in enrolling. There are a number of components of what they're doing which is helping people work out for themselves whether they are ready for that commitment and that level of challenge.* (X8, transcript: 5).

Most providers have experience delivering other types of education: for example, professional qualifications, test preparation, FE level education, usually providing education to non-traditional students (older, working) and moving into undergraduate provision from that base. Some respondents talked about the impact that the move into UG level has on how they operate, due to perceptions about 'traditional' UG level students:

> *Undergrads probably need a bit more support I would have thought, that's our experience. If I look back over the last five years it has taken us by surprise… undergraduates are less prepared to study than the undergraduates I remember teaching, prior to 1997 even [asked what they do about this] we have a rigid regime, to improve progression.* (X9, transcript: 6)

He goes on to talk about how this move into the traditional student market was not foreseen:

> *When we were acquired by Apollo many thought we were going to follow an Open University type approach and sort of recruit online students who were part-time and in employment but that's not really been our strategy, we've more or less gone for a classic full-time student who was career orientated [asked why] it was the market that we felt comfortable with and it was the market that responded to us in the offering that we made: career focused law, accounting and finance, they happened to be full-time students. I dare say there is an opportunity for us in the future to start looking at a greater number of part-time students; we've had reasonable success in the full-time market.* (X9, transcript: 6)

A common theme expressed in interviews is that there is the need to vary education provision according to differing age groups and institutions: in institutions where they traditionally deliver to an older student population executives talk about having to change education they provide if more 18-year-olds came to study with them

> *You know it's a very different challenge for students coming for their first experience of HE who probably does have labour market outcomes in mind, that's a different challenge for an organisation to support that student to support the student who has already had a successful career following on from a degree thirty years ago.* (X8, transcript: 8)

Hence the move into undergraduate higher education may involve a complete shift in organisational culture with regard to how the programmes are delivered and administrated.

Another theme related to providers making a step-change in response to changing student demographics is with regard to international and home students. Many of the providers talked about themselves as international institutions (X12, transcript: 1), hence they feel comfortable providing education to international students and are clear about what is required. The common view was that a move towards recruiting more home students will impact provision:

> *Well it will only make it even more challenging in the sense that UK students, they've gone through educational system in the UK and they know what is required and their expectations are higher. So which means that you just can't put any lecturer in front of them, they know the difference, they are familiar with the system in this country and what it's supposed to be. So it makes us even more, pay more attention to the quality assurance part of things as against if somebody is coming in from abroad, who probably doesn't really understand UK educational system, you can put anything in front of him or her, he or she would still think it's fine. But when you deal with UK students, you cannot put anything in front of them because they know the difference.* (X2, transcript: 4)

A similar view was expressed by X13;

> *I think that's a big challenge for us, both in the facilities that domestic students will expect us to have, it means an organisational shift and development. And in terms of pace and momentum of learning, we're based on the fact of self-motivated students who are paying for their programmes will see us much more as client-provider relationship, that is familiar to us.* (X13, transcript: 4)

He goes on to talk about the problems of getting students engaged with learning outside of class and coming prepared to lectures and seminars, which is seen as particularly acute for home students.

Widening participation: students fees, student data

Linked to the previous section, which outlines some perceptions of students with regard to education level and status, are views on the socio-economic demographic of the students they enrol. Executives were asked about the student demographic, whether they keep track of widening participation in their institution, and what their general views on this are. Overall, the impression garnered from the interviews suggests that widening participation is not a priority for the sample providers. Many have very low levels of students from lower socio-economic groups, or do not collect such data on the background of their students. Student fees and bursaries were a main theme within this topic and also the need to provide extra support for such students; usually these were spoken about as a future potentiality rather than a concrete experience of their institution. Ultimately it may be that a customer is a customer regardless of background or socioeconomic status.

The first issue when asking about widening participation is about the type of data they collect on students; this varied between institutions. Some collect data and do analysis according to postcodes of students:

> *Yes we keep track. We know what proportion already have difference levels of qualification. We also do an analysis by postcode. This is of less interest to our validating universities that when I first joined. When I first joined in 2008, [private provider] were very interested in the proportion of our students who lived in postcodes defined as deprived areas… [asked about numbers of students who fall in this category] it was about 12% of students who were living in those postcodes defined as deprived areas when I last looked at it.* (X8, transcript: 5)

The 12 per cent figure stated by this respondent represents a figure in line with national figures of around 10 per cent on representation of 'underrepresented groups' from low participation neighbourhoods in UK HEIs (HESA, 2013). The collection and analysis of data in this case seems to be in direct consequence of the provider's validation agreement with a traditional HEI. In other cases executives were not able to answer questions about widening participation. For some this is the result of inadequate systems to hold student data: '*I will be the first to admit that we are not at the forefront of this. We've just had a new management information system which we'll be bringing online in January, BANNER, hopefully that's going to improve things'* (X9, transcript: 8). Despite this concession, he was able to provide detailed information about numbers of women and ethnic minorities – data on socio-economic background was less readily available in this instance as this data is held at school level for this provider (the information provided is outlined in Table 41 above). Others do not keep track on backgrounds of students and they *'don't set goals around inclusivity'* (X13, transcript: 5). One respondent raised the issue that it is difficult to keep track of widening participation if you have high numbers of international students (X12, transcript: 5).

Executives described some variances they see in the student demographics:

> *There are some UK students who work pretty much all the way through the programme who've got the Skillset money and have managed to survive, perhaps living on the floor of flats of people who own part of Venezuela. The range is very huge between those people, people who've managed to seize the opportunity and those who see it as a natural thing.* (X12 transcript: 4).

However, for some institutions those from economically disadvantage backgrounds are largely absent. One respondent was asked specifically about the challenges of recruiting

a diverse student body or even widening participation when their students seem to come from a corporate elite. He explains that '*it's really hard when you're doing postgrad post-experience because you get some natural selection – you have to have an undergrad degree so that kind of wipes out a lot of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds…*' (X6, transcript: 4). Therefore with regard to postgraduate professional programmes it may be unlikely that providers could recruit from lower socioeconomic groups as, by definition, the students on these programmes come from a corporate elite.

Thinking beyond this specialist 'elite' subgroup in the student market, executives still report very small numbers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (around 5 per cent for one case, X7, transcript: 7). This respondent goes on to raise the need for bursaries and specific outreach programmes:

> *Our long-term aim is to become fees-blind, like the top American arts colleges, where we judge people on their ability to benefit rather than ability to pay, but you have to collect an awful lot of money to be able to do that and I don't see that happening during my tenure.* (X7, transcript: 7).

A similar view was expressed by another respondent (X11, transcript: 5), hence the hope for widening participation in some of the sample providers is a future aspiration rather than something that is already in place. In fact these providers offer only very small numbers of bursaries (X11, transcript: 5), though the ones that are available no doubt offer a huge help to those who would not be able to afford full student fees. For example, one respondent describes the details of the bursaries in his institution:

> *Creative Skillset changed the fortunes of the school entirely as a public institution because of ten scholarships which brought the annual fees of 24 grand down to 3 grand for those people. We now have five of those at any one time. It's not as many as we'd like to have.* (X12, transcript: 4)

Another provider offers a small number of bursaries, though the executive highlights the lower fees than traditional university degrees, so if they offered bursaries as well '*you're looking ridiculously competitive'* (X14, transcript: 11). The level of student fees in the traditional university sector, for some, suggests that by offering programmes that have lower student fees this will address widening participation in their institution. As one executive puts it:

> *I don't know which car you drive but we can't all drive Rolls Royce, we can't all drive Bentley, some of us will have to drive Mercedes and some will have to drive Golf, which is why not everybody can afford to go to university … because of the very expensive tuition fees they pay there. Some prefer to come to alternative providers like us because we are affordable and we are also doing the business.* (X2, transcript: 8)

By offering low cost opportunities for UG or PG study some of the institutions see themselves as responding to the need for education that is cheaper than that available in traditional HE.

Widening participation was usually equated with the need for extra support and resources:

> *[A]s we increasingly get people from different social backgrounds we need to assess that clearly at the outset and to make sure that we're providing the pastoral care, additional support might be required to make sure that they have a good experience but also to make sure that they don't disturb the experience of the other students. It's a balancing act to make sure all students are well served and integrated.* (X7, transcript: 5)

Another respondent associates widening participation with needing more space and larger classrooms, etc., and suggests that the provider does not have the space (despite previously indicating that they are looking to increase enrolments) and made a comment about there being a really nice restaurant on the site and '*we couldn't have people from pre-experience masters hovering up the food*' (X6, transcript: 4). The light-hearted response to questions about widening participation in this case suggests that there is no desire to address this matter and that this provider and some others in the sample are extremely happy to provide education to a well-off professional elite. Others see the task as beyond the HE sector more generally: '*we can get involved in outreach where possible but I do think that asking universities to solve the problems of the schooling system is a little unfair*' (X14, transcript: 8). This response widens the debate to how far any HEI can deal with this issue when socioeconomic privilege is entrenched well before a person enters higher education, again suggesting that for some providers the issue is considered outside their institutional remit. One of the providers, however, stands out in that it is a wholly open access institution and that anyone can apply regardless of experience or background as part of the remit was to be open to all.

Varied levels of contact with traditional universities

Very few have a lot of contact with universities, notwithstanding validation relationships (for example, X8, transcript: 6; X14, transcript: 8), or progression arrangements as described here: *'a number of universities have given us progression agreements, which is what enables students to go from the foundation programme to other universities, and we have[…] about ten of them in total and we've got others in the pipeline'* (X2, transcript: 7). Some providers tend to collaborate more with other institutions overseas (X12, transcript: 6). Some providers' relationship with other education providers is dependent upon international contacts rather than relationships with UK-based HEIs, for example in student exchange programmes. It was indicated that DAP is important for developing relationships with other HEIs around the world (X7, transcript: 6).

Some respondents talked about higher levels of contact with the university sector: *'Institutionally [I have contact] with quite a few. Personally with many many* more' (X6, transcript: 5). X5 provider has a relationship with the OU. The following quotation demonstrates high levels of contact:

> *We provide materials to several universities who incorporate our programmes into their degree programmes. There are two Russell groups and two new universities. In terms of wider contact we've got something like 70 different universities represented in our external examiner process. We have a programme approval process that involves external academics and we pay people to come and sit on our approval boards to review new programmes. We are external examiners as well.* (X9, transcript: 9-10)

Where there are relationships with traditional HEIs, this can be difficult for providers as the institutions they collaborate with can face difficulties themselves. As one executive explains:

> *The well-publicised events at the [institution removed] has caused us to rethink where we're going because they were going to be one of our significant partners so we have an exit arrangement with them now for 2014, they are withdrawing from the validation process, we had to really think about where we're going. [Institution removed] for a variety of reasons, we're on an exit strategy with them, we're wanting to grow and they are wanting to open a London campus, which wasn't helpful and the [institution removed] programmes we will exit those programmes by 2015. We're in play to change the structure of the whole business, mainly because of the changes in the market place and changes in the direction of our partners as well.* (X13, transcript: 6)

Some stated that building a relationship with universities was something they are interested in developing in the future (X4, transcript: 3). When asked about the lack of contact with other UK HEIs one respondent talked about reluctance of UK HEIs to engage with private providers: *I joke a lot that a lot of people in HE will cross the street to avoid me as I've gone to the dark side, the Darth Vader of HE'* (X7, transcript: 9); he goes on to suggest that this attitude seems to be changing.

Varied levels of contact with employers / industry

Despite the career focus of much of the education on offer at the sample providers there was varied contact with employers and industry reported by the executives interviewed. Some have strong connections with the professions, especially accounting and law (X9, transcript: 10). This respondent goes on to talk about how the law programmes use courtroom simulation to advance the training provided – very focused on practice. Others have more general contact: '*we got lots of relationships from informal to formal'* (X14, transcript: 8). Another law-focused provider states that they have very strong contacts with law firms and that the private sector is very strong in this particular profession (X5, transcript: 5). Others have less contact with employers or industry (X8, transcript: 6) and conceding that '*we should have better relationships, but we're not really into that'* (X11, transcript: 7). One respondent distances his institution from industry despite a background in the profession by saying that *'we only do qualifications, we don't do training programmes'* (X10, transcript: 7), therefore making a distinction between the education delivered at his institution and others within the sector.

Varied contact with government, with some having strong links

Executives were asked about the contact they have with government, and the quality and experience of this contact. Some of the smaller providers talked about there being no direct link with government on policy (for example, X3, transcript: 4), whereas some of the other providers had very good contacts and also engaged with lobbying bodies. For those who have little contact, some explained this as a result of the institution being industry-facing rather than education-facing (X12, transcript: 6); furthermore in this case the disciplinary focus of the provider has an impact on how the institution engages with government departments: '*the question of how you teach film has always been vague in*

any government's mind' (X12, transcript: 6). Therefore it is understood that the government has a clearer position on some disciplines than others, the arts being perceived to be an underdeveloped area in this study.

Providers that did not report direct contact with government mentioned indirect opportunities for influencing policy via other means, such as publishing articles, being involved in lobbying bodies or discipline specific associations: '*I have no contact with BIS, I have no formal contact with them at all. But I am deeply enmeshed in UUK'* (X11, transcript: 7). Another example is as follows:

> *Via the association of business schools, we have done a lot of executive education for a lot of the government departments, so we kind of know them. But no, it's still a trick that's been missed. I haven't seen Willets at all, he said he was going to come and visit me… I try to keep my head down a little bit. I have lots of opinions on funding and undergrad, though I'm more of a commentator, I write about it. I don't hang about Westminster all day trying to solve these problems. I am looking at what we're doing, we're relatively protected from it but I don't think it's the right policy for the country [talking about the UKBA].* (X6, transcript: 6)

This suggests his views are communicated indirectly via his writing in journals; indeed some of the executives have published articles in a number of outlets on matters relating to private provision of higher education in the UK. Another respondent talks about some reasons why the relationship is not as developed as it could be but still reports access to government and also key persons within their own organisational structure:

> *I think historically we've been more focused on overseas markets and getting to understand those. So what we tend to have there is ministers from the overseas countries. We have had UK government ministers there to give plenary sessions as well. So we do mix international and domestic markets there. We do have direct contact with the individual secretary of state, which is limited. On our council we do have three members of the House of Lords and representatives from HEFCE-type organisations, which gives us a good feel for what is going on in policy.* (X13, transcript: 7)

One respondent, when asked about input into HE policy, stated that this occurs '*only on the same basis that public universities do'* (X9, transcript: 10), without giving specifics of what this means. He goes on to state that '*at the moment there isn't a representative body for the private sector cause we're so tiny. We are asked for our views and government seems to want to encourage alternative providers'* (X9, transcript: 10), which suggests that there has been some direct contact with government as his views

have been asked for. Indeed, because the executives interviewed head up some of the more successful private providers of higher education, it is to be expected that they would be approached by government for input or feedback due to the relatively small size of the private HE sector in the UK. However, for some, getting their voice heard is not necessarily straightforward; this respondent was a member of a group that worked on the white paper after a period of repeated lobbying to be involved, and goes on to say:

> *Politically it's very hard because we're small, we might punch above our weight a little bit in certain areas but we're relatively very small. … I don't have a direct line into government, I have some indirect lines into government and I know a few people in a few offices, but part of our strategy is to build those connections because I think our experience is very valuable here in terms of political direction.* (X14, transcript: 9)

Therefore, in providers that do not have good links with government it is suggested that creating and maintaining relationships with government is a future aspiration.

There was a section of the sample that reported very strong connections with government which have been built up over a number of years. One executive, when asked if he has contact with government responded:

> *Of course we do, yeah. We're delivering to their policy agenda. I've had several meetings with David Willets and officials in BIS. […] We've been engaged with the sector for a long time.* (X5, transcript: 5)

Another well-connected provider has various ways of engaging with policy areas that are relevant for the higher education in the UK: '*we have contacts within the UKBA, QAA, BIS, in the home office and we are members of Guild HE which is the representative body for smaller HE institutions which has been very active and positive and helpful and we talk with UUK as well and the UK international higher education unit*' (X7, transcript: 10). These quotations demonstrate the multiple avenues that some executives use to gain access to information about, and exert influence over, the direction of higher education policy. This approach to some extent mirrors the practices of the traditional HE sector. Some providers also reported that they have people within their organisation whose role is specifically to develop and maintain contact and influence with government:

> *We have a special lobby department. We are in and around Whitehall lobbying at all different levels, different departments… it important that we are wired into*

> *the political debate, so yes we have very good contacts. On the university thing, we responded to all four consultation papers in great detail.* (X10, transcript: 7)

> *Yeah we have a member of our team whose responsibility it is to be aware of consultation events and ensure our views are represented.* (X8, transcript: 6)

Well-established contact has enabled one provider to argue for a more clear distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit providers, as it was perceived that there had been confusion about the approaches of the non-HEFCE funded HE sector (X7, transcript: 11). Another executive made a more critical comment about the government's understanding of the HE sector: *'personally speaking I think most governments are clueless about how universities operate'* (X13, transcript: 7). The idea that the government is out of touch therefore leads to a number of misunderstandings: perceptions about the private HE sector in government policy go beyond the blurring/distinction between the boundaries of the for-profit and not-for-profit providers and one executive explains from his experiences in having contact with government that there are presumptions about the people who head up private providers:

> *I think they assume that I'm a free-marketeer who thinks there should be no regulation, no quality standards, that anything should apply and that somehow I don't care about what the sector is, or that I want to make a fast buck. It's total rubbish.* (X9, transcript: 10-11)

Therefore a key element of the relationships between private providers and government is for executives to dispel some of the negative associations that may be made about private higher education and the people who lead those organisations. The achievement of this objective puts private providers in a better position to argue for particular policy changes if they are already known within the sector.

Perceptions of higher education policy and governance

The next section goes beyond describing the relationships between private providers and government to analysing the executives' responses that communicate perceptions about the direction of higher education policy in the UK and the governance regimes in place. The responses can be categorised as follows: positive perceptions of the general direction of higher education policies; perceived negative impact of uncertainty and lack of clarity in government policy; specific policy configurations (allowing access to the national student survey (NSS), student loans company (SLC) funding, QAA auditing

and high tuition fees in the traditional HE) have positive impacts for private providers; and the two bodies most relevant for private providers are the QAA and UKBA.

Perceptions of the wider political landscape and higher education policy direction were touched upon in responses to questions about perceptions of higher education policy. For example, it was asserted that New Labour had a major impact on the ability of private providers to operate in UK HE (X10, transcript: 2; also mentioned by X9), other executives highlighted that it was Margaret Thatcher who started this process (X11, transcript: 3; X13, transcript: 7). There is the perception that the view of private HE has changed and the general community is much more open and friendly than in the past. One executive remarked about the general direction of higher education policy:

> *David Willetts' white paper, when I read it I really liked it, I was impressed by it, I was impressed by the concept of widening access, I liked the student focus in it, I thought it was a brilliant piece actually: not everybody thinks the same as me though. There is a lot of criticism out there of that white paper.* (X1, transcript: 6)

The positive remarks about the general direction are common, though there are more reserved perceptions of the details of policy and how the government can manage the HE sector. Some executives talked about an initial reluctance to engage in traditional HE governance, though some providers who began with a sceptical view are now embracing certain aspects of the HE system, usually attributed to necessity and the changing landscape (X11, transcript: 3).

More negative comments were made about the lack of clarity about procedures for private providers. For example, X9 suggests that when asked about the process for renewing DAP, BIS do not know, and that, where there is a new process such as this for alternative providers, the rules and processes are developed as and when they are needed (X9, transcript: 7). One executive describes the process of applying for DAP and how '*the rules, they made them up as they went along*' (X10, transcript: 2). X10 also suggests '*they have no idea'* (X10, transcript: 7). There is the perception of confusion and inconsistency in government policy, where the capping of student numbers is contradictory to the idea of a student market (X10, transcript: 7), despite the general trend in higher education towards marketization.

A crucial point for many providers was that uncertainty around government policy makes planning extremely difficult, as these executives explain:

> *All education, like the NHS, is constantly meddled with, constant meddling by people who just really don't get it, and this is at all levels. It's very difficult whether you're a school, or a university or a small organisation like us, it's very difficult to plan, you know, you don't know what they're going to do from one week to the next. They don't know what they're going to do from one week to the next. Education is a long term business, it takes two years minimum – and we're quick compared to the university sector that is quite stodgy, we move quickly because we're commercial we have to – but even then it takes two years, from conception through to having bums on seats for a new degree, then it's another three years before it starts to make any kind of pay back, so you're looking at a minimum of five year horizon. To do that sort of planning you want some sort of stability, you want political stability, you don't want people constantly changing policy. I'm not alone, the entire sector is awash with this sort of thing.* (X10, transcript: 7)

> *[W]ho will be the future government? It's a volatile state. What happens with the borders agency…. There's a lot of argy bargie going on between the borders agency and the treasury. It would help if we know what it would settle to in the future. It's really hard to make investment decisions… I think it's going to drag on.* (X6, transcript: 6)

The perception that this is how things are and there is little hope for more clarity and consistency makes the relationships with government described above even more crucial, as it seems that opportunities to make small differences to how policy is developed can have major impacts for the subsector of the UK HE market.

Specific policy decisions can make a big difference for these providers: for example, the criteria for the opportunity to apply for degree awarding powers and university title (X7, transcript: 2-3) or, as one executive cites, the ability to access student loans and national student survey (NSS), are key to the viability and success of his organisation (X11, transcript: 7). Another respondent also mentioned the importance of students at alternative providers being able to access student loans (X9, transcript: 11). Tuition fees are also argued to have a major impact by many executives (X8, transcript: 7): one executive explain the reasons for this:

> *[F]or the first time price has become apparent. This is already leading to the benefits of a freer market economy whereby students are starting to say 'well hang on a minute; if I'm going to accrue all this debt I'm going to want something more specific. I want to know how many hours the university is going to be teaching me, I want to know what my graduate salary's going to be like, I want to know what the benefits are. That is a good thing.* (X14, transcript: 10)

Following on from the perception that tuition fees in the traditional HE sector are good for private providers is the opinion that a reversal of this policy would have a huge impact: '*the government really could damage [provider name removed] tomorrow if they abolish top-up fees*' (X11, transcript: 7). Despite this view, none of the executives expressed an opinion that this would actually happen, and as we can see from the data outlined in section 6.1., most providers have clear plans to expand in the near future despite concerns about the lack of clarity in policy.

Two key organisations were referred to by all respondents when asked about higher education policy or with challenges to the organisation more generally – QAA and UKBA. The reason for this seems to be UKBA rules on requiring Highly Trusted Sponsor Status (HTSS) to be able to issue student visas, which in turn is reliant upon a certain level of QAA audit being performed. As one executive states: the '*main pressure is about the visas'* (X12, transcript: 4). However, for some of the more established providers a full institutional review by the QAA acts as a legitimising process by which they can become embedded in the HE sector: '*We have always wanted to be on the inside of the education quality community looking out, as opposed to the outside looking in. Which is why we chose to go through institutional review'* (X14, transcript: 5). In addition to some institutions choosing to go through a full institutional review, others had to go through this in order for DAP to be given, as institutions must go through a QAA review during the application process. Many of the providers going through full institutional audit have had some contact with QAA previously through validation arrangements with partner universities (X1, X2, X6, X14 talked about this) or from prior experience in the HE sector (X4): *'I used to work at a university so it was not a new experience'* (X4, transcript: 2). X4 mentioned being audited as well by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) so some level of auditing is usual for most of the providers. However, the more in-depth level of audit required for the QAA full institutional review represented an '*extra bureaucratic burden'* (X11, transcript: 4) and, for some providers, staff members needed to be convinced of the merits of going through the process as they did not want to engage in QAA audits; having gone through the process, this has now been accepted, as audits give the institution greater credibility (X11, transcript: 5).

The credibility that a private provider accrues from a QAA audit is a common theme in the ways executives talk about governance. In addition to this general perception, there are also positive comments about the experience of going through the review itself. One respondent at a provider who has gone through a full institutional review talked about it as a positive experience:

> *The QAA are very, very supportive. They don't approach you with a 'you either make the mark or you're out', rather they approach you with an attitude of 'we are here to bring the standards of education in the UK up to a high level', and that's what we're doing. So if you are not up to a particular mark, we will not fail you, but we will encourage you to raise your standards.* (X1, transcript: 4)

The idea that going through a QAA review results in a perspective on how the institution can improve was reiterated by others (for example, X5; X13, transcript: 4; X14, transcript: 5):

> *So for us, it's helped us, it's opened our eyes even more and helped us to improve what we're doing in terms of academic standard, in terms of learning opportunities available to students, and in terms of the sort of information we've put out in our brochures, our website, the documentation, to make sure that it is accurate and complete. So that has been positive.* (X2, transcript: 3)

Some providers are pragmatic about the experience of engaging in QAA audits:

> *I see no point in having a go at them, we can always have a go at regulators, it's an easy target but they've got a job to do. You know, we can all be critical of quality being reduced at the concept of process, but how does anybody define quality? Put ten people in a room and ask them to define quality and you'll get twenty different definitions, it's an abstraction. So they're trying to find ways of dealing with it, it's not perfect but then name the perfect system anywhere. So our view is to work with them, to work with them and help where we can and I have a very good relationship with the boss of QAA and we have people going to conferences and contributing to things as we do with HEFCE, we've got two people sitting on two HEFCE committees, so our view is that even though we're private we are part of the system, we are part of the HE sector and we're going to play a constructive role within it.* (X10, transcript: 5)

For others it is less about becoming part of the HE sector and more about how the QAA reporting can present the institution positively and have an impact on how they can market themselves to students: *'it makes us more attractive to other students because they see that if our standards are high, […] it just attracts better quality students, it's better for us all round really'* (A4, transcript: 4). Because of these factors – that it provides legitimacy for engaging the HE sector, looks good to potential students and is a

requirement for the UKBA HTSS for issuing student visas – many executives have a pragmatic and also positive relationship with QAA, which is a surprise to some who may have had reservations about going through the process in the first place: '*I am in fact very, very impressed with QAA, I am very surprised. It is the people isn't it, it is the academics from other universities, the director, the institutional reviewer, and they were excellent, there is no doubt about it. It raised our standards, I approve of the process'* (X1, transcript: 4). It may be that these positive comments relate to executives identifying multiple benefits of engaging fully with QAA and the recognition that this relationship is an ongoing necessity. However, this is not to say that there were no negative comments about the QAA. One executive described the process as '*painfully thorough'* (X9, transcript: 6) and another suggested that a QAA review is '*a huge challenge for a small organisation'* (X14, transcript: 3), usually attributed to limited resources (both time and money). The financial costs of joining the QAA in addition to the necessary resources to go through an audit can make it difficult for the smaller providers, as one explains:

> *The down side is the cost and the time. It costs us £19,700 applying for QAA oversight, with the [institution name removed] it's been free for seven years. The time that we have had to prepare for QAA it took us six months minimum to make sure all our papers are in order, we sort of had to even bring in consultants, which cost us almost £10,000 more, just getting ready for QAA. Now, when you look at that, that is a huge expense, not only in terms of monetary expense, in terms of time, which is a huge distraction from your day to day responsibilities of managing the college.* (X2, transcript: 3)

However, for providers to be able to recruit international students, they need HTSS from the UKBA, which is reliant upon going through at least an educational oversight review; so, even though the cost for small providers is a large proportion of funds available, they do not have a choice if they wish to operate within the international student market (one of the smaller providers' main reasons for establishment was to provide low cost HE to international students). The cost of becoming a member of QAA was mentioned less by the larger providers.

Another problem for providers mentioned by executives is the language used in QAA guidance and reporting and there are various examples of principals/CEOs talking about differences in language use in policy and in their business: *'in the beginning it felt like you needed a doctorate in QAA-speak to understand them'* (X6, transcript: 4); and

another comments that '*going through QAA what is actually happening is we're learning the language of the QAA'* (X14, transcript: 5). It was explained by one executive how the lack of common language prior to providers learning the language made the process much more difficult: *'The misunderstanding that existed and we would use different terms for things and they weren't quite understood*' (X9, transcript: 3). This respondent went on to talk about how his organisation had to adopt the vocabulary of the traditional HE sector, and how the QAA represented the view that alternative providers should fit into established norms despite political rhetoric that welcomes difference. Providers are buoyed by the rhetoric of a market in higher education that is open to different institution-types but find that this rhetoric does not ring true with the experience of going through a QAA audit. As one executive highlights: *'to be honest with you, they are designed for universities they are not at the moment for private colleges, it will take time for them to understand the culture'* (X3, transcript: 3), therefore for this provider it is a matter of time before the QAA will have a better understanding of how private providers operate as the relationship between these organisations are still relatively new.

Other negative comments about the QAA were mentioned by a small number of executives. These include a questioning of the strategy of the QAA reviews. One respondent talked about the purpose of the QAA reviews, suggesting that there seems to be too much focus on a paper-trail and the demonstration of processes in place: *'it feels like auditing rather than strategic assessment'* (X6, transcript: 4). Another questioned the role of vice-chancellors in HEFCE and QAA, arguing that the top people in HE should not have a role in HE regulatory bodies: '*why should universities regulate themselves?'* (X5, transcript: 3) Another executive thought that the review process lacked input from employers (X9, transcript: 7); and another highlighted how staff perceived a negative impact on the culture of his organisation: *'before QAA things were more informal. the transition was difficult… There was some resistance; 'they've ruined the culture here''* (X6, transcript: 4). Notwithstanding the range of negative comments about the QAA the main response from executives was positive in character: comments made on the UKBA, the other key player in government policy, were more unequivocally negative in nature.

It was asserted that there are multiple negative impacts of UKBA rules about students being able to work whilst studying, the number of staff recruited and the type of auditing process providers have to go through, rules around English language testing of applicants. (X4, transcript: 3). The overall climate of UKBA rules with regard to international students is very difficult for some of the providers in the sample: *'UKBA rules in terms of international students coming in, discouraging people from coming to the UK, which have been hugely, hugely disastrous for colleges like ours'* (X2, transcript: 3). These negative comments about the UKBA have been reiterated by other respondents (X3, transcript: 4). The results of the problems with the UKBA is that some of the providers interviewed talked about needing to focus more on home students in the future (X3, transcript: 4): *'The UK border agency have done their best to decimate the international student market, and have succeeded. So we switched out interests to the home market'* (X1, transcript: 4). One provider that has a large proportion of international students in their student body talked about the response from the students themselves with regard to a potential change in recruitment strategy:

> *When we started to have trouble with the borders agency when they brought the new regulations in because that time we weren't under the QAAs educational oversight. We had to look to recruit more EU and UK students and I had a visitation from the student's union here and they said we understand why you've got to do this but we hope that it doesn't go on too long because what we value here is a wonderful diversity of students and the fact that we learn from them.* (X7, transcript: 5)

Therefore, for some providers the strategy of changing focus in response to UKBA rules may have a major impact on the student culture in the organisation. Not all providers reported declining international numbers: some respondents whose organisation has a heavy focus on international students did not feel the impact of UKBA rules in the same way as those whose comments are given above. In fact their international student body is expanding (X6, transcript: 4). Another executive talked about the impact that closures of around 600 private colleges had on their overall enrolment and international student enrolment, also citing increases (X9, transcript: 8). Subsequently we can see there is a mixed picture with regard to the impact of UKBA rules on the providers in the sample. To a certain extent there is the perception that some tightening up was in fact necessary, but that UKBA rules have now gone beyond what was required to achieve this aim:

> *There are various pressure groups working with the UKBA, well it is not the UKBA but the ministers. So there are a couple of pressure groups that we are now involved in: ExEd and StudyUK, both pressure groups attempting to persuade ministers to at least ease up a little on the international student market. [...] They really have gone too far the UKBA, though it was needed, a sort of cleansing up the international market was needed because it was being abused in many cases. And now with the London Met debacle you are seeing a publicly-funded university are not running it properly either and it should be run properly, but I think they have gone too far.* (X1, transcript: 6)

The comparisons between poorly run traditional universities and private providers are used by executives to highlight the differential treatment they feel they receive in regulations. Further inconsistencies are perceived in relation to the rules about the requirement for HTSS and QAA reporting to recruit international students, where this is not required for recruiting home students: '*To have highly trusted status you must go through educational oversight, however, you can still teach British students and EU students without that, and I find it bizarre that we protect international students because of the immigration implication but that we allow second rate to teach our own young people or people from the rest of Europe'* (X7, transcript: 10), therefore the regime around international student visas is perceived to be more about immigration than about education quality.

All the providers in the sample have at the very least achieved a basic level of legitimacy in the HE sector – most have gone through a QAA institutional review, some have DAP and some have university title - and may be able to recognise the impact of engagement in the HE sector as a positive thing. The more embedded an institution is, for example with DAP and University title, the more they identify with some concerns expressed in the traditional university sector. Higher education policy is experienced as a difficult process for gaining degree-awarding powers, for example but, once a provider has established itself and gone through the various quality assurance processes, it has a vested interest in the policies remaining stringent as they have already met the criteria. Many want to distance themselves from less-established or maybe less-reputable providers and argue that the reputation of UK HE is important in the global student market.

Coverage of private providers in the media: negative, simplistic, ignores the true distinctions in the subsector

Executives were asked to reflect upon media coverage of private providers during the interviews. The responses given suggested that executives perceived media coverage to be negative in character, simplistic and ignores the true distinctions between private providers in terms of for-profit and not-for-profit status; though there were signals of hope that this may be changing. Some of the responses highlighted that negative and simplistic coverage results in the use of labels that do not work, such as 'private universities', or conflate private providers with the for-profit sector. The terminology used in media is varied, often using the term 'for-profit' as a prefix in the coverage of private providers with that status. The main media outlet that covers private providers is the *Times Higher Education*, which one respondent described as specialising in 'unfortunate' coverage, with quite limited information given (X1, transcript: 6). X2 differentiated between 'genuine colleges like ours' and bogus colleges, stating that the media were correct to publish articles on bogus colleges. The attempted distancing between the sample providers and 'bogus colleges' and between for-profit and not-for-profit providers was something that some felt was missing from media reporting:

> *The nature of the portrayal in the media of the private sector of higher education, I think often starts from the assumption that the private sector is comprised of companies which are delivering HE to make a profit. It is a very simple straightforward picture of what the private sector is and it doesn't really capture the diversity or describe what we do.* (X8, transcript: 7)

Another respondent goes on in a similar vein:

> *They don't quite know how to deal with us because we're not like BPP. BPP is a sort of commoditised higher education and they will follow the Apollo model, their American owners. They're very commoditised, very successful, very profitable, high volume, low margin business model. We're different…. So they don't really know how to handle us. I tend to ignore some of the more wacky views of the public sector.* (X5, transcript: 6)

The perception of simplistic coverage that dichotomises public and private is missing the main issue for some of the respondents: '*the issue is not really between public and private, it's between for-profit and not-for-profit*' (X7, transcript: 11), though it must be mentioned that all the executives who asserted the importance of the difference between

for-profit and not-for-profit were in the not-for-profit category (conceptualisations of public/private/for-profit/not-for-profit are explored more fully in the next section).

Following on from the perceived benefits of engaging with the QAA is the idea that the reporting of reviews may change media coverage of private providers:

> *The way the media portray is not a good one. I think the inspections are changing things as everything is in the public domain, once you go through the inspection successfully or not successfully, people can see what you are doing.* (X4, transcript: 4)

Engagement with auditing is hoped to impact on perceptions in a positive way as providers' reported on can demonstrate particular achievements via the QAA reporting process. However, one executive highlighted that the transparency of the QAA reports means that any issues raised by the audit will be pulled out and reported on in a way that supports preconceived ideas about the private HE sector:

> *This I find frustrating because the press will look at the results of the review for a small independent private provider and they'll make snap judgements and because this is the first time we're going through review we're bound to have some things that are not right. They are judging us off the bat of a first audit and that's unfair. They are comparing us to universities who have had in some cases a hundred years to sort it out, so it is very unfair the way that we are being judged at the moment.* (X14, transcript: 6)

The idea that the media coverage of private providers is unfair and biased is a common theme in the interviews, as is the more general discourse about the 'level playing field' which will be outlined fully below. With regard to media coverage, it is perceived that despite the negative and simplistic reporting this is changing:

> *The media always like to insert 'for-profit' in front of your name. it's all those issues about whether it is right to make profit out of higher education, those sacred cows that are exposed. People have their opinions that you shouldn't exist, there should only be the public sector. We're trying to challenge the status-quo and we're trying to do it in a good way. There are examples of bad practice out there; people constantly want to throw those at us. Interestingly they don't do the same of public universities, cause there are some bad examples out there as well. A constant battle. If you're trying to do something and you're trying to change perceptions then it will take a long time… I think it will [change] over time, it's got to hasn't it.* (X9, transcript: 11-12)

The quotation above represents a hopeful view of things having to change: the following respondent is more definite in his view of coverage becoming less negative:

> *It's improving, the luddites out there shall remain nameless but it's definitely improving, they are seeing that there is a difference between for-profits and not-for-profit private sectors and we are not-for-profit, and in a very short time we've built a strong reputation… just because you're for-profit, or in our case for-surplus we're a charity and as I explain to some of these people who don't want to listen we have the same status as a university, except that I cannot rely on the tax payer to bail me out when I screw up like some of the universities do.* (X10, transcript: 8)

What is interesting in the two comments above is that in order for the executives to promote their provider there is a focus on bad practice in the traditional HE sector. The rhetoric in some interviews with executives was quite divisive; relying upon negative representations of some HEFCE funded universities as a way of highlighting perceptions of double standards in the reporting of private providers in the media.

Public private concepts: differentiations, self-perception as 'trailblazers'

The subtitle of this section refers to how executives talked about their institutions, compared to those in the traditional HE sector, as on the one hand they made strong differentiations on the grounds of organisational model and culture whilst maintaining that there was no real difference between the private and public sector, usually suggesting that this is because there are no public universities in the UK: *'all British universities are private'* (X11, transcript: 2). For this executive the only difference is that universities sign contracts with HEFCE and alternative 'independent' providers do not. X3 talked about how international students coming to the UK to study do not make the differentiation between 'public' and 'private' providers of higher education (this view is also supported by the results of the interviews with students), he therefore argued that it is important that the whole sector works together to make UK HE 'secure'. The idea that all HEIs are in it together and there should be no difference between them is stated by some executives, usually referring to the not-for-profit part of the private sector. For example, the following two executives talk about their charity status and how this relates to the traditional university sector:

> *We're the same as any university who are charities as well. We look to maintain standards and invest in research. We're not looking to give shareholders any money, we could talk more about how the private sector works as it's quite different… they do block teaching, they don't invest in research, they don't have full time faculty, they spend up to a third of their income on marketing, when the university sector spends maybe 1% on marketing, we're trying to get 5% here, but that's millions and millions.* (X6, transcript: 6)

> *We have to be commercial because nobody funds us, we have to make money and that's what makes us private, even though technically we have the same status as a university – charity, royal charter - we have the same status but nevertheless we're still private.* (X10, transcript: 3)

For some the similarities between traditional HE and the private education charities outweigh the differences and the true distinction is to be made between the for-profit and not-for-profit private sector:

> *Not-for-profits, independent, and I think there is a general perception that we are idealists, we do very well in the national student survey so we deliver what we promise and there's a lot of respect and there's no problems [asked if there is a differentiation made between for-profits and not-for-profits] I really hope there is because that is where there is a big gulf… problems about increasing shareholder value, they are taking money out of the business and putting it in the pockets of shareholders*. (X11, transcript: 8)

It was commonly asserted by executives at not-for-profit providers that they look to serve stakeholders, not shareholders. One respondent argued that the only for-profit universities are in USA and are Apollo group, the University of Phoenix for example, *'they have a bad reputation, we have nothing in common with them. They are for-profit and we are absolutely not-for-profit'* (X11, transcript: 2). One executive talks about his specific role in moving the provider into a more academic direction and distance the institution from for-profit providers: *'The profit making film school thing is going to get bigger and bigger. It was my role to take the film school out of that into a much more ambitious academic one and not to be seen with them'* (X12, transcript: 8).The distancing from for-profit providers is something that many in the not-for-profit sector are keen to emphasise. Which is not to say there was a trend towards identifying with the traditional HE sector in a straightforward way and many executives were equally strong in making distinctions between the 'public' and 'private' sector.

Executives are keen to on the one hand make clear that all UK HEIs are private but, on the other, put distance between how the traditional sector and themselves operate. For example: *'we're in the private sector, we're not like universities, we don't tell the world what we're up to we get on and do it'* (X5, transcript: 2) suggesting that traditional universities are very open with their plans which goes against how commercial businesses may operate in a competitive environment and that the private sector 'gets on with it', it is not slow like public sector institutions (a very commonly-held view in the sample). Another executive suggests that *'all the innovation has come from the private sector because they have to be to stay ahead of the game'* (X5, transcript: 2), implying that the economic imperative of recruiting students means they are better at innovating content and delivery in line with the needs of their profession and that public institutions just sit back because they have access to other means of funding. The contract that public institutions sign with HEFCE to gain access to funding is argued by some executives to be a major negative for traditional universities. One respondent stated that HEFCE funded HEIs are envious of lack of restrictions on recruitment at private providers (X7, transcript: 9), another highlighted that the HEFCE contract equates to loss in autonomy (X11, transcript: 2). The requirements of HEFCE for securing funding is argued to dilute what this executive perceives to be the core mission of his institution:

> *Universities are always being pressurised by the government to widen their mission and we have a very narrow mission of teaching primarily and research second and the rest of the sector are always being forced by government to engage in local industry, companies, all sorts of other initiatives, widening participation and all that sort of thing and I see all those as distractions from the core mission of the university that is to teach and to do research. I'm very glad that we don't get those constant pressures to dilute our mission.* (X11, transcript: 6)

Therefore we can see that for some respondents there is a narrow view of what a university is for, whereas HEFCE and those that argue for the public university take a broader view that incorporates the concept of public goods. The idea that traditional universities operate within a different framework from a commoditised model is a derided concept, which is evidence in some of the quotations throughout this chapter.

In some cases the traditional HE sector is used as an example of bad practice and bad outcomes for students. One executive highlighted the problem of badly performing public universities damaging the reputation of UK HE (X5, transcript: 6). Another

respondent (X7) mentioned the low retention rates in some post-92 universities in comparison with his own institution's high retention rates. One executive talked in detail about the 'graduate premium' – which refers to the higher earnings a graduate may earn in comparison with someone their own age who did not attend university – highlighting that this is negative in some cases in public institutions (X7, transcript: 9-10). The following quotation is a typical example of how public institutions are presented in a negative light: '*We are committed for example to a very strong staff : student ratio, at the moment it's about 13.6, which is genuine, some institutions count everyone including lavatory cleaner, but ours is actual academic teaching staff FTE*' (X7, transcript: 9). The repeated positioning of these private institutions (good) in opposition to the public sector (bad) was common throughout the interviews with executives. The fact that many executives expressed the idea that privatisation is a good thing is unsurprising; however, it may be useful to see some quotations that extol privatisation in HE and how this is achieved through an attack on the traditional university sector:

> *I know some people in the public sector think they have some sort of holy grail and that they have the monopoly on the concept of quality but that's nonsense… To some extent the rigours of demand are good because you just know you don't get it right you will be going home.* (X10, transcript: 8)

> *British universities always oppose any sort of reduced government funding, they are absolutely addicted, [asked why this would be the case] because it's easier isn't it, getting money from government, you don't have to worry about satisfying students, you don't have to worry about marketing yourself, you don't have to worry about anything, the money just comes in… Whereas if you are in a market, you've actually got to satisfy students or whatever, then actually you might have to do a bit of work, which they resented of course. There are other reasons of course, people come up with all sorts of grandiose reasons about it being a public good and it's terribly socially unfair to charge students but the reality is that all nationalised industries resent denationalisation, whether you talk about railways, the utilities, they all bitterly resented that denationalisation or privatisation because they had a nice cushy number, thank you very much, and people like nice cushy numbers.* (X11, transcript: 1-2)

> *I don't have the level of overhead, I'm lean, I'm focused, I'm a specialist, I don't have the level of overhead and baggage to support like the universities do. My salary is five figures, not six – what's the average vice chancellor's salary? £220,000 plus benefits. When I come to recruit in the market for an academic administrator or a programme leader I am competing with universities who are paying 30-40% more than they should be paying against market rates. So what you have is a very complacent and bloated industry, which frankly needs taking apart and opening up price is one of the means of being able to do that.* (X14, transcript: 11)

These long quotations are grouped together as they belong to the same 'school of thought' that public sector institutions are badly run and that privatisation will result in a better HE sector. It is clear from the interviews with executives that in some cases the antagonism towards private providers in HE, evidenced in media coverage and experiences executives have had of a chilly welcome into the sector, cuts both ways, meaning that negative perceptions of public/private sector are common in discourse within the HE sector.

Concept of level playing field: sample providers are 'underdogs' in sector

Two rhetorical devices were commonly used in interviews with executives: that of the 'level playing field' (explicit); and that of the 'underdog' (implicit). This quotation is an example of how the private sector is implicitly positioned as an underdog:

> *The independent higher education sector and its relationship to the publicly funded sector is the exact opposite relationship to how the independent school compares with the publicly funded schools sector, it's a reversal. And the reason is that is history, there is not enough history behind us yet. […] We need a bit of time for governments and the public to come to terms with independent provision alongside publicly funded provision.* (X1, transcript: 6-7)

Linked to the concept of the underdog is the idea of the level playing field and how differential rules are unfair to private providers. One respondent (X2) stated that private alternative providers are at a disadvantage due to differences in the ability to access student loans and funding [B6 in the staff interviews in section 6.2 also highlights this point]. Another respondent (X5) mentioned unfair rules about the tuition fees that can be charged to international students – that private providers are not allowed to charge higher tuition fees to international students, whereas the publicly-funded sector is exempt from this rule. X5 also mentions the fact that private providers have VAT added to their tuition fees whereas public funded universities do not (this was also mentioned by other execs). Another executive makes the same point: '*If we are forced to apply VAT on supplies of education from private providers but we are competing against universities and colleges who don't, there is an immediate twenty per cent disadvantage … we take the view that there ought to be a level playing field'* (X14, transcript 2). Also X5 talked about how private providers with DAP have to reapply every six years whereas the public sector get DAP in perpetuity. Another executive lists some aspects that he perceives to be prejudicial:

> *It is unfair, you get QAAed in a different way than the universities. We can't use the office of independent adjudication in the same way, so there's much more uncertainty in the not-HEFCE funded sector. we don't get the same level of undergrad grants, in business we can get 6 but not 9 because we're not HEFCE funded.* (X6, transcript: 6-7)

However, with respect to the introduction and increases in tuition fees in traditional universities this is used as evidence of a fairer system for private providers:

> *For most of the [provider name removed] time it has never benefited from any public funding at all. That clearly is potentially a huge disadvantage.… Now we're in the situation where that is still the case but the expectation on students as to what undergraduate study costs has to some extent changed.* (X8, transcript: 1-2)

This view was replicated by many of the executives in the interviews. The concept and complaints around the 'level playing field' found in the interviews with management/owners in this study reflect the findings of Massey and Munro (2010), who list in detail the aspects in which private higher education providers feel to be at a disadvantage to public institutions.

Future prospects: growth but remaining relatively small, aspirations for DAP/university status

When asked about what the future holds for their institution executives responses fall into two main themes: expansion and applying for DAP/university status. Expansion is discussed in number of terms; an overall increase in student numbers; recruiting more home students; recruiting more undergraduate students; and a change or addition to the premises from which they operate. For example, one executive states that *'growth will continue and we have a new site, and we will be filling that. We will be doubling our size in the next two years'* (X1, transcript: 5) another respondent talked about continuing to increase student numbers by ten per cent year-on-year (X11, transcript: 6).Others talked about signing new leases on buildings in anticipation of student number growth (X10, transcript: 3; X12, transcript: 2) and also the development of new purpose built campuses (X10, transcript: 6), or expansions of existing sites (X14, transcript: 4). One executive talked about the need to expand to cover running costs, as previous student numbers were much higher: he planned to facilitate this growth by focusing on expanding their home student recruitment (X2, transcript: 5, similarly X3 made these comments). Another suggested their expansion will be focused on undergraduate

students: *'I am also trying to rebalance the streams of income – if you get people on degree programmes they stick around longer, they're more loyal'* (X6, transcript: 5). Despite the plans for growth in student numbers and expansion of premises, the growth is not perceived to be unending: '*we don't aspire to be huge. I don't envisage us getting much beyond a thousand students to be honest because once we get to that level – the thing that our students like here is that it's small, it's like a community'* (X14, transcript: 4). Another respondent highlights that even with huge growth the private sector in HE will still be small in comparison to the traditional HE sector:

> *There is a significant growth in the private sector, or whatever you want to call it, under policy, there is no question that if we carry on at this rate universities like [provider name removed] will be twice as big in ten years, but the sector will still be dominated by traditional government funded institutions.* (X11, transcript: 8)

Another strand in the future plans of the sample providers is the further engagement with the traditional HE governance and policy sector with the view to apply for DAP and/or university status. As one executive states, the plan is *'to reach a very high level of quality with our quality assurance engagement, then to go for degree awarding powers in the future'* (X1, transcript: 2). Another expressed aspiration to get DAP and university status, but only if the policy conditions are right (X2, transcript: 9). X10 mentioned applying for university title, which would be made possible by BIS working out a way to implement certain rule changes without the White Paper going through (X10, transcript: 8): '*we will apply for university title, but ours will be very much a university for the professions'* (X10, transcript: 9). The reasons for providers wishing to get university status is around the rules about VAT application and on international students being able to work amongst others (X12, transcript: 7). One executive suggested that the development of blended distance learning is key to the long term goals of the provider: '[our plan] *is to be firmly placed in the higher education sector with its own taught degree awarding powers and that we will move further forward with blended learning so we can deliver at a variety of campuses overseas'* (X13, transcript: 2).

Overall the providers have ambitious plans to grow and embed themselves in the HE sector in the UK. There are a range of reasons for their confidence moving forward – from the perception that media coverage is becoming less negative, to developing contacts with government, to better opportunities for gaining DAP/university status. As

one executive puts it: '*I think what you're going to see over the next few years, you're going to hear a much more concerted voice from this sector in terms of what the issues are'* (X14, transcript: 9). The perception that the private HE sector is gaining ground in the UK and that the policy environment is becoming more welcoming to them suggests that there will be a more organised lobbying position from this sector in the near future.

6 – Interviews with staff and students at case study providers

6.1 Case Study Providers

The case studies from which the in-depth interviews with staff and students will be drawn represent a range of providers operating in the UK: from more established, university-like organisations, in terms of their student selection and education delivery, to providers with more open-access and diverse teaching methods (see table 42). The case study providers also span a range of disciplines from within the arts, humanities and sciences.

Table 42: Overview of institutions where interviews have been conducted with staff and students

Case study	Status	Description of discipline coverage and mode of delivery	No. interviews with staff	No. interviews with students
A	not-for-profit, charity status	Broad discipline coverage. Traditional in delivery approach.	4	3
B	for-profit ltd company	Narrow discipline coverage in the performing arts. Mainly face-to-face delivery.	6	1
C	not-for-profit, charity status	Narrow discipline coverage in the visual arts. Learning by doing ethos. There is teaching but mainly focused on producing films.	4	3
D	not-for-profit, charity status	Narrow discipline coverage in the arts. Distance learning. No teaching as such. Course materials provided, mainly feedback on work.	5	11
E	not-for-profit, charity status	Narrow discipline coverage in real estate and construction. Distance learning with strong use of delivery and student development using ICT tools.	-	3
F	for-profit ltd company	Narrow: Accountancy, Banking and Finance, Law, Business and Management, Health, English language. Blended learning, online, with some face-to-face teaching	-	2
Total			19	23

Letters and a participant information sheet (see Appendix B) were sent by email to potential interviewees via a representative from the organisation and multiple follow up emails were sent. Response rates varied from case study to case study; for example, there was very little response from students at case study B, whereas the response from students at case study D was very strong and the author was able to pick interviewees according to programme of study, age and gender in ways that was not possible at other providers. All interviewees signed an informed consent form (see Appendix C) to confirm they had read the participant information sheet and these are held electronically by the author.

Initial contacts with the case study institutions were made with the executives during the interviews outlined in Chapter 5 for most case studies. However, some contact was made with students at case study B, E and F via opportunities developed through contact with CFE research consultancy who was commissioned to conduct research on private providers in the UK by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The interviews with students at case studies E and F were included in this study mainly due to the low response rate of students at some of the case studies (A, B and C) initially contacted. As there was a stronger response from staff members at case studies A, B, C and D, members of staff were not approached to take part in interviews for case studies E and F.

6.2 Interviews with staff and tutors

Overall, 20 interviews with members of staff or tutors were conducted over the telephone over a five-month period (November 2012 – March 2013), the majority taking place in November and December 2012. One of the interviewees withdrew from the study after the interview had been conducted, despite reassurances of anonymity, for fear of repercussions with regards to some of the views and information disclosed during the interview. This leaves nineteen interviews for analysis for this section of the study, ranging in length from 21 to 51 minutes (the majority lasting over 40 minutes). All interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach that sought to draw out relevant information and identify recurrent themes in the responses. The interview schedule is outlined in Appendix D, which broadly looks to elicit responses on the interviewees' own background and history, their current role and responsibilities, views on the students they teach or have contact with, and about the provider as an employer. There was also a question about the wider context of higher education policy in the UK. Overall the interview schedule was deliberately open, so that a conversation could take place and follow up questions developed spontaneously and appropriately.

Table 43: Information on staff interview respondents

Interviewee	Job title	FT/PT	Length of time working at provider	Previous experience teaching in traditional HEI
A1	Programme director	FT	4 years	yes
A2	Programme director	FT	2 years	no
A4	Post-doctoral research fellow	FT	11 years	no
A5	Programme director	FT	4 years	no
B1	Programme leader	PT	3.5 years	no
B2	Tutor	PT	3.5 years	yes
B3	Tutor	PT	3 months	yes
B5	Tutor	PT	20 years	yes
B6	Operations director	FT	20 years	no
B7	Programme leader	FT	2 years	yes
C1	Head of department	FT	20 years	no
C2	Senior lecturer	FT	7 years	yes
C3	Head of department	FT	12 years	yes
C4	Head of studies	FT	20 years	no
D1	Tutor	FT	7 years	yes
D2	Tutor	PT	1 year	yes
D3	Tutor	PT	7 years	no
D4	Tutor	PT	14 months	yes
D5	Tutor	PT	6 months	yes

Interviewees ranged in terms of the length of time at the provider from 3 months to 20 years – on average they had approximately 8 years' experience at the provider (see table 43). Of those interviewed 11 had worked in the HE sector before, which means they are able to a certain extent compare their experiences in the private sector with the public sector. 11 interviewees work full time and 9 work part time, therefore there is a good spread of staff who have secured permanent contracts and those who work on a more casual, part-time basis. In fact 11 respondents mentioned doing other paid work – for example, in FE, HE, running own business, or working freelance in their professional capacity.

Looking at Table 43 it is easy to identify the employment practices of the private provider with regard to staff contracts. Some of the reasons for particular models of teaching contracts have been explored in sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 which outline executives' explanations about how they arrange contracts for teaching staff and how these might develop in the future. Twelve of the respondents explicitly mentioned having responsibility for curriculum development, which usually aligns with the type of contract (for example those employed full time have responsibility for curriculum development) except for case study D where part-time staff also mentioned having responsibility for curriculum development.

The following sections will elaborate on some of the themes that were evident in the interviews with staff at private providers, covering a range of topics in relation to themselves: the provider as an employer, perceptions of students and views on wider trends and policies in higher education. The interview data is presented as quota sample of all staff at private providers in order to illustrate a range of views and offers an insight in the experiences and views of some members of staff and indicate possible areas for further quantitative research with staff at these institutions in future studies.

Deliberate versus unintentional employment

The interviewees were asked about how they came to be working at the provider and this elicited responses, not only in terms of the series of events that led to their recruitment but also motivations. A theme that came out of these responses was the difference between a deliberate and unintentional move into employment: 'deliberate' meaning that the person actively sought out employment with the institution and 'unintentional' meaning that the person began working for the provider in a limited capacity through a network of contacts and their role has subsequently snowballed into something more permanent and/or demanding – what could be termed 'creeping employment'. A further finding is that within the 'deliberate' category different aspects were highlighted as being key; location of provider, mode of delivery and also the idea of 'strategic employment'.

For some staff a key motivation for applying for a job at the provider is the proximity to home: '*Well obviously I knew of their existence, I knew they were there, I only live sort of a 15 minute drive away … I know that local area. … And I saw that the job had been advertised, so I chose to apply for it'* (A2, transcript: 2). Another reason for consciously going for work with the provider was the mode of delivery and flexibility offered by tutoring online. For example, one respondent talked about an interest in unconventional teaching (D3, transcript: 1) and described a strategy whereby the respondent was able to build up an employment portfolio that works for them – doing some teaching work in prisons, balancing out the working at home as a tutor for the distance learning programmes (D3, transcript: 4). Another respondent talked about the advantages of working for a traditional HEI at the same time as working for an alternative provider, where inspiration from working with a diverse student body in the alternative provider generates ideas for the traditional HE teaching, and also the academic body of work built

up in traditional HE feeds into the tutoring at the alternative provider (D4, transcript: 4-5). Further, they state that '*it's much more exciting to do that than just being in the one institution'* (D4, transcript: 5). Here we can see that staff take responsibility for their own employment and make conscious decisions about how they structure their work according to their particular interests and needs.

Another member of staff talked about employment as an 'experiment', to explicitly use work as a learning experience in an instrumental way, thus falling under the category of Strategic employment. The respondent states: *'I was more interested in kind of the empirical research if you like, in actually seeing how they operate'* (D2, transcript: 1) and later the respondent goes on to say:

> *Private and public education will be developing in the future and so I want to be kind of proactive in terms of gaining a careful understanding of not only how it operates but also all of the risks and problems involved and the logistics of delivering it, I think I've got a pretty good understanding of how that operates... And they have a model which I think works quite well. And really in the future, if I engage again with public institutions, it will probably be on the basis of providing services… formulate courses and you know enhance existing provision, kind of implement courses within the public sector… I definitely see that as an opportunity in the future.* (D2, transcript: 5)

Therefore the part-time tutoring at a private provider that specialises in distance, online education is consciously sought out to build up first-hand knowledge about how it works in order to develop particular skills in an area the respondent sees as an opportunity for further employment across the whole of the HE sector.

Another respondent talked about something that could also be described as strategic employment. A distance learning tutor considering their own 'personal planning' felt that they could combine their own continuing education with a means of having an income – meaning they might withdraw from a contract with a traditional HEI whilst continuing working for the alternative provider, stating it '*would be a lovely way of keeping in touch with teaching'* (D5, transcript: 6). All the above quotations about the conscious strategies used by staff in private providers derive from one provider – this provider tends to recruit teaching staff on a flexible model of delivery, not only in terms of how much teaching the tutor can take on but also in how the tutoring is performed at a distance.

A different position described by staff at some of the other providers is the unintended: an outcome of chance meetings/friendships, and something that may have developed organically over a period of time – the concept of serendipity seems to be relevant to some of these respondents:

> *It was a case of just having moved to the area and sort of in transition really between houses and just realised there was a university down the road and just thought I'll drop my CV, perhaps not expecting to hear anything and was contacted within the day and just happened to fill a gap that emerged, you know was then in as it were, went from there. Didn't intend to work in HE to be honest with you.* (A5, transcript: 5)

The suggestion that this respondent just 'fell into' teaching in HE, may be to a certain extent qualified by the assertion that he or she dropped off a CV to the provider. Another describes how a friend recommended them to the provider and this was something the person did not seem to actively pursue: *'I didn't really consider it to be honest … But it was simply that they were wanting to start a module … and a friend suggested me .... So it wasn't actually advertised I don't think, I think it was more through recommendation really'* (B2, transcript: 1). Networks are crucial in getting and staying employed in many industries (Sullivan, 1999) and this was the case for this respondent. Another respondent talked about a *'fortuitous encounter'* with a friend who introduced them to someone at the provider (C3, transcript: 2), which resulted in a teaching job. The importance of networks for recruiting teaching staff at private providers is suggested by one respondent to be problematic: *'I think in this sector a lot of people fall into jobs through who they know, friendships and you know kind of personal routes and I just don't think that necessarily makes it the most rounded workforce'* (B7, transcript: 9-10).

Another aspect of unintentional routes into employment is in the way contracts and careers develop over time and are sometimes driven by the employer rather than the employee: '*Well I was running my own business as well… I was just supposed to be visiting lecturer … then I was asked to do this and then I was asked to do the other, it was just, I was doing more time than the full timers, let's put it like that'* (A1, transcript: 1). The final position of the respondent was it seems a product of the needs of the organisation, rather than a conscious desire of the employee. The existence of change and growth in terms of a member of staff's career is to be expected in the respondents who have been at the provider for many years. Another describes the transition from

student to management in the organisation over a long period of time: *'I was a student at the school, as it was then… and I became a member of the teaching faculty... And I worked here as a freelance tutor … when the company changed hands… I became much more involved in the school and I've worked my way from there'* (B6, transcript: 1). This development was described as happening over many years. For others the transition happens over a short period of time: '*Yeah it was a very sudden transition. In fact when I started the job it was one day a week, moved to two days within about six months and then it was three days within a year'* (B1, transcript: 1). The 'testing' of the relationship between employer and employee can be mutually beneficial in the sense that each can decide to build up the contract based upon first-hand experience. For this respondent, what started out as a conscious decision to work at the institution, turned into a more unconscious career progression:

> *It was a part time role at that point. And so the changes have kind of been gradual in that I was asked to do some teaching on other under graduate courses actually quite quickly, that they weren't, they were just, could you just do this and we'll pay you just to do that course for that term. And then over time it just seemed simpler just to make it a regular thing!* (A2, transcript: 4)

It seems the tentative employment of teaching staff with a view to building up the contracts over time is a common practice in this sector.

Match and mismatch between provider and employee values

Linked to the deliberate or unintentional decision to work for the provider in question is the perception that there is overlap between employer and the respondent's values. This can be around the way the institution is structured and goes through decision-making processes to the way it treats staff. When one respondent was asked why they wouldn't consider working for a traditional university, they replied '*Well they're large bureaucratic organisations and I wouldn't fit in it. I'd probably swear too much at people and tell people what to go and do. Well having been running my own business for nine years and previously having a very, very free reign… it was always a renegade world'* (A1, transcript: 2). He goes on to explain more about how he aligns with his employer: '*I'm not here because I'm paid a great deal because I'm not, I'm here because I want to be here to see what they're doing, help them and develop it. And*

that's the real … So I'm a bit of a strange case' (A1, transcript: 3). This respondent expresses commitment and solidarity to the mission of the provider he works for and also acknowledges that the institution provides the environment in which he can operate comfortably. Another respondent echoes this view: *'if I went into kind of an equivalent level job somewhere else, I'd have a department, I would have a staff, I would, you know, I would have a whole host of problems that I spend most of my life avoiding!'* (C3, transcript: 8). The perception of what things are like in public institutions in these cases are to a certain extent based upon first-hand experience as they both have worked in the traditional HE sector.

Another respondent highlighted the convergence of ethos in a broader sense – about the whole organisation, not just their position within it – arguing that the private sector has better outcomes due to the profit motive: '*why is it that private hospitals seem to run more effectively than public hospitals? Now is that because of the workload or something, I don't know, or is that because there's a fundamental approach to the way that public and private institutions are run that's different? … I think coming back to the idea of profit within our sector, within the private sector, profit's not a bad word, excess profit is two bad words'* (B6, transcript: 9). This person was the most senior member of staff in the staff interviews conducted, suggesting that his elevation to operations director is a result, amongst other things, of his subscription to the same views as the owner of the organisation, or these views have been acculturated over a period of time. His views were the most critical expressed about traditional HEIs amongst all the staff interviewed (as were those of the owner of the provider in question in the interviews with executives).

To a certain extent it might be expected that members of staff who work for private providers of HE subscribe to the views outlined above. An interesting outcome of the interviews is a mismatch between the ethos of the organisation and the ethos of the individual employee. Instead of finding a clear alignment of views on private and public higher education, some respondents talked about the differences between their own views on higher education and the existence or actions of their employer. A common theme was the expression of strong views against student tuition fees:

> *I would prefer not to see fees in higher education at all, however I choose to work for a private institution, for many other reasons! And so you know that's a tricky one for me to answer if you know what I mean…. I went to university when they were just stopping grants and introducing student loans and we were all horrified then … if it was down to me, I would prefer there not to be fees in higher education!* (A2, transcript: 7)

One respondent talked about being against tuition fees and also being against different levels of tuition fees as this would lead to class differentiation in the way HEIs recruit students (D5, transcript: 5). Another asserts strong views against tuition fees: *'my personal view is that they should never be asked to pay for it, it should be free like mine was'* (B2, transcript: 5). The fact that staff did not subscribe to a tuition-fee model, whilst counter to the views of executives and the strategic position of the provider with regard to fees, may not be considered a radical view to have despite working in the private sector – to a certain extent there is no alternative institution they could work for that does not charge tuition fees. However, another respondent goes much further than disagreeing with tuition fees: *'I don't really agree with the private funding versus HE model, I just don't think you can balance the ethics of commerce with what HE is supposed to be about'* (B7, transcript: 10). This represents a clear mismatch between the ethos of the provider and the ethos of the individual member of staff.

Another aspect of a divergence between provider and staff member is a discord between their own views on higher education, conditions of employment and perceptions of academia and teaching. One respondent who works for a distance learning provider admits to being extremely sceptical about the pedagogy:

> *I wasn't sure myself how one can teach students on line to be honest! … the … people who interviewed me … I explained how I was actually quite critical of on line teaching and I bring that baggage… but I could see that they're coming from, it's a different rationale to why they implement it compared to universities with proper buildings.* (D5, transcript: 7)

In this case the staff member makes clear to the provider that they do not necessarily subscribe to the ethos of the organisation with regard to mode of delivery, but this is something they can 'agree to disagree' about and still forge a working relationship. Other respondents talked about the expression of differences of opinion in their on-going working relationships:

> *The senior management I think and I have different ideological, philosophical ideas about what the school should or could be, which causes you know some friction. I think everybody here I think wants to do really well by their students, I think that's true, but I'm not sure we all agree on what that means, which is probably a good thing, a difference of opinions always helps but … Yeah, I mean recently it's just really brought to light for me the kind of conflict between what I perceive as my strengths that I bring to the Institution and how the kind of, the teaching that I do and the research and the overseeing of dissertations and stuff is kind of like all very well and good but it's incidental to my real work, which is making sure that the admin stuff is taken care of. Whereas I think somebody could my admin job with an A Level, you know, and some enthusiasm. I think I could bring other strengths that have been ignored.* (B1, transcript: 9)

This respondent felt that their position as an academic is secondary to the administrative function and talked about differences of opinion between them and senior management. Here there is a mismatch between the provider and the staff member about what it means to be a member of teaching staff. Another respondent at the same institution raises a similar point:

> *It's the constant tension really ethically for me, because I'm employed as an academic, so I follow academic standards and that's what I have to uphold. The school is a private company, so it needs turnover. Personally I've always found that an inherent dichotomy and I've actually had a lot of clashes with the senior management about it, whereby I'm reinforcing academic standards.* (B7, transcript: 7-8)

Some respondents from this provider mentioned a number of areas with regard to their own beliefs of how a higher education institution should work and how this may cause conflicts with the ethos of the organisation. As one states there is *'a bit of PR machine here'* (B7, transcript: 11), which is something that the respondent is uneasy about.

Importance of professional identity developed outside of HE

For some of the case study institutions, the professional identity of the academic staff outside of a teaching role is paramount for the respondents interviewed – this can also be evidenced in the interviews with executives outlined in section 5.1.2. Many members of staff interviewed have other careers, and/or come from a background of running their own businesses. There is the concept that teaching is done by 'practitioners' not teachers (C3, transcript: 7) and that *'we're very much industry facing and that determines a lot of how we teach'* (C4, transcript: 4). Further, this viewpoint is associated with a particular kind of relationship with the students: *'everybody here has got film professional experience, which is not, doesn't go unnoticed by the students'* (C1, transcript: 5). A

respondent at another provider explains the desire to be a professional musician and the reality results in the need to take on teaching work, but that the professional experience has a positive impact on the teaching work:

> *Yes and I think I kind of slightly romanticise my perception of my existence, so I just want to be a self-employed musician, even though actually on paper I'm probably just a guy who teaches at a college… the reason I think my students, that is my music students, they respect me as a teacher is because I also play music, so I have to kind of keep those things going. I love teaching as well, you know I think I'm good at it, I love teaching… I think most of the music teachers, most of the teachers here aren't also employed, they're just self-employed, so for them everything's a gig, you know, an hour's teaching is a gig, so you know everything's just another gig. So it's very much kind of pieced together, you know they have … There's a combination of performing so they don't have to teach all the time and I also think teaching because there's not enough performances.* (B1, transcript: 3)

The same respondent goes on to make a linkage between predominance of professional identity and also relates this to the kind of contract that teaching staff are on:

> *The teachers don't see themselves, they don't really have identities as educators. And there's a bit, not a culture of … And because, yeah, there are two things, they don't see themselves primarily educators, as in fact most lecturers don't anyway I think, but whatever, but they also don't see themselves as part of the school so much, they do a bit of work for us but they don't have to do any lesson plans because we provide all the materials, they don't have to … So there's not really … I think salarying the staff would be a good start, but well somehow engaging people in the culture so that they buy into it more you know.* (B1, transcript: 4)

Here the respondent suggests that to have better contracts for teaching staff would enable them to become more fully engaged with teaching in the sector and while the contracts remain more casual or indefinite professional identity derived from outside HE teaching will remain paramount. Interviews with executives suggest that the professional identity of the tutors they employ is a key attractor for them as employers and, in turn, for how they sell the programmes to students; therefore the model of teaching staff as primarily professionals, higher education teachers second may remain intact at some providers for the foreseeable future.

Comparisons with traditional HE sector: size, dynamism and competition

Respondents who have had experience in the traditional HE sector were asked to talk about the similarities and differences between such experience and the alternative

provider currently employing them. This prompted some dichotomies: fast versus slow; big versus small. Some of the comparisons made by the interviews with executives were echoed by the respondents here.

A simple distinction made between the providers in the case studies and the traditional HE sector was with regard to size: Universities are big (negative), our provider is small (positive). One respondent notes that at the provider they work for, *'it's a big village… there's many schools bigger than us'* (A1, transcript: 8), which is a straightforward comparison to make. However, other respondents related size to the quality of contact with students and student satisfaction:

> *It's a small university, so people, it's difficult for people to sort of vanish off the horizon if you like, you know, we normally can pick up on is there an issue with X because they haven't been to/seen them in tutorials.* (A5, transcript: 5)

> *The main difference incidentally between us and these larger ones, which are to some extent Government funded, is that we operate with a much higher level of student satisfaction, that's to say they get a lot more individual attention from us, then they can at somewhere like [institution name omitted]... I mean if you had anything like the quantity of people that go through [institution name omitted], it would be an impossible job!* (C1, transcript: 7)

Therefore in terms of dealing with students it is perceived that smaller institutions can do this better. However, there are perceived challenges of being a small institution in how they can handle the bureaucratic structure and administration necessary in HE (C2, transcript: 6) and the impact QAA has in terms of committees, documentations and compliance requirements, that *'can be massive for small organisations like us'* (C4, transcript: 3). *'So we're doing a lot and we're doing the same procedures in many areas as very big institutions with huge resources'* (C4, transcript: 5).

Another common comparison made between the private providers and the traditional HE sector is about the ability to act quickly in the private sector, ultimately resulting in what is described as a more dynamic working environment. The following respondent had no experience of working in the traditional HE sector but had perceptions in line with others who responded, which suggests there is an accepted currency around the ('slow') practices in the HE sector. In this quote they are talking about how the current employer may have similarities with the traditional HE sector:

> *And obviously being at a private university I guess is something different again and it does have I guess some elements that I would almost expect to see in the state sector, which as I say I haven't worked in it, so I'm only surmising and guessing. But you do get that kind of academic feel of sometimes things are, take a little bit of time to get sorted or organised because there's a lot of talk before and discussion and academic thought put into… I suppose in the private sector would be just deemed as you know quick business decisions! But that's kind of just part of the culture of the place I'm working at and I'm not negative about it, it's just something different to kind of adapt to.* (A2, transcript: 5).

It is interesting that presumptions are made about (a) how the private sector operates and (b) how the traditional HE sector operates and that even though the institution the person works at is a private provider, it may still operate structurally in similar ways to the traditional HE sector, which is something that occurred to her when asked a very general question about her overall experiences. For some the idea of what it means to be a university raises concerns about how the provider might change: *'I don't want to become an HEI, I don't want to be you know that overly, sorry this is pejorative but that sort of bureaucratic, overly … I still want to remain lean, focused, mobile, because then you can respond to student needs quickly'* (B6, transcript: 8). This view mirrors the owner of the provider. The concept of bureaucracy as a negative result of becoming larger or more embedded in the HE sector is commonly utilised in interviews that make comparisons with the 'dynamic' private sector:

> *We're still distinctive in that the managerial culture that I saw developing in other higher education places and the hierarchies that you get in much larger institutions and the politics, is minimal here… we still are, compared to most other places, light on our feet and very focused on supporting the students.* (C3, transcript: 3)

Another respondent who has experience in the traditional HE sector makes some interesting comments about the culture in those organisations, highlighting the perceived dynamism of the private sector:

> *It's just very different, it's like a different species, a different shape altogether, which I'm mulling over and I put down partly of course to [institution name omitted] being such a large and established university that does a lot of organisational things that are embedded and very efficient and not efficient in other ways, but very embedded anyway, everyone's used to them. At the [private provider] there's a lot of ways in which we're making it up as we go along, which is appalling sometimes, but in other ways it's very exciting because it does leave room for things to happen. And so if a student has an idea or a request or the tutor is struck with some inspiration, it's not that difficult to get to talk*

> *somebody about it because it's still being built. So it's chaos but it's sort of happy chaos, I didn't think it was, I thought it was student annoyed chaos and tutor stressed out chaos until I went over to [institution name omitted] and over there the students are very efficient and very professional and very calm but maybe it's my imagination, it just seems there's a little weariness and a little bit of a lack of excitement about anything.* (B2, transcript: 4)

The perceived difference between larger, traditional, more established and more bureaucratised HEIs and the smaller, newer and less embedded in the HE sector providers has an impact on how some staff experience teaching and the delivery of curriculum – citing more freedom and excitement at the private provider. A tutor at another institution makes a similar point to the quotation above: *'with the HE courses I run at more formal institutions, it's quite strict in terms of this is the curriculum and this is how you need to lecture it, obviously having your own ideas but in terms of the paperwork, there's set ways of doing a lot of things, so it becomes a little bit prescriptive'* (D4, transcript: 2). As this respondent indicates – for some staff traditional HEIs are more experienced as more formal institutions and are also perceived to have a more permanent feel to them. The respondent goes on to talk about having more autonomy and freedom in their role at the alternative provider and therefore enjoying it more (D4, transcript: 3). There is the idea that *'maybe a non-state organisation can offer something challenging and interesting'* (D5, transcript: 8), which is an idea to keep in mind when we look at other themes in this section around perceptions of students and the impact of an economic view of HE.

The freedom and dynamism attributed to learning and teaching did not however extend to academic staff with regard to performing research. In particular, staff at one institution mentioned this as a key issue for themselves as academics. One respondent describes the situation:

> *I was given my 5% of my role to work on research, which equates to one hour and nine minutes a week. So I can probably read a paper at work if I want to, or send some e-mails, so no it's not very much, it's so much not part of my work and I've been recently told if you can try and cut back on the research … lest they distract my energy from my important admin role. So I find it confusing as a man who has got a research degree …that would be valued, but it's not! … I take a lot of annual leave to go to conferences and they seem to think it was a bit mad.* (B1, transcript: 3)

The balance of research activity with teaching commitments is something that most academics deal with over the course of their careers. The marginalisation of research for the staff members at this institution is difficult for those who see themselves as academic in the broadest sense and see research and teaching to be complementary. The respondent explains more about where they believe the problem may lie:

> *Neither of them [the owners] come from educational backgrounds and they both have an inherent fear and distrust of the massively publicly funded higher education system, which I sort of understand, you know, it's kind of bloated… But with that, they reject every kind of part of that paradigm. But they kind of want the kudos of being higher education but without any of the informed understandings …if you want to be in higher education, you have to accept that it's higher for a reason, you've got people actually know stuff and have conducted research.* (B1, transcript: 4)

This touches on a point of relevance to the data generated in the sections on interviews with staff and executives in that to a certain extent it may be possible to identify how far engagement with the HE sector is based upon shared understanding of how HE may operate and also demonstrates key areas of disagreement, for example around the importance of research to the organisation and to the development of academic staff. It would be interesting to explore research that looks at differences in approach to research activity in an HE organisation, for example comparing research intensive and teaching intensive institutions in the traditional HE sector.

A final theme that staff made in comparisons between traditional and private provision in HE is with regard to the concept of 'competitiveness' and the idea that private providers are more competitive than traditional universities in how they operate: *'One of the things you're going to find actually as you talk to people in the private provision sector is these are businesses, so you know we are much more aware of confidentiality and commercial risk I think'* (B6, transcript: 2). This person had no experience working in traditional HEIs to compare this with, and it would be relevant to note the very strong debate about growing competitiveness and market awareness that has been engendered in the traditional sector in recent years by both research assessment and by changing methods and criteria for student recruitment. Some of the executives and entrepreneurs made similar comments about keeping future plans more confidential whilst traditional HEIs 'shout their plans from the rooftops' (see section 5.1.2. 'Public private concepts'), as of course they are legally required to do. The idea of there being

fundamental differences between the public and private sector in terms of sharing information and taking risks is an interesting point when we think about how private providers engage in the HE sector through activities such as QAA reviews. Indeed some executives were uneasy about the transparency of QAA reporting due to the negative coverage of private providers in the HE sector. Despite the emphasis on the difference between the public and private sector with regard to this, one respondent mentioned that they thought things were changing: *'I think universities are slowly becoming, they are more competitive, I think there's definitely indications of that … I think universities are moving towards us, but I think we're moving towards them faster than they're moving towards us'* (B6, transcript: 6). The concept that the private and public sector are moving closer together is a prevalent one.

Perceptions of the provider as employer

One of the key areas that this study wished to investigate was around views held by employees of the provider as an employer, as there is very little data or previous studies that have looked at this issue. In particular, respondents talked about the lack of staff development, the economically precarious nature of their position and, in some institutions, discouragement in doing research: all of which may be considered contrary to the traditional academic culture in most UK HEIs (though it may be noted that teaching-centred institutions may also, and increasingly, adopt a particular research culture which has less focus on academic research [see Deem and Lucas, 2007]).

The main theme that arose in interviews about respondents' experience as staff members of the private providers was the lack of support for staff or staff development. In some cases staff training is minimal, only basic computer software training for example, and staff may be expected to pay for their own development courses: *'Any staff development that happens … we're expected to pay for ourselves… staff are expected to do this [teaching course] when they come to work for the school but they're also expected to pay for it you know. So it, the expectations are a little bit one- sided I feel'* (B5, transcript: 3). According to the respondents at this provider training in management skills, or support for doing a PhD is not encouraged or funded (B1, transcript: 8). Other respondents also described in-house staff development as 'weak', but talked about how they are encouraged to keep up professional work (C4, transcript: 8). Some respondents

cite mixed experiences of staff development, where the formal structure is lacking but some opportunities for development do exist:

> *Staff development is minimal to be honest, minimal to non-existent I would say, which is a great pity and something I've missed from FE, I gained quite a lot from that in FE. Having said that, opportunities to go out to conferences and so on, yeah, I've never had anything refused, if you put in a request to attend something external then yeah.* (A5, transcript: 8)

Therefore we can see that the availability and uptake of staff development in providers is not necessarily straightforward. There are varying comments from respondents from the same institution on staff development and support; for example, one respondent talked about having some support to do various things that develop them as an individual (D1, transcript: 6), whereas another cites very little support (D2, transcript: 4). This demonstrates the subjective experience and varying reporting of themes in the interview data. One respondent suggested that the situation is changing for the better at the provider they work for: *'It was hopeless to start with! We didn't have any staff development. Now we have, we are actually, we've just started in the last year actually having personal development plans and reviews … I think it's improving, I don't think it's great by any means but it is improving'* (A4, transcript: 4). That the situation is improving is good news for the staff at that provider. The availability of staff development and support can make a difference to some staff members, especially those working remotely, such as those for the distance learning provider. One such respondent talked positively about the outcome of 'staff development days': *'I feel now more confident that I know what my role is, whereas before it's been very sort of loose'* (D3, transcript: 3). For this tutor, accessing staff development has clarified their role and made them more comfortable supporting students.

Another key theme that arose in interviews about the provider as an employer is about the financial insecurity many respondents face. The main issue seemed to be about the management of multiple careers – that of a professional person in their field and that of a higher education teacher; coupled with uncertainty about future work this means that some respondents overcompensate : *'I just always assume that if I can be earning money then I should, I'm always scared that if I lose a job … I feel really self-employed all the time, so I'm just, oh my God I've got to do this, I've got to keep working!'* (B1, transcript: 3). The idea that you take on work whenever offered, as you do not know

what is around the corner, is confirmed by the experiences of other respondents; for example, one respondent talked about struggling financially between working freelance professionally and doing teaching work (B2, transcript: 2); another spoke about living hand to mouth (C1, transcript: 5); and another about how badly paid they are for teaching the undergraduate level programmes (D1, transcript: 2), especially when considering that the hourly pay is not high combined with the fact that tutors spend more time than the hours given for supporting students (D1, transcript: 2; D3, transcript: 2); lack of clarity around what they are paid to do with regard to student support (D5, transcript: 2); and another spoke about whether it was economically viable for them to continue working as a tutor despite enjoying the work: *'I've never felt poorer'* (D2, transcript: 5). Another stated: *'I think it's a good supplementary job, in a way it's almost … In one sense it's like voluntary work… it's almost something in between voluntary work and paid work because there's a lot of goodwill I'm putting in as well'* (D5, transcript: 7).

The majority of the respondents referred to above are on part-time contracts (C1 is full-time), which may go some way to explain the financial problems that they have. It may be interesting to juxtapose these comments with those made about the 'importance of the professional identity' in this chapter, and also the section in the executive interviews data: 'perceptions of teaching staff as primarily professionals'. The relationship between professional work and teaching work is a complex issue for the staff at these providers – their professional identity is important to them and also important to the provider, but this results in particular contractual arrangements and financial insecurity, which makes life more difficult for them. Some executives spoke about a move towards more full-time positions being available but some have no plans to change their staffing arrangements in the future. Whichever path is chosen has major implications for the experiences of teaching staff in those institutions.

Another theme that arose was more generally about the organisational culture, of which the two matters about staff development and financial insecurity also form a part. It is noted that overall respondents were more negative about their experiences as employees (whether full-time, part-time or in a more casual capacity) than any other subject covered in the interviews and there is the general perception that whilst the provider is 'good' for students it is not so good for staff. One respondent is positive about his

experiences of teaching but is less enthusiastic about management approaches towards staff: *'I suppose that's one of the enjoyable things, you see what you've done, actually grow into something. But I also get the feeling that carrots are dangled, you know, things are said and then nothing ever happens you know'* (B5, transcript: 5). There are some expressions of mistrust about what is said in the organisation and what is put into action. Another respondent from the same provider highlights a related issue:

> *I mean just to be honest I'm grateful I'm here and you know it's a job, I work very hard to give my students a brilliant experience… So I think you know there's no problem with the job side of it. In terms of me as an individual, to answer your question, support or not, you know the management are very unsupportive actually and very, what's the word, suspicious and untrustful, which is not very helpful.* (B7, transcript: 9).

The respondent goes on to detail a situation where there are difficulties arranging time off work to enrol on a programme of study [details removed to maintain anonymity] and how this sounds strange in the context of a higher education institution and how traditional HEIs operate, both practically and culturally. A respondent at another institution has a very different experience of the organisational management culture:

> *Excellent really, I mean I've been given a great deal of autonomy, for which I'm … And I think other kinds of research shows that people work best when they're trusted and when they're given space to exercise what they're good at, and I'm given that to the max… [the provider has] a very light touch management and have been very supportive of everything that I've done and given me the space in which to develop and you know the space to which to try and fail and so on.* (C3, transcript: 6)

This shows that the staff experience of a trusting or suspicious organisational culture varies between providers and may be seen as symptomatic of the management style of the executives who run the provider.

Another part of organisational culture that raises issues for some staff is the levels of research activity that are deemed appropriate for teaching staff. Some staff cite the pressure to focus on teaching and administration rather than research. Overall, three respondents out of the 19 interviewed mentioned doing some research as part of their current role. Staff from case study A mentioned research being conducted in their institution (A1, transcript: 3) and some mentioned their desire to conduct research in the future (A2). One executive (X9) talked about the focus on teaching at their provider

rather than research and suggested the possibility that private institutions that are very focused on the student experience and less so on research may be more attractive to teaching staff who are themselves more focused on teaching than research. The interviews with teaching staff conducted for this study show that all respondents talked positively about their contact with students and commented that watching students develop was the best thing about their work, so to some extent this does show a very keen commitment to teaching in the staff members interviewed for this study. However, there were also many members of staff who talked about doing research in their own time because the institution does not support this activity (particularly in case study B), or wishing to do research in the future. Alternative providers receive very little or no money for research, and institutions that have no research income rely heavily on tuition fees, therefore it appears that they may develop an 'economic' relationship to students in which students are equated with the characteristics of the consumer. This kind of relationship between company/customer may be the one they are comfortable with if they have come from a business background. Some respondents talked about the provider 'missing out' on research despite there being the academic capacity and interest to take this forward and further, not grasping the role of a university in higher education (B7, transcript: 8). Therefore, this seems to suggest that, in some cases, the heads of the providers do not recognise the desire and potential for their teaching staff to conduct research where an interest does occur due to the way the institutions are wholly focused on teaching and delivering education to students.

Another aspect, where staff see a difference between how thing are changing for the better for students but not for teaching staff, or things even getting worse, is in staff-student relationships: *'It seems that more and more the students are being given a voice which you know stands up for every point that comes up during a teaching week, month, semester, and that seems to be less and less for the teachers'* (B5, transcript: 3). As concepts for communication are being developed for students in HE institutions, there is the sense that the 'staff experience' is being forgotten. One respondent who works for the distance learning provider noted that there is a lack of opportunity for engaging with other members of staff and offers a solution to the problem: *'I think there's one thing I probably wish the [private provider] had more of… I think it would be interesting for staff who teach at the institution to be able to have a forum'* (D2, transcript: 10). There is

a forum for students already established at this provider; therefore the technology is in place for a possible extension to a staff forum as well.

The concept of these providers being more focused on the 'student experience' at the expense of the 'staff experience', being less focused on providing good working conditions for staff, was discussed in some interviews. One respondent, however, concedes that this may reflect to a certain extent the situation in the whole HE sector in the UK: *'I think our rights have become pretty much eroded anyway, I think it's much worse in the private sector'* (D5, transcript: 9). The idea that the private providers as employers are viewed in more negative terms than other aspects of the organisation in interviews is a key finding of the study. However, that is not to say that respondents were wholly negative about their experiences – many had positive things to say, and 13 of the 19 respondents planned to continue working at the provider (13 plan to stay, 3 do not plan to stay, and one is not sure; for two respondents no information is available). Some of the more positive comments were around the existence of a flat hierarchy and high levels of trust and autonomy; some respondents talks about being trusted by the alternative provider they tutor for (D4, transcript: 4) and having high levels of autonomy (D5, transcript: 3). Other positive comments were around the availability of opportunities for developing your own ideas within the core remit of the institution. For example, one respondent states:

> *If there's a clear project which is a benefit to everyone, then whoever wants to drive that, can drive it and be supported quickly… put the business case to us, we have a pot of money for business cases and if they are in line with the company values and if they will bring clear benefits to the students, we'll approve it. So that is quite an exciting part of the school.* (B7, transcript: 13)

Another respondent likens the position of staff to that of students, where you operate in an environment that is not prescriptive and the motivation and drive must come from the individual: *'I think as a faculty person, it's similar to being a student, that the opportunity is there and it's what you do with it'* (C2, transcript: 5). The prevailing belief is that staff can and should take responsibility for their own working lives, though this is, of course, dependent upon opportunities being both visible and there to be taken advantage of.

Perceptions of students

The respondents were also asked about their views of and experiences with students. Overall respondents were very positive about the students they teach or have contact with. Some of the key themes that came up in responses were with regard to the particular demographic of the students at the provider.

Some of the general impressions expressed highlighted students as extremely motivated and engaged in the programme of study. All staff talked positively about their students. The students are seen as having high confidence levels and positive attitudes: '*one thing is that they've got that get up and go…. And I think it's that kind of can do attitude and the fact that they're not just sitting there silently'* (A1, transcript: 8); as being excellent students: *'The calibre of students at the school is very high… In their ambition, in their motivation, their discipline and you know not all of them but I would say 30 to 40% of them come, you know have held professional posts'* (C2, transcript: 3); and being highly motivated: *'the students who come here come here because they want to, nobody's been forced … by their parents. We choose people who are committed and they are committed, the activity is one that they really want to engage in, it's genuinely creative, it's genuinely exciting for them and for us'* (C4, transcript: 6). There are higher numbers of adult learners at these providers than in traditional HE, so many will be starting an undergraduate or postgraduate degree after a period of working. It is suggested that these kinds of students have higher levels of commitment to the programme of study and are therefore highly motivated to carry out the work required to complete the course. For another respondent, passion for the subject was also key, as the high cost of the programmes and no clear route into employment may make it a difficult choice for many:

> A *lot of people I think go to university because they can and because it's something you should do. Whereas you get a lot of people who are really, really, really into what they do and they can't get enough of playing music, and I'm not sure how much, I don't know, maybe people are like that with every subject. But like if you're going to embark on a music degree and it's going to cost you like 30 grand to do it or whatever and you know there's no job at the end of it, you've got to like it.* (B1, transcript: 7)

The idea that students are passionate about their area of study was also evident in the interviews with staff at all providers. However, one respondent highlights an issue that

they have seen in their institution where the desire to achieve a degree by following the easiest path possible means that some students are not engaged with the academic content:

> *We have almost two types of students, one is, wants to be a successful musician, we now also have students that want to get a degree and that's the easiest route for them because they've spent their life playing popular music. And that creates some interesting problems when it comes to music because they're passing modules but somehow not engaging with the very core of the subject.* (B3, transcript: 3)

Therefore, we can see that having an interest in something does not necessarily translate into a fully engaged student where the main objective is simply to gain a qualification at the end.

The demography of students and inequality of access was raised by a number of respondents. Gender was mentioned in some interviews where some programmes lacked female applications (entrepreneurship: A1, transcript: 4; popular music performance: B7, transcript: 6), whereas others noted that their students were mostly women (fine art: D1, transcript: 5). The gender balance was discussed as something resulting from the subject of study and reflects to a certain extent gender stereotypes about the subjects men and women study (for example, in the provider that focuses on arts provision, the majority of students are female, except on the digital photography programmes where men are the majority). One respondent also talks about the predominantly white student body and how this also relates to class:

> *Well the first thing I'd like to qualify that what I'm about to say is hugely speculative, that there really is no data to support it, but just based on my knowledge of the school, the sector, the students, I think there's a few things. I think that from what I've observed, a lot of students often come from a very similar socio economic background, often with parents that can help support them.* (B7, transcript: 6)

The intersection of race and class is crucial for this respondent as he suggests that middle-class ethnic minorities would not choose to study popular music performance. What is also key is that the students are perceived to be from a reasonably well-off background, which reflects the student body in UK HE more widely (see HESA, 2013). The lack of diversity in the students is commented on by another respondent: '*Well the social mix… I would like there to be a better representation of people from less*

advantaged backgrounds... [due to cuts from external funding] they reduced the number of bursaries. We give international bursaries as well, to students from poorer countries' (C4, transcript: 7). The respondent goes on to talk about it getting more difficult to recruit people from disadvantaged backgrounds. A respondent from another provider also states that *'[t]he students I'm teaching now are completely different; they tend to be from very wealthy backgrounds, quite often with jobs already allocated to them from when they've been born'* (A5, transcript: 5). And another states:

> *What I find most fascinating about the students that are in front of me is actually their background and the people that I was at college with … are simply not there… And I find that very, very sad because then it means that you are teaching a group of young people who are lovely and diligent and talented but they don't represent the whole of the varied spectrum of our society.* (B2, transcript: 7)

The lack of socio-economic diversity in the students at these providers to a certain extent reflects the situation in some sections of traditional HE (see HESA, 2013) and is understandable, given the position of providers, outlined in the interviews with executives, who do not see widening participation as a purpose of the providers' recruitment policies. However, the provider that is organised as open access sees more diversity in the students it recruits – this being a positive experience for some staff, as one comments when asked what they enjoy most about tutoring: *'looking at the variety of works that come through, there's adults from so many different backgrounds, countries, ages, it's really, it's quite unpredictable, so it never gets boring because there's always something new coming through'* (D4, transcript: 2). Some respondents at institutions with high numbers of international students cite this as a positive aspect of working at the provider (C1, transcript: 4; C3, transcript: 3) and a bonus to the whole institution: *'we are more international than any of them, anywhere, and that makes the course more exciting and more diverse, more stimulating I think'* (C4, transcript: 7). One respondent stated that working with students from around the world is inspirational (D4, transcript: 4). The range of comments from staff on this matter shows that the diversity of the student body (gender, race, class and nationality) has an impact on how staff experience teaching at the provider.

For one provider, staff commented on recent changes to the types of people they get enrolling on programmes:

> *In the past you might have assumed students … would have been the kind of recreational, you know kind of retired and people changing career later in life and what have you, and indeed they still get a fair few number of those, you're seeing an increasing number of youngsters, people who would either normally apply to a public university, you know, 18, 19 years old, doing an undergraduate programme, or students who have started at a public university and dropped out, say either during the first year or at the end of the first year and then obviously seeing … [this] as an alternative way of completing their studies. So you are seeing now very often a broader profile, demographic of students. In terms of the students' ability, I would say on par with what you're seeing at other kind of institutions I've worked at. I mean my experience has been… [in institutions with a] widening participation remit.* (D2, transcript: 6)

Comments from another respondent at this provider support this view (D3, transcript: 4-5), and this person went further, saying that the changes in the way the provider has arranged its courses mean that *'we're not getting those people anymore'* (D3, transcript: 5), talking about an older person taking a course for enjoyment. However, another respondent from the same provider mentioned that they do not have very many young students (D5, transcript: 4), suggesting that whilst there may be more young students at the provider these are still in the minority.

Use of ICTs by staff and students

There were many responses on online and blended learning and the use of technology in HE, particularly with regard to the use of social media at the face-to-face providers. Staff at the distance learning provider discussed more the experiences and impact of using ICTs as the predominant mode of communication with students.

Many staff at providers who deliver education mainly through face-to-face interaction talked about social media when asked about the impact of ICTs on how they communicate with students and deliver the curriculum. For example, A1 mentions the use of social media, twitter and Facebook (A1, transcript: 6) and has a twitter following. A2 talks about '*tweeting stuff and putting stuff on LinkedIn'* (A2, transcript: 2). B3 also mentioned the use of Facebook in a positive way, as students engage with it (B3, transcript: 6). B7 mentioned the use of iPad, YouTube and Spotify in the classroom. One respondent talked about innovative approaches to the traditional lecture methods such as 'Flipped classroom', where you allow access to a video of the lecture to students and use the direct contact time to do more interactive activities (A1, transcript: 6). As is common

in most traditional HEIs now, providers have virtual learning environments where relevant information is made available to students. For this respondent this does not necessarily help the student engage with the curriculum:

> *We have the VLE and everyone's lecture notes, or most people's lecture notes are up there, so again the student has an excuse not to go because the material is there electronically for them at the touch of a button… I think it creates this sort of distance and things, everything becomes a bit remote, which I think again doesn't help students perhaps engage as I would like them to perhaps.* (A5, transcript: 7)

Despite these examples, face-to-face interaction is the main way staff at campus-based providers deliver education to students. When asked about perceptions of online learning some respondents have reservations about it as an approach:

> *Let's say the jury is out at the moment. I'm not, I'm certainly not against and I think providing it adds value and the students see something gained from it, then I think it could be very good, because I think we're all going to be under enormous pressures, and the way in which American universities are going.* (A1, transcript: 7)

The development of online education at campus-based institutions is happening more slowly than at those institutions which deliver education at a distance. Because of this, the use of technology was understandably talked about more by respondents at the distance learning provider. There were many examples of different ways of developing contacts with students and an awareness of the impact of different modes on how the relationship between tutor and tutee evolves. For example, D1 talked about using Skype in an introductory meeting to help build relationships with students (D1, transcript: 3). This respondent also cites other examples of contact that are both asynchronous and synchronous[21]: *'[we do] asynchronous seminars and we do kind of making days where we meet once every few hours to see what people have been doing'* (D1, transcript: 4). Another suggested that the student forums are very useful (D4, transcript: 4). In the mixing of modes of contact, it is important to go beyond emails simply going back and forth between tutor and student. A reliance on email exchanges is seen as problematic by this respondent for a number of reasons:

[21] Asynchronous teaching methods use online learning resources to facilitate information sharing outside the constraints of time and place among a network of people. Making days may be considered an example of synchronous activity, where tutors and students all agreed to work on their respective creative project for the programme of study on a particular day and regularly update information over the internet on their progress; writing text, uploading photographs and responding to other people's work.

> *I think one of the issues is e-mail as a means of exchange of information and queries etc., that there's an enormous opportunity for misunderstanding…You don't get the subtlety of… eye contact….They're [emails] very time consuming, because anything that's nuanced or ambiguous has to be… [you need] six e-mails where you might just need a five minute conversation…it's not time saving, it's a complete fallacy, and I think that needs to be made, you know shouted loud and clear. There isn't travel time of course, there isn't the travel time and you could argue that that's saved but … And it's also tiring, you know, communicating, always communicating in this way is tiring and frustrating, but I think the on line groups, seminars and meeting together on line, once everybody's used to it, works really well.* (D1, transcript: 8-9)

Another respondent explains how emails lack spontaneity and are more restrictive than face-to-face communication with students (D4, transcript: 3). However, some are reluctant to Skype students as they find this more intrusive and prefer email as the main communication between tutor and student as they find it easier to organise (D4, transcript: 3).

Other concerns raised as a result of an experience of online learning is about the impact on collegiality between academics (D1, transcript: 8); the feasibility of doing online programmes in fine art for example (D2, transcript: 6); and questions about how certain subjects can translate into that mode of learning. Another talked about the lack of 'momentum and excitement' in contact with distance learning students compared to their experience working with students face-to-face in traditional HEIs (D5, transcript: 4).

There is also the perception from some tutors that online learning attracts a certain type of person who likes working alone (D3, transcript: 3), which to a certain extent overlooks the situation for a lot of students who do not have much choice about how they study: for them the decision to study at a distance is not motivated by the desire to work alone, although many will have taken this aspect into account when deciding if they should enrol on the programme of study (see section 7.1. which outlines data from interviews with students). For this tutor there is the presumption that if they do not hear from the student, they are doing fine, and that it is only those struggling who contact them (D3, transcript: 3). Looking at the interviews with the students, the respondent data suggests this matter is more complex (see section 7.1), as some students, despite having difficulties, do not feel able to contact tutors. The same respondent talked about an example of when the relationship between tutor and student had broken down and the

student had come back some time later and said that they were disheartened by the lack of feedback. This tutor mentioned that they are quite hard and do not chase students who drop-off as 'we're all adults' and the fact that they do not get paid for that kind of role. However, they have more recently softened this position due to the students and the provider being more "serious" in how they receive and deliver education (D3, transcript: 6).

Impact of view of HE that foregrounds economic imperatives

Within this theme it is possible to identify a series of interconnected subthemes: the view of students as consumers; a foregrounding of the economic cost of HE and the impact of institutional context; and the maintenance of academic standards in the face of an economic transactional view of HE. Some staff interviewed expressed the view that students are becoming more like consumers (six explicitly stating this to be the case in just those terms). One respondent highlighted that for younger students the role of 'consumer' is sometimes adopted by the parents (B1, transcript: 8). The majority of the students at these providers are not 18-year-olds, rather they are older students who have worked for a period of time before enrolling on a programme of study, and these students may also have a particular idea of a consumer relationship with the education provider (B1, transcript: 8). Descriptions of what this actually means for some staff respondents are outlined here:

> *They expect an awful lot more… they're much less tolerant of when things go wrong. … they're much more vocal about saying, well I don't like this, I want to change that. And that, I have no problem with that because they are consumers aren't they? I think they're much more aware of the fact they're investing in their future and they're investing in their education and they want to get the most out of it.* (B6, transcript: 9-10)

> *I do think that since they're more equipped to point out if they don't feel they're getting value for money or if they disagree with the feedback you give them on an assignment for example! … But I do think students more and more think that somehow it's got to be somebody's fault if they haven't got the grades that they feel that they should have deserved, which is quite interesting because I suppose there is the argument that they haven't been taught to the standard to get them the grades that they want to and they have paid for that teaching but obviously you know teaching's a two way thing and you have to put the effort in yourself as well*. (A2, transcript: 7)

These two quotations talk about students increasingly having a voice and using it to complain about the service they receive and/or the marks they get on their work. In both

instances there is the perception that this is happening more often. There is also evidence of concessions to the possibility that the students may have good cause for raising issues due to the fact that they have paid for the education themselves.

Another respondent sees the impact of such a notion as that of the student-consumer on how the students engage with the programme of study. At this provider, degree programmes are completed in two years rather than the three that is typical in the traditional HE sector, which makes the experience more demanding for the students and the staff:

> *I still think there's respect for the knowledge and academic sort of standards. But yeah, I think for a certain percentage of them it is seen as a means to an end, rather than engaging in the process, it is largely all about the product, and that does concern me, obviously as a teacher… I think also the fact that we're on this two year programme, it's very intensive and there's really very little time for reflection and for sort of just looking at the bigger picture if you like of what you're really trying to achieve and why and how you'll grow as an individual…. that really does feel at times, I mean I'm just speaking as an academic but I think the students are exactly the same, that you're on this conveyor belt, you're on this treadmill and there's really not a chance to get off and value certain things.* (A5, transcript: 6)

The two-year degree is developed as a way for students to study intensively and complete the programme quickly, which results in lower living costs for students over the whole degree (which can save a lot of money if the student needs to live in London, for example). The economic imperative for these programmes is evident – the provider has developed these to be competitive and give students an alternative to the three-year degree – the student has most likely chosen to do a two-year degree to save money and get the degree finished as quickly as possible.

Many respondents talked about the impact of tuition fees, which is also a key issue in the interviews with executives and entrepreneurs (see section 6.3) and in interviews with students (section 7.1). One respondent, talking from their experience of teaching in the private and traditional HE sector, said: *'simply because they're paying more money now and they want to see more for it'* (D5, transcript: 5). Dissimilar to the unequivocally positive stance on tuition fees that the executives have, staff interviewed for this study highlighted some negative consequences that they could identify from their experiences. This respondent has experience teaching at a private provider and in the traditional HE

sector and recognizes a relationship between the amount a student pays and the level of commitment and motivation exhibited towards study:

> *So what's very interesting about the difference [institution name omitted] one is privately funded… and the students pay themselves and [institution name omitted] is Government funded, so students don't pay…What seems to be paradoxical is that the course where the students don't pay, they seem to have high commitment to it, which doesn't make very much sense… in buying education you feel like you own the education and therefore you don't need to commit to the education as much. So it's more like you say a consumer transaction rather than an engagement… [the students who do not pay tuition fees] allow for us to take greater risks in a way. So when they're feeling like they're not getting what they've paid for, they are more committed to sticking with it to see the greater results. I didn't phrase that very well, but what I suppose I'm trying to say is that we seem to have more freedom with the curriculum … Whereas, interestingly, the [alternative provider] seems to be, in my experience, more practical based, so learning skills rather than ideas.* (B3, transcript: 4-5)

The idea that tuition fees have consequences for engagement, motivation, commitment levels *and* the ways the curriculum is delivered is an interesting one. This may also be linked to some of the comments made by students described in section 7.1 where students feel differently about the programme of study depending on how much is coming directly from their pocket (rather than subsidies from government – the costs of delivering the course remain stable). The freedom for providers to take risks with curriculum and pedagogy, which is extolled in the dynamic organisational culture, may to a certain extent be curtailed by a conservative student body whose main objective is the successful completion of the course. It seems that students who are paying fees directly from their own pockets want a 'safe transaction', which is something that the respondent above is referring to.

Contrary to some respondents who view the situation of students behaving like consumers as worse in the traditional university sector, this respondent talks about his experiences and suggests that the context of the institution may have an impact on how far students take on this role:

> *I have students you know pipe up about the smallest thing and say you know … I'm not paying six and a half grand for this. And often the language they use… is that of a kind of angry hotel customer … There's this kind of sort of entitlement…. that probably doesn't exist in conservatoires and other universities, … if you have a hundred years of heritage behind you and a marble*

> *staircase, you're probably in a better position to tell a student to go away and read the handbook. … So there's proximity and there's a culture that allows students to shoot from the hip I think sometimes in terms of I want this, I want that. And then yes, I think it has quite a consumer-y attitude.* (B7, transcript: 7)

The impact of institutional context on the prevalence of a student-consumer position is something that respondents talked about, in that some thought the situation to be more pronounced in the private sector, some in the public sector, but in either case the view is that the position has consolidated over time.

The rise of the student-consumer position raises some issues about how HEIs and private providers maintain academic standards in the face of an economic transactional view of HE; which refers to the contradictory pressures of when the education being offered is purchased as a commodity, yet buyers (students) are also being assessed and graded. Most respondents agreed that this is something they have encountered, but all state that the provider takes a firm position on this matter: the students are paying for the service they receive, but they do not relax academic standards to suit the student-consumer. As these respondents explain:

> [We get] *lovely questions* [such as] *why can't I get a better mark? Because if I give you a better mark and you don't deserve it, that denigrates every other person who has worked bloody hard in the … sorry excuse my … you know what I mean. And it just hits them straight between, well I do, I hit them straight between the eyes and say don't be stupid, you're here, you're paying to be at a good university, as well as we can possibly make it, the last thing I'm going to do is lower standards for you.* (A1, transcript: 9)

> *We don't adjust the way we mark just because they've paid money, we still mark as strictly, you know, we mark to the criteria, we mark to the way we've been trained to mark, so if somebody fails, they fail… we're not compromising academic standards for student retention.* (B5, transcript: 7)

The position on academic standards is very clear at these providers. However, student criticisms of non-academic matters are more prevalent, and it is these that may be taken on board in order to deliver the service their students want. For one respondent who has experience in the traditional HE sector, the student-consumer position is more entrenched there than at the private provider:

> *It's more prevalent over at [traditional institution name omitted] where some of my colleagues are practically running scared you know because of student complaints … they're very worried about dropping any further in the National*

> *Student Survey. At [alternative provider], students haven't been like that but they're starting to get like that, fortunately only one or two.* (B2, transcript: 4-5)

A respondent at another provider describes their experience in the traditional HE sector:

> *I see a massive big difference, at the other institutions it was about more students mean more money… But also with the data, with keeping student retention, achievement, it was a lot more about the funding. I've been in institutions where courses have just closed down because we weren't getting enough students in, ethically it's not right for me. With the [private provider], I feel completely the opposite of that, these students that I do have communication with, do want to do the work, and it's, I think there's so many students there that it's not about the money, it's about their experience. I think there's a lot more pressure with the more formal institutions.* (D4, transcript: 6)

This respondent goes on to talk about the implications of the increasing importance of student fees to traditional HEIs and how the private provider, despite relying wholly on fees because of the way they recruit students, feels that *'there's not the pressure there to keep your students because there are so many students enrolling all the time'* (D4, transcript: 6). Therefore, it is perceived that even in a provider that is reliant upon student fees, the student-consumer culture has not impacted on the teaching staff in this case. At another provider, staff members did not recognise the consumer position in their own students: *'it doesn't work like that here… we've been completely untouched by those kinds of developments'* (C4, transcript: 8), so we can see there is a mixed picture across the interviews with staff in this regard.

Some members of staff did not recognise the student-consumer idea as coming from students themselves; rather, this was something that had been communicated to them from the institution's management. One respondent talked about pressure from the provider to adopt more formal ways of communicating with students, and that there seemed to be a focus on consistency coming from management (D3, transcript: 5). It may be that the provider was responding to feedback from students about this matter, as this issue was highlighted in the interviews with students in this study (see section 6.3.), but also may come about from a desire to formalise and systematise the tutor-student relationship which is indicative of a move towards a student-consumer concept. Therefore the idea of the student as a consumer, that may be within the culture of the organisation itself, may not arise from how the students engage with the provider but in how the organisational management speaks about students: *'I don't have anybody who I feel is operating as the customer, but I've seen that elsewhere. However, the directors*

regularly say that you know that's something to be aware of, when people are purchasing a course, the fact that it is a very direct relationship' (D1, transcript: 6). It has been found in this study that the student-consumer position may be adopted by students, parents and by the education provider itself.

Perceptions of HE policies and governance

Linking to the previous theme on the impact of the economic view of HE are views on HE policy in the UK. As the alternative providers in the study are making inroads into the traditional HE sector arena, matters that have major impacts on traditional HE are increasingly being felt here. Experience and views on contact with QAA were paramount in the responses to questions about HE policy – as were the activities of the UKBA (government is currently looking to overhaul UKBA due to mounting criticism and pressure from multiple sources, not least in the HE sector [see BBC, 2013]), which reflects the major concerns of executives outlined in section 5.1.2.

General comments about higher education policy were mixed: some respondents who have a negative view of higher education policy seem to view it from a broad perspective, thinking about the whole HE sector; whereas those with more positive perceptions were viewing policies from a private-sector perspective. For example these two respondents have very strongly critical views on HE policy:

> *Well I've seen a major change in recent times with higher education policy in the UK and I can't help but feel that reducing Government funding is having an incredibly negative impact on higher education and further education.* (B3, transcript: 9)

> *Higher education in this country, as far as I'm concerned, is in crisis… I think it stems back to you know what Thatcher did with polys becoming universities and a complete misunderstanding and lack of explanation that actually it's not to stay that a vocational training or a craft training is lesser than an academic training but they are profoundly different, and have to be structured differently and assessed differently.* (C2, transcript: 6)

These respondents acknowledge broader impacts of HE policy on the ways higher education is conceptualised and funded. Another respondent sees HE policies from a different perspective: *'we remain exposed to the vagaries of politics and indeed the wider economy, but at the moment there's definitely some positive supports … coming out of the political arena'* (C3, transcript: 9). By identifying developments in HE

policies that are beneficial to private providers, this respondent expresses more positive perceptions of policies.

As with interviews with executives, the subject of HE policies often results in responses about the QAA. All case study providers have had contact with the QAA and some respondents commented on their recent experiences:

> *Oh God, we've just been assessed by them [QAA] … it's a been a very, very difficult ride, they're obviously used to assessing universities …. we are somewhere between you know the kind of sixth form and university, with sort of aspirations to be one but also total rejection of that same thing.* (B1, transcript: 4)

For this respondent going through a QAA review has highlighted some issues with how the QAA approach private providers (a problematic 'one size fits all') and how it may be challenging for a provider who is sceptical and critical of the HE sector to engage in QAA reviews. The experience of going through a QAA review is talked about in more positive terms by executives in the interviews outlined in section 5.1.2.

The concept of the level playing field outlined in interviews with executives was also evident in interviews with staff at private providers. Similarly to the comments in the interviews with executives and entrepreneurs this member of staff feels that private providers of HE are at a disadvantage as there is not a level playing field. This respondent gives some examples of where they see an absence of a level playing field:

> *So I mean let's start with QAA …There's a ladder of fees, and that ladder goes right down to 1,000 students. As a private provider, if I want to go to a QAA, I have to pay, my fees start at the 5,000 position. Now that's prejudicial, why would we have to pay more? … HEFCE's regulatory framework and the Government's, the statutory framework from 1992, prohibits them paying any research grant funding to a private provider …I know that's not appropriate for us right now but that's an indication of the kind of unlevel playing field that we deal with. So there's, everywhere you look there's those kind of barriers for us entering this market.* (B6, transcript: 3-4)

This member of staff was a member of senior management, so you would expect his views and experience to align closely with the with the executives and entrepreneurs interview for this study. He goes on further with regard to contact with QAA and how they have related to the private provider he works for: *'the rhetoric is we want to broaden the breadth of provision, we want to have a range of providers. That's the*

rhetoric. The reality is they want to turn everything into an HEI and they don't want to change anything' (B6, transcript: 4). Other respondents talked about the challenges of going through QAA as it was a learning process for them and the provider, which they hope will be an easier process in the future (C4, transcript: 3).

Thinking about the future of the provider

All respondents were asked about what they think the future holds for the provider they work for. There was a variety of responses, usually positive, which may be linked to the view of the majority that they would continue working for them. Respondents were optimistic about the future with regard to enrolling more students. A key theme in responses was around the idea of uncertainty, which may be expected with questions about the future, but it is interesting to see the reasons for their uncertainty: increasing competition and UKBA rules on international students. One respondent makes a general comment about uncertainty: *'everybody's a bit cautious of what is going to happen, what's the intake going to be like next year, what's the reaction of people, are more people going to go … there's lots of feelings around about what will happen and nobody knows of course, none of us do'* (A1, transcript: 9). To a certain extent the uncertainty expressed in interviews with staff may be the result of a more general level of uncertainty in the whole HE sector (The Guardian, 2011c; Times Higher Education 2012a).

The situation with international student visas and the UKBA rules are a major area of concern for private providers and their staff. Policy decisions in this area can have a major impact on the provider. As one respondent explains:

> *Well in the situation with international students, things, you know, things are not easy for an independent school like us and it may be that we can't sustain the degree of independence that we've always operated forever, which we value, maybe we can't do that. .. Our position has become weaker than theirs [other institutions worldwide] because of the UKBA, there's no question of that… it's much easier for students to get into school in these other countries and to then stay in these countries and work, at a highly professional level. And that's affected us, so you know.* (C4, transcript: 9)

The ability of UK private providers to compete with other HEIs across the world is questionable due to the general national environment for recruiting international

students. If international student numbers reduce further, providers switch to recruiting more home students, but for some respondents there is a balance to aim for in the future:

> *I think if they can maintain that balance that they've got currently between the UK and international students, I think that works quite well, so I think it should, as much as possible, continue in the current levels because there obviously, there are shortcomings to being a fully UK studented university! And conversely being, having too many international students because they're not getting the British education experience they thought they were getting because actually they're actually not really with that many British people!* (A2, transcript: 5)

UKBA policies will to a certain extent shape the future of private providers in how they recruit students and the resulting student culture in those institutions.

Another aspect that drives uncertainty is the view that there is increasing competition in the sector:

> *Competition is hotting up, and so I think they may find it increasingly a more competitive environment… they have a lead over their competition, things like they have a well-established model which you know it works.... But that model is easily replicated, so they need to ensure that they somehow capitalise from the lead they have. And I believe there are ways in which they can do that and I may talk to them in the near future about that.* (D2, transcript: 6)

Another respondent from the same provider makes the same point: *'[this institution] is a tiny little organisation and I think they might, they might find that the competition outstrips them if it's better resourced'* (D1, transcript: 7). The provider in question is a distance learning provider, which raises issues for some staff members about how far they can compete with other distance learning providers who may be able to replicate their education model with greater resources to do so.

Despite these concerns, many respondents have optimistic perceptions on how the provider will develop in the future: *'I think it's going to do very well. I think if it carried on its momentum I think it will do very well'* (A4, transcript: 6): *'I think it's just going to become an incredible success actually'* (B2, transcript: 7). Expanding on these positive views these respondents explain how they see the provider evolving over time:

> *I think they seem to attract a lot of students and students pay the money, so the [provider] is expanding and moving towards accredited degrees. And you know the future seems very bright for the [provider]. And you know it's interesting that through their model they're attracting teachers and developing research*

> *ideas, so I mean it is moving, definitely, and moving in the right direction, in my personal opinion.* (B3, transcript: 9)

> *I think they're really expanding, especially because they're developing courses that fit in with the industry and moving with the times.* (D4, transcript: 5)

The positive perceptions of providers engaging in research and developing a new curriculum that is relevant to industry demonstrates that for some respondents the providers offer a promising alternative to working in the traditional HE sector.

6.3 Interviews with students

The details of the student participants are outlined in table 44. The codes allocated correspond to the letters used for the staff interviews, but have been allocated to begin at 10 so we know that throughout the thesis executives are allocated an X code, staff case study letter and numbers 1-9 and students case study letter and numbers 10+. The majority of the respondents were male (n=15): there were only eight female student respondents. This is a result of the recruitment of interviewees that came forward. In the case of the provider (case study D) that had many students coming forward for interviewing the researcher was able to ensure a more gender-balanced sample. For some institutions there are greater numbers of male students (case study B for example). Overall figures from the BIS survey of students in private providers suggest that private providers enrol proportionately more women than men (women 55 per cent: men 45 per cent; see BIS, 2013: 83), which suggests that men are overrepresented in the interview data generated for this study. Although a consideration of the case study contexts and the possibility that some providers may enrol more men than women may partly explain the higher response rate from men to take part in interviews.

Interviews with students covered a range of subjects relating to their decision to study at the provider; reasons for the choice of subject; experiences with academic staff; and perceptions of the provider: the interview schedule is available in Appendix E. It was decided to cover a wide range of subjects in order to explore their experiences fully: for example questions were included that ask about their experiences balancing work and study, which is especially relevant as it has been found that students at private providers are more likely to work than those in traditional institutions (BIS, 2013).

Table 44: Student participants' information

Code	Gender	Age	Programme	Level	Mode	Domicile status
A10	male	23	LLB Law	PG	FT	International
A11	male	27	Business Management and Communications	UG	FT	International
A12	male	27	Applied Computing	UG	FT	International
B10	male	20	Popular Music Performance	UG	FT	Home
C10	male	25	MA filmmaking	PG	FT	Home
C11	male	32	MA filmmaking	PG	FT	EU
C12	male	37	MA filmmaking	PG	FT	International
D10	male	53	Photography	UG	PT-DL	Home
D11	male	65	Art History	UG	PT-DL	Home
D12	male	50	Photography	UG	PT-DL	Home
D13	male	61	Creative Studies	UG	PT-DL	Home
D14	female	62	Painting	UG	PT-DL	Home
D15	male	51	Photography	UG	PT-DL	Home
D16	female	49	Creative writing	UG	PT-DL	Home
D17	female	50	Textiles	UG	PT-DL	Home
D18	male	49	Photography	UG	PT-DL	Home but living overseas
D19	female	65	Fine art	UG	PT-DL	Home but living overseas
D20	female	32	Photography	UG	PT-DL	Home
E10	female	50	Construction Real Estate	PG	PT-DL	Home
E11	male	32	Rural Surveying	PG	PT-DL	Home
E12	female	31	Surveying	PG	PT-DL	Home
F11	male	23	Business and Finance	UG	FT	Home
F12	female	20	Accounting	UG	FT	Home

Nine of the respondents are enrolled on a full-time programme (40 per cent) and 14 on a part-time programme (60 per cent), largely the product of the large number of distance learning students represented in the study (n=14). Seven of the respondents are enrolled on a post graduate programme and 16 on under graduate programmes. The majority are home students (n=18), two of which are expats studying from overseas. Five of the students interviewed for the study were not home students (1 EU and 4 non-EU) and these students were also asked supplementary questions about their reasons for coming to the UK to study and what their experiences have been.

Of the 23 respondents, 14 are studying by distance learning so are able to study regardless of location. For three respondents the location of the provider was close to their place of residence. Five moved to the UK in order to study and one respondent moved within the UK in order to do the programme of study.

The majority of respondents have had experience of higher education before – only two out of the 23 students interviewed had no experience of HE before. Two out of the 21 respondents who had experience of higher education before studied with another alternative provider, five studied at an HEI in their home country, and 14 had studied at a publicly-funded university in the UK. Many of the respondents who had studied in the traditional HE sector had graduated some time ago and were now returning to studying after a long period of working. The data on what students were doing prior to enrolment confirms this: only six of the respondents were studying (5 full-time, 1 part-time), the majority were working (13 full-time and 2 part-time), one was retired and the other unemployed. The majority are also working in some capacity at the same time as studying (n= 16).

Some of the international students talked about the temporary and casual work they have done whilst studying – working odd days in a print company or a chip shop – the UK students tend to have permanent employment. When asked about how they manage the balance of working and studying, some respondents highlighted the difficulties they have in trying to do both (using terms such as 'challenging', 'not easy'): *'it's quite difficult to be honest with you, it takes a lot of time as you can imagine.. I'm finding it possible… it's the motivation as well... once I get started I'm okay'* (D13): *'it's a nightmare, finding the time'* (D17). Others stated that working does not impact on studying, and that they find doing both at the same time works well for them: *'the studying is very simple, it's very easy for me to do. Because it's very practical I can do that at the weekend and write it up in the week and it doesn't impact on my work at all'* (D15). Students who are doing programmes of study in creative disciplines because of a keen interest in the subject matter reported a successful marriage of work and study in their lives and the fact that studying represents a sufficiently different mode of activity from paid work. There seemed to be a clear difference between those who had children and those who did not in terms of how they report being able to balance work and study. As one respondent states: *'it's okay. I don't have kids, married, you know, comfortable. The free time I have is mine to use… I think if I'd had children as well as the job I have it would have been impossible. My life is working, studying and occasionally I go out. Studying is my primary leisure activity'* (D18); and another who does have children: *'just juggling time, and family life is always a challenge… I had to pull out of the course when my wife was pregnant for the second time'* (E11). The difficulties associated with

multiple ‘roles’ in being able to successfully complete a programme of study is unsurprising, but it is important to note that as particular institutions, such as private providers, enrol mature students these difficulties with managing work, family life and studying will need addressing.

Decision to study with provider

Respondents were asked why they decided to study with the provider; answers include references to the flexibility of the programme of study, the option to do an undergraduate degree in two years, interest in the course itself, cost, the reputation of the provider, recommendations, providers discipline specialism and mode of delivery. The response most frequently given was due to the perceived flexibility of the programme of study (n=7). As one respondent explains:

> *It was the flexibility primarily, there doesn’t seem to be another way of doing a degree in photography in this way. I did look into part time courses at local colleges and universities, but they did seem to require a lot more attendance. It was the flexibility and the fact that you could do it from your own home, without having to attend a brick and mortar college.* (D10)

Another highlights the constraints full time work places on their ability to attend a traditional HEI: *‘because I work full time, working shifts I can’t get the time off to go to university’* (D20). The ability to fit in studying with full time work is a major factor in the choice of institution that distance learning respondents made.

At one of the campus-based providers, the option of doing a degree in two years rather than three (or even longer overseas) is another key attractant for some respondents, as this international student states: *‘it was a two year degree. I had no ties in Britain, and I knew I would able to concentrate a lot better, so I would be able to spend less time and less money’* (A12). The option to do a degree in two years is very attractive to certain students who have a clear goal following graduation and want to get the degree as quickly as possible, and also those who are looking to save money on living expenses over the course of a degree programme.

Students were also asked about other elements that may have impacted on their decision to study at the provider – the marketing and promotional material they may have seen prior to enrolment and also the perceptions of employers of a degree from the provider.

A common way students learn about providers prior to enrolment is via searches on the internet: eight of the respondents explicitly mentioned the web presence of the provider as being a key source of knowledge and information. One respondent used the internet to search for feedback on the provider to try and assess whether students are happy with the provider: *'I looked at their website… and then searched the net for any negative feedback about the college or the course and didn't find any'* (D15). Case study D seemed to have the most developed marketing strategy, as students from this provider cited multiple marketing methods – website, leaflets, a stand at an exhibition and advertisements in magazines.

Potential employer perceptions of providers were also discussed in interviews. For some this is not something they thought about prior to enrolment: *'I didn't think about this. I doubt it would have much impact'* (D16). For those students who are doing programmes as a way of doing something they enjoy, perhaps as a supplement to an already established career or to one they are nearing the end of, employer perceptions are of little concern. However, one respondent states that *'if I'd really wanted to do this as a career choice I would have actively looked for the best institution and done it over three years and taken the loan'* (D18). Therefore the motivations for doing the programme of study, out of a passion for the subject rather than for career development, can impact students' choice of HE provider. An international student made an interesting comment about the perception of the private provider he studies at and the UK HE sector as a whole: *'back home I don't think employer perceptions would change whatever university it was if it is not Oxford or Cambridge'* (A12). The respondent is suggesting that differentiations are not made between institutions that are not Oxford or Cambridge (elite): non-Oxbridge institutions are interchangeable entities. This perception expressed by an international student confirms the view of the executives who argue that UK HE should work together to ensure the sector has a good reputation overseas, as differentiations are not necessarily made along the lines that are common in discourse about universities in the UK (private/public; red brick/ post-92).

When asked about reasons for choosing the particular course, the most frequently given reasons were for career development (n=9): *'a good strategic decision about the job opportunities'* (A12); *'in order to progress I need a qualification, because colleagues in the department have done qualifications'* (E12); and personal interest in the subject

(n=9). For many respondents their current programme of study has been chosen very consciously, sometimes in opposition to their previous experience in higher education: *'remote learning, I'm making a very conscious decision to study, I have personal commitment. When I was eighteen I was going to university because that's what you did. I didn't make a decision to go to university; it was made by teachers and parents. That was the path of life'* (D18). The fact that these students are making a conscious decision to study and that this comes from them rather than external expectations of parents or employers may mean that interest in the subject take precedence over other factors. Other reasons given were about the course itself (n=3): *'I was excited by the fact that it was a practical course'* (C11), and for a personal challenge (n=1). Students were also asked to reflect upon the criteria the provider used in selecting them for a place on the course. Responses covered the following reasons: qualifications; experience; performance in interview; and ability to pay the fees. The ability to pay was more frequently mentioned in case study D, where the provider has an open access policy and has no constraints upon enrolment of students. Case study C students focused more heavily on qualifications, experience, performance in interview and passion for subject.

Student experience studying at provider

The next sections will outline responses with regard to the students experience on the programme of study, their perceptions of staff, experiences of the learning and teaching and the reflection on any successes or difficulties they may have had. Many respondents were extremely positive about their overall experience on the programme of study, making comments like: *'it's amazing'* (D13); *'fascinating*' (D11); *'I've loved it. It's been very challenging. ... It's an extraordinary place'* (C12); *'one of the best decisions I have ever made'* (A12); *'I really enjoy the course'* (C10); *'very stimulating… I'm learning a lot'* (D14). Another expands to relate the positive experience to the learning experience: *'the learning experience is so encouraging. We get to meet our tutors after lectures, we have tutorials, you have the opportunity to discuss anything you have not understood. I am not used to this system back home, it is really encouraging'* (A11). Overall the impression garnered from the interviews with students is that they are generally happy with the programme of study and the provider. One respondent, who is on a two-year degree programme, acknowledged that the schedule for the programme has limited his ability to engage with non-academic activities:

> *I find the course quite demanding. It is quite different from what I expected because I think it is really intense, we don't really have time to do any extra-curricular activities. So it is interesting, at the same time it is intense.[asked about the extra-curricular activities he had in mind] I planned to join the law society, the Caribbean society, the Christian society. The programmes that they have, they are on every week. The gym, and sports, it's really intense, so I don't have time.* (A10)

The demanding pace of the two-year programmes was also commented on in interviews with staff, who felt that they left little time for reflection (see section 6.2.). The overall higher education experience is impacted upon by the compression of the degree programme but, as the ability to complete a degree in a much shorter period of time was the main attraction for the students, it is unlikely that there would be a programme of study that would satisfactorily meet requirements for quick completion and time for extra-curricular activities. Another respondent who is enrolled on a postgraduate programme accepts the high demands of the programme of study compared with an undergraduate level programme and sees it as a reflection of how they operate in a work environment:

> *Because this course is at a higher level, you are expected to be able to do things yourself, to have already gained a level of ability and initiative. The students on this course would not be accepted onto the course if they needed a lot of support, they need to be able to do it on their own… it follows that in the real world we've got to be able to get on and do things ourselves.* (E10)

The ability to work at a high level independently is crucial for many students who are studying with a distance learning provider. This student finds the adjustment between undergraduate study at a traditional university and postgraduate study at a distance learning provider more difficult: *'you're not speaking to a tutor every day, going from a degree that I've done full time, lectures, the understanding was a lot easier because you have someone there telling you and showing you, where in distance you don't'* (E12). The lack of face-to face contact can be very difficult for some students at distance learning providers and the opportunities to attend 'learning days' are dependent upon having the time and money – for this student those factors mean they cannot attend even though they would like to go.

Other respondents made more negative comments about their experiences: *'variable'* (D10); *'on the whole not too bad. I find the tutorials a bit lacking'* (D12); *'I found some*

quite dispiriting. The first course was fantastic… I've some that are pretty grim. I didn't feel that all the tutors are up to the job' (D16). For these students there is a problem of consistency across courses (the students do a series of courses to build up credits for a degree) where there are variances in the quality of the materials and tutors provided. One respondent gives an example of how the material provided can be inadequate: *'I do find some of the notes they provide a little bit skimpy. Sometimes they're not quite so clear. So you go on forum to ask what other students think.... sometimes there's not enough information so you don't know what to do'* (D17). Other respondents talk about the variability in the tutors themselves and how some do not seem to know what the students are supposed to be doing (D16).

The majority of respondents were positive about the contact they have had with members of staff at the case study providers (n=13). For example, one respondent stated that they are *'very good. The staff are always warm and welcoming when we have problems'* (A10) and another comments that *'the tutors I've had have been absolutely excellent, supportive when I've made mistakes ... my current tutor has been happy when I've submitted work to pick up the phone and chat to me for half an hour, on why he wrote the things he wrote and what I should be looking to do next'* (D10). The way members of staff respond to students, in particular in giving feedback on work and making time to talk, is crucial for many students. One student remarks on their experience with staff in reference to the pay that they receive: *'My latest tutor is great, making time, lots of phone calls. And considering how much they get paid their commitment is immense'* (D18). The idea that students take on board the pay/contractual arrangements of staff and view their experience with staff from that perspective is an interesting one. Students may also take into account the professional background of staff in appreciating the level of teaching ability; for example one student commented *'they are very nice people, professionals, but doesn't always mean they are able to teach […] it is not easy if you have a gift, [..] some of them are not so good for teaching, but overall it has been a good experience'* (C11). Therefore, as some providers prioritise the professional background of their teaching staff, teaching skills may be a secondary concern, which has an impact on how students engage with the learning and teaching on the programme of study. Another example of a respondent acknowledging the circumstances of staff members is outlined here in relation to some criticisms of the education they are receiving:

> *I appreciate that the tutors probably have a day job, but I am paying so much money for this: I've paid three grand a year for a booklet and some text books. I've paid that money so I expect the tutors to be online… I think that phone calls would be better. There's not enough correspondence between the tutor and the learning.* (E12)

The respondents above who acknowledge the pay, working arrangements and teaching abilities of staff are doing so in a way to try to express their own particular positive/negative perceptions of teaching staff at the provider. Other negative comments about staff tended to focus on the relationship between the student and tutor rather than their ability to teach per se: as in case study D, tutors do not perform a traditional teaching function – instead they focus on assessing the student's work. These quotations demonstrate some difficulties faced in communications between tutor and student:

> *I wouldn't describe me as having a relationship as such with my tutor, more a working acquaintance [asked about impact of lack of contact] I find it a bit demotivating at times and I've had the experience with tutors that I just didn't click with.* (D12)

> [There is] *not much contact with tutors outside of feedback… I find it very difficult to discuss what I'm doing when I'm half way through… if you want to see your tutor, mine was close enough to do this, you had to pay to go and see them… I can contact my tutor, but I feel like I am intruding somehow.. it shows that I'm not confident about what I am doing psychologically.* (D17)

These two quotations demonstrate a situation that is contrary to some staff perceptions about non-contact from students outlined in section 6.2, where there is a presumption that where there is no contact the student is 'fine'. Here we can see that there is something else going on whereby students require a level of confidence to contact tutors and that a lack of contact can affect motivation – this is a major issue for students who are studying at a provider that has adopted an 'independent-learner' model for students to work within.

The experiences that respondents have with staff have an impact on their overall perceptions of the provider, which to a certain extent depend upon the model of learning and teaching the provider has established. Case studies A, B and C follow more traditional face-to-face teaching methods and for those institutions respondents generally made positive comments about teaching staff and the modes of learning. As a respondent from case study A comments: *'it was okay in most cases… there were topic based*

tutorials…the lecturer would give us assignments... We have loads of support from staff' (A12). For students at distance learning providers the primary method of learning is self-taught from the materials provided (D10), or in the least some direction is provided for self-guided research. As one respondent explains: *'the course materials are fairly scanty, there's a lot of research... It's fairly structured. You're not hand held [asked about how they are learning] experimentation, research'* (D14). Another respondent outlines the experiences they have had: *'for each module you get a folder, and papers, base materials, lists of references that we source ourselves, we don't really have online lectures… we had one actually that was about development appraisals, which was brilliant. It was complicated…but she showed this example that she recorded herself, it was very helpful'* (E10). Overall, the way teaching and learning are arranged at campus-based institutions and those delivered at a distance are very different – even in instances where the campus based providers are looking to innovate how they deliver content, they are still doing so within the framework of the traditional teaching formats (for example, making lectures available online). Respondents whose main mode of learning is via face-to-face contact with staff did cite some examples of the use of ICTs in the delivery of education: *'yes, regularly, we access weslaw, lexis, […] most of the assignments we did last term we had to 'turn it in' on the internet'* (A10); *'I use the virtual learning environment, to hand in course work'* (A11); and another stated that there is minimal use of digital technology, but there is some use of Moodle, email, and staff email summaries to students (C11). At the distance learning providers the students reported more developed forums for students to use over the course of their studies – in fact students can be assessed on the writing they produce in a forum/blog setting – a learning log. One respondent explains some of the activity online that occurs:

> *In the forums there are two or three very active tutors who get in there and roll their sleeves up… there is also a website that has quite a lot of videos on it which talk about preparing for assessment, what makes a good learning log, those sorts of things… the [provider] also has its own blog where tutors take it in turns to contribute articles or items of current interest they do that for all of their subject areas.* (D10)

Another respondent highlights how the provider-run sites are supplemented with others over the course of study:

> *The learning log is essential from my point of view. The forums are a funny one. The [provider] one is okay, the software they use is not really brilliant, they're*

> *okay. You get better feedback by using wider global social media platforms. So for example I use the [provider] one to store my assignments, my blog is on WordPress and my images are stored on Flickr. I get feedback not just from the [provider] students, but globally.* (D15)

This description encapsulates a broad range of online activity that is typical of some respondents at this provider: another respondent also mentions using *Flickr* (D18) and many students at this provider have set up and maintain their own blog. This description of distance learning where students are self-reliant and are generally fine working alone and make use of forums where necessary fits in with how some respondents talk about their experiences at the provider: for these respondents the ability to be fine with being alone is key in how they engage with the education provided. One respondent reflects upon the isolation they have experienced studying by distance learning:

> *It's pretty isolating.. I think it's not something that concerns or troubles me. It's an interesting insight into my own capabilities as a person…it can get lonely at times and it would be nice to be able to speak to other students face to face but that's the way distance learning is, you can't do that. I thought about all this before I plunged into it. Having known what it was like at the OU, I thought can you deal with the isolation factor. I find I can deal with it. The outcome is the most important factor for me… it opens up areas for understanding about my own personality, not just about the work that I'm doing. It's a bit deeper than just doing the essays or research, it's a holistic experience… I was at a bricks and mortar university a few years ago and I found that, I found that isolating in a different way.* (D13)

This respondent's previous experience studying at the OU and also at a traditional university is expressed as a resource through which the respondent could prepare themselves for distance learning and frame the experience of isolation within that process. Another respondent also relates their experiences in distance learning to their previous experiences in higher education, this time with regard to their 'academic motivation and ability':

> *Because of previous experience in higher education I was aware how much of your time is spent working alone, remotely. My working is like that too. I am used to being left to my own devices… I notice on forums, those who have not been in higher education before seem to expect that someone is going to come and tell them what to do, with distance learning, no one is going to tell you what to do*. (D18)

Another respondent attributes their comfort with little direct contact with other students or staff to being a 'loner': *'But for me, I'm a bit of a loner and for the most part I'm fine*

with just the forums' (D10). For these respondents the forum offered by the provider is satisfactory and meets the requirements for a suitable mode of contact between staff and students. However, not all respondents feel this way about the forum at their provider: some are unsure about appropriate levels of communication (D17), are unhappy with it as a form of communication, or do not have the time to make full use of it (D14; D19). One respondent actually supplements their learning by taking related courses at a local college to experience contact with people and access facilities (D17). Another respondent explains their view on forums: *'I had a look at them and they just didn't catch me… it's not something I click with. In my work I have to. In general I don't really like it as a means of communication – it's not interactive enough'* (D12). Clearly the forum at this provider does not attract some students due to lack of clarity, interactivity and purpose.

At another distance learning provider – case study E – students do not email tutors directly at all. Instead all communication between tutors and students, and between student and student, is done via the VLE. One respondent describes how this works and the positive aspects of this procedure:

> [talking about interaction with other students] *Via the VLE, everything is discussed via the VLE as everything is monitored by the tutors, so if want to solve a problem, someone might say they have found an article that is interesting….so instead of replicating work, it makes life a bit easier. And also some of the tutors answer the other student's questions, the tutor monitors all the answers and monitor what is said on the VLE so that one student could not say something wrong – they would intervene. So if I were to say you do this and this and this, the tutor could intervene and say that is wrong. All our communication must be via the VLE so they can monitor the quality of the answers and the discussion. And also other students might not be able to come to the face to face sessions, so they can benefit by monitoring the discussion on the VLE.* (E10).

The idea that this may provide greater information to students as they will be able to see what other students are asking is in some ways similar to how a seminar works in face-to-face institutions; it may also reduce the necessary duplication of work that tutors who deal with students individually may have to face. The monitoring role of tutors in this instance is also crucial as students rely upon information in the forum being correct. The same respondent highlights that, whilst the system is good, the reality of putting the system into practice can raise difficulties: *'I think it works really well, it could be improved, people could be sharing more. There are times when I could have shared*

more but I didn't have the time' (E10), which echoes some of the comments by respondents from case study D who state they do not engage with the student forum through lack of time. The idea that students lack the time to engage in forums may have an impact on how far the forum successfully achieves its objectives, as too few contributors may limit its usefulness. One respondent suggests that too few people using the forum can have negative impact: *'there was only three of us using the VLE and it's difficult getting a debate going when there's only three of you'* (E12). The lack of opportunities available to distance learning students for debate and discussion may be limited further if students do not actively contribute to forums, through lack of time, interest or engagement in the medium. Another respondent suggests that having direct contact with tutors would be preferable to using the forum: *'in an ideal world we'd have times for tutorials like university perhaps over the phone, so we could have a chat, there's only so much you can do on a forum'* (E11). Forums could be described as an imperfect solution to the problem of how to get dispersed people communicating together around a particular subject – the research data suggests that more needs to be done to ensure students are more comfortable with them as the main mode of communication between staff and students.

The distance learning providers generally do not offer traditional teaching methods via ICTs, rather, they have developed a different approach where students have no lectures, and have little direct contact with staff (except where contact is arranged between the student and tutor). The fragile relationship between staff and students also stretches to non-academic support: *'there's no pastoral support as far as I can see. Though I don't seek it out… I don't see the point in bothering tutors… I suspect support is quite thin on the ground'* (D15). Students are wholly dependent upon (1) the course materials provided,(2) the forum/virtual learning environment, (3) some contact with tutors (direct via emails/phone or indirect via forums), (4) their own independent scholarship. The experience of students at these providers demonstrates a more independent learning model than that practised in campus based institutions where there is more direct contact between teaching staff and students (Halsey, 2008), more established pastoral support mechanisms and opportunities for developing peer support networks (Wilcox et al., 2005).

Respondents were asked to reflect upon the difficulties and successes they have experienced since enrolling for study at the provider. They gave varied responses: some focused on adjusting to living in the UK and studying in the UK HE system (e.g. A10); another citing the difficulties in dealing with other students (C11); maintaining motivation when the subject of study is not interesting (D18); or difficulties with communicating solely online (E11). One theme that emerged in case study D was around the concept of trust – as more than one respondent referred to worries that others will steal their ideas. One respondent comments that *'there's been a lot of toing and froing because I have to show where I get my ideas from. And that I'm nervous about 'cause I know how easy it is for ideas to be stolen, granted they may not be applied in the way that I wanted'* (D20). This issue seemed to stem from the mode of communication (forum, online) and the discipline (the arts). The concept of trust is an important one for students to feel comfortable communicating with other students and tutors. It is not clear whether the lack of trust mirrors similar concerns of arts students in the traditional HE sector.

Another theme that came up is a lack of money to engage in activities that would be beneficial to a student's academic progress and success, and also the impact tuition fees have on a student's perception of a provider. One respondent talks about the impact they feel a lack of money has had on them:

> *I'm pretty sure I've failed my exams, the stuff that came up in the exams were the things that I'd struggled to get to grips with. Some of my colleagues have been to the study days and the tutors actually told them what the exam questions were going to be on, so not going along to this I felt like I'd really missed out on that…. I can't afford to go on the days, I feel at a disadvantage. It costs one hundred and thirty pounds. I already pay one hundred and fifty pounds a month and I don't have a lot of money.* (E12)

That money enables student to purchase a better educational experience is not a new phenomenon, however this respondent highlights that certain elements that they see as crucial are out of reach due to the cost of travel and accommodation when attending study days.

Respondents generally did not refer to tuition fee costs, except in the case above where the student is struggling financially. However, one respondent made an interesting point about the impact of the level of fees paid directly out of their pocket and how they

interact with the education provider. This respondent, a student in receipt of a bursary which significantly reduces the amount of tuition fees they pay, states that: *'I felt that I was more forgiving of things not being ideal in certain areas… for example, classes clashing with other things you want to be able to do'* (C10). This respondent goes on:

> *Because I am paying significantly less I would say my expectations are lower, I feel like I am getting a lot for that money… for students that have to pay the full fees are generally less tolerant of things going a bit wrong, say with scheduling, not getting appropriate classes.* (C10)

The idea that this student is more accepting of problems than others who are paying full fees illustrates to a certain extent the thinking of students in higher education – that the fees were being paid from elsewhere did not come into the equation as they were previously in traditional HE. In this respect students at private providers may make similar linkages between tuition fees they pay and expectations of the educational service they receive as those studying in public institutions. This aspect relates to the themes in the interviews with executives and staff in sections 5.1.2 and 6.2 around the impact of tuition fees on how students relate to the education and the institution they are studying at.

Another theme that emerged around success is that for some respondents just being there and doing the degree is an achievement in itself:

> *My biggest success was actually starting in the first place, personal reasons, I was in a bit of a dark place at the time and I had some coaching through work and I said I could do this, and she said well why don't you do it. So actually submitting the portfolio was a success for me. From that point of view it was quite therapeutic.* (D10)

> *I think anyone doing distance learning, with a job and a family, is a massive achievement in itself... It takes an awful lot of motivation.* (E11)

For many respondents, being enrolled on a degree programme represents something of an achievement – they spoke of studying a subject that they are passionate about, returning to HE where they had not achieved what they wanted previously or had a bad experience of higher education, facing their own 'demons', or developing themselves in the midst of many existing work or family commitments. For these students there is a level of pragmatism about what success means for them in terms of progressing and completing their degree programme.

Respondents were asked to reflect upon the programme of study they are on and whether they would change anything given the chance: seven respondents said they would not change anything about the curriculum and eleven said they would change something. When asked to elaborate, those that said they would change something about the curriculum referred to; better support for students; more emphasis on a particular aspect (for example, directing, management); modules to be aimed at a higher level; more clarity in the written materials; and smaller modules (so you take more modules with fewer credits). Despite these suggestions, the majority of respondents stated that the course had met their expectations (over 80 per cent). Those that said their expectations had not been met referred to the amount and quality of the information in the course materials provided by case study D provider (D17; D19). Several respondents went further than saying the course had met their expectation and said that the course had surpassed their expectations (A10; C10; C12; D13; D20) expressing very positive comments about their experiences studying with the provider. However, the ability of the provider to meet expectations is relative to the level of expectations to begin with, as one conceded that 'my expectations aren't high, let's put it that way' (E11). Despite this caveat we can see that the overall perception of students interviewed was positive. Respondents stated that the best things about the provider they are studying at are: flexibility, small institution, the support, the tutors, a 'melting pot', independent learning, the location. One respondent (F11), however, found it difficult to say anything positive about the provider as they had negative views on the quality of the teaching. This respondent explains: *'we felt that [the provider] were only interested in getting people in, getting the money and then churning out identikit degrees'* (F11).

When asked what the provider should do differently, there was a range of answers: set up internships; better accommodation, library and sporting facilities; better consistency between tutors; and for distance learning providers to arrange opportunities for face-to-face interaction between staff and students. Within the set of questions towards the end of the interviews, where students are asked to talk about their satisfaction with the provider over a number of questions, respondents were asked if they were satisfied, if they would consider using the provider again, whether they would recommend the provider to others and whether they thought the provider offered value for money. The responses overall were extremely positive: 18 out of 23 respondents were satisfied and said they would recommend the provider to others; 20 said they would use the provider

again; 13 thought the provider offered ‘good’ value for money; six thought ‘okay’ and four thought the provider they are studying at did not offer value for money. Despite the overall positive response, this question did throw up some issues about how the providers operate: for example, for case study A there were issues about the facilities on offer and how these relate to the presentation on the provider website (A10); at case study C there were issues raised about the very high fees charged (C11); at case study F one respondent was extremely critical about a lack of anything offered to students outside the classroom (F11). Some respondents from case study D made some interesting comments that relate the value for money the provider offers to the wider HE sector. For instance one respondent states:

> *It’s not bad. Let’s not pretend that higher education of any kind is cheap. When you pay 700 or 800 pounds in a lump sum for what looks like on the face it looks like 35 exercise notebook and ten hours of tutors time, doesn’t look like much value for money. But would you do it without that? Can you do if for that money anywhere else? I think the answer in both cases is no and so I don’t think I have an issue with the value for money. If you get a good tutor you get far more that the headline amount from it. It also rewards the amount of effort you put in it. It provides you with a structure for you to put in as much effort as you like, so to some extent the value you get from it depend on how much you engage with it.* (D10)

Another suggests that the value for money is good, *‘very much so, comparatively, with other areas of higher education’* (D13). However, another respondent who states that the provider does not offer value for money sees that the tuition fees charged at the provider have gone up a lot in response to the rise in tuition fees in the traditional HE sector, but that the provision has not improved accordingly:

> *The course fees have gone up, they have quadrupled since I started. And I know that this has gone up because of the rise in university fees. But what they offer has not quadrupled… they have changed what they are offering, in terms of the website, the course that they’ve written, but I would not rate it at four times the original price.* (D19)

The idea that tuition fees in the traditional HE sector are a key comparator for both the students who are looking to do a degree and also the provider themselves in how they set the fees for their institution is evident in interviews with student and with executives and staff. In particular the level of contact with and the perceived quality of the academic staff were associated with concepts of value. Other aspects were also mentioned: course materials; access to facilities etc., but when respondents reflected upon their concept of

value invariably their positive responses were closely linked to perceptions of good contact with quality teaching staff.

Respondents were also asked about what they plan to do when they complete their programme; half of respondents plan to use the degree to further their career or inform their professional work. For some respondents in this group the degree represents a qualification: *'ultimately my achievement is the qualification. The course gets you from a to b, yes it does, it's like anything in life, experience is worth ten times more than academic prowess'* (E11). For this respondent the degree is what it enables in the job market. The real objective for this person is to translate the credential into experience. Of the remainder who do not intend to use the degree to develop a career, three plan to do further study, five intend to do nothing with their degree and the remainder are unsure about what their next step is. One of the respondents who plan to do nothing explains: *'I am interested in it for the structured learning, I am not interested in the qualification'* (D15) – many respondents in this category are considering doing another degree, either postgraduate or another undergraduate degree in another subject. One student talks about another objective tied in to the successful completion of the programme of study – a kind of redemption:

> *There is also something else, for a variety of personal reasons when I did my degree the first time around I didn't get the level of degree that I ought to have got… this is my second chance at a 2:1 I owe it to myself…. I've lived a large chunk of my life believing that I didn't do myself justice. It certainly impacted on work for the first three or four years. It affected my confidence in a whole range of things over the years, so I owe myself a 2:1… it will enable me to look in the mirror and say you were right you did deserve one.* (D10)

That higher education has personal meaning over and above the development of knowledge, skills or the acquisition of qualifications and credentials is the possibility of personal development. To a certain extent we can relate this to the background of the students interviewed – many have previous experience in higher education and are returning to study to focus on an area of personal interest to them.

International students

This section will briefly outline some data generated in the interviews that are particular to the international students, who were asked about their decision to come to the UK to study and what their experiences have been. Many international students decide to leave

their home country due to the perceived poor quality of indigenous higher education. The reasons for a decision to come to the UK rather than other countries with good reputations in HE (such as the US, Australia) were varied. For the students at case study A, the ability to do a degree in two years rather than four or more years at home or in other countries, was the main attractant. One respondent highlighted that for people from his home country England was *the* place to go to study: *'Also England is a special place for Nigerians… for a long time we have parents or relatives who study in the UK…I had an uncle that studied in Ireland, my best friends parents studied in England, my best friend studied at Oxford'* (A12). The reputation of the UK as a good place to study in HE is strong in some countries. Other respondents cited family reasons as the main reason for coming to the UK. For the London-based provider(s) location was also a key factor: *'London is the cultural capital of Europe, so it offered a great opportunity to learn… the chance to study in a city like this is tremendous'* (C12).

For all international students, coming to the UK to study has met their expectations. Some London-based students were extremely enthusiastic about the city and how this has enhanced their experiences studying in the UK: *'London is so huge, it has been a change of life for me'* (C11); *'it has exceeded my expectations. I am speaking London specific…there is so much to this city, all of the culture and the energy feeds into the school'* (C12). The draw of London for international students is a major incentive for many HE providers who decide to set up in the city.

Four of the five international students plan to stay in the UK when the programme of study is completed (three to continue studying, one to work), the other intends to return to their home country to work.

6.4 Summary of qualitative research findings

This section will offer a brief overview of the results of the analysis of qualitative data generated in interviews with executives, staff and student at private providers.

6.4.1 Overview of interviews with executives

The purpose of the interviews with executives was to gain further information on the providers and explore the views and perceptions of those who drive forward the provider. Overall the interviews produced rich data that can be viewed as a source of information about the providers (see section 5.1) and also indicative of perceptions and views of the individuals interviews around particular themes (section 5.1.2). Below is a list of the themes that arose in the interviews:

- Goals of the organisation: filling market gaps, alignment with industry, seeking legitimation in HE sector. The belief in a gap in the market acts as a catalyst and goal for some providers, especially with regards to provision that aligns closely with a particular profession. The more successful providers have very clear goals with regard to the route to university status.
- Establishment and development of curriculum: dual influences of industry requirements and the student market. Curriculum is driven by the goals of the provider (see first point above). Professional bodies and marketing departments in providers play a key role in curriculum development and in decisions about moves into new disciplines.
- Perceptions of teaching staff as primarily professionals, which has a knock-on effect on the contract-types available to existing and potential employees. Growth or decline in student numbers also have a major impact on the numbers and recruitment of academic staff.
- Blended and distance learning: there is an interest in developments and awareness of drawbacks of this approach to delivery of higher education. Executives raised a number of perceived advantages of a blended learning approach, referring to concepts of online education as a resource and as a tool.
- Perceptions of students: recruitment and the step-change required to educate undergraduates and home students.
- Widening participation is not a priority for the sample providers: there are varying approaches to the collection of data on the background of students. It is acknowledged that providers who enrol students mainly on postgraduate professional programmes may find it difficult to recruit significant numbers from lower socioeconomic groups.
- Varied contact with traditional universities, industry and government: Very few have a lot of contact with universities, notwithstanding validation relationships; Despite having strong connections to professions and professional bodies, a

minority have significant contact with industry and employers; There are huge variances between providers with regard to the quality and quantity of contact they have with government.

- Perceptions of higher education policy and governance: There are positive perceptions of the general direction of higher education policies; perceived negative impact of uncertainty and lack of clarity in government policy; and the two bodies most significant for private providers are the QAA and UKBA.
- Coverage of private providers in media: There is the perception that media coverage is negative in character, simplistic and ignores the true distinctions between private providers in terms of for-profit and not-for-profit status; though there were signals of hope that this may be changing.
- Public/private distinctions and perception as trailblazers: Executives made very particular arguments about public/private concepts in that the public sector is represented in a negative way. Related to this is how they construct themselves as trailblazers.
- Concept of level playing field and construction of private providers as underdogs in the sector were evident in how executives talked about their experiences, especially with regard to higher education policy.
- Future plans for growth and acquisition of DAP/university status: Expansion is discussed in number of terms; an overall increase in student numbers; recruiting more home students; recruiting more undergraduate students; and a change or addition to the premises from which they operate. Future plans also include further engagement with the traditional HE governance and policy sector with the view to apply for DAP and/or university status.

6.4.2 Overview of interviews with staff

Interviews with staff at the case study providers allowed for a different perspective on providers from within, allowing the opportunity to explore some of the issues that came up in interviews with executives. Respondents were asked to reflect upon their decision to work at the provider, their experiences over their time of employment, how they view the provider and their teaching experiences. Overall, the interviews with staff raised a range of positive and negative experiences and some interesting themes around the affiliation between their current employment, their own identity and views on higher education more generally. Below is a list of the themes that arose in the interviews with staff:

- Deliberate versus unintentional employment: ‘deliberate’ meaning that the person actively sought out employment with the institution and ‘unintentional’ meaning that the person began working for the provider in a limited capacity through a network of contacts. Within the ‘deliberate’ category different aspects were highlighted as being key; location of provider, mode of delivery and also the idea of ‘strategic employment’.

- Match and mismatch between provider and employer values: where a match occurs this is linked to negative perceptions about public institutions (bureaucratic, large) and/or positive associations with the private sector more broadly; where mismatches occur these are attributed to concerns about tuition fees and the compatibility of HE and commerce.
- Importance of professional identity developed outside of HE: complex relationship between professional identity and higher education teaching (this is explored in more detail in section 'Analysis of interview data across all groups' below).
- Comparisons with public sector prompted some dichotomies with regards to size, perceptions of dynamism and competition: fast versus slow; big versus small.
- Perceptions of the provider as employer: respondents talked about the lack of staff development, the economically precarious nature of their position and, in some institutions, discouragement in doing research.
- Perceptions of students: very positive about students themselves. Concerns were raised about the lack of diversity in the student body.
- ICTs in higher education: use of social media, forums, VLEs and also as 'direct' communication tools (emails, Skype).
- Impact of view of HE that foregrounds economic imperatives: respondents discussed the concept of students as consumers; a foregrounding of the economic cost of HE related to tuition fees and the impact of institutional context; and the maintenance of academic standards in the face of an economic transactional view of HE.
- Perceptions of HE policies are negative when looking at them from the perspective of the whole sector and are viewed more positively in terms of the impacts on private providers in the HE sector. Experience with the QAA is an important aspect of how staff may view HE policy.
- Thinking about the future of the provider: uncertainty, optimism.

6.4.3 Overview of interviews with students

Interviews with students at case study providers sought to uncover their backgrounds, reasons for choosing the provider to study with and the experiences over the course of study. The data generated points to an overall positive relationship between the students and the providers. Here are some key points from the interview data:

- Previous experience of HE – professional experience too.
- The majority do paid work whilst studying, discuss varying success in balancing work and study, and indicate some impact of family status on their overall experience of studying. The flexibility of provider, the subject and motivation for study also has an impact on their experiences.
- The students interviewed had made a very conscious decision to study and this has an impact on the subject of study (directly related to career at work, or

closely aligned with personal interests), and also the level of engagement and motivation the student exhibits. The full engagement with the programme of study may be perceived relate to the high levels of satisfaction expressed by the respondents.

- Key factors in decision to study at provider may have a positive or negative impact during the course of studying: Flexibility is crucial in the decision to study and the experience of learning (positive); Two-year shortened degree pathway key attractant for some students but this impact negatively on their experiences once they are studying.
- Employer perceptions of the provider are not considered prior to enrolment, despite majority looking to develop their careers as a result of the programme of study.
- Many respondents identify themselves as independent learners.
- The quality of contact between staff and students is key for many students: when they have good experiences with staff their overall perception of the education they receive is positive. Those studying at providers with face-to-face contact with staff expressed their experiences more positively than those who do not. At distance learning providers, non-contact with tutors may represent an issue – staff presumptions that students who do not contact them are fine does not play out in the interviews with students. A student that lacks confidence in communicating with tutors or engaging with online forums may have a negative perception of the education they receive as a result.
- Forums can work well, but there are issues about how they work, how to promote trust and invite higher levels of engagement. Forums could be described as an imperfect solution to the problem of how to get dispersed people communicating together around a particular subject – more needs to be done to ensure students are more comfortable with them as the main mode of communication between staff and students.
- Tuition fees have an impact on how a student perceives the education that is delivered to them – those that pay lower fees (the result of receiving bursaries) report lower thresholds for satisfaction and directly attribute the amount of fees paid by themselves as the reasons for this. Tuition fees in the public sector also act as a key comparator for students in how they perceive the education they receive as they see what is available to them through the lens of the fees in the public sector – therefore they state that they are getting value for money if the fees at the private provider are lower than at a traditional university. Tuition fee levels in the public sector also act as an indicator to the private sector of what level of fees they can set in their institution (differentiations on price), what students might be willing to pay and what the alternatives are for them.

6.4.4 Analysis of interview data across all groups

There are multiple areas of overlap in responses between the different groups interviewed for the study – for example, executives and students both talked about the way the providers serve particular types of students (working professionals for example)

that are typically ignored by the traditional HE sector, with the exception of MBAs in traditional universities. Table 45 outlines three common themes that were touched on in interviews with executives, staff and students and describes how they were expressed by respondents.

Table 45: Some common themes in interviews with executives, staff and students

Some Common Themes across all groups interviewed	Expressed in executive interviews	Expressed in staff interviews	Expressed in student interviews	Overview
Staff as 'professionals' outside of HE	Teaching staff who are also active professionally are viewed as a major asset to the provider in how they can market programmes and ensure the education is industry relevant. The prevalence of professional-teaching staff is used to explain the employment arrangements that favour part-time, casual teaching contracts.	The professional identity of teaching staff is very important to them. Balancing professional work and teaching work results in high levels of uncertainty for staff and many report financial issues resulting from lack of employment security.	The professional experience of teaching staff is appreciated. Just because someone is very experienced professionally does not necessarily translate into them being good teachers.	Staff experience a 'double-push' towards both professional and academic identity – in order to remain relevant to providers staff must remain engaged in their profession, which results in providers not offering full time teaching contracts to ensure their teaching staff are active professionally and the lack of security in teaching contracts means that professional work is necessary to survive. A focus on professional experience and casual contractual arrangements may mean that teaching skills are not developed.
Tuition fees	Tuition fees in the traditional HE sector have a major impact on the success of private providers and higher tuition fees are perceived to be good for private providers. Tuition fees rises in the traditional HE sector may signal rises in tuition fees in the private sector	Some respondents report instances where students respond as 'consumers', though this is not overwhelmingly the case. Invariably the concept of student-consumer comes from within the institution itself. Payment of tuition fees can result in students being less engaged with the education as a transaction is made apparent. Concept of 'safe transaction'.	Comparisons with tuition fees in the public sector are used as a way of interpreting the education received and may motivate the decision to study at a private provider. Levels of satisfaction with the delivery of education may be related to the fees paid by the student themselves	Tuition fees in the public HE sector have a major impact on two aspects; the decisions that students make and the experiences of the educational process that students and staff report; second, on how HE is conceptualised and how students are positioned as consumers. These two aspects are intertwined.

Some Common Themes across all groups interviewed	Expressed in executive interviews	Expressed in staff interviews	Expressed in student interviews	Overview
ICTs in higher education	Campus based providers are interested in developments in ICTs but are concerned about the drawbacks. Where ICTs are used they are to supplement traditional teaching methods. Distance learning providers have developed particular modes of using ICTs in education, usually focused around the use of ICTs for communication between staff and students and the development of forums. There is no attempt to replicate the traditional lecture-seminar mode prevalent in traditional HE. It is accepted that even in instances where the programme is delivered at a distance some face-to-face contact is desired by students.	Campus-based providers supplement traditional teaching methods with ICTs – particularly around social media and the development of VLE. Some concerns are expressed about the impact online education delivery may have on student engagement. Staff at distance learning providers report various methods of contacting students. Many staff utilise ICTs in order to balance teaching work and other paid work. Forums are emphasised at some institutions more than others. There are questions about the impact online education has on collegiality between staff.	Students appreciate being able to work remotely where other commitments restrict access to traditional modes of higher education. Not all students engage in forums fully as there are issues about having the time and confidence to contribute. There are also concerns related to trust.	ICTs use is varied across the providers – some providers use ICTs extensively whilst others use ICTs to supplement a curriculum heavily dependent upon face-to-face contact. Face-to-face contact is seen as a better way of communicating as it is more responsive, interactive and stimulating. Attempts to develop ICTs in ways that replicate face-to-face contact have varied success. Students prefer the option to have some direct contact in addition to independently directed learning.

As can be seen from Table 45, data from all interview groups can be viewed in relation to one another for some aspects of the study: the concept of teaching staff as professionals; the impact of tuition fees; and the use of ICTs in higher education. Some of these issues are discussed in more detail in chapter 7.

6.4.5 Limitations of the interview data

Whilst the interviews provide rich and in-depth accounts of the experiences of students and staff in the alternative higher education sector, we should remain aware that these are the stories of diverse individuals rather than a straightforwardly generalizable cohort of staff or students. Three of the case studies were in the arts disciplines and it is helpful

to consider the impact this may have on the data produced: for example, the experiences of teaching staff balancing professional and academic identities may be more pronounced in the cases looked at than for other disciplines due to the irregular and unpredictable nature of work in the creative industries (Ross, 2008); also the high levels of personal interest and motivation to study experienced by the students interviewed may derive from study being an extension of a hobby and a broad basis in the arts in which people exhibit high levels of intrinsic interest and motivation (Hoven Stohs, 1992). We should also remember that the individuals interviewed for the research were a self-selecting volunteer sample and, as such, were relatively motivated and organised individuals, in some cases with their own reasons for wishing to take part in interviews (an established interest in the research itself, or in order to disclose uncomfortable experiences). Despite these limitations, I have been able to identify some recurring themes and shared experiences that could be said to characterise the experiences of staff and students at alternative providers.

7 - Discussion

The thesis so far has presented background information, quantitative data on private higher education in the UK and qualitative data generated in interviews with a sample of executives, staff and students at alternative providers of higher education. This chapter will present a discussion about what this original research tells us and how these findings add to what we already know. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have outlined quantitative data for the UK and analysis of qualitative interviews with executives, staff and students at private providers in the UK.

7.1 Growth in the private HE sector: students, mode of delivery

The quantitative data demonstrates that the private sector is seeing growth in student enrolments – surveys by HESA (2011) and BIS (2013) demonstrate an overall increase in students enrolled at private providers (+79 per cent between 2009/10 and 2012). Data generated in interviews with executives also suggests that there has been a surge in enrolments for most providers over the last five years – in addition to this, most have indicated predictions for further growth in the near future. Investment in new buildings, refurbishments and expansion of disciplinary offering also indicate confidence in the sector. Trends in the UK reflect global trends that show growth in the private higher education sector. To a certain extent the private sector is picking up students not well served by traditional higher education (what Altbach et al., 2009 calls ‘demand absorbing’ institutions): those older professional students who may be returning to higher education for a second or third time to advance their career or study a subject of personal interest. Policy changes in 2010 have, however, embedded disincentives for some people returning to HE who already have an existing HE qualification. The UK Government does not provide funding to universities for students who are studying for 'Equivalent or Lower Qualifications' (ELQs), which means that universities have to charge higher fees to students who already have a qualification and want to study for another course at a lower or equivalent level. In this study it is found that a number of aspects had an impact on mature students’ decision about where to study – for many the distance learning model in addition to the subject of study resulted in only one option. The ability for students to work at a pace that suits them was also a key factor as many of the students’ work, sometimes in very demanding, high-pressured jobs. Others are

retired and do not want the pressure of working very quickly. Private providers are also an option for international students who want to come to the UK to study, but have not got into an Oxbridge institution, as they do not necessarily differentiate between the public and private institutions outside of Oxbridge.

Following the discussion of branding of HEIs in the Australian context by Heaney et al. (2010) that outlines the Australian education export strategy, the interviews with students in this study identified different layers of how branding/marketing may apply to private providers of higher education: (1) the UK brand; (2) the location brand (in particular London; Heaney et al., [2010] describe the 'state brand' where students' decisions may be based upon the location of the institution); and (3) the educational institution itself. It has been found in this study that these layers can be identified in how international students talk about their decision to come to the UK to study. In addition to the three aspects described in Heaney et al. (2010), the interviews conducted with students for this study also suggest another category: (4) flexibility of delivery. The two-year degree was a strong reason for the students to choose the private provider. Flexibility of delivery was also crucial for the home students, as these students are usually working and may also have family commitments. Other research on international students' decisions to study in the UK has been confirmed in the results of the interview data. For example, Min et al. (2012) found that international students studying at private HEIs in Singapore had four motivations for embarking on their study programme: academic & education, career & migration, pleasure & experience and work. International students' motives for moving abroad to study can be 'classified into (a) seeking academic quality, and (b) seeking opportunities (such as employment, migration, experience and exposure)' (Min et al., 2012: 123). Wang (2004) separated these into three aspects: academic; career, and; experiential. The international students interviewed for this study expressed motivations that align with the research summarised above: there was a strong sense that the students were very happy to come to the UK to study and had a very good impression of the UK HE sector from their experiences at the private providers.

The flexibility of online learning and also the remoteness from the higher education institution can result in different kinds of students participating in higher learning than would necessarily attend a campus based, full-time programme. One of the important

arguments for the development of online provision is the idea that offering education more flexibly will enable greater diversity and widen participation in higher education. Goold et al. (2007) suggest that online learning enables more diversity in the kind of students in terms of cultural and educational background. Despite this, they highlight that the nature of online interactions themselves, between students and staff, may actually lack sensitivity to the different backgrounds that students may come from. This demonstrates complexity in how we can conceptualise online provision as a straightforward ingredient in the widening participation project. Private providers serve students not fully considered by traditional universities – older, professionals, those wishing for a flexible approach to learning. In a review of Tierney and Hentschke's book *New Players Different Game: Understanding the Rise of For-profit colleges and universities*, Breneman (2008) highlights that:

> There is less discussion than one might have wished on why the traditional institutions left so much space available for the for-profits to fill. Community colleges, university divisions of continuing education, regional public and private universities—all apparently had an opportunity to meet the needs of the students who are now enrolling in for-profit colleges and universities, but most failed to seize it. (Breneman, 2008: 355)

The thesis research is not able to answer the question of why traditional universities have been apparently unable to serve non-traditional students, but we can see confirmation of the idea that students *are* turning to private providers because of gaps in the market for higher education[22]. This raises questions of whether supply or demand has changed and, if so, which aspects. Recent data published by HEFCE (2013a) on supply and demand in UK higher education has focused on enrolments by discipline, in particular looking at demand for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, as these are considered as one of a number of 'strategically important and vulnerable subjects'; however, it is possible to draw out some figures that may illustrate significant falls in part-time enrolments: there were 109,207 part-time enrolments in 2001/2, this fell to 84, 826 in 2011/12 (a fall of 22 per cent). This is happening at the same time as full-time enrolments are increasing (by 30 per cent). Over the same time period, mature enrolments have increased by 1 per cent whilst young enrolments have increased by 35

[22] Despite this theme being identified in interviews, data on registrations at private HE providers by level and mode of study outlined in table 12 show that 86.7 per cent of those enrolled on a first degree at private providers study full-time, 10.1 per cent part-time and 3.2 per cent by distance learning, which compares with 68.1 per cent studying full-time and 31.9 per cent part-time at public HEIs (see table 13), which indicates more focus on full-time provision.

per cent (HEFCE, 2013b).[23] Clearly there are significant changes in enrolments of part-time and mature students in higher education in the UK, whether the supply of programmes of study for these students are diminishing in traditional institutions requires further confirmation, however the interviews with students in this study seems to suggest that students are turning to private provision as they cannot identify a feasible option in the traditional university sector. The relationship between private providers and non-traditional students is explored in more detail in the next section.

7.2 Private providers and 'non-traditional' students

What is interesting is that, while private providers are responding to gaps in the market for higher education for non-traditional students, the widening participation agenda in HE seems to have changed. The development of alternative providers of higher education suggests that an opening up of the higher education sector will enable an opening up of higher education for all. This research has identified some examples of 'open access' higher education that represents flexibility in access and flexibility in delivery, both of which have attracted a particular section of the community into higher learning. However, access to higher education remains stratified along socio-economic class boundaries, a trend that had become entrenched during the massification of HE in the second half of the twentieth century (Reay et al., 2001). Changes in the university sector may not address this issue:

> As what were once elite university systems become majority systems of tertiary education, the national responses have varied, but in no cases do ruling groups simply devote greater resources to expanded systems that strive to educate a broader range of citizens. (Collins, 1999: 234)

Widening participation whilst increasing over time (Jones and Lau, 2012), has more recently been replaced by social mobility (David, 2012), which does not deal with inequality directly. Jones and Lau (2012) describe the situation of blended learning and its relationship to the widening participation agenda in the European context, suggesting that blended learning can have a positive impact on the ability of HEIs to recruit and support non-traditional students through their programmes of study. In the study by Jones and Lau (2012) the majority (80 per cent) of students fell into the 25-49 year old

[23] HEFCE data defines 'young' as those aged under 21 on commencement of their studies. 'Mature' are defined as those aged 21 and over.

category, 14 per cent over 50 years and 6 per cent 18-24. The small number of younger students aged under 25 years is similar to the findings of this study. However, the opening up of higher education opportunities for older, working people does not mean that widening participation of people from lower socio-economic class background will necessarily occur; in fact the opposite may occur, as opportunities to access higher education reinforce existing inequalities. As the interviews with executives show, at some institutions all students come from a corporate elite. Postgraduate recruitment will suffer from a lack of diversity in the potential students who already have an undergraduate degree. There were discussions in the interviews about the potential for fees-blind institutions where students are recruited on merit, but none of the executives who mentioned this goal could anticipate this happening in the near future. In the meantime private providers offer little for those students from poorer backgrounds over and above a small number of bursaries: some believe that offering a cheaper alternative is enough. The potential for an opening up of the HE sector along widening participation objectives is not a major concern for the private sector. As Marginson (2007) states: 'equal educational opportunity is a public good readily lost in the transition from state-run systems to markets' (Marginson, 2007: 320).

Private provision, in emulating the elite HE institutions in the UK and US may compound socio-economic inequalities. For example one of the executives talked at length about the high employability of their students and also the services they provide to their students, which in turn results in high tuition fees (over £14,000 a year). There is the question of to what extent the higher fees also act as a social filter so only particular types of students enrol, in particular those from well-off backgrounds, who will find it easy to find work following graduation, not only due to their grades and experiences in higher education but also because of the social and cultural capital already at their disposal. In this case the students are paying for the social milieu, the contacts and networking, the location and the prestige of a higher fee institution. This is evidenced by an emphasis on the role of alumni in developing students post-graduation.

Differentiation on price as well as discipline and flexibility in delivery highlights how private providers are targeting particular niche markets in higher education. Private providers in the UK are carving out niche markets within the broader higher education market, by focusing upon distance, part time provision, on programmes with close

relationships to a profession or group of employers. The emergence of providers operating in niches reflects the findings from other countries (see for example, Heaney et al., 2010 for the Australian context). The executives interviewed for this study also highlighted 'uniqueness' when talking about the provider.

The students interviewed for the study are overwhelmingly older, working, and with previous experience of higher education, compared to students in mainstream public universities. The adult higher education market is identified as a key market niche in higher education and may account for the rise in part-time enrolments in private HE in the UK, whilst at the same time opportunities for adult education have diminished over the past decade or so. Coulter and Mandel (2012) see this subgroup of students as pivotal in the development and growth of distance learning provision: 'As busy parents, workers, and community members, they have seized on and subsidized the explosion of distance education that makes schooling possible given the constraints of their busy lives' (Coulter and Mandel, 2012: 40). Blended learning can contribute to development of lifelong learning opportunities for people who would not be able to access HE in other ways (Jones and Lau, 2012). Coulter and Mandel (2012) talk about the huge shift in undergraduates that incorporates adult learners, and how this may impact upon the long-standing teaching methods of traditional universities. However, it may be that adult learners do not impact on the traditional university sector to the same extent as at the private providers investigated for this study due to the proportions of them enrolled in those respective institutions. In fact, the students interviewed for this study feel that a traditional university education is not for them at this point in their lives. Students that looked at other traditional options for study simply found that they did not meet their requirements. Coulter and Mandel (2012) describe traditional universities as unwelcoming for adult learners: 'The fact is that within the brick and mortar walls of the first-tier universities, adult students are still not welcome' (Coulter and Mandel, 2012: 41), this may result from the inflexibility of teaching, practical arrangements like library opening hours, to the learning culture of the institution.

As outlined earlier in relation to data published by HEFCE (2013b), there have been decreases in mature student enrolments in HE in the UK over the last two years (7 per cent between 2011 and 2013; Office for Fair Access, 2013) and there have been decreases in the proportion enrolling full-time on undergraduate programmes from 23

per cent of all full-time first degree students in 2004/2005 (HESA, 2006) to 20 per cent in 2011/2012 (HESA, 2013). There has also been a significant decrease in overall part-time enrolments in traditional universities over the last two years (40 per cent fall between 2011 and 2013; Office for Fair Access, 2013). Many part-time students are mature students, so the drop in part-time enrolments will be closely linked to the drop in mature students as well. Howard and Davies (2012) suggest that there are lower incentives for adult learners to enrol as they face higher risks (Howard and Davies, 2012). Coulter and Mandel (2012) go on to explain why adult students might not be equally distributed across the HE sector: 'They might wish to enjoy the fruits of the best universities and colleges, but they can neither drop out of life to study full-time nor waste time fulfilling requirements designed for youngsters' (Coulter and Mandel, 2012: 41). The adult students interviewed for this study were certainly focused on doing a degree in a subject that interested them or that could advance their career – the wider aspects of attending a university (the social and cultural activities) were generally of no interest to them. One student (F12) actually stated that she was pleased that the private provider she was studying at treated the students as professionals, with little time allocated for socialising between learning opportunities. The finding of the study that many mature students begin a HE programme out of interest for the subject and the personal learning development reflect other studies that report that 'mature students asserting that their motivation for beginning undergraduate study is directed by an intrinsic desire for learning rather than extrinsic financial benefits' (Howard and Davies, 2012: 2, see also McCune et al. 2010), however career development is also a key issue for some of the students who took part in the study.

The segregation of adult learners into specialist HEIs, such as some of the private providers looked at in this study, may result in institutions that specialise in educating mature students whilst many traditional universities continue to focus on the 18-year old school-leaver. However, the reduction in the number of mature, part-time students may also equate to a system that is less diverse in socio-economic terms, as many students in that group come from poorer backgrounds (OFFA, 2013). Instead of 'niche' institutions who tailor their provision for non-traditional students, Coulter and Mandel (2012) argue for integration of adult learners into traditional higher education institutions. This may also counteract the unequal access of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in traditional HEIs. However, the desire to welcome adult learners must also be married

to a greater flexibility of education provision, as this was a major factor for most students interviewed for this study.

7.3 Higher education and ICTs

A key component of integrating greater flexibility in accessing HE is argued to be ICTs. Faber et al. (2012) link the development of ICTs to lifelong learning (LLL) and the requirement for careers to be accredited, and suggest 'i-learn', an individualistic model for higher education learning that takes into account blended learning didactics with building networks across different higher education institutions in Germany, to respond to trends for increasing distance and lifelong learning. Faber et al. (2012) suggest that 'given that the future is impregnated with mobility, intercultural, multilingual and individualized experiences, higher education institutions need to adopt the attitude of organizations that anticipate the future' (Faber et al., 2012: 231). However, research on students, staff and employers with regard to online education is rather limited: even in areas where more research has been done, it takes online learning as an extension of the practices of traditional higher education institutions, for example in studies on 'blended learning' (Davis and Fill, 2007; Ginns and Ellis, 2008). A recent survey has found that online higher education is not considered to be equivalent to traditional programmes of study and only a third of employers would consider employing online graduates (Financial Times, 2013).

Research has focused on the pedagogic advantages and innovations of online provision rather more than on the marketing model and underlying educational philosophies being deployed. This study has found that students' experiences of learning online vary, especially with regard to how far they engage with VLEs and forums, which is in line with research on 'blended' learning that has demonstrated large individual differences in how they use and experience studying in this way, for example with regard to disability, culture, previous experience with ICT's and attitudes to computers in education (Sharpe et al., 2006). Some students reported positive feedback on the experiences of using forums and other online methods of communicating with others about their academic work; which is in line with other students that have found that 'many [students] stated that this learning environment offered them a place to collaborate with others, overcome loneliness and opportunities to negotiate and share learning with their peers that they had not experienced before' (Jones and Lau, 2012: 407). Other research has highlighted the following reasons for non-use of forums: usefulness, constraints on access (general interest provision, rules about accessing the internet in the workplace, respite from

already technologically saturated existence, ‘digital denial’ (avoiding technology as a distraction) (Selwyn, 2012). Only one of the students in this study mentioned constraints on access (stating that their rural location meant that broadband was not always working as it would need to), rather, the main issue was around usefulness and lack of time. Moore and Pflugfelder (2010) highlight the propensity for students negotiating virtual learning environments (in their example, immersive environment ‘*Second Life’*, but their point also has resonances for users of mainstream VLEs to be either ‘bored’ or ‘lost’). Selwyn has also found that ‘most interviewees described these discussion boards and forums as being used only by a minority of learners’ (Selwyn, 2012: 90), which reflects how some students talked about forums in this study. Levels of comfort in engaging with forums and issues with trust have also been expressed by the students in this study.

In terms of how students engage with course materials and online forums, the role of instructors is key, which is why it is important to research experiences of staff working in online education as well as ‘student-consumers’. The staff who work at a distance learning provider in this study talked about the various ways they manage the medium and their workload, some coming up with their own particular methods for dealing with certain aspects of tutoring (for example, ensuring a Skype meeting occurs early on in the student-tutor relationship). There are some variances in how far staff utilise and feel comfortable with ICTs as a communication tool. There have been a small number of empirical studies that have investigated the experiences of staff who are involved in the delivery of online higher education. Contrary to pragmatic rhetoric, studies by Gibson and Herrera (1999), Zhang, (1998), Dahl (2003) and Yoshimura (2008) suggest that the preparation of courses was much more time-consuming than they had expected and that online instruction takes more time than face-to-face instruction, especially when it came to communication with their students. This is something that has been raised as an issue in the interviews with staff in this study, which is offset against the perceived benefits of being able to work from home at times that suit them. Söderström et al.’s (2012) research states that ‘online courses have also contributed to better working conditions for teachers’ (Söderström et al., 2012: 1): this research suggests that this may be true to a certain extent as staff are able to take control of their own working time and enjoy being able to manage their own workloads between tutoring for the private provider and other paid/professional work. However, the time-consuming nature of communication via

ICTs and the resilient desire for direct contact with tutors expressed by students in interviews shows that the impact of ICT-based HE is a complex matter.

In addition, the experiences of staff working as online tutors has been explored in a study by Yoshimura (2008) that draws on observation and interview data. It was found that online tutors see themselves as 'facilitators' to a more learner-centred approach to learning. There is evidence in the research conducted for this thesis that in the distance learning case studies (D, E and F) staff do not teach in the same ways as teaching staff in traditional universities but, rather, support students as they make their own journey through the course materials. The mode of learning is self-directed and reliant upon the quality of the course materials. Selwyn's (2012) study on the experiences of international students enrolled on distance education courses at a UK university investigated their (non)use of technology in relation to their studies also found that the central component of learning was paper-based resources (Selwyn, 2012: 89).

Selwyn (2012) provides an overview of current arguments about the development of distance learning and its relationship to communications technology, which suggests that learning using the internet has resulted in a shift to a more user-centred and personalised educational experience: 'the role of the individual learner shifts from receiving learning instruction in a passive manner to one of actively (re)constructing the place, pace, timing, and nature of the learning event' (Selwyn 2012: 86). The experiences of students in this study do not support this hypothesis fully. There is evidence of the importance of flexibility for students, in the sense that most of the distance learning students in this study would not have been able to study elsewhere, as for them it is perceived to be the only option. However, the innovation in access and timing is not necessarily matched by an innovation in pedagogical approaches to learning. Students may be active in autonomously deciding when to study, but the content itself remains to a certain extent unchanged: in this regard students remain passive. It may also be argued that the removal of much direct contact between students and tutors, or those responsible for devising curriculum, means that a student's passive relationship to the curriculum may be reinforced rather than undermined. However, there is no evidence in the interviews with staff and student to support this idea; rather, students have a key role in guiding their own learning and developing an autonomous role. What is difficult to disentangle or at least interesting to consider is how developments in learning technologies and

associated pedagogy (towards independent learning) actually align with how higher learning is achieved – through the acquisition of particular skills of research; the gathering of information, assimilation and creation in the 'assignment' or publication. To a certain extent we can see that students perceive the necessarily independent mode of distance learning to dovetail with the aims of higher education and the obtaining of a degree regardless of how the education is delivered. Some distance learning students themselves commented that the way the learning was arranged actually promoted higher learning and those with lots of previous experience of higher education were comfortable with this approach.

Many of the staff members interviewed for this study talked about the use of ICTs to enhance the ways they communicate with and disseminate information to students. The use of various applications for social networking, user-generated content, syndication of content can be used to develop pedagogic engagement (Hall and Hall, 2010). Hung and Yueng (2010) found that in face-to-face courses social media helped to facilitate feelings of social connectedness, which is highly related to functions of information sharing and interactivity. However, there are limitations to the benefits this can bring to students: interviews with students can show the reluctance to commit fully to provider-run forums and other online opportunities. The capability of the technology is not the predominant factor in how far technologies and applications are popular, successful, or useful, but in how they are really used by the people they are aimed at: there is a gap between theoretical and real use of technologies. Hall and Hall (2010) define this as a 'tension' between the different institutions and actors that has resulted in 'an uncertainty about the effective use of Web 2.0 tools within traditional pedagogic spaces' (Hall and Hall, 2010: 257). Instead, developments in ICTs can be conceptualised as one of many factors that interact with each other rather than the 'answer' to straightforward problems (Ravenscroft, 2009).

Hall and Hall (2010), following the work of Bandura (1995), highlight the importance of self-efficacy in how people progress through a programme of study, and discuss how this has particular resonance for the use of technology in learning. In their research they tried to uncover how far virtual interactions impact on self-efficacy and found that 'Web 2.0 strategies and tools can begin to open up spaces for people to develop self-efficacy

and agency' (Hall and Hall, 2010: 269). This may be the case, but this research suggests that self-efficacy – meaning the belief in one's own ability to successfully complete tasks and achieve educational objectives – impacts upon a person's readiness to engage in ICT-based communication: a cycle of raising or lowering of self-efficacy levels can occur. In the interviews with students who were studying on distance learning programmes where there are particular opportunities for remote communication, some respondents talked about having the confidence to make your voice heard, to say what you think and to contribute to online discussions: they do not want to sound stupid in the questions they ask, to tutors, or in the things they say on forums. The findings in this study support some of the findings in Selwyn's recent study on how distance learners use technology in their studies (see Selwyn, 2012): the continued importance of paper based sources 'study packs', which may be supplemented with independent research (online or reading books); and with forums remaining peripheral to the main activities. Some students deliberately do not contribute to forums/blogs. One student's non-use of online elements of peer support and interaction was due to not wanting to share ideas that could then be 'stolen', supporting Selwyn's finding of other distance learning students' non-use of forums, etc., as learning and assessment is a 'competitive activity' (Selwyn, 2012).

7.4 Private sector academics and the student-consumer

As with face-to-face teaching, the quality of relationships between those who are taught and those who teach is paramount. In this study, students in all types of learning institution spoke of the importance of teaching staff to their experiences of education and in many cases, for the students, teaching staff *are* the institution. Whilst the autonomy of the institution and the management is perceived to be crucial, especially for CEOs or principals who are passionately against public involvement in higher education provision, the autonomy of academic staff (already eroded in the public higher education sector) is to a certain extent denied. It seems autonomy is right for the business, but wrong for those employed by the business. Relative autonomy for salaried staff appears to be lower than in public counterparts where it is still relatively high, despite recent research suggesting that changes in higher education towards managerialism have impacted negatively on academic staff (Ellis and Turberville, 2013). Self-employed tutors who are paid by the hour, or piecemeal for the delivery of modules, can by nature

of their contract be offered higher levels of autonomy (to carve out time to develop their own professional career), but these are often low-paid workers.

This study on private providers in the UK has also found that tuition fees in the public HE sector have a major impact on two aspects: the decisions that students make and the experiences of the educational process that students and staff report; and, second, on how HE is conceptualised and how students are positioned as consumers. These two aspects are intertwined. The concept of a 'safe transaction' was raised in interviews with teaching staff, who describe differences in how students respond to similar programmes of study and also how students rationalise the education service they received dependent upon the amount they contribute towards the tuition fees. There is the feeling that fewer risks can be taken with the curriculum: a focus on skills, less critical thinking. Some of the members of teaching staff talked about the problems of having a particular model of HE delivery, what may be termed a 'safe transaction', where the discipline being taught is particularly creative (see B3). The concept of the student-consumer is relevant for some private providers in this study (in particular the for-profit provider), but this is not clearly articulated by the students themselves – though some did question what 'their money actually bought them'. For the staff, the concept of the student-consumer was more strongly articulated by the institution itself, through management, the way the institution interacted with students. Evidence of the concept of students as consumers was most evident in interviews with executives, who very clearly view students in this way. The presence of this view within private providers is not surprising, especially if we consider the infiltration of corporate culture as model for public university management (Bines and Demaine, 1992).

7.5 Private sector perceptions of higher education policy and governance

The relationship between public universities and private providers in the UK is a key theme in this study – evident in how higher education policy is conceptualised and developed and in interviews with executives and staff. It is argued by some executives that the whole sector is having an identity crisis and that we are reaching a watershed in HE policy, which represents a turning point for the whole sector and for private providers too. Executives highlight multiple issues around the way external bodies perceive and interact with private providers; for example, how private providers are

portrayed in media and how QAA deal with them. Some staff also identify issues with how the leaders of the private providers (those executives interviewed for this study) see the HE sector (B1 for example), where there are negative views of public universities and how they operate. Some executives interviewed for the study used antagonistic language in how they position their institution (innovative, dynamic, focused) and how they talk about the traditional HE sector (slow, lazy, diluted mission). This is common discourse in the discussion of the public/private divide, frequently found in debates about the NHS and other public institutions. It is interesting that the executives state that there is no public sector in the HE sector, but then use stereotypes about the public sector to attack traditional universities. Despite the strong views against the traditional HE sector held by some executives, there are still plans to engage with and take steps towards gaining university status. Many of the members of staff and the executives and entrepreneurs interviewed talked in some way about a transition period for the organisation, particularly in 'becoming' an HEI. There are 'key moments' highlighted: QAA educational oversight; QAA full institutional audit; gaining degree awarding powers (DAP – taught and research); gaining university title, all of which drive and differentiate providers. Overall we can see that all the providers are going through key changes, albeit at differing stages, and that the situation can change rapidly – for example, over the course of 2012/13, two providers acquired university title, another changed name.

All executives interviewed for the study spoke about the lack of a level playing field in the sector. A member of staff (B6) also complained in detail about QAA and UKBA policies that he argued were unfair to private providers and that traditional universities are given preferential treatment. Throughout the interviews there is evidence of two positions of the private providers: the 'underdog' and the 'trailblazer'. For example: *'I think the Academy is very, very powerful and very, very defensive in its position… we're just an upstart really aren't we?'* (B6, transcript: 6). The idea that private providers are in a disadvantaged position flows not only from perceptions of higher education policy matters but also in how policy and the providers themselves are portrayed in the media – in particular the *Times Higher Education*. One staff member describes this: *'It's public rhetoric … I mean there was an article yesterday about the sort of scaremongering about the number of private institutions that are receiving SLC'* (B6, transcript: 6). The idea that private providers are unfairly represented in media

coverage and face unfair rules in relation to QAA and UKBA is expressed by all executives interviewed for the study.

The research conducted shines a light on the character of private higher education provision in the UK and finds some aspects of difference and some similarities with the traditional, public sector. Interviews with staff at private providers suggested that these institutions are able to instigate rapid change, in ways that demonstrate flexibility and organisational focus that are quite different from how bigger, publicly-funded universities are perceived to operate. This may be more to do with the relative size of the institutions in question than with the way the organisation is funded. Often the motives of the executives of these providers are to maintain 'a tight ship', where their autonomy is paramount. The necessity of dealing with QAA is taken on board and recounted as part of a positive move forward for the organisation, but there is a fine line between arguing for private provision to be taken seriously in the higher education landscape, going through QAA etc. and being subsumed into already established higher education processes and practices. The terms of acceptance are balanced against the consequences of non-engagement and where possible negotiated.

7.6 The public private divide in UK higher education

The boundary between public and private in the HE sector is to a certain extent blurred as some private providers seek to compete with traditional universities by emulating elite British and American institutions. At the same time, changes in the policy landscape over the last 30 years, and especially in the last three, have partially privatised the public HE sector. David Willetts, opening the *Guardian's Future or Higher Education Summit 2013*, stated that 'legally, all UK universities are in the private sector' (The Guardian, 2013a). Marginson (2007) highlights the problems with conceptualising HE in public/private terms and offers some revisions. The reasons for doing this is because he suggests that public/private attribution of universal and essential characteristics obstructs a view to the role 'public' institutions play in producing private goods and also results in difficulties perceiving a possibility for a global public educational good without the existence of a global state. Ultimately it is an oversimplification and the dualistic framework is unhelpful, something that this research has also found. In response to a theoretical discussion about private/public conceptualisations in higher education,

Marginson (2007) states that the following revision is required in the UK context: 'In national higher education systems, higher education is not overwhelmingly private in character. Regardless of formal ownership or fee systems, a substantial part of the goods produced in higher education are public goods' (Marginson, 2007: 222-3).

Marginson (2007) also argues that scholars should be more precise in how they use the terms. He argues that a reduction to differentiation by ownership is not helpful:

> In terms of the requirements of explanation and of policy making, more important than the formal legal title of ownership, is the *social and cultural character of the outcome or 'goods' produced by higher education institutions*: the effects of these institutions in teaching/ learning, research, certification of graduates, community and national Service. (Marginson, 2007: 309-10, emphasis in original).

A focus on the good itself, purposes and outcomes rather than ownership, allows for a different perspective of the alternative providers in this study in that we can consider whether their activities results in the production of public or private goods. One of the key areas that may allow us to perceive public goods from private enterprise could be the existence of a thriving research community in these institutions – unfortunately, at present only a small amount of research is being conducted in a small minority of private providers, despite the desire to expand into research expressed by the executives interviewed. As was found in interviews with academic staff, for some research was actively discouraged by the management as this was outside the core business of the provider – that of servicing students. The primacy of the 'student as consumer' as a guiding force for the way institutions operate and succeed may be said to reinforce HE as a private good. Therefore, we may consider the dual downplaying of research and development and emphasis on the student-consumer represents the dominance of the production of private goods in the alternative providers looked at. In this way we may identify ways in which arguments for the privatisation of the HE sector is analogous to the debate about privatisation of the NHS and health care – it does not matter who owns and provides the service, all that matters is its quality (The Guardian, 2011a). But there are two responses to this. One is that private ownership of supply inevitably has consequences for the nature of provision; the other is that the provision of services such as health and education should be a matter of public ownership to ensure it is delivered in line with democratic demand and public and national strategy.

In an acknowledgement of the limitations of the concepts of public-private when looking at HE in the American context, Tierney (2012) highlights the way different educational organisations with similar student outcomes (high drop-out rates) can be conceptualised in very different ways. The example Tierney uses describes how community colleges and for-profit providers, who have very similar student demographics and similar problems in ensuring their students graduate and transfer successfully into the employment market, are, in the case of community colleges, interpreted as doing the best they can, whilst the same results are used to argue that for-profit institutions should do better by their students (Tierney, 2012: 150). This illustrates a key issue for this study and other research on private higher education in focusing on how far we can make distinctions between outcomes and practices in the private and public sectors. Is what is happening in private provision the same as, or very different from the conditions in the public sector? Some argue that the differences are not as pronounced as discourse on the subject would suggest (Horn, 2011). It can also be argued that the growth of private provision is itself a driver of the marketization of provision in the public sector as well as, indeed more than, a response to it (meeting a need otherwise unmet – the key claim of the private providers).

If we look at the alternative providers in the UK we can see that there are differences with regard to the types of people enrolling onto their programmes – these are not the 18 year old leaving school with A-levels taking their first step into higher education. In the case studies outlined in this thesis the students had a more varied background: professionals in employment; international students wanting to get their degree completed as quickly as possible; older people returning to HE to explore a subject they love. This is not to say there are no 18-year-old home students taking their first degree at these alternative providers, and these 'different' categories of students can also be found in traditional HEIs, but they are in a minority. In addition to the variances in the student body, one of the key areas of distinction is a focus on skill acquisition for the employment market. For some of the providers looked at, the linkage between industry and education is paramount and the education provided could be interpreted as training for the acquisition of credentials for career development in the workplace.

A key question with regard to this issue is how far we can say that this characteristic differentiates alternative providers from traditional HEIs as the emphasis on links with industry, not just in terms of providing graduates with a path into work but also in how curriculum is developed, become the norm in HEIs. Interviews with staff have shown that the curriculum at these providers has in many cases been developed by professionals in the respective field, and the direction of expansion into particular disciplines is led by a combination of analysis by marketing personnel in institutions and relationships to industry and industry-accreditation bodies. In this way we might say that the educational 'good' has an industry- and market-led character that is more pronounced than the education provided in HEIs. We might envisage that the gap between alternative providers and traditional HEIs will lessen over time in this regard, especially as we observe growing instrumentality of both students and universities in the traditional sector. But what about Marginson's (2007) other point that it is 'outcomes' we should be looking at? If we look at outcomes for the students interviewed in this study we can see that the differences between alternative providers and traditional HEIs begin to become more complicated: overall the students were happy with the education they received. The high completion and employment rates at some of the institutions also shows that looking at 'outcomes' may melt away perceived differences between alternative providers and traditional HEIs.

This study has found that private providers are good at serving non-traditional students in the sense that they are an option for students who do not fit the model of the traditional post-A-level 18-year-old student. They are also good at developing programmes that serve industry and have a clear relationship to particular professions – a focus on career, which is an aspect of crucial importance to many students. One of the providers had a well-developed network of graduates, suggesting that attendance at the institution represented, in part, the introduction into a kind of 'old-boys network'. Another had developed a mentoring scheme where graduates mentoring existing students '*can offer some extra and fresh insight on the project whilst offering them a window or even a door into the professional world*' (C3, transcript: 5). This may be similar to the kind of benefits seen in elite state-dependent HEIs where a degree from x can represent a passport into an established network that can help establish elite professional careers (see for example Blackwell, 2011). Bourdieu (1986) suggests the establishment of exclusive networks is evidence of the ways that 'cultural capital' is

organised as a way of bolstering vertical hierarchies. The fact that one of the private providers has established this for their own students suggests that they model themselves closely on an Oxbridge model of elite higher education. More negative aspects of the private provision include a less rounded student experience, fewer facilities and less support. The students are therefore receiving in some cases a rather narrow experience in terms of the education available to them. In some institutions direct contact with academic staff is limited and students have to develop self-directed learning skills in order to succeed – though this is interestingly seen by some as the point of higher learning in any case. There is also the argument that private providers are not so good for academic staff, where there is an academic culture of fewer full-time employment contracts, undermining of research, poor staff development and a 'customer comes first' ideology – student as consumer of educational product more explicit in how executives and entrepreneurs talk about the education provided in their institution. There are also few incentives to widen participation in their student body; this is evidenced by very few bursaries and the fact that some providers do not collect data on the background of their students. Staff also express that students want a 'safe' education, which may be considered as conflicting with the university as a place of higher learning; as Holmwood states: 'providing space for reflections on complexity and uncertainty *is precisely what universities are for*' (Holmwood, 2013: 402, emphasis in original). The nature of higher education and the implications of its commodification will be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

8 - Conclusions

This chapter will relate the research findings and implications to the research questions outlined in the introduction to this thesis: How far can we say that private higher education is growing in the UK?; What is the nature of private HE provision?; What are the impacts of the privatisation agenda on UK higher education?; What is the relevance of private higher education to information/knowledge society theories? In doing so this section ties together the theoretical and empirical discussions outlined in Chapters 1-7 with the objective of seeking to clarify what the contribution to knowledge this thesis offers.

8.1 How far can we say that private higher education is growing in the UK?

The private higher education sector in the UK is a fast moving sector that, to a certain extent, is difficult to track due to the speed of changes and also the lack of data available. Chapter 4 of the thesis has outlined data on private higher education worldwide and in the UK more specifically. Recent surveys by HESA (2011) and BIS (2013) indicate some figures that show areas of growth in the sector, though because of the voluntary nature of the data returns to those organisations (rather than the compulsory data returns that are part of the contract publicly-funded institutions have with HEFCE) the data available is not complete. There are indications, from the surveys conducted and the interviews with executives in this study, that private higher education is witnessing a period of growth, which may be conceptualised in a number of ways. First, there is a growth of student numbers: overall HESA documented around 56,000 students in 2009/20, whereas the more rigorous BIS data (2013: 28) approximates around 197,000 students at these providers (which still does not account for nearly a third of providers operating in the UK). A proportion of these are on FE-level courses so may be considered separately in terms of an account of higher education provision. In the future, surveys of private providers may be developed to be conducted as part of validation arrangements with public institutions or professional awarding bodies which may circumvent the need to perform general data collection as seen in the HESA and BIS surveys. The issue around how to access data on institutions that may have no requirement to make information publicly available about enrolments is a significant

issue for researchers studying private providers, especially considering that over half of private providers currently in operation are for-profit and many of these may be unlikely to share detailed data on student numbers.

The results of the interviews with executives show that most providers report strong growth trends and have a positive outlook in terms of growing student numbers in their organisation. Linked to the growth in student numbers is the enlargement of the disciplinary provision that individual institutions offer. This type of growth, whilst linked to growth in students numbers – as moves into particular disciplines are invariably linked to the perception of a healthy student market in that subject – may be considered as a different element of growth in the sector in that institutions with a narrow disciplinary focus may diversify as they become successful and financially secure. The evolution from a small, specialist provider to a larger institution providing wider disciplinary focus does not however happen quickly for these providers, despite the fast moving nature of the sector. Even the most established organisations take some time to move into new areas, as this is considered as a massive investment for the organisation in terms of time, energy and money. The executives interviewed for this study talked about the desire to expand to a size that would still be considered small in comparison with most traditional universities, therefore it may be perceived that online education is a more likely avenue for large-scale growth (even limitless). Despite recent UK figures showing a drop in distance-learning enrolments at private providers, and also wider debates about online higher education, it may be argued that online higher education has characteristics that are significant to profit-orientated business models of education delivery: the ability to reproduce education cheaply once programmes have been established; the de-professionalization of academic staff to part-time tutors; and the ability to facilitate the education commodity exchange without the need to offer additional facilities or services to students. Therefore, ICTs as a key mode of delivery, in the private and public sector, may meld with trends towards privatisation to allow a commoditized education exchange, which may be especially evident in the growth in future enrolments at some private providers in the UK.

Another aspect of growth in the sector is in regard to engagement with traditional HE governance. There is evidence in the interviews with executives that some more established private providers have clear objectives in the HE sector – the ultimate goal is

gaining university status. University status is seen as the passport into greater legitimacy in the sector and as a solution to the perceived problem of the uneven playing field. To a certain extent, the negative perceptions of the publicly-funded HE sector were side-lined by some providers in the willingness to engage in the traditional HE sector: the two views (negative views of publicly-funded institutions and positive views of the engagement with the HE sector) are held at the same time. For some providers, obtaining university status is an instrumental process that will be good for the business; however, for some who have aspirations to emulate elite institutions, university status is part of that broader objective.

There is a recent proliferation of literature on this aspect of higher education development, with much writing coming out of the US, South America and Asia. The kind of research conducted for this thesis has been recently published in the context of US higher education (see Hess and Horn, 2013): For example in research that attempts to explore the experience and role of what they term 'executives and entrepreneurs' in the private HE sector (Muldoon, 2013); makes comparisons between traditional and for-profit higher education using interviews with administrators, board members, instructors and a recent graduate (Wildavsky, 2013); and investigates the role of for-profits in the development of online learning (Horn, 2013). To date there has been little written on the UK situation, mainly due to the relatively low level of private provision in operation; however, the findings of this study show that this sub-sector has been growing, and will continue to grow according to the forecasts and plans of the executives interviewed for the study. The research outlined for this thesis seeks to redress this gap in the research, and offers a starting point for further research on private higher education in the UK. The next five to ten years will be crucial for the sector. Some argue that what we see now is the result of political and economic decisions made ten to twenty years ago, or maybe even longer, that have undermined the ability of the traditional university sector to successfully meet the needs of all seeking higher education. A recent report on by Barber et al. (2013) published by the think-tank the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) suggests that urgent reform is necessary in response to the '[a]valanche coming', where they argue that the whole HE sector is facing a revolution. The aggregate growth of private provision in the UK and implications for the HE sector, in terms of particular aspects of the educational experience they offer, may be seen to be crucial in terms of how publicly-funded institutions are being pushed into thinking about themselves as

private institutions as well (comments made by David Willetts being an example of this, The Guardian, 2013a; The Telegraph, 2013).

8.2 What is the nature of private HE provision?

Drawing on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative research on private providers outlined in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, we can begin to see a picture of private higher education provision in the UK. First the overall picture of the sector shows that providers are generally small scale: hiring small numbers of academic staff and enrolling small numbers of students across a narrow range of academic disciplines. Even with those providers that follow a non-specialist approach to their programme offering, we can see that this is narrow in comparison with the coverage of subjects available at a traditional university. The disciplinary focus of a large proportion of private providers' focus is on business, management, accountancy or IT subjects, and around 40 per cent of all students enrolled at private providers are studying on business or management programmes. Another key characteristic of private providers is the development of flexible delivery modes, in particular part-time, two-year degree programmes and also distance learning provision; however the profile of full-time and flexible delivery has been found to have different levels of prevalence according to the subject of study (BIS, 2013).

Overall providers have a pragmatic approach to higher education in that they purport to offer higher education in subjects and modes that suit their students. Most important is the relationship to professions, whether it is accountancy, law, banking, music or film. The executives interviewed for the study have a clear idea of the purpose of the programmes of study they offer: to meet the requirements of the professions. The goals of the providers' establishment are seen to have clear relationships to professions and also the perception of opportunities in the student market. The clear focus on the professions has an impact on the staff who teach at private providers, which was evident in the interviews with executives and staff, whereby staff are considered professionals in their respective discipline outside of HE rather than career academics. The knock-on effect of this is the development of fewer opportunities for full-time work in higher education in the private sector. The kinds of contracts that are available for staff, lack of opportunities for doing research and the lack of staff development within the providers looked at in this study show that the 'paired-down' HEI approach that focuses solely on

delivering HE to students has a major impact on academic working conditions and culture. If the private sector is held up as a model of efficiency in terms of delivering higher education, it should be noted that there are consequences to this kind of approach in terms of the experiences of staff in higher education.

Turning now to the students, we can see that data on private providers shows enrolments spread across FE, UG, PG levels more evenly than public institutions that have a stronger emphasis on UG students. Also, half of private provider enrolments are international students, which is significantly higher that the figures of around 15 per cent for publicly-funded HEIs (HESA, 2013), despite the perceived impact of UKBA rules on international student recruitment reported by the executives interviewed for the study. The high proportion of international students enrolled at private providers may diminish slowly over time, as some executives interviews spoke about the need to focus on recruiting home students. UKBA rules instigate changes in the profile of the student body and in the ways that private providers target potential students – becoming more focused on home students is perceived by executives to have an impact on what the typical student will expect from their education. In the same way, a move from recruiting mature, working students to younger students is argued to have implications for how the education is delivered. We can see that in recruiting high numbers of international and mature students, private providers have to a certain extent developed educational programmes that suit those students' particular needs and abilities.

In the UK, following legislation in the 1980s and 1990s, Higher Education has been forced to address the commercial viability of a system no longer fully supported by the state. Within this context of change, international students have been actively sought by universities to raise revenue. Trends over the last 20 years show marked increases in non-EU international students coming to the UK to participate in higher education. In 1995 there were 100,500 non-EU students in higher education in the UK (approx. 47 per cent of these in PG); 2007/08 there were 229,640 (approx. 55 per cent in PG study); in 2011/12 the numbers had increased to 302,680 (approx. 53 per cent PG study; HESA, 2013).[24] In the UK, an increase in international students over the last 20 years has contributed to changes in provision available to international students, and has certainly

[24] In 2011/12 non-EU international students represented 15 per cent of all students enrolled at all levels in UK higher education.

placed more emphasis on support for those students who directly pay substantially higher fees than home students on the same programmes of study. The higher tuition fees that international students face in studying in the public HE sector may have contributed to the strong enrolments of international students at private providers. The international students interviewed for this study have a very strong perception of the UK as a place to come and study, and the reputation of the HE sector is very good, particularly in countries where there is a strong socio-cultural history of young people coming to the UK to study (Nigeria for instance).

The empirical work shows mixed motivations of students overall in studying at private providers – some were focused on developing their careers, others saw it as an opportunity to formalise personal interests and hobbies. In both cases, the flexibility of the modes of study is crucial for many students. If we look closely at the reasons for taking up the programme of study talked about in the interviews with students, there is a mixed picture in terms of how we may perceive the equation of higher education with training. Noble (2002) argues that education is distinct from training in that training is operational information required for other's use, whilst education is the opposite – knowledge for the self. In this study there are examples of both: some are doing the programme to gain a qualification to advance their career; others are doing it for a love of the subject; and some would fall somewhere between the two. However, if we expand our understanding of the education, not from the perspective of the student but to that of the provider, we can see that in some private providers education is closely tied to employer requirements, which suggest that what is on offer is training rather than education (Noble, 2002).

A key issue with regard to opening up higher education to market conditions and the development of online learning is about perceptions of efficiency and cost-savings. As noted above with regard to private higher education, the political discourse that asserts a common sense notion of how competition pushes prices down and service quality up is not necessarily born out of empirical fact. Applying the efficiency logic to online education suggests that developments in communications technologies enable an acceleration in the industrialisation of information commodities and that the funding crisis in the higher education sector presents an opportunity for increased online provision. However, the technocratic ideals of the information society (and knowledge

society in this example) can underestimate the costs of technological reform (hardware, software, training, establishment of technological support mechanisms, etc.) and the costs of continued maintenance (some of which is documented by Bok, 2003). Therefore, we may understand that the industrialisation of education via communications technologies can in this example be likened to the problems in manufacturing – the cost of setup and tooling can inhibit the production of many worthy and quality products, at the expense of those products that are relatively easy to manufacture and have enough mass appeal to warrant the set-up costs. The opening up of the higher education market and the development of online provision may mean that less popular disciplines or sub-disciplines, or those with high set-up costs could be side-lined, 'discontinued' or only available in elite institutions. The provider that has the highest student enrolments in the sector also has well-developed online provision, which suggests, as noted earlier, that the delivery of higher education via ICTs presents an opportunity for larger scale enrolments than those envisaged by the providers who will mainly deliver education through face-to-face methods.

When analysing the nature of higher education provision via private providers, some may be criticised due to elements that executives are keen to offer as a positive aspect of the education they provide: the close alignment between professional/industry requirements and higher education. As described earlier, Noble (2002) suggests that in such cases the education provided is training rather than higher education per se. A clear focus on 'what the market wants' means that private providers (as well as many traditional universities) are increasingly aligning their degree programmes to professional and industry frameworks as student-consumers emphasise the importance of this aspect in their aim to secure employment post-graduation. This is not to say that this is a particularly new phenomenon as there is evidence of key influences of industry in academic disciplines such as civil engineering (see Barnard et al., 2013 for a description of the evolution of the civil engineering discipline in the academy). However, it is now the case that the requirements of employers are held up as a standard through which university education may be judged across a wide range of academic disciplines. A focus on the core needs of the student-consumer has other consequences too: private providers demonstrate a situation where higher education is unnourished by research and are more focused on employability rather than critical reflection and inquiry. To a certain extent this is characterised in the interviews with staff who identify

students' desire for a 'safe transaction' – a straightforward curriculum and process of assessment. A removal of larger ambitions of education, in all but a handful of 'elite' private institutions, means that for the most part private higher education provision represents a very limited version of the public university envisaged by Holmwood and colleagues (Campaign for the Public University, 2011).

Taken at an individual level, we can see that the individual student may be happy with the education provided and this was in the main the case for the students interviewed for the study. The provider is also happy to concentrate on providing education to the student. As argued above, the focus on this single element of the traditional HE sector – teaching students – represents a simpler institutional remit than that of the traditional university in the UK. What is the problem with this? A broad criticism may be made in that, as they are not publicly regulated, they are not subjected to public guidance, therefore the higher education they deliver is individualised (hence the focus on students as customers), not providing for society and not providing a collective good. An example of how this translates empirically is with regard to widening participation: traditional institutions are directed by public policy in their obligation to deal with widening participation issues (how far universities engage with this and successfully recruit students from lower socio-economic background is another matter, especially in the elite institutions) as they are regulated by OFFA on widening participation (see OFFA, 2014). This study has found that private providers have varying views of widening access, usually framed as a future goal rather than a current objective. The lack of interest or activity in widening participation in private providers is indicative of a sector that denies the possibilities for higher education to achieve something over and above the provision of education to the individual-student-consumer. As argued in part one of the thesis, economic and neo-liberal views of higher education emphasise individual benefits over and above collective benefits and place market solutions at the forefront of developments in the sector: this leads to a marginalisation of possibilities for public goods (Marginson, 2007, see also, Pusser, 2002). The broader impact of private providers on UK higher education is now considered in more detail in the next section.

8.3 What are the impacts of the privatisation agenda on UK higher education?

Despite the evidence of growth in student numbers and expansion of providers, evaluations of the impact of private providers on the HE sector in the UK should go beyond a look at student numbers, as the true impact of private providers may be considered conceptual and political. Here we may consider the implications for the activities of the traditional sector (without suggesting cause and effect), for example around a growing instrumentality and utilitarian character of HE, growing marketization (Bok, 2003) and customer consciousness (for example in the growing importance of NSS). The motives of the students in taking this option, the understanding of education among both staff and students, even at their most benign and generous, all raise questions about the changing social character of higher education represented by the private providers. In addition to the perceptions and experiences of staff and students at private providers explored in this research we can begin to see how these providers fit in with broader government policy and how the process of commodification that lies behind policy and practice takes shape.

As outlined in Zumeta (2011), in his paper on state policies and private higher education in the US, he recognises definite policy postures: laissez-faire; central planning; and market competitive. Looking at the developments in the sector it is possible to identify a shift from a laissez-faire approach to private providers in the UK towards a market-competitive approach whereby state actions are moving the HE sector to a state where public and private may compete more equally. This includes higher tuition fees for students, funding cuts for public institutions, greater interest in the operations of the private sector and development of information and accountability policies. Private providers for the most part would like the whole sector to be privatised, as they argue this would enable fairer competition in the sector – an argument that is also put forward in discussions of higher tuition fees in the public HE sector. With regard to tuition fees, public institutions are to a certain extent defensive and HE staff argue against tuition fees (both in the public and private sector). Though institutional management (particularly in elite institutions) seems to have no problem with it and see it as an opportunity for maximising income. Differentiation on price is key to how institutions may market themselves in the future (which is in line with how private providers already

operate, an example of which is indicated in the Guardian [2011b] in relation to the setting of tuition fees).

The increased information available on private provision (through HESA data collections, BIS funded research, QAA full institutional reviews), whilst informing HE policy-makers also acts as important 'consumer information', which may explain the readiness some providers have to engage in processes that allow greater transparency despite misgivings about bureaucracy and the publicly-funded HE sector more widely. What is interesting is that Zumeta (2011) categorises this 'market competitive' position to be related to a context of a large and influential private higher education sector operating alongside neo-liberal government that adopts privatisation strategies (see table 5 on page 69). The UK case demonstrates a development of this approach even where the private sector is relatively small. It may be argued that the strength of the force for neo-liberal ideologies in the UK is at such a level that the relative size of the private sector is irrelevant, especially as the publicly-funded HE sector is simultaneously being urged to see itself as private rather than public sector. In relation to wider political changes in the UK, where Conservative governments (and continued by New Labour) moved towards 'anti-monopolies' in the public sector (The Guardian, 2011a), including health, law, social work and education, political pressure had a direct effect on how universities operate and on academia more generally. As higher education reform gains momentum, political discourses increasingly refer to privatisation as an inevitable and desirable alternative to strong public funding in the sector. As this discourse has developed and become mainstream, attitudes towards private providers have altered – from being a questionable alternative to the obvious solution to the problems of higher education (funding, the ability to meet demand, to be able to respond to the needs of the economy). Discourses of efficiency of the private sector are evident in how private providers position themselves in interviews with executives and staff, which also reflects political discourse evident as far back as the white papers published in the early 1990s that focus on efficiency in higher education rather than social justice (Bines and Demaine, 1992). Private providers influence the debate on how higher education may develop further in the future and also the more reputable and successful providers, such as those included in this study, may act as 'flag bearers' for the sector.

The dominance of neo-liberal ideologies on the existence and performance of public institutions is resulting in multiple crises across public sectors in health, education, local governance (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2011). It is possible to identify how higher education policy discourse can be viewed as an arena of practice and cites of contestation, conflict and struggle with regards to meaning and power. Trends in government policy towards privatisation have been met with some response in the academy, in particular the Campaign for the Public University's propositions (listed in section 3.4), that provides detail on the characteristics of a public university, which explicitly make clear the ways in which higher education may produce public goods. This acts as a counter to the prevailing rhetoric of higher education as producing private goods for the market. Golding (2010) details how the commodification of higher education may be characterised in current trends:

> The commercialisation of universities focuses on the delivery of goods (qualifications and accreditation) for payments (fees), and distils the essence of education into the transmission of useful knowledge that can be traded for such accreditation, and thus used as a voucher and passport to improved employment opportunities. (Golding, 2010: 211)

An analysis of education and knowledge brings to the fore the principles of social control and expressions of power so it is possible to look closer at the development of private providers of higher education and perceive that changes in this sector reflect trends evident more widely in society. The privatisation agenda has major impacts on how institutions operate and on how far public and private sectors can contribute public goods. Noble (2002) highlights the danger in competing with what he terms diploma mills as there is the possibility that traditional universities will end up resembling those institutions that have a much more narrow focus on the delivery of education to the student-consumer, which marks a step change away from the broader public purpose of the traditional university. Murdock (2012) describes this process of transformation in society as corporatisation: where public institutions behave like private ones, which in turn represents an extension of corporate power. It may be perceived that the true impact of private providers may be conceptual and ideological, and that the success of these institutions will offer neo-liberal voices a hook that may enable the application of further pressure on public higher education to follow a privatisation agenda.

8.4 What is the relevance of private higher education to information/knowledge society theories?

The relevance of the growth of private HE to theories of the information society is important to the research presented in the thesis. The reasons for this are as follows: the relationship between the information society, which highlights the impact of developments in communications technologies, and knowledge society theses means that the interaction of ICTs and education may represent a useful tool for analysing current trends. This section will consider what the research reveals and what can now be said about such theories. Higher education reform discourse in the UK is tied to the information society thesis: that new ICTs can and should dramatically change (for the better) the processes and outcomes for citizens. The central question is whether the growth of HE facilitated by private provision is actually expanding the information society. To a certain extent it is possible to identify how particular conditions have resulted in private provision offering opportunities for students to study on higher education programmes of study that would otherwise not be available to them because of lack of flexible provision in the traditional university sector. ICTs as communication tools enable relationships to develop between students and tutors and between fellow students. The digitalisation of education content is limited in some distance learning providers, which may be surprising given the emphasis on developing digital content in some publicly-funded institutions. In particular, one case study institution represents an interesting case of institutional motivations and also student motivations in that there was clearly the desire to offer and experience education for its own sake, rather than being explicitly about professional qualifications and training.

Newman (1999) highlights how university education goes beyond a simple transmission of information. Therefore knowledge is the result of an individual's acquisition, assimilation, and rationalisation of the information that is available. The students interviewed for this study overall spoke positively about their experiences and found studying interesting and challenging. Many were very pleased to be able to study at the private provider due to a perception of a lack of alternatives. In this respect we can see how private providers enable some students to engage in knowledge development. The success of private providers in attracting working, mature students demonstrates how far higher education is seen as essential for many professionals working in business or law for example. For the most part, students expressed a combination of interest in subject

and desire to gain a qualification to develop their careers. However, it should be noted that an acknowledgement of the potential for aspects of the information society to be functioning does not equate to its wholesale acceptance. Instead the link between technological determinism and the idea of the information society is key, and one that should be at the fore when assessing academic, popular and policy literature (Garnham, 2000b). Avoiding technological determinism means that we can see how social and cultural contexts can impact on the uptake and usage of ICTs in higher education; for example, the development of platforms for peer-to-peer support are not experienced by students and staff in an unproblematic way (as described in sections 6.2 and 6.3). The difficulties some students face in studying in higher education at a distance means that private providers accept that, even on distance learning programmes, some face-to-face contact is necessary. The application of ICTs in higher education is a complex issue, especially considering a remit of developing higher knowledge that may be accelerated (but at the same time limited) by characteristics of societal use of technologies.

The linking of technology, progress and corporatisation means that it is difficult to conceptualise how communications technologies may be developed by higher education institutions outside of these parameters. The information society suggestion of a transformation of society has in fact been in the main part passed through a 'commodity' filter: the apparently freely-available information is a small part of a larger process of corporate appropriation. A key feature of the information society is commodification of information and knowledge resulting in the reduction of the information society to an information economy. In fact Robins (1999) argues that the utopian ideal of the information society works in the interests of corporations and governments (Robins, 1999), which should not be underestimated in the circulation of the information society thesis ideology. New communications technologies may merely be a tool to extend marketising trends that already existed in modern societies. As outlined in Chapter 1 of the thesis, it is argued that the ICTs have played a crucial role in the increase in the commodification of knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994) and in new modes of consumption (Ritzer, 1998). Thus, rather than being a new phenomenon resulting in a new 'information society', technologies are tightly linked to existing capitalist structures and markets that seek to extend commercialisation practices further still.

Instead of a large-scale transformation in society we can see elements that are embedded in commoditisation that extend the life and strength of late capitalism by extending free market activities and practices into a further sphere of public activity. There are concerns about wider links between the growth of private providers and the broad agenda of neo-liberalism and the dominance of the 'market' in areas previously part of the public domain, which have been touched upon in section 8.3 above. The shift from an information society to an information economy is one way of conceiving this. There is a strong neoliberal agenda in UK higher education but the issue is also more complex than that: systemic effects bring higher education into the private sector, which demonstrates how the commodification of knowledge results in the informational society operating under economic imperatives (therefore an information economy). It is argued that the commodification of knowledge is a critical issue for higher education, as Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) argue: 'attempts at the commodification of information are probably less problematic than attempts to commodify knowledge, pedagogy and assessment' (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005: 45). The ability of private (and privatising) higher education sectors to commodify knowledge through the assimilation of the individual-student-consumer, the development of disciplines in direct response to the needs of professions or employers, the exclusion of the possibility of the creation of public goods in the core activities of HEIs, ultimately undermine the potential for the information society whilst being simultaneously dependent upon the existence of such an ideology that obscures the dominance of commodification processes.

8.5 What is the original contribution to knowledge of the thesis?

The final section of the thesis highlights the main contribution to knowledge about private providers in the UK that this thesis brings. There has been very little research on UK private higher education in the UK: to date Middlehurst and Fielden (2011), HESA (2011) and BIS (2013) are the key sources of information prior to the publication of the thesis. The data collected by HESA and BIS has a particular position in that the data is generated without a theoretical basis for the enquiry over and above the need to find out what is happening in the sector. No other research study has interviewed CEOs/principals and staff at these institutions. The BIS study has interviewed and surveyed students at the providers but these follow more a questionnaire format than the interviews conducted for this study. The findings of the study shows that the picture of the sector is a complex one and particular interpretations by bodies such as UCU or

expressed in the *Times Higher* may simplify the sector to that of a caricature of commercial enterprise using education as a commodity to be sold at a profit without regard for the students, staff or the HE sector more generally; without acknowledging that the processes of commodification these institutions represent are not as straightforward as this. Instead, we may identify how the private providers work within a framework of increasing privatisation of HE in the UK and in so doing represent a symptom of the rapid transformation of the sector. The ability of private providers to deliver the education that students want is to a certain extent demonstrating changes in how higher education is perceived and the function it performs in society. The concept of higher education as a public good is eroded in higher education policy and also in the operations of the private providers investigated in this study. Even in cases where the more established and successful providers engage with the HE sector there remains a strong utilitarian focus that foregrounds higher education as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market by student-consumers. The research conducted for this study contributes to the literature on academic work, student experiences of higher education, private higher education and to wider debates about the privatisation of higher education in the UK.

References

Abd Hadi, Z. and McBride, N. (2000) 'The Commercialisation of Public Sector Information within UK Government Departments', *The International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 13(7): 552-570.

ACM (2014) Academy of Contemporary Music. Accessed 25 February 2014, available at; http://www.acm.ac.uk/

Allen, I. E. and Seaman, J. (2003) *Seizing the opportunity: the quality and extent of online education in the United States, 2002 and 2003*, September 2003: The Sloan Consortium.

Allen, I. E. and Seaman, J. (2007). *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning.* US, Babson Survey Research Group/The Sloan Consortium.

Allen I. E. and Seaman, J. (2011) *Going the Distance: Online Learning in the United States, 2011.* Babson Survey Research Group/The Sloan Consortium.

Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L. and Rumbley, L. E. (2009), 'Trends in global higher education: tracking an academic revolution: a report prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education', UNESCO, Paris, paper presented at the *UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education*, accessed 26 Jun 2012: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001832/183219e.pdf

Aronowitz, S. (2000) *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating the Higher Learning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bandura, A. (1995) *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barber, M., Donnelly, K. and Rizvi, S. (2013) *An Avalanche is Coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead*, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

Barnard, S., Hassan, T., Dainty, A. and Bagilhole, B. (2013) 'Interdisciplinary Content, Contestations of Knowledge and Informational Transparency', *Teaching in Higher Education*, Special Issue on 'Making sense of teaching in difficult times', published online 17 September 2013; DOI:10.1080/13562517.2013.836089

Barnes, J. (1999) 'Funding and university autonomy', pp. 162-90 in M. Henkel & B. Little, eds. (1999) *Changing Relationships Between Higher Education and the State.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Bauman, Z. (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.

BBC (2011) 'Students to get best-buy facts and consumer rights', 24 June 2011, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13874483

BBC (2013) ‘UK Border Agency 'not good enough' and being scrapped’, 26 March 2013, accessed 26 February 2014, available at; http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21941395

Bell, D. (1974) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: Adventure in Social Forecasting.* London: Heinemann.

Berg, B.L. (2007) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. London: Pearson Education.

BIMM (2014) *BIMM Music Colleges*. Accessed 25 February 2014, available at; http://www.bimm.co.uk/

Bines, H. and Demaine, J. (1992) Review Symposium: Freedom, Inequality and the Market in Higher Education. White Papers of Education in 1991. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 13(1): 113-124.

Bjarnason, S., Kai-Ming C., Fielden, J., Lemaitre, M. J., Levy, D. and Varghese, N.V. (2009) *A New Dynamic: Private Higher Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

Blackwell, M. (2011) ‘Old Boys' Networks, Family Connections and the English Legal Profession’, *Family Connections and the English Legal Profession (May 22, 2011). Public Law* 426 (2011).

Bourdieu, P. (1986) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*, translated by R. Nice. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bourdieu, P. (2004) *Science of Science and Reflexivity*. Polity.

Breneman, D. W. (2008) ‘New Players, Different Game: Understanding the Rise of For-Profit Colleges and Universities (review)’, *The Review of Higher Education*, 31.3 (2008): 355-356.

Brennan, J. and Teichler, U (2008) ‘The future of higher education and of higher education research. Higher education looking forward: an introduction’, *Higher Education*, 56:259–264. DOI 10.1007/s10734-008-9124-6

Bryman, A. (2006) Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Research: Prospects and limits. *Methods Briefing 11*. Manchester: CCSR.

Bryman, A. (2008) *Social research methods*. 3rd Edition. OUP Oxford.

Bryman, Alan (2012) *Social Research Methods. 4th Edition*. OUP: Oxford.

Bok, D. (2003) *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education.* Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

Bott, C. (1998) ‘Protection of Information Products: Balancing Commercial Reality and the Public Domain’, *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 67(1): 237-64.

Brabazon, T. (2002). *Digital Hemlock: Internet Education and the Poisoning of Teaching*. Sydney: University of New South Wales.

Brabazon, T. (2007) *The University of Google: Education in the (Post)Information Age.* Oxon: Ashgate.

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century.* Monthly Review Press: New York and London.

Brennan, J. and Teichler, U. (2008) 'The Future of Higher Education and of Higher Education Research: Higher education looking forward: an introduction' in *Higher Education* 56: 259-264.

Browne, J. (Oct 2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Funding and Student Finance.*

Campaign for the Public University (2011) *In Defence of Public Higher Education*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://publicuniversity.org.uk/2011/09/27/higher-education-white-paper-is-provoking-a-winter-of-discontent/

Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2001) *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Castells, M. and Himanen, P. (2002) *The information society and the welfare state: The Finnish model*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CFE (2012) Project overview: *Understanding Privately Funded Providers of Higher Education in the UK.* Accessed 15th July 2012, available at; http://www.cfe.org.uk/HEprivateprovider [webpage no longer available]

CIHE (2008) *Higher Education and Colleges: A Comparison between England and the USA*

Collini, S. (2012) *What are Universities For?* London: Penguin.

Collins, J. (1999) 'Introduction', *Qualitative Studies in Education Special Issue on Higher Education*, 12: 229-37.

Cooke, R. (2008) 'Online Innovation in Higher Education', *Submission to the Rt Hon John Denham MP Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills*, 8 October 2008.

Costanza-Chock, S. (2007) 'The Globalization of Resistance to Capitalist Communication', pp. 221-249 in Murdock, Graham and Janet Wasko (eds) (2007) *Media in the Age of Marketization.* Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, Inc.

Cox, R. W. (1993) 'Gramsci, hegemony and international relations', in *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, ed. S. Gill, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 29-63.

Coulter, X. and Mandell, A. (2012) 'Adult Higher Education: Are We Moving in the Wrong Direction?', *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 60:1, 40-42.

Dahl, J. (2003) 'How much are distance education faculty worth?' *Distance Education Report*, 7(14), 5–7.

Dahrendorf, R. (1959) *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

David, M. E. (2012) 'Changing Policy Discourses on Equity and Diversity in UK Higher Education: What Is the Evidence?' *Widening Participation in Higher Education: Casting the Net Wide?* (2012): 22.

Davies, P. (2012) 'Can Governments Improve Higher Education Through 'Informing Choice'?, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60(3): 261-276.

Davis, H. C. and Fill, K. (2007) 'Embedding blended learning in a university's teaching culture: experiences and reflections', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(5): 817-828.

Dearing Report (July 1997) *The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*

Deem, R., & Lucas, L. (2007) 'Research and teaching cultures in two contrasting UK policy contexts: Academic life in education departments in five English and Scottish universities'. *Higher Education*, 54(1), 115-133.

Delanty, G. (1998) 'The Idea of the University in the Global Era: From Knowledge as an End to the End of Knowledge?', *Social Epostemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 12(1): 3-25.

Delanty, G. (2001) 'Challenging Knowledge: The University in the Knowledge Society'. *Organization* 8.2: 149-153.

Delanty, G. (2002) 'The University and Modernity: A History of the Present', pp. 31-48 in K. Robins and F. Webster eds. *The Virtual University: Knowledge, Markets and Management*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Nov 2009) *Skills for Growth: The National Skills Strategy*.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (March 2010) *One Step Beyond: Making the Most of Postgraduate Education*.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (June 2011) *Students at the Heart of the System*.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Nov 2012) *Applying Student Number Controls to Alternative Providers with Designated Courses: Consultation*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/34705/12-1292-applying-student-number-controls-consultation.pdf

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (June 2013) *Privately Funded Providers of Higher Education in the UK*, BIS Research Paper No. 111, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/207128/bis-13-900-privately-funded-providers-of-higher-education-in-the-UK.pdf

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (July 2013) *International education strategy: global growth and prosperity*, accessed 10 September, available at; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/229844/bis-13-1081-international-education-global-growth-and-prosperity.pdf

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (August 2013) *Alternative Higher Education Providers: Student Number Controls, Draft Guidance for 2014/15*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/230113/13-1097-alternative-higher-education-providers-student-number-controls-draft-guiidance-2014-15.pdf

Department of Constitutional Affairs (2008) *Freedom of Information*. Website accessed 30/1/08 at www.foi.gov.uk

Ellis, V. and Turberville, S. (2013) 'The Changing Nature of Academic Work', paper presented at the *BSA Work, Employment and Society conference*, 3-5th September 2013 at the University of Warwick.

Etzkowitz, H., and Leydesdorff, L. (2000) 'The Dynamics of Innovation: From National Systems and 'Mode 2' to a Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government Relations', *Research Policy*, 29(2), 109–123.

Etzkowitz, H., Webster, A., Gebhardt, C., and Cantisano, T. B. R. (2000) 'The Future of the University and the University of the Future: Evolution of Ivory Tower to Entrepreneurial Paradigm', *Research Policy*, 29, 313–330.

Europa (2014) Digital Strategy, i2010 Strategy, eEurope Action Plan, Digital Strategy Programmes, accessed 14 February 2014, available at; http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/information_society/strategies/index_en.htm

Eurostat (2013) *Level of Internet access – households*. Available: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tin00134 (accessed 2 Feb 2014).

Faber, K., López, V. and Prescher, T. (2012) ‘‘i-learn’: Developing a New Approach in Higher Education for Lifelong Learning’, *European Journal of Higher Education*, 2:2-3, 218-233.

Fairclough, N. (1993) ‘Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketisation of Public Discourse’, *Discourse and Society* 4(2): 133-68.

Financial Times (2013) *Moocs are treated with suspicion by students and recruiters*, published 18 August 2013, accessed 6th Sept 2013, available at; http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f6f45fc4-0678-11e3-ba04-00144feab7de.html#axzz2chcu0roz

Finkelstein, M. J. (2012) ‘The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University (review)’, *The Journal of Higher Education* 83.3 (2012): 462-465.

Francis, J. B. (1999) ‘The University and the E-Learning Corporation: When Opposites Attract and Worlds Collide’, *Staff and Educational Development International*, 3(3): 241-51.

Friedmann, G. (1961) *The Anatomy of Work: The Implications of Specialization*. Heinemann: London.

Fuller, S. (2001) ‘A Critical Guide to Knowledge Society Newspeak: Or, How Not to Take the Great Leap Backward’, *Current Sociology*, Vol. 49(4): 177-201.

Garnham, N. (2000a). *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity: Arguments about the Media and Social Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Garnham, Nicholas (2000b) ‘‘Information Society’ as Theory or Ideology: A Critical Perspective on technology, education and employment in the information age’. *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2: 139-152.

Gates, B., with Nathan, M. and Rinearson, P. (1995) *The Road Ahead*. New York: Viking Penguin.

Geiger, R. L. (1996) ‘Diversification in US Higher Education: Historical Patterns and Current Trends’, pp. 188–205 in V. L. Meek, L. Goedegebuure, O. Kivinen and R. Rhine, eds., *The Mockers and the Mocked: Comparative Perspectives on Diversity, Differentiation and Convergence in Higher Education*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, et al. (1994) *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. London: Sage.

Gibson, J. W. and Herrera, J. M. (1999) ‘How to go from classroom based to online delivery in eighteen months or less: A case study in online program development’. *T.H.E. Journal*, 26(6), 57–60.

Gillard, D. (2012) *Education in England*. Available: http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history/timeline.html (accessed 29 Jan 2012).

Ginns, P. and Ellis, R. A. (2008) 'Evaluating the quality of e-learning at the degree level in the student experience of blended learning', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 40(4): 652-663.

Glass, G. V. (1976) 'Primary, Secondary and Meta-analysis of Research', *Educational Researcher*, 5(10): 3-8.

Glassner, B, and Loughlin, J. (1987) *Drugs in Adolescent Worlds: Burnouts to Straights*, New York: St Martin's Press.

Golding, P. (2000) 'Forthcoming Features: Information and Communications Technologies and the Sociology of the Future' *Sociology*, 34(1): 165-84.

Golding, P. (2010) 'On being informed and the commodification of the public sphere', pp. 207-223 in Gripsrud, Jostein, ed. *Relocating television.* London: Routledge

Goold, A., Craig, A. and Coldwell, J. (2007) 'Accommodating Culture and Cultural Diversity in Online Teaching', *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 23(4), 490-507.

Graham, G. (1999) *The Internet: A Philosophical Inquiry*. London, Routledge.

Graham, G. (2008) *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*. 2nd Edition. Exeter: Societas.

Greene, J.C., Caracelli, V.J. and Graham, W.F. (1989) 'Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs'. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11 (3): 225-274.

Grimshaw, D. and Rubery, J. (2012) 'The end of the UK's liberal collectivist social model? The implications of the coalition government's policy during the austerity crisis'. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 36(1), 105-126.

GSM (2014) GSM London. Accessed 25 February 2014, available at; http://gsm.org.uk/en/

GSMA (2012) *Shaping the Future – Realising the Potential of Informal Learning through Mobile*, accessed 30 May 2012, available at: http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/shaping-the-future-realising-the-potential-of-informal-learning-through-mobile

Hall, R. and Hall, M. (2010) 'Scoping the pedagogic relationship between self-efficacy and Web 2.0 technologies', *Learning, Media and Technology*, 35:3, 255-273.

Hall, R. and Stahl, B. (2012) 'Against Commodification: The University, Cognitive Capitalism and Emergent Technologies', *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism &*

Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society 10.2: 184-202.

Halsey, G. (2008) *Student Contact Hours Mini-report*, National Union of Students. Accessed 26 February 2014, available at; www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/3976/Contact%20hours%20mini-report.doc

Hammersley, M. (1996) 'The Relationship between Qualitative and Quantitative Research: Paradigm loyalty versus methodological eclecticism', pp. 159-174 in J.T.E. Richardson ed. *Handbook of Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. Leicester: BPS Books.

Häyrinen-Alestalo, M. (2001) 'Is Knowledge-Based Society a Relevant Strategy for Civil Society?' *Current Sociology*, vol. 49(4): 203-218.

Heaney, J. G., Ryan, P. and Heaney, M. F. (2010) 'Branding private higher education institutions in Australia to international students', paper presented at *Academy of World Business Marketing and Management Development (AWBMAMD) Conference* 12-15 July, Oulu, Finland.

HEFCE (June 2011) 'Universities and colleges to provide key information for students', accessed 10 September 2013, available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2011/name,62300,en.html

HEFCE (July 2011) *Opportunity, Choice and Excellence in Higher Education*.

HEFCE (2013a) HEFCE publications on supply and demand for higher education subjects, Press Release published 31st July 2013, accessed 6th September 2013, available at; http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2013/name,82842,en.html

HEFCE (2013b) Data about demand and supply in higher education subjects, accessed 6th September 2013, available at; http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/crosscutting/sivs/data/

Heidi (Higher education database for institutions) (2013) *Data on Staff and Students at UK HEIs.* Accessed 10 September 2013, available; http://www.heidi.ac.uk/

Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D., and Perraton, J. (1999). *Global transformations: Politics, economics and culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) (2006) *Performance indicators in higher education in the UK 2004/05.* Cheltenham: Higher Education Statistics Agency.

HESA (2011) 'Survey of Private and For-Profit Providers of Higher Education in the UK 2009/10 – Provisional Figures', press release 14th April 2011, available at; http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2086&Itemid=310

HESA (2013) 'Statistics – Students and Qualifiers', accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/239/

Hess, F. M., and M. B. Horn, eds. (2013) *Private Enterprise and Public Education*. Teachers College Press.

Hill, M. W. (1999) *The Impact of Information on Society: An Examination of its Nature, Value and Usage.* London: Bowker Saur.

HMSO (1999) *The Future Management of Crown Copyright*. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/advice/crown-copyright/future-management-of-crown-copyright.pdf

HMSO (1998) Crown Copyright in the Information Age. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at: http://www.opsi.gov.uk/advice/crown-copyright/crown-copyright-in-the-information-age.pdf

Holmwood, J. (2013) 'Book Review Symposium: Stefan Collini, What are Universities For?' *Sociology* 47.2: 402-404.

Horn, M. B. (2011) 'Beyond good and evil: understanding the role of for-profits in education through the theories of disruptive innovation', *American Enterprise Institute*, April 27th 2011: http://www.aei.org/paper/education/private-enterprise/beyond-good-and-evil/

Horn, M. B. (2013) 'The Role of For-profits in K-12 Online Learning', pp. 140-153, in F. M. Hess and M. B. Horn, eds. (2013) *Private Enterprise and Public Education.* Teachers College Press.

Hoven Stohs, J. (1992) 'Intrinsic motivation and sustained art activity among male fine and applied artists', *Creativity Research Journal*, Vol. 5, Iss. 3.

Howard, C. and Davies, P. (2012) 'Attracting mature students into higher education: The impact of approaches to learning and social identity', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 2012: 1-17. DOI:10.1080/0309877X.2012.684038

Hung, H. and Yuen, S. C. (2010) 'Educational use of social networking technology in higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15:6: 703-714.

Inglehart, R. (1999) 'Postmodernization Erodes Respect for Authority, But Increases Support for Democracy', *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance* (1999): 236-256.

Jacoby, R. (1987) *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. New York: The Noonday Press.

Jeanneney, J.-N. (2007) *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge: A View from Europe.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jones, N. and Lau, A. M. S (2010) 'Blending learning: widening participation in higher education', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47:4, 405-416.

Kinser, K. (2006a) *From Main Street to Wall Street: The Transformation of For-Profit Higher Education.* ASHE Higher Education Report: Vol. 31: 5. San Francisco: Wiley Periodicals Inc.

Kinser, K. (2006b) 'Principles of student affairs in for-profit higher education.' *NASPA Journal* 43.2: 264-279.

Kinser, K. (2009) *Access in U.S. Higher Education: What Does the For-Profit Sector Contribute?* PROPHE Working Paper 14, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe

Kinser, K. (2010) *Access in US Higher Education: What does the For-Profit Sector Contribute?*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe

Larsen, K., Martin, J. P. and Morris, R. (2002) *Trade in Educational Services: Trends and Emerging Issues* (working paper), OECD.

Levidow, L. (2002) 'Marketizing Higher Education: Neoliberal Strategies and Counter Strategies', pp. 227-48 in K. Robins and F. Webster eds. *The Virtual University: Knowledge, Markets and Management*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Levy, D.C. (2008). *Access through Private Higher Education: Global Patterns and Indian Illustrations.* (PROPHE Working Paper #11). Accessed 10 September 2013, available at: http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe/publication/paper.html

Levy, D. C. (2009) 'Growth and Typology' in *A New Dynamic: Private Higher Education* Bjarnason, S., Cheng, K-M., Fielden, J., Lemaitre, M-J., Levy, D., and Varghese, N.V., Paris: UNESCO.

Levy, D. C. (2011) 'Public Policy for Private Higher Education: A Global Analysis', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 13(4): 383-396.

Levy, D. C. and Zumeta, W. (2011) 'Private Higher Education and Public Policy: A Global View', *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 13(4): 345-349.

Lévy, Pierre (1997) *Cyberculture*. Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob.

Maher, F. A. and Tetreault, M. K. (2008) 'The knowledge economy and academic capitalism', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(6): 733-740.

Mansell, R. (2004) 'Political Economy, Power and New Media', *New Media and Society*, 6(1): 96-105.

Marginson, S. (1997) *Markets in Education*. New South Wales: Allen and Unwin.

Marginson, S. (2006) ‘Putting ‘public’ back into the public universities’, *Thesis Eleven* 84: 44–59.

Marginson, S. (2007) ‘The public/private divide in higher education: A global revision’, *Higher Education*, 53: 307–333.

Masuda, Y. (1990) *Managing in the Information Society: Releasing Synergy Japanese Style.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Massey, A. and Munro, G. (2010). *Higher Education in the Age of Austerity*. Policy Exchange.

Massy, J., Harrison, T. and Ward, T. (2002) *The European E-learning Market*, Summary Report, BizMedia.

McCune, V., Hounsell, J., Christie, H. et al. (2010) ‘Mature and younger students’ reasons for making the transition from further education into higher education’ *Teaching in Higher Education* 15(6): 691–702.

McNair, B. (2000) *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere.* Routledge: London and New York.

Middlehurst, R. (2006) ‘A world of borderless higher education – impact and implications’, pp. 71-88 in S. D’Antoni, ed. *The Virtual University: Models & Messages and Lessons from Case Studies* by), UNESCO: Institute for Educational Planning.

Middlehurst, R. and Fielden, J. (2011) *Private Providers in UK Higher Education: Some Policy Options*, Higher Education Policy Institute. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.hepi.ac.uk/455-1969/Private-Providers-in-UK-Higher-Education--Some-Policy-Options.html

Middleton, C. (2000) ‘Models of State and Market in the 'Modernisation' of Higher Education’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(4): 537-554.

Miller, W. (1997) ‘Troubling Myths About On-line Information’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* XLIII (47) A44.

Min, S., Khoon, C. C. and Tan, B. L. (2012) ‘Motives, Expectations, Perceptions and Satisfaction of International Students Pursuing Private Higher Education in Singapore’, *International Journal of Marketing Studies*; 4(6): 122-38.

Moore, K. and Pflugfelder, E. H. (2010) ‘On Being Bored and Lost (In Virtuality)’, *Learning, Media and Technology*, 35(2): 249-253.

Moore, N. and Steele, J. (1991) *Information Intensive Britain: A Critical Analysis of the Policy Issues.* London: Policy Studies Institute.

Morley, L. (2001) 'Producing new workers: Quality, equality and employability in higher education', *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), 131-138.

Morse, J. M. (2003) 'Principles of Mixed Methods and Multimethod Research Design', pp. 189-208 in A. Tashakkori and C. Teddlie, eds. *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioural Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.

Mosco, V. (1989) *The Pay-Per Society: Computers and Communications in the Information Age.* Ablex Publishing Corporation: New Jersey, USA.

Muldoon, M. (2013) 'The Costs and Benefits of Nonprofit and For-profit Status: Perspectives of Executives and Entrepreneurs', pp. 33-56 in F. M. Hess, and M. B. Horn, eds. (2013) *Private Enterprise and Public Education.* Teachers College Press.

Murdock, G. (2012) 'Reclaiming the Commons: Economies, Technologies and Public Cultures', *Discourse, Communication, Conversation Anniversary Conference of DARG and CMARG* held at Loughborough University March 21st-23rd 2012.

Murdock, G. and Wasko, J. (eds) (2007) *Media in the Age of Marketization.* Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, Inc.

Murphy, E., Dingwall, R., Greatbatch, D., Parker, S. and Watson, P. (1998) *Qualitative Research Methods in Health Technology Assessment: A review of the literature.* Health Technology Assessment, 2 (16). Southampton: University of Southampton.

Naidoo, R., and Jamieson, I. (2005) 'Knowledge in the Marketplace: The Global Commodification of Teaching, Learning in Higher Education', pp. 352 in pp. Ninnes & M. Hellstén, eds., *Internationalizing higher education: Critical explorations of pedagogy and policy*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Naidoo , R., Shankar, A. and Veer, E. (2011) 'The consumerist turn in higher education: Policy aspirations and outcomes', *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(11-12), 1142-1162.

Negroponte, N. (1995) *Being Digital*. London: Hodder and Soughton General.

Newman, R. (1999) 'Sites for Power and Knowledge? Towards a Critique of the Virtual University', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(1): 79-88.

Newman, R. and Newman, J. (1985) 'Information work: the new divorce?', *British Journal of Sociology*, 36: 497–515.

Nilsen, K. (2001) *The Impact of Information Policy: Measuring the Effects of the Commercialization of Canadian Government Statistics.* London: Ablex Publishing.

Noble, D. F. (2002) 'Rehersal for the Revolution', pp. 282-300 in K. Robins and F. Webster, eds. *The Virtual University: Knowledge, Markets and Management.*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Norris, P. (2000) *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

OBHE (2006) 'Collaboration Now, Competition Later? US for-profit Kaplan Strikes Again in the UK, as Foreign and Private Provision Continues to Grow', *The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education*. Breaking News Article - 6th July 2006. Accessed 12 November 2007, available at; www.obhe.ac.uk

OBHE (2007) 'And Then There Were None? Increasing Private Equity Buyouts in Higher Education', *The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education*. Accessed 12 November 2007, available at; http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/view_details?id=409

OECD (2009) *Educational Research and Innovation Higher Education to 2030, Volume 2, Globalisation*. OECD: OECD Publishing.

OECD (2011), *Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2011-en

OECD (2012) Online Education Database, OECD Stat. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at: http://www.oecd.org/education/database.htm

Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2013) *Annual report for 2012-13*. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/OFFA-ARA-2013.pdf

Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2014) *Trends in young participation by student background and selectivity of institution*. Accessed 26 February 2014, available at; http://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/OFFA-2014.01.pdf

Office for National Statistics (2012) *Family Spending, 2012 Edition*. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-spending/family-spending/family-spending-2012-edition/index.html

Office for National Statistics (2013) *Statistical bulletin: Internet Access - Households and Individuals, 2013.* Accessed 2 Feb 2014, available at; http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2013/stb-ia-2013.html

Office of Public Sector Information (2008) accessed 10 October 2008. See www.opsi.gov.uk/advice/crown-copyright/index.htm [now available through the National Archives]

Olssen, M., Codd, J. and O'Neill, A-M. (2004) *Education Policy: Globalization, Citizenship and Democracy.* London, Sage.

Pakistan Higher Education Commission (2012) 'Enrollment by Sector', Statistical Information Unit. Accessed 10th July 2012. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.hec.gov.pk/InsideHEC/Divisions/QALI/Others/Pages/Enrollment.aspx

Parker, D. (2004) *The UK's privatisation experiment: the passage of time permits a sober assessment*. Univ., Center for Economic Studies. Accessed 2 February 2014, available at http://cyberinet03.inet-tr.org.tr/telekom/cesifo1_wp1126.pdf

Parker, M., and Jary, D. (1995) 'The McUniversity: Organization, Management and Academic Subjectivity', *Organization*, 2(2): 319-338.

Parliament UK (2011a) Government reform of Higher Education: Written evidence submitted by the Oxford University Campaign for Higher Education (OUCHE). Published 10 March 2011, accessed 23 February 2014. Available at; http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmbis/885/885vw22.htm

Parliament UK (2011b) Early Day Motion 1999: For Profit Universities. Session 2010-2012. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2010-12/1999

Peters, M. A. (2007) *Knowledge economy, development and the future of higher education*. Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers.

PROPHE (2012) National Data on Private Higher Education, accessed 14th March 2012. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.albany.edu/dept/eaps/prophe/national_data.html

Pugh, G., Coates, G. and Adnett, N. (2005) 'Performance Indicators and Widening Participation in UK Higher Education', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 59(1): 19–39.

Pusser, B. (2002) 'Higher education, the emerging market and the public good', pp. 105-125 in P. Graham and N. Stacey, eds., *The Knowledge Economy and Postsecondary Education*, Washington D.C: National Academy Press.

Pusser, B. (2005) *What are those data worth? The problems of conducting research on for-profit colleges and universities*. Unpublished Manuscript. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

QAA (2008) *The framework for higher education qualifications in England,Wales and Northern Ireland*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/FHEQ08.pdf

QAA (2012*) Quality Assurance Agency*. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/default.aspx

Ravenscroft, A. (2009) ‘Social software, Web 2.0 and learning: Status and implications of an evolving paradigm’, *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 25(1): 1–5.

Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M. and Ball, S. J. (2001) ‘Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, `Race' and the Higher Education Choice Process’, *Sociology* 2001 35: 855-874.

REF (2011) *Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/pubs/2011/02_11/

Regents College (2012) ‘Our History’, accessed 10 June 2012, available at; http://www.regents.ac.uk/home/our_history.aspx

Ritzer, G. (1998) *The McDonaldization Thesis*. London: Sage.

Roberts, G. (2003) Review of Research Assessment: Report by Sir Gareth Roberts to the UK funding bodies. Accessed 10 September, available at; http://www.rareview.ac.uk/reports/roberts.asp

Robins, K. (1999) ‘New Media and Knowledge’, *New Media and Society*, Vol. 1(1): 18-24.

Robins, K. and Webster, F. (2002) ‘The Virtual University?’, pp. 3-19 in K. Robins and F. Webster, eds. *The Virtual University: Knowledge, Markets and Management*.. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ross, A. (2008) ‘The New Geography of Work Power to the Precarious?’ *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7-8), 31-49.

Ryan, S., Scott, B., Freeman, H. and Patel, D (2000) *The Virtual University: The Internet and Resource-Based Learning.* London, Kogan Page Ltd.

Sadlak, J. (1998) ‘Globalization and Concurrent Challenges to Higher Education’, pp. 100-107 in P. Scott, ed. *The Globalization of Higher Education*. Buckingham, SRHE & OU Press.

Sadri, A. (1992) *Max Weber’s Sociology of Intellectuals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2009) *Research Methods for Business Students.* Fifth Edition, first published in 1997. Pearson Education Ltd: Essex.

Schlesinger, P. (2013) ‘Expertise, the Academy and the Governance of Cultural Policy’, *Media Culture Society* 35 (1): 27-35.

Schiller, D. (1999) *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Schiller, H. I. (1989) *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schiller, H. I. (1996) *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America.* London: Routledge.

Scott, P. (1998) 'Massification, Internationalization and Globalization', pp. 109-129 in P. Scott, ed. *The Globalization of Higher Education*. Buckingham, SRHE & OU Press.

Selwyn, N. (2007) 'Curriculum Online? Exploring the Political and Commercial Construction of the UK Digital Learning Marketplace', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(2): 223-40.

Selwyn, N. (2011) Digitally Distanced Learning: A Study of International Distance Learners' (Non)use of Technology, *Distance Education*, 32(1): 85-99.

Selwyn, N. (2013) 'Digital technologies in universities: problems posing as solutions?', *Learning, Media and Technology*, 38(1): 1-3.

Sharpe, R., Benfield, G. Roberts, G. and Francis, R. (2006) *The Undergraduate Experience of Blended E-learning: A Review of UK Literature and Practice*. The Higher Education Academy.

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*, London: Sage.

Simpson, O. (2004) 'Access, Retention and Course Choice in Online, Open and Distance Learning', *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 2004(1). Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.eurodl.org/index.php?p=archives&year=2004&halfyear=1&article=103

Simpson, S. (2004) 'Explaining the Commercialization of the Internet: A Neo-Gramscian contribution', *Information, Communication and Society*, 7(1): 50-68.

The Sociological Imagination (2011) *Campaigning for the Public University*. Podcast interview with Gurminder K. Bhambra, 28th May 2011. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://sociologicalimagination.org/archives/4554

Söderström, T., From, J., Lövqvist, J. and Törnquist, A. (2012) 'The transitions from distance to online education: Perspectives from the educational management horizon', *The European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, (Date of publication: 01.06.2012), accessed 10 September 2013, available at: http://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:540442

South African Department of Education (2008) *Register of Private Higher Education Institutions*. Updated 13th August 2008.

South African Department of Education (2012) *Register of Private Higher Education Institutions*. Updated 18th April 2012. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.saqa.org.za/docs/misc/phei/lphei.pdf

Stafford, B. (1999) 'Information for People or Profits?', pp. 137-56 in S. Hawthorne and R. Klein, eds. *Cyberfeminism*. Melbourne: Spinifex.

Strathern, M. (2000) 'The Tyranny of Transparency', *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(3): 309-321.

Sullivan, S. E. (1999) 'The changing nature of careers: A review and research agenda'. *Journal of management*, 25(3), 457-484.

Tallent-Runnels, M. K., Thomas, J. A., Lan, W. Y. et al. (2006) 'Teaching Courses Online: A Review of the Research'. *Review of Educational Research* Spring 2006, 76(1): 93–135.

The Guardian (2003) *Proposals 'make mockery' of University ideals*, published 4 June 2003.

The Guardian (2004) *Freedom of Information: Pricing the Right to Know*, published 15 May 2004.

The Guardian (2006a) *Give us back our Crown Jewels*, published 9 March 2006.

The Guardian (2006b) *What Price Information?*, published 16 March 2006.

The Guardian (2007) *MPs attack Freedom of Information Act curbs* published 25 June 2007 in MediaGuardian. Accessed 10 September, available at http://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/jun/25/pressandpublishing.politicsandthemedia

The Guardian (2008) *Make or break week: Research Assessment Exercise Universities wait anxiously for results that may bring academic glory or financial dismay*, published 16 December 2008, accessed 10 September, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/dec/16/research-assessment-exercise

The Guardian (2011a) David Cameron to end 'state monopoly' in provision of public services, published 21 February 2011, accessed 26 February 2014, available at; http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/feb/21/david-cameron-public-services

The Guardian (2011b) *Tuition fees 2012: What are the universities charging?*, published 23 June 2011, accessed 23 February 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/mar/25/higher-education-universityfunding

The Guardian (2011c) *Higher Education White Paper is Provoking a Winter of Discontent*, published 27 September 2011, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/sep/27/higher-education-alternative-white-paper?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487

The Guardian (2012a) *College of Law sale prompts call for private equity veto*, published 17 April 2012, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/apr/17/college-law-sale-private-equity

The Guardian (2012b) *Mobile phone boom in developing world could boost e-learning*, published 30 May 2012, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2012/may/30/mobile-phone-developing-world-elearning

The Guardian (2013a) *University competition, collaboration and the clash of the private providers*, published 5 March 2013, accessed 6th September 2013, available at; http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/mar/05/guardian-he-summit-private-providers

The Guardian (2013b) *Sal Khan: the man who tutored his cousin – and started a revolution*, published 23 April 2013, available at; http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/apr/23/sal-khan-academy-tutored-educational-website

The Telegraph (2013) *David Willetts: our privately funded university revolution.* Published 24 July 2013, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/10198076/David-Willetts-our-privately-funded-university-revolution.html

Tierney, W. G. (2012) 'The Conundrum of Profit-Making Institutions in Higher Education', pp. 149-174 in L. W. Perna, ed. *Preparing Today's Students for Tomorrow's Jobs in Metropolitan America*.: Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Tierney, W. G. and Hentschke, G. C. (2007) *New Players, Different Game: Understanding the Rise of For-profit Colleges and Universities*. Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press.

Times Higher Education (2011) *'Well-regarded' providers in line for less frequent, light-touch inspections*, published 30 June 2011, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=416662

Times Higher Education (2012a) *Battle won, but maybe not the war*, published 26 Jan 2012, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=418820&c=1

Times Higher Education (2012b) *QAA in the dark on 63 of 94 private providers*, published 23 February 2012, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=419116

Times Higher Education (2012c) *Private Equity Firm Gains Degree Awarding Powers*, published 17 April 2012, accessed available at http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=419667&c=1

Thussu, D. K. (2005) 'From MacBride to Murdoch: The Marketisation of Global Communication', *The Public*, Vol. 12(3): 47-60.

Tiffin, J. and Rajasingham, L. (2003) *The Global Virtual University*. London: Routledge.

Tourain, A. (1974) *The Post-Industrial Society*. London: Wildwood House.

Tourain, A. (1995) *Critique of Modernity*. Cambridge and Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Trow, M. (1974) 'Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education', pp. 55-101 in *OECD Policies for Higher Education. General report on the conference on future structures of post-secondary education*, Paris.

Tsoukas, H. (1997) 'The Tyranny of Light: The Temptations and Paradoxes of the Information Society', *Futures*, 29: 827–843.

UNESCO (2006) *The Virtual University: Models and Messages*. Education on the Move Series: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2009a) *Global Education Digest 2009: Comparing Education Statistics Around the World.* UNESCO: Institute for Statistics.

UNESCO (2009b) *Launch of Three Reports on Higher Education*, press release 7/7/09, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.unesco.org/en/the-2009-world-conference-on-higher-education/dynamic-content-single-view/news/launch_of_three_reports_on_higher_education/back/9712/cHash/5823f646fd/

UNIKE (2012) *Universities in the Knowledge Economy – UNIKE Overview of the UNIKE project*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.ir.zju.edu.cn/userfiles/20121210132815879120150.pdf

University and College Union (Feb 2010) *Privatising Our Universities: A UCU report on the new cross-party consensus and the Americanisation of UK higher education*

University and College Union (July 2010) *Marketisation and the Growth of the Private Sector in Tertiary Education*

University and College Union (Sept 2011) *Students at the Heart of the System, Higher Education White Paper: UCU Response*

University and College Union (Sept 2012) *Public Service or Portfolio Investment?: How Private Equity Firms are Taking Over Post-Secondary Education*, accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/0/l/ucu_psopi_oct12.pdf

University and College Union (25th Oct 2012) *'News: Regulation needed to stem influx of private equity firms in education'*, accessed 10 September, available at; http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=6364

The University of Manchester (2012) Statistics. Accessed 15 July 2012, at; http://www.manchester.ac.uk/aboutus/facts/statistics/ [webpage no longer available]

Universities UK (2010) *The Growth of Private and For-profit Higher Education Providers in the UK*, published March 2010.

Universities UK (Sept 2011a) *Universities UK: Response to the Higher Education White Paper.*

Universities UK (Sept 2011b) *Efficiencies and Effectiveness in Higher Education: A Report by the Universities UK Efficiency and Modernisation Task Group.*

Universities UK (Feb 2012) *How the System Works.* Available at; http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/HowTheSystemWorks/Pages/Howthesystemworks.aspx

Urry, J. (2002) 'Globalizing the Academy', pp. 20-30 in K. Robins and F. Webster, eds. *The Virtual University: Knowledge, Markets and Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Välimaa, J. and Hoffman, D. (2008) 'Knowledge Society Discourse and Higher Education', *Higher Education*, 56: 265-85.

Vartanian, T. P. (2011) *Secondary Data Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press Ltd.

Wang, Y. (2004) 'Pursuing Cross Cultural Education: A Multifaceted Investigation'. *International Education*, 33(2).

Wangenge-Ouma, G. (2008) 'Higher education marketisation and its discontents: the case of quality in Kenya', *Higher Education*, 56: 457-71.

Washington Post Company (2007) Annual Report. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.washpostco.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=62487&p=irol-reportsAnnualArch

Webster, F. (1995) *Theories of the Information Society*. London: Routledge.

White, D., Warren, N., Faughnan, S. and Manton, M. (2010) *Study of UK Online Learning: Final report*. A report to HEFCE by the University of Oxford. Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning (TALL) unit of the University of Oxford's Department for Continuing Education: Oxford. Accessed 10 September 2013, available at; http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/projects/UKOnlineLearningStudy-FinalReport-Mar10-FINAL-FORPUB.pdf

White, J. and Weathersby, R. (2005) 'Can universities become true learning organizations?', *The Learning Organization: An International Journal*, 12(3), 292-298.

Wilcox, P., Winn, S. and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005) ''It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education'. *Studies in higher education*, 30(6), 707-722.

Wildavsky, B. (2013) 'Crossing to the Dark Side? An Interview-Based Comparison of Traditional and For-Profit Higher Education', pp. 57-79 in F. M. Hess and M. B. Horn, eds. (2013) *Private Enterprise and Public Education.* Teachers College Press.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter?: Myths about Education and Economic Growth*. London: Penguin.

Wood, S. (1982) 'Introduction', pp. 11-22 in S. Wood ed. *The Degradation of Work?: Skill, Deskilling and the Labour Process*. London: Hutchinson.

Yoshimura, M. (2008) 'Educators in American Online Universities: Understanding Corporate Influence on Higher Education', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, Vol. 34, no. 4: 295-305.

Youell, A. (2012) 'RE: Survey of private and for-profit providers of Higher Education in the UK 2009/10', [email] to Sarah Barnard (S.H.Barnard@lboro.ac.uk), sent 19th March 2012 20:19:02.

Zhang, P. (1998) 'A Case Study on Technology Use in Distance Learning', *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 30: 398-419.

Zomer, A. and Benneworth, P. (2011) 'The Rise of the University's Third Mission', pp. 81-101 in J. Enders, H.F. De Boer and D.F. Westerheijden, eds. *Reform of Higher Education*, Sense Publishers: The Netherlands.

Zumeta, W. (1992) 'State Policies and Private Higher Education: Policies, Correlates and Linkages'. *Journal of Higher Education*, 63(4): 363–417.

Zumeta, W. (1996) 'Meeting the Demand for Higher Education without Breaking the Bank'. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(4): 367–425.

Zumeta, W. (2011) ‘State Policies and Private Higher Education in the USA: Understanding the Variation in Comparative Perspective’, *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 13(4): 425-442.

List of Abbreviations

ACM - Academy of Contemporary Music

BIMM – Brighton, Bristol and Dublin Institutes of Modern Music.

BIS – Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

BITE - The British Institute of Technology & E-Commerce

CDR – Cohort Default Rates (USA)

CMI - Chartered Management Institute

CIHE - Council for Industry and Higher Education

DAP – Degree Awarding Powers

DELNI – Department for Education and Learning in Northern Ireland

DLHE – Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education

EUROSTAT – European Statistics provided by the European Commission

FE – Further Education

FHEQ – Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

GATS – General Agreement on Trade in Services

HE – Higher Education

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEFCW- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

HEI or HEIs – Higher Education Institution(s)

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

HTSS – Highly Trusted Sponsor Status

IBCs – International Branch Campuses

ICTs – Information Communication Technologies

IFS – Institute of Financial Services

ISI – Independent Schools Inspectorate

IPEDS - Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (USA)

IPPR – Institute for Public Policy Research

IPR – Intellectual Property Rights

KIS – Key Information Sets

LLL – Life Long Learning

MBA – Master of Business Administration

MEG – Mixed Economy Group (HE in FE colleges)

MOOC – Massive Online Open Courses

OBHE – The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFFA – Office for Fair Access

PIPA - Protect Intellectual Property Act

PROPHE – Program for Research on Private Higher Education

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency

QCF – Qualifications and Credit Framework

RAE – Research Assessment Exercise

REF – Research Excellence Framework

SFC – Scottish Funding Council

SOPA - Stop Online Piracy Act

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

TDAP – Taught Degree Awarding Powers

TNCs – Transnational Corporations

UCB - University College at Buckingham

UKBA – United Kingdom Border Agency

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNITAR - Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (Malaysian Private Virtual University)

VLE – Virtual Learning Environment

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule for Head person at provider

About the person (role, length of service, previous employment)

Name:

Job title:

Time in that position:

Previous employment:

About the organisation (years running, numbers of staff)

When was it established?

How was it established?

What is its status (for profit, non-profit etc.)? Your role during the early years: (if applicable)

Were there any particular challenges faced in establishing the organisation?

How has your role changed over time?

How many staff is there?

What is the proportion of staff in the different job families?

How do you see staffing arrangements changing in the short term and long term?

What are the long term goals of the organisation?

Who do you perceive to be your main competition?

About the education (development of curriculum, delivery, QA, assessment)

What are the ranges of courses you offer (further education level, undergraduate, postgraduate)?

In terms of the curriculum, how was this initially established/ or developed?

What are the main forms of delivery of curriculum? (classroom-based, online, one-to-one, tutorials)

How are students assessed? (Examination, online or in person? Course work, etc.)

What is your relationship to QAA and other bodies that investigate HE in the UK.

About the students (how many, background data, recruitment, support)

How many students are there?

Where do they come from (local, UK, overseas)?

Does the school collect information on the backgrounds of students? How do you keep track of widening participation? Any figures I can have?

What are the trends in enrolment over the last 5-10 years?

How are students recruited?

How are students assessed before starting a programme? (on what criteria are they judged)

What support mechanisms are there for students?

What facilities are available for students?

What are the success/drop-out rates of students?

About relationship to other organisations (government, universities, employers)

Do you have contact with other universities? If so, what kind of relationship is there?

Do you have established relationships with employers? If so, what kind of relationship is there?

Do you have much contact with government/ departments about the direction of HE policy, or have any input into developments in the sector?

How do you perceive the direction of HE policy and how this impacts on your organisation?

What do you think about the way your organisation and others like yours are portrayed in policy and in media coverage? The Times Higher Education for example.

Where do you see your organisation in the future? What plans do you have to move into different areas (for accessing students, disciplines, etc.)

Gain access to further information and interviews with tutors and students. Would that be okay? If so, named person to speak with to arrange this?

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information sheet

What is the research about?

The project is investigating the development of alternative Higher Education in the UK, trying to build up an accurate picture of the sector that is seeing a period of growth. The research is trying to increase understanding of developments in the sector that are often portrayed as a homogeneous group, where in fact there are a large range of providers delivering HE in the UK.

Why is it being done?

This sector of higher education is seeing growth in student numbers and increasing consideration in higher education policy. However, there is a lack of quantitative and qualitative research on alternative providers of higher education in the UK. Research on such institutions will inform policy development and allow a greater understanding of the experiences of students and staff at these providers.

If I take part, what do I have to do?

Once you have indicated that you are happy to take part the researcher will send you an Informed Consent Form, which you should read and sign prior to the interview taking place. It is anticipated that interviews will be conducted over the telephone and should take 30 - 45 minutes of your time.

What if I don’t want to take part or change my mind later?

If you don’t want to take part simply do not reply to this letter. If you initially decide to take part, but later decide you would rather not, you can withdraw your cooperation at any point by contacting Sarah Barnard at S.H.Barnard@lboro.ac.uk

What about keeping my answers confidential?

At no point will participants be identifiable in research reports or publications arising from the research. Participants will be ascribed a reference number, which will be used in internal storage and any publications. No responses that allow a person to be identified will be made public and your anonymity will be maintained at all times.

For further information please feel free to contact Sarah at S.H.Barnard@lboro.ac.uk

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form (to be given prior to interview to those who have agreed to take part and signed at the start of the interview)

The interview will be recorded and transcribed – this is an aid to the interviewer, so she can concentrate on your responses rather than taking notes, and also to aid analysis.

The electronic files related to your interview will be stored at Loughborough University for a maximum of ten years.

Each participant will be ascribed a reference number, which will be used in any reporting of the research findings. Individuals will not be identifiable in publications.

Only Sarah Barnard, based at Loughborough University, will have access to the personal data and the raw interview data.

The data will be used for a PhD thesis publication and academic publications.

The data will be owned by Sarah Barnard, Loughborough University.

The final results of the research will be owned by Sarah Barnard, Loughborough University.

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form and agree to be interviewed on the basis set out in those documents

Signed _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Schedule for Staff

Provider

Name

Contact details

ABOUT YOU

Job title:

Time in that position

Time at provider xxx

Previous employment/education?

Why applied for this job? Did you apply to other HEIs?

Is this your only job? If not, what else?

YOUR CURRENT ROLE

Full-time/part-time? Hours per week?

What does the job involve?

Do your responsibilities include curriculum development, recruitment, teaching, marketing, research, pastoral care, administration, managing the organisation? Ask about these in more detail. What proportion? Which do you enjoy/not enjoy?

Has your role changed at all, if so how?

Which courses are you involved in? how are those courses delivered? How far are you involved in the preparation of courses? How time-consuming?

How has digital technology impacted on your work? Time-saving? What do you think about online learning/blended learning?

ABOUT THE STUDENTS

How many students do you teach? How are they recruited and supported?

How do students compare to your previous experiences?

Are students becoming more like ‘consumers’? What is your experience of this?

How do you balance student retention with maintaining academic standards?

YOUR ORGANISATION

What is staff support like? Staff development? Career progression? Pension/other benefits?

What is your overall experience of working at xxx?

If experience of other HEIs what are the similarities/differences?

Do you plan to stay in short term/ long term?

What do you think the future holds for your organisation?

WIDER CONTEXT

What do you think about the direction of HE policy?

Any other comments?

Appendix E: Interview Schedule for students

Provider Name

Contact Details

ABOUT YOU

Gender Age

Programme of study (Level and subject)

Part-time/fulltime?

Student status: Home/EU/International

What, if any, experience of higher education, did you have before you started this course?

If had some experience of HE ask: Did you study with your current provider or another provider in the UK or elsewhere?

Did you have to move away from home in order to study your current / most recent course?

What were you doing before you started this course?

During the course of your studies at xxxx have you worked at all? (what type of work, hours etc.) Talk about the relationship between paid work and studies.

REASONS FOR CHOOSING PROVIDER

Can I ask why you chose to study with this specific provider?

Did you consider, or apply to, any other providers in the UK?

How far did marketing materials influence your decision about studying with xxx?

What do you think employers perceptions are about a degree from your provider? Did you think about this prior to application?

What were your reasons for choosing to take this particular course?

On what criteria do you believe the provider selected you for a place on your course? (For example, through your qualifications, your prior experience, your ability to meet the financial costs).

How much information did your receive about the programme prior to enrolment?

ABOUT THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

In your experience how do you find the course?

How much direct teaching do you get? What are the main ways you are

learning?

What are your experiences of dealing with staff?

How far are you engaged with the course? (successes/difficulties)

How do you use digital technology during your studies? (online elements?)

Is there anything about the curriculum that you would change?

Has the course met your expectations?

What do you plan to do once you have completed the course? In your view, how will/did this course help you to achieve this? What else do / did you hope to achieve as a result of completing this course?

SATISFACTION WITH PROVIDER

What, in your view, are the best things about your provider?

What, in your view, could your provider do differently to improve the student experience for students like you?

To what extent would you say that this provider offers value for money?

How satisfied are you with your provider overall?

Would you consider using the learning provider in the future?

Would you recommend provider to others?

Do you have any other points you wish to add about your course or your provider?

REASONS FOR CHOOSING TO STUDY IN THE UK (EU INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ONLY)

Why did you choose to study outside your home country?

Why did you choose to study in the UK?

Has studying in the UK met your expectations?

Did you encounter any issues when applying to study in the UK?

What are your plans for when you have completed your course?