

**EXPLORING THE GENERATIVE MECHANISMS IN A
RETAIL MANAGER'S LEARNING**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the generative mechanisms in a retail manager's learning, when studying for a Foundation Degree Award in Retailing (FdA in Retailing) within a large multi-channel retail organisation. The researcher, a senior lecturer with the university responsible for piloting the programme was the lead tutor on one of the core first-year units. The low student completion rates during the pilot stages of the programme raised profound questions about the effectiveness of company-based foundation degrees across the interrelated macro politico-economic, meso organisational and micro individual learner levels. In order to identify generative mechanisms present in junior management learning, a critical realist, longitudinal case study spanning four years was undertaken. The principal participants were the junior managers, studying for the award and those with responsibility for managing, administering and teaching the degree programme. The methods used for data collection were semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence, including student learning logs and portfolios. Data was analysed using template analysis. The findings reveal that the experiences of managers studying for the FdA in Retailing were extremely variable. For some, the programme provided expansive learning opportunities that proved valuable to the organisation and the individual. Although, the lack of demand for higher level skills and qualifications for those in junior management roles resulted in the FdA being undervalued and misunderstood in the organisational setting. This had serious consequences for the majority of managers studying for the award, as the necessary senior and store management support and required infrastructure to maintain and expand the programme were lacking, thereby restricting learning opportunities. This research underpins the development of a more complex and nuanced understanding of management learning in the retail sector, which builds on previous research (Fuller and Unwin, 2003; 2004; Felstead et al, 2009) that sought to promote management learning, which is economically viable yet rewarding for the learner and beneficial to the organisation.

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'No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility' (Orson F. Whitney, 1855-1931)

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Abbreviations

AGCAS	Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
DBIS	Department for Business
DFEE	Department for Employment and Education
DFES	Department for Education and Skills
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
EBTA	Employer Based Training Accreditation (UK)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FdA	Foundation Degree Award
FD	Foundation Degree
FdF	Foundation Degree Forward (Government Quango)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for Education
HND	Higher National Diploma
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NLT	National Learning Targets
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
ONS	Office of National Statistics
PPD1	Personal and Professional Development 1
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UKCES	UK Commission for Education and Skills
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WALF	Working as Learning Framework

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene ‘that initial spark of interest’

In July 2007, I was invited to a meeting to discuss the launch of a new Foundation Degree Award in Retailing (FdA in Retailing). I was attending in my capacity as Unit leader for Personal and Professional Development 1 (PPD1), a new unit and the first of six to be studied by students undertaking the FdA in Retailing in their first year of study. The programme commenced in the September of the same year. The FdA in Retailing was a commercial programme developed in collaboration with Foundation Degree Forward and a multi-channel retail organisation, who supplied the pilot cohort of students. The acquisition of the two-year Foundation Degree was a major achievement for the Business School, and marked the beginning of a new chapter in vocationally orientated programmes designed to meet employer specific needs.

The pilot programme launched with 22 students selected from stores across the north of England, all of whom were in full time employment and working in junior line-management roles. The programme was subjected to continuous evaluation and at the end of the second year only six of the initial cohort remained, five of which graduated in the summer of 2009. The very low student retention rate raised a number of important questions for those managing and teaching on the programme. Initially, I was interested to find out what had caused these high profile students to leave the programme and what had happened to them as a result. Early research findings suggested these students were struggling to obtain adequate employer support. This sparked my interest to conduct further research to investigate whether the foundation degree worked in meeting the needs of the retail sector, the organisation and the individual manager. In brief, Foundation Degrees are a university (level 5)

qualification, equivalent to the first two-years of a full honours degree and designed in partnership with employers to address local, regional or national skills needs. They combine academic and workplace learning and offer flexible modes of study to enable those in full-time employment to complete the programme in two-years (QAA, 2015).

1.2 Background and Rationale

Felstead et al (2009:1) have studied how “*improving working can lead to improvements in learning*”. In their longitudinal study they explored the links between macro-level forces that shape employment, the nature of work organisation, and importantly the ‘expansive’ or ‘restrictive’ character of learning environments, that can extend to the learning territories of individuals (Fuller and Unwin, 2003). This study has helped shaped my thinking about the ways in which working and learning relate to one another in the development of junior line managers studying for a FdA in Retailing. Felstead et al (2009) contend that each learning environment comprises a dynamic interplay between processes generated within workplaces and those emanating from wider structures and stages of the productive system. Conducting longitudinal research within the critical realism paradigm has provided the opportunity to use the working as learning framework to investigate the students learning environment in terms of the productive systems in which they operate and the discretion levels that they are able to exercise.

Critical realism argues that the real world operates as a multi-dimensional open system. Three different layers of this open system have been taken into account within this study, these are the government level, that includes the broader political, economic and educational landscape, the organisational level that is the case

organisation and the individual level that comprises of the line manager/student studying on the Foundation Degree programme. This multi-layered perspective is particularly appropriate for this research since Foundation Degrees were a political initiative intended to advantage both individuals in work and their employers. Accordingly, using critical realism will enable the thesis to gauge the success of the initiative at all three levels.

The Macro (government) Level

At this level, forces that structure employment also shape learning and skill development. Market failure in vocational education and training (VET) in Britain over the last three decades has prompted the government to intervene (Grugulis, 2008) so that the Government and its agencies have now become the prime movers in the VET system, with other stakeholders taking subordinate or minor positions (Keep, 2006). However, government intervention in VET has not been without its problems. The system has incurred many changes and while some areas have still managed to perform well, for example, engineering, the majority of sectors, including retail do not have strong legacies of education and training. The government have called for a more demand-led skills system (King, 2007) and are committed to becoming one of the top countries in the world for jobs, productivity and skills by 2020 (UKCES, 2009:5). It is against this backdrop and need for improved economic performance that FDs were first introduced in 2000 (QAA, 2010). Dearing (1997) commented that this qualification would provide the opportunity to break down boundaries between academic and vocational education and encourage active partnerships between higher education institutions and the worlds of commerce, industry and public service. One of the main drivers of the FD was to enable participants to develop the right blend of

skills that employers need. Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) conducted much research that extols the virtues of FDs, but the signals about the future of this qualification are mixed (Wilson, 2005). The Foundation Degree Task Force Report (DfES, 2004: 49) recognised that FDs were planted in difficult terrain yet they are beginning to ‘grow and flower’ but are still subject to attack. FDs are not yet capitalising on some of the distinctive features of the qualification. There are issues around employer engagement and integration of academic and workplace learning (Greenwood et al, 2008). The abolition of FdF in 2010 provided a timely opportunity to explore whether the FD in Retailing was succeeding in integrating the worlds of academia and work to meet employer specific and individual learner needs in the retail sector.

The Meso (organisational) Level

The organisation involved in the pilot programme was chosen as the case study. The company, a multi-channel retail organisation operated within the private retail sector. The retail sector and in particular supermarkets have a poor record of training and development. Traditionally those working in retailing have fewer qualifications compared with those in other sectors. Currently, 13 percent of managers hold no formal qualifications (Skillsmart Retail, 2006). Research indicates that there has been a cultural reticence within the retail sector to develop staff (LSC, 2003), with the primary function of the organisation being “*the production of goods and services and the achievement of organisational goals*” (Rainbird et al, 2004). Although, Unwin et al (2007) contend that workplaces are also sites for learning and “*dynamic*” enquiry. They regard the workplace as a complex environment in which learning takes many forms. The extent of pedagogical variety and the nature of the learning opportunities

available to and created by employees occur within a set of contextual relationships that shift and change with time. Further, an organisation's position in the productive process and the effects of employee discretion and managerial decisions together can limit or support the opportunities for learning at work (Felstead et al, 2011). This thesis examines the relationship between organisational context, vocational education and workplace learning by drawing on aspects of the "*working as learning framework*" (WALF) (Felstead et al, 2009). It also draws on the work of Fuller and Unwin (2003 & 2004) to identify the expansive and restrictive features of the qualification.

The Micro (individual) Level

Much workplace learning literature focuses primarily on the workplace itself. At a conceptual level, most writers acknowledge the significance of locating individuals within activity systems or communities of practice. They regard individuals and social structures as integrated, and therefore underplay the personalised and detailed perspectives of the individual learner. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003:5) posit that people have lives that are separate from their worlds of work, yet they cannot step outside the social structures that are a part of their habitus and identity. They argue the need to develop participatory perspectives on learning to accommodate this crucial conjunction. At this level, the study focuses attention upon the individual managers undertaking the FD programme. The aim is to explore the activity systems of which the learners are part, their workplace, and the individual learner dispositions to learning. The study also assesses the extent to which foundation degrees use constructivist and social learning theories to enhance workplace learning.

1.3 Research Objectives

Essentially, Foundation degrees when first introduced by the DfES in 2000 were designed to provide graduates, needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills. They integrated academic and work-based learning through close collaboration between employers and higher education providers to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment, thereby, in theory, satisfying the needs of both employers and employees (QAA, 2015). However, since 2009, the number of students studying for a Foundation Degree has been in steady decline. Some researchers have argued that new initiatives such as Foundation Degrees require care and attention to grow and prosper, yet, since the demise of Foundation Degree Forward (FdF), the Labour Government quango with responsibility for the qualification, no government funding has been spent promoting the award (Verinder, 2015). This raises serious concerns about the viability of Foundation Degrees generally and in particular within the retail sector.

The research questions traverse the three levels outlined above, the government, organisational and the individual in order to address the key research question and ascertain whether Foundation Degrees work at these three levels of analysis. The aims and objectives are set out below:

The Macro (government) Level: to explore whether the FD in Retailing is succeeding to integrate the worlds of academia and work to meet employer specific needs in the retail sector. A central driver of FDs is to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills that employers and the labour market need (QAA, 2015). One of the main objectives therefore, has been to examine the extent to which the

FdA in Retailing is addressing the needs of the retail sector especially in relation to skills.

The Meso (organisational) Level: applying the working as learning framework to examine how the interrelationship between the wider contextual pressures and the organisation's activity systems influence workplace learning. Authentic and innovative work based learning is an integral part of foundation degrees and their design. The intention is for learning to be a two-way process that involves the development of higher level learning within both the higher educational provider and the workplace (QAA, 2015). Participation in multiple communities of practice forms part of Fuller and Unwin's (2003 & 2004) expansive restrictive framework. The key objective at this level was to investigate whether Foundation Degrees are helping to create expansive learning environments and further, develop an expansive/ restrictive continuum specifically for Foundation Degrees.

The Micro (individual) Level: to investigate the relationship between individual learner's positions, their dispositions to learning and learning for work. This research seeks to examine in depth to what effect studying for the FdA in Retailing had on the individual manager to ascertain whether the Foundation Degree was meeting student expectations. In order to address these research questions and identify the broader generative mechanisms an autonomous reflexive approach akin to that proposed by Archer (2007) was undertaken. Archer's morphogenetic approach to reflexivity and is discussed further in the forthcoming section.

1.4 Taking a Reflexive Approach

This study, as previously mentioned resides within the paradigm of critical realism. Social reality, within this philosophical tradition, is layered comprising deep and emergent structures in an interdependent relationship with social agency that in turn generates social change (Ackroyd, 2009). Epistemologically the aim is to produce theory that accurately identifies causal mechanisms in social change therefore, what constitutes good knowledge “*has to be both meaningful to actors and provide understanding of their active impact in social relations and on structures, such as workplaces and labour markets*” (Brook and Edwards, 2013: 239). This emphasis on ‘thick engagement with actors and social change’ has prompted researchers working within this domain to take a reflexive approach to their research. Archer (2009: preface) defines reflexivity as “*regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa*”. Hence, in her opinion, it is the interplay between what, people are concerned to achieve in society and their context (social constraints and enablement’s) that shapes the mode of reflexivity regularly practiced. Of the four modes of reflexivity characterized by Archer (2007) (communicative; autonomous; meta-reflexives and fractured) the autonomous reflexive featured the most prominently within this study as the ‘internal conversations’ of participants largely focused on outcomes therefore, had a strategic orientation to action (Caetano, 2014).

Time features in Archer’s work on morphogenesis. She suggests that processes of change occur for agents and social structures in interlocking and complex ways. In order to account for the structural context of the fieldwork and the academic environment a temporal aspect to reflexivity was adopted that comprised the period

before contact was made with the research setting, the time during the field research and the period afterwards when analysing and writing up the findings (May, 2004). As mentioned at the outset to this chapter, the ‘spark’ of interest to undertake this study came from the small number of students who successfully completed the programme although, initial interest surfaced beforehand when the managers studying for the award started to voice their concerns with regard to organisational support. Therefore, data collection commenced before the study officially started in 2008. The dual role as an academic teaching on the programme and as a researcher is reflected upon in the methodology chapter and in the concluding section of this thesis.

1.5 Research Intentions

The government have presented a strong case for FDs and there fit into the overarching strategy on VET, yet research undertaken to date has only provided a small snapshot of their implementation and progress. This thesis provides an in-depth study that will benefit both policy and practice with regard to the roll out of FDs across the retail sector. It highlights, from an organisational perspective, some of the key issues encountered in the design and delivery of the FdA in Retailing over a four-year period (2008-2012) in the development of junior line managers.

Management learning is still a relatively new field of study (Easterby, Smith and Thorpe, 1997). Learning by managers in the course of their everyday work remains a “*blind spot for management development and educational practitioners*” (Cullen and Turnbull, 2005). The context in which the learning takes place also remains a nebulous and poorly defined concept (Felstead et al, 2011:6). Research into the interrelationship between management development, education and the organisational

context will therefore benefit both theory and practice. The research undertaken also expands the WALF framework to include that of junior line management and contributes to the debate on expansive and restrictive learning and the development of a new continuum specifically developed for Foundation Degrees.

Billett (2001:22) contends *“it is necessary to offer an account of learning for work which acknowledges the independence of individuals acting within the interdependence of the social practice of work”*. This thesis attempts to understand the manager/student’s individual disposition to learning based on their experiences and interactions both before and whilst studying for the Foundation Degree. This adds to existing knowledge on the role of the individual in participatory studies. A blended learning approach is used in the design of the FD in Retailing in order to maximise learning opportunities and forge links between a student’s work experience and academic study. Evans et al (2006:11) argue that constructivist and socio-theories of learning are best suited to workplace learning. A number of notable theories are applicable to this study including those provided by Lave and Wenger (1991); Engestrom (2001); Eraut (2004) and Wenger, (2007).

Exploring the experience and effectiveness of management learning through an FdA in Retailing involved conducting a detailed analysis of the retail context and the large multi-channel organisation that piloted the programme. The findings showed that both of these contexts had a considerable bearing on the individual managers’ experience of studying for the award and their ultimate perceptions of going through the programme. Qualifications were not significant when it came to securing managerial jobs, as the work of retail managers was found to be relatively low skilled

and tightly controlled through rules and procedures (Lloyd and Payne, 2014). Therefore, organisations, in the sector, did not place high value on educational attainment. As a result, the systems and structures were not in place to support work-based qualifications effectively. Further, they were unable to position this type of qualification within their existing talent development strategies. The FdA in Retailing therefore remained marginalized and misunderstood within the organisational setting which raises crucial questions about VET policies to increase higher level skills through an FD within the retail sector. In addition, for those studying for the award the experience was immensely variable although, even against the backdrop described there was evidence of expansive learning. Provided below is an outline of the content of this thesis.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

The early part of the introduction sets the scene for what is to follow, and explains how that ‘initial spark of interest’ in the FdA in Retailing came about. It also outlines my role in the research process as not only a researcher but also as a participant in the study. The importance of this role becomes evident in chapter four when discussing methods of data collection. The introduction also serves to provide background information on not only Foundation Degrees but also other central areas of research to which this thesis belongs, namely that of management and workplace learning.

Chapters, Two, Three and Four, provide further background and context for the study. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature. Split into three main sections; the first offers an introduction to the retail context, the second discusses the complexity of management moving from traditional theories of management to those more related to

junior managers and management practice whilst the final part considers how managers learn in the workplace. Within this part of the chapter, two key theories are presented, the first is Fuller and Unwin's (2003) Expansive and Restrictive Continuum, the second is Felstead et al (2009) Working as Learning Framework, both form part of the conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter Three provides further contextual information specifically concerning the history and development of Foundation Degrees (FDs) and the Labour Government's commitment to provide more industry led qualifications. A number of the key characteristics of the qualification are evaluated which include employer engagement and participation in the design and delivery of FDs and the role of the workplace mentor. The chapter also raises a number of pertinent issues concerning the future of FDs prior to introducing the delivering institution and the FdA in Retailing.

Chapter Four is structured around Crotty's (1998) four elements of social research, epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. The value of taking a critical realist approach to this longitudinal study are discussed in relation to ontology and epistemology and continued when outlining the case study methodology selected and the use of different methods of data collection including semi structured interviews and participant observation. I have aimed to be reflexive in the latter stages of this chapter especially when discussing my role as researcher as employer. The chapter concludes with the method of data analysis and ethical considerations.

The empirical findings have been divided into three chapters (Five, Six and Seven), these chart the students' progress through the Foundation Degree beginning first with

the formation of the FdA in Retailing. This chapter provides contextual information on the contentious way in which the case organisation was selected to pilot the qualification and the problems encountered populating and promoting the programme within the organisation. The theme given to chapter six relates to going through the programme, this part of the thesis focuses on the support given to students whilst studying for the award and the issues of balancing full-time work, life and study. The final chapter entitled 'reaching completion' discusses the thorny issue of student retention and the methods used to evaluate the FdA in Retailing.

Chapters eight and nine present a more comprehensive analysis of the findings by drawing together the empirical chapters and the literature. To gain a deeper more holistic understanding of learning at work, Felstead et al (2009) argue that it is necessary to traverse a series of analytical layers of enquiry, which he refers to as the "*context of learning*". The three levels of analysis discussed earlier, the macro (government), the meso (organisation) and the micro (individual) are used to structure the discussion at this stage, in order to address the objectives of this study and answer the overriding research question. Part One now continues with a review of the literature commencing with the retail context.

Chapter Two: The Literature Review

This chapter is divided into three main sections; the first offers an introduction to the retail context. The second discusses the complexity of management moving from traditional theories of management to those more related to junior managers and management practice. The final part of the literature review considers how managers learn in the workplace, drawing on constructivist and social theories of learning. Retailing is a significant sector to study, as it is the largest private sector employer in the UK, accounting for roughly 11% of the British workforce, therefore hugely important to the British economy. However retail work has been described as diverse, problematic and understudied (Grugulis, 2011). The diverse character of retailing and the challenges the sector faces in relation to technological advancements are discussed first prior to reviewing the nature and skills required of those undertaking retail work. This is where many of the problems are encountered as retailing has often been regarded as a ‘Cinderella Industry’, characterised by hard work, low wages, with few qualifications on offer and modest career opportunities. This first section provides the context for the discussion on management and later, management learning. Defining management can be challenging, the early part of the section on management considers the classical theories of management. These provide universal definitions of management but as this thesis focuses on junior management learning, it proved preferable to examine what managers do in the context of their everyday work. The management development literature strongly suggests that management learning should be grounded in what managers actually do, or are required to do. However, findings of other studies illustrate that much management development focuses on improving functional performance and is based on formal methods of development criticised as being less effective than more informal methods. For this reason, the

literature veers away from the management development literature to that of workplace learning. This strand of literature offers a range of theoretical frameworks that can be used to evaluate learning, including the Working as Learning Framework (WALF) and the Expansive and Restrictive Continuum (Fuller and Unwin, 2003/04). Other prominent writers that have been significant in shaping the contextual and social nature of learning in the workplace include Lave and Wenger (1991), Engeström (2001) Eraut (2004) and Billet (2001). This chapter presents an appraisal of their contribution in relation to the expansive and restrictive approaches to workplace development as proposed by Fuller and Unwin (2004). Their work is important to this study as it has been significant in shaping the debate underpinning the structure / agency dynamic influential in changing the traditional perceptions of learning in work.

2.1 An Introduction to the Retail Context

The retail industry is the largest private source of employment, employing approximately 2.9 million people across the UK (British Retail Consortium, June 2010) a figure set to rise to 3.3 million by 2017 (UKCES, 2010). Retailers currently represent 5 % of gross domestic product (GDP) and account for 10 % of the total national workforce (Gambin et al, 2012). However, the sector is polarised with a concentration of large multiple retailers at one extreme, and at the other a large majority of small businesses (Hart et al, 2007). While independent retailers greatly outnumber the multiples, they are economically weak in comparison with the efficiency and productivity generated by the large corporate chains. As a result, the independent sector has steadily declined in contrast with the rising dominance of a few large multiples,

particularly in sectors such as food (Burt and Sparks, 2002) and the growth of the of the multichannel and omnichannel¹ retailer.

2.1.1 Challenges Facing Retailers

The recession of 2008-2009 adversely affected retail by around 4 %, but the effects are less than in some other sectors. More challenging to retailers has been the increasing requirement to source and invest in emerging markets such as China, the Far East and Eastern Europe and heightened focus on managing social, ethical and environmental risks throughout the supply chain (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2015). There have also been demographic changes including a projected increase in the 50 plus age group by 2020 (DfES, 2000), this is set to have an effect on the labour pool and range of goods and service offerings. However, it is technological change and the growth of multichannel and omnichannel retailing that are currently causing the most concern. Retailers are increasingly using sophisticated IT systems to manage their supply chains, drive down costs and manage shrinkage. This includes responding to consumer demand through improved multi-channel operations and enhanced customer service offerings (ranging from value shopping to high-end luxury purchases). The Department for Business Innovation and Skills in their ‘Strategy for Future Retail’ (2013) acknowledge that retailing and consumer requirements are changing and are therefore seeking to better understand the digital skills required by retailers, from web platform and systems design to high level mathematics and data analysis skills. They argue that retailers need the right people, at the right levels of the business to delivery these requirements. However, the retail sector has not competed well against other

¹ Omnichannel is a new retailing concept and one that is supposedly the logical evolution of multi-channel retailing where the customer can use more than one sales channel to shop from a retailer for any given transaction. It is said to provide a 360 view of the consumer (Bishop, 2013).

sectors to attract and retain the best talent and the following sections examine why this is the case by firstly considering the nature of retail work.

2.1.2 Retail Work

Put simply retailing is the journey between production and consumption (National Skills Academy, 2015). Levy and Weitz (1992:6) define it as “*the set of business activities involved in selling products and services to the ultimate (final) consumer*”. Braverman (1974), in his deskilling thesis, noted the importance of both goods and services in a retail transaction, and the simultaneous production and consumption of labour as part of the retail process (Price, 2011). He argued that labour becomes the commodity in service transactions therefore the deskilling of workers is inevitable due to the capitalist process. Retailing has traditionally provided employment opportunities through the provision of part-time employment and non-standard hours of work (Gambin et al, 2012), in fact, many of the jobs are part-time and non-standardized. Women account for 58 % of the workforce (Skillsmart retail 2010), ethnic minority workers 7 % and disabled workers 12 % (Harris and Church/LSC, 2002). Almost a third of retail employees are under 25 years of age, compared to 13 % in the economy as a whole (Skillsmart retail 2010). Half the workforce are employed in sales and customer service operations whilst 18 % are managers or senior officials, this is in stark contrast to the average percentage in England suggesting that ‘professionals and higher-level occupations’ are grossly underrepresented in retail. Work in supermarkets is structured in a way that makes it labour intensive and low skill, and where work, including that undertaken by managers, is tightly controlled. This could result in fewer incentives for organisations to encourage learning which may have implications for this study. Undoubtedly, this occupational structure has

affected the qualification/skills profile and quality of entrants into the retail sector (Hart et al, 2007:6), although, skills in retailing can vary in accordance to the retail format adopted and to a lesser extent on the nature of the products sold (Price, 2011). Prior to discussing skills in relation to retail, it is necessary to consider the broader skills landscape and the national strategy relating to skills.

2.1.3 The Nature of Skill in Retail

Grugulis (2007) suggests that the term skill like knowledge is a complex concept; however, she suggests that Cockburn's (1983) tripartite definition is useful in discussing the nature of skill and its application to the workplace.

There is the skill that resides in the man himself, accumulated over time, each new experience adding something to a total ability. There is the skill demanded by the job – which may or may not match the skill in the worker. And there is the political definition of skill: that which a group of workers or a trade union can successfully defend against the challenge of employers and of other groups of workers (p 113)

When the concept is broken down into the skill of the individual, job and social setting, it forms part of a complex social system. Retailing has traditionally been “trapped in a low skills, low pay equilibrium” (Skillsmart Retail, 2004: 22). The term ‘Low Skills Equilibrium’ was first devised by Finegold and Solskice (1988) and later by Wilson and Hogarth (2003) to describe what they saw as systems failure in the British economy; an economy characterised by low-wages and with a relatively high

proportion of low specification companies in which demand for high level skills is relatively low. Further Keep (2012: 72) suggests:

service sector work organisation and job design has taken work and broken it up into jobs that require only small parcels of skill and knowledge which is relatively easily and swiftly acquired, leading to training times that are quite limited, and to a workforce that is easily disposable and a situation where the costs of labour turnover are minimised.

Retail work has therefore traditionally demanded low skills levels, with the sector employing a relatively high proportion of female workers with lower than average qualifications attainment. 11% of employees do not hold any qualifications (Skillsmart Retail, 2010), and 31 % of sales staff have below level two qualifications. Employees with level three qualifications has risen from 19 % in 2004 to 38 % in 2010, but this falls short of the 52 % target set by the LSC. Unsurprisingly, low pay is prevalent with the median hourly wage being £6.94 compared to £10.97 for all employees in the UK (Wright and Sissons, 2012). Hart et al (2007) suggest that this can greatly affect the attraction, recruitment and labour turnover in retail.

The sector has a reputation for skills under-utilisation. In a SKOPE study conducted in 2002, 45 % of sales workers reported being ‘over skilled’ and 57 % over-qualified (the highest amongst all occupations) (Keep et al, 2002). The Work Foundation in 2009 also found that 55 % of ‘servers and sellers’ were ‘over-skilled’ for their job. With some interviewees commenting this was a ‘major problem’ that extended to management roles (Office for National Statistics, 2009). One explanation given for

the reported levels of skill-under-utilisation was the flexible nature of retail work; 56% of retail employees work part-time (twice the UK average). Grugulis (2007) argues that it is “*naïve to assume that workers are simply mechanistic aggregations of skill*”. An individual’s capacity to do work is not innate; but socially created and sustained. Therefore, there is no guarantee that the skills and knowledge of employees will be utilised in the workplace (Block, 1990:75).

Part-time work alongside awkward shift times and cost factors are cited as reasons why there is a cultural reticence in retail to develop staff and may account for why only ‘limited opportunities exist’ (The LSC, 2003). Further factors include a lack of relevance and flexibility in part of the learning awards to the needs of the organisation and high turnover of staff (typically 45%). However, these explanations may just be a smoke screen for more fundamental reasons, that of the nature of retail (service) jobs and the skills required to carry them out. Rose et al (1994) contends that the growth in the service sector has led to the rise in unskilled work, whilst Braverman (1974) drew direct comparisons between the changing nature of work within supermarkets to that of manufacturing. Store-level retail work is subjected to routinization and is tightly controlled with little opportunity provided for employees to exercise discretion. This results in a lack of requirement for people to possess higher-order skills. Poor retention levels have resulted in a large proportion of the training budget (50%) being spent on employee induction. Importantly, high turnover figures ‘*represent an outflow of skills and experience from the firm which can seriously hinder competitiveness and efficiency*’ (Bevan, 1987:1).

In relation to skills gaps; technical and practical skills; customer handling and management skills are all identified as areas in need of improvement, with customer service regarded as the most essential customer skill required at all levels (Harris and Church, 2002). However, research conducted by Wright and Sissons suggests there are specific issues around skills in the sector (2012:30):

There is evidence that both conceptions of skills in the sector and the way in which they are rewarded often suffers from a technical definition of skills, rather than a more holistic view which also identifies the importance of soft skills in the sector. This requires a form of culture change among parts of the sector's management and a better understanding of the way that employee skills can contribute to productivity and profitability. There is also a wider issue regarding the Qualifications Framework and the extent to which this matches up with the types of skills needed.

Retail investment in training is generally lower than found in the economy generally. Byrom et al (2000:418) argue that retail has not done an effective job in training employees. Employers engage less with the external skills infrastructure, for example, use of further education colleges (FE) and engagement with higher education (HE) (Gambin et al, 2012). Only 13 % undertake any form of work based learning in contrast with 15.5 % across all sectors. The attitude to qualifications remains ambivalent, if not negative amongst many retail employers. A senior recruitment officer stated (Huddleston and Hirst, 2004: 16):

There might be NVQs and other qualifications for retail operating staff, but the problem is that they are not widely distributed. As a result, few companies look for these qualifications when recruiting non-management positions. This means that many sales assistants or consultants don't think it is worth obtaining a qualification because it won't make much difference. In the UK retail trade, minimal value is placed on training customer-facing staff.

Harris and Church (2002) argue that the retail industry requires better skilled and more flexible workers, yet they say the logistics of delivering training and providing for continual lifelong learning present enormous challenges in the retail environment. They suggest that it is difficult to release employees from the shop floor during busy trading times, and if employees are required to return to the store for training outside then this will incur greater cost as they will need to be paid. Large retailers as a result have introduced distance-learning packages. A National Retail Training Council Survey (cited by Aron, 2001) conducted in 2000 indicated that 59 % of retail staff received off-the-job training, this includes courses, evening and weekend study, e-learning and block study. 31 % received on-the-job training and 10 % received both. On-the-job training includes mentoring, job shadowing and learning through doing. Although, a different set of findings produced by Hart et al (2007:22) found that the majority of training by retailers is delivered in-house and through work-based learning programmes. They argue that these approaches enable retailers to control the cost, quality and consistency of training; however, they note that management knowledge, time and skill can be a limitation. For example, the modern apprenticeship (MAs), ostensibly designed to address the UK's deficit in intermediate level skills has failed to deliver the results sought owing to a lack of take up and completion. Reportedly, it

was a useful vehicle for young people and employers to attain their own ends but was marginal in terms of a recognised structure for training and the completion of education (DfES, 2001 p 12). In a study of the retail sector, employers were found to be uninformed or indifferent about MAs, rather than negative towards them (Spielhofer et al, 2004). Although, it does indicate that employers may lack commitment towards skill development in this sector (Keep, 2003).

This examination of retailing does not paint an encouraging picture of the retail sector or retail work. It is clear that retailing is hugely important to the British economy and therefore government policy although the sector as a whole is under-theorised in relation to other sectors, diverse and problematic. The retail workforce is made up predominantly of women and young people (especially students) undertaking part-time jobs; this undermines job quality and places an emphasis on ‘soft’ rather than ‘hard’ skills. Low pay is prevalent in the sector and this in turn drives high employee turnover. The sector as a whole has a poor reputation for training and development, much of which is undertaken in-house by internal training providers with minimal value placed on external qualifications. It is not surprising therefore, to find that the sector is struggling to recruit and retain talented employees, especially those with the skills required to manage their retail operations in a competitive and volatile market.

2.2 Examining the Concept of Management

The previous section provided an introduction to the retail context, retail work and the skills required of employees in the sector. Retail management is discussed later in this chapter but first a number of the most prominent management theories are examined and critiqued. Mintzberg (2004) contends learning to be a manager can be

a formidable task. He argues that managers have to make sense of complex, often conflicting and demanding expectations, yet they often receive little by way of an introduction to management and once in the job may end up having to ‘sink or swim’ (Watson, 1994). Managers of an organisation may be amongst its key staff, and have a disproportionate effect on performance (Grugulis 2007), yet many novice managers do not realise how sharply management differs from individual work (Hill, 2007). Additionally, defining the term management can be problematic as Watson (1994) discovered in his ethnographic study of ZCT. He found that qualifications, organisational function (e.g. whether working in personnel or production) and seniority of post can all have a bearing on management activity and the way in which managers are developed. For this reason, the literature on this topic is divided into two sections, the first concentrates on defining management. Many of the classical theorist’s present management as a generic set of functions often taught to those learning about management related subjects (including managers studying for the FdA in Retailing). The major theories are evaluated prior to appraising what managers do in practice. Attention, when discussing this aspect, shifts to junior rather than senior management roles, as this thesis primarily focuses on those in first-line manager positions. It is important to gain an understanding of management as Hales (1999) suggests much management education, training and development rests upon a set of ideas about what managers presumably do, and therefore are being trained to do.

The second part of the section concentrates on the development of managers, firstly examining the purpose of management development and contrasting formal and informal methods of development. Emphasis then shifts to workplace learning and the underpinning learning theories that emphasise the situated and social nature of

learning. This section argues that the nature of management as presented by the traditional management theorists only partially represents what managers actually do in practice. Managers are not rational actors that plan and control. Instead managers, particularly junior managers, can easily spend the majority of their time just reacting to what happens around them, their role is therefore uncertain and ad hoc (Stewart, 1994). This understanding of what managers actually do in practice is important for engaging in the discussion about how managers are developed.

2.2.1 Defining Management: Not a Straightforward Task

Many of the traditional approaches to management tend to emphasise (implicitly and explicitly) management as the control of relationships. Scientific management constructs the supervisor-employer relationship as one where the manager/supervisor is firmly in control, giving instructions to employees who then carry them out (Linstead et al, 2009). Taylor assumed a unitarist perspective on organizations and viewed managerial work as unproblematically functional (Willmott, 1984). The classical management functions first introduced by Fayol (1949) and later extended by Urwick (1952) consist of five elements: forecasting and planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling. This definition of management has remained popular in the management texts although Mintzberg described the classical functions of Fayol as being “folklore’ (1975) and “no longer of use to us” (1971). Empirical research conducted by Carroll and Gillen (1987) refuted this claim as they found that managers did spend time in the classical management functions, although they found that time patterns spent with respect to these responsibilities can vary according to job and level categories. Fayol also took a contingent and situational approach to management. He believed there were no absolute rules or principles in

management, arguing that allowances must be made for different changing circumstances.

Similarly Drucker (1986) argued that management work, management jobs and management organisation are not absolutes, but are determined and shaped by the tasks to be performed, 'Structure follows strategy' without understanding the mission, the objectives, the strategy of the enterprise, managers cannot be managed, organizations cannot be designed, managerial jobs cannot be made productive. Drucker (1977:25) views management to be a social function "*embedded in a tradition of values, customs, beliefs and in governmental and political systems*". He suggested that an understanding of the fundamentals of managerial work is required to become a competent manager with the ultimate test of ability being performance. Purely acquiring knowledge about management skills and techniques enables the individual to become a technician only. Drucker (1977:336) proposed a '*management by objectives*' approach that stresses the need for each manager to be focused on the 'success of the whole' organisation. Although, most employees have little or no control over the objective needs of the organisation, and implicitly encouraged by the employment relationship to develop an essentially individualistic and instrumental orientation to their work (Wilmott, 1984). Drucker appears to present a partial and idealized view of managerial work, which disregards its political dimensions.

Mintzberg's (1970, 1975) proposed a typology for describing managerial work as a relational process based on the behavioural observations and study of the mail of five chief executives. He identified three groups of roles: interpersonal, informational and decisional. A major criticism of Mintzberg's work was that he generalised about all

managers from a small sample of those at or near the top of the organisation, although he indicates that managers in different types of jobs and at different levels vary in the relative importance of these roles to their overall responsibilities. Studies by Mintzberg (1973), Kurke and Aldrich (1983) portray managerial work similarly over time, for instance terms like brevity, fragmentation and variety are constants. Mintzberg's work in particular encouraged a number of studies that use the method of structured observation in various managerial occupations such as public administration, police officers and school principals (Tengblad, 2006). The classical theorists present theories of general managerial functions and responsibilities in the work process which, are unproblematic and open to definition. However, critics would argue that management is not capable of accurate definition. Further, the classical theorists have not attempted to focus on individual managers or issues of what managers do (Hales (1986).

2.2.2 Alternative Ways to Define Management by Examining What Managers Do

Hales (1986) proposed the need for more consistent and comparable categories of management. He drew upon Stewart's (1976:4) nominalist definition of management "*anyone above a certain level, roughly above foreman whether in control of staff or not*" within his own research and suggested that Stewart's (1994) studies are useful in providing evidence on what managers do in general. Stewart initially conducted diary studies to find out what managers do and concluded that junior managers in particular actually do very different things and there is no one, set managerial role but a whole range of different jobs and responsibilities. Stewart's later comparative study on middle managers in Britain and Germany illustrated how differences in manager role expectations and work activities are the result of interactive effects between

national culture and organizational structure. It does not however highlight or account for any similarities between the two groups of managers. Hales (1999:338) drawing on further theory and empirical studies suggested there are three broad aspects of managerial work that seem to be common to the work of most managers: generic managerial activities, key substantive areas in which these activities are undertaken and the characteristic features of these activities. When asking ‘what do managers do?’ Hales (1999) identifies a substantive list of central activities that all or most managers engage in. Managers appear to devote considerable time and effort to four of these activities: the day-to-day management of people, management of information, day-to-day monitoring of work processes and non-managerial activities, such as assisting with technical work.

Hales (1999) regarded managers as having a preoccupation with routine, day-to-day ‘maintenance’ of the work system and, in particular, with those who carry it out. He describes the work of managers as being ‘reactive, ad hoc and unforeseen’ rather than planned. Activities are short, interrupted and often fragmented. Interaction is verbal and face-to face. The nature and boundaries of the managerial job and juggling the competing demands can create tension, pressure and conflict. Stewart (1999) cited a study by Sune Carlson who looked at the workload and working methods of nine Swedish CEOs. The study spanned four weeks and focused on how managers spend their time. The findings were similar to those presented by Hales. The manager’s day is typically hectic and fragmented with much time spent switching attention from one person to another. This contrasts markedly with Fayol’s description of a manager as one that plans, organises and controls. In addition, Carlson’s study and subsequent studies highlight the importance of technical skills and being skilled in managing

relationships and this brings to the fore the political nature of management (Sayles, 1964). Reed (1984) regards management as a social and political activity, whereas Willmott (1997) presents an understanding of managerial work based upon a reconstruction of labour process theory. He argues that locating managerial work within a plurality of cultures has the merit of appreciating its socially organised, negotiated quality. In his view, functionalist representations of management do not pay close enough attention to the organisational politics and social processes of managerial work. In summary, managerial work is not as straightforward as the classical management theorists would have us believe. It is not functional, coherent or easily identifiable, instead it comprises of a diverse range of activities and responsibilities which, can vary in terms of context (sector, organisation), status (senior to junior management positions) and practice (role or position) and from individual to individual (Grugulis, 2007). One further aspect not yet discussed is that of leadership, there is much debate on whether leadership is distinct from management or whether both are equal and complementary as again, this can have implications for the skills and knowledge required by managers in the workplace.

2.2.3 The Continuing Debate: Leadership Verses Management

In the 1980s, the focus was very much on management, with an emphasis on management development, management competencies and managerial assessment, leadership was regarded as a 'politically incorrect' word (Iles and Preece, 2006). However, since the turn of the century, there has been a renewed academic and political interest in leadership (Storey, 2004), to the point where 'management' has now become the negative word (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). The differences between management and leadership have been the topic of much debate, with the issues

appearing tangled and difficult. In the social psychology, literature ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ have been terms that have been used interchangeably (Brotherton, 1999) and until the mid-1990s, people in authority, such as higher management, were largely assumed to have a leadership role. A number of writers have now sought to draw clear distinctions between ‘management’ and ‘leadership’. For example, Kotter (1990:85) argues:

Leadership is different from management, but not for the reasons most people think. Leadership is not mystical and mysterious. It has nothing to do with having ‘charisma’ or other exotic personality traits. It is not the province of a chosen few nor is leadership necessarily better than management or a replacement for it. Rather leadership and management are two distinct and complementary systems of action. Each has its own function and characteristic activities. Both are necessary for success in an increasingly complex and volatile business environment

Kotter (1990) claims that ‘management’ is about coping with complexity, leadership in contrast is about coping with change. Zaleznic (1990) however argues that leaders and managers are basically, different types of people. He acknowledges that it is possible for one person to be both a manager and leader but states that conditions favourable to the growth of one may be inimical to the other. He describes the nature of managerial work as being rational and systematic, involving the functions of organization, direction and control. Management in his opinion limits choices, whereas leadership ‘*develops fresh approaches to longstanding problems and opens issues for new options*’. His list of leadership qualities varies significantly from that

of managers and focuses primarily on personal qualities, in his opinion leaders are artistic, as well as being an integral part of the aesthetic product, creative, able to turn ideas into images that excite people, risk takers who seek danger especially where there is opportunity and reward.

The leadership qualities outlined by Zaleznic abound in the biographies and autobiographies of business leaders yet Grugulis (2007) states it is difficult to see how these *'fairy-tale'* versions provide useful perspectives on organisational governance, one-dimensional categories underpinning the differentiation of leaders from management are misleading. Raelin (2004) contends that managers have always been more than administrators and to view leaders as *'saviours'* is to risk the same heroic thinking which once marked the rise of managerialism. Storey (2004) expands upon this view when stating that the transformational leadership model has run into *'choppy waters of late'*. He argues that there is now much more *"caution, suspicion and scepticism of the overblown claims which were relatively unquestioned at the height of the Charisma boom. This caution and scepticism carry consequences for modes of leadership development (2004:34)"*. Mangham (1988) suggests that managers are in danger of being seduced by the latest management fads and fashionable ideas that promise easy solutions (transformational leadership, excellence) and self-serving fantasy images of management. Nevertheless, these *'neo charismatic'* approaches to leadership have been the single most dominant paradigm over the past decade. Now it appears that they are on the wane, being replaced by approaches classified as *'new directions'* including contextual approaches, leadership development and authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, Day and Antonakis, 2012), with the focus on

the leader's soft skills, that incorporates how they inspire and organise others (Storey, 2004).

Recent literature has started to redress what is seen as a false subordination of management to leadership. Dalton (2010) argues that management and leadership are not at opposing ends of a spectrum, rather they are equal and complementary. All managers he states need both qualities especially those at the top. Claxton and Gold (2013: 262) also argue that in practice, both, rather than being separated are often found together especially in relation to roles. However, Hales (2005) in his study of first-line managers, suggests the leadership role of junior managers is more likely to be confined to operating routines, only occasionally extending to resourcing and human resource matters. He suggests supervisors “*are more likely to be consulted on routine operational matters than strategy*” (Hales, 2005:501). Delbridge and Lowe (1997) contend there is still strong demand for supervision as opposed to more inspirational leadership. Pressures to improve customer service and performance generally have resulted in higher levels of supervision and micro-management rather than greater discretion for workers in the retail sector (Hales, 2005). Further Hales (1999) argues that there has been little by way of change to the core elements of the managerial job or the ways in which managers are selected and developed. He suggests that many management and leadership development theories tend to overlap and it is therefore unsurprising to find in the literature a general lack of understanding as to what makes a good manager (Dalton, 2010). This means that learning and development specialists are particularly at risk of designing development programmes for qualities that they do not fully understand. Further, even those in management positions find it difficult to articulate what they do in practice, preferring instead to

discuss their roles in general terms. The next section reviews a number of studies by Watson (2001) and Kotter (1982) that illustrates this point.

2.2.4 The Complexities of Management

The wide range of activities undertaken by managers leads Heller (1985, 1995) to claim that management is not one but a number of occupations, with the skills required for each being very context-dependent. He classified management as being quite a 'homely' occupation although highlighted its complexity and problematic nature. Watson (2001) in research undertaken in a large telecommunications company found that managers are often searching for themselves in the way they think about and do their managerial work. He found that the stance that managers adopt on the nature of managerial work has personal strategic elements, in the sense that it helps individuals shape their own lives. Yet he found that some managers find it difficult to make sense of their roles and tend to define what they do in very general terms. One manager when questioned on his role reported, "*I am in charge of this office and the office in Birmingham*" (2001:50), hence providing very little information on his responsibilities and day-to-day activities. Further a study conducted by Kotter (1982) involving senior managers also revealed just how little awareness managers can have about the skills, knowledge and relationships they possess and how specialized they are. A lack of understanding and appreciation of different managerial roles can make it difficult for those with responsibility for selecting and training managers (Stewart, 1999:11).

Some of the latest management literature addresses the struggles of managerial reality in the process of becoming and being a manager. This research attempts to bridge the

gap between fixed ideas of what it is to be a manager and how management is practised (Andersson, 2010). The traditional theories and models paint a picture of management as being a logical and systematic process of planning, organising, motivating and controlling. However, this can be misleading as management practice is much more fluid and contextually based. Managers often carry out their work on a day-to-day basis in conditions of variety, turbulence and unpredictability (Armstrong, 2012). In addition, management is also a social and political activity (Reed, 1984). Not only are managers required to meet departmental and organisational targets they also need to create a good impression of themselves and manage their own careers. This is particularly important for those in junior management positions where their role is to form a conduit between senior managers and front-line employees (Watson, 1994) where they are required to fulfil a routine operational rather than strategic role. Traditionally, management development and training has been based on the notion that management concerns the acquisition of competencies, techniques and personal awareness. The challenge according to Andersson's (2010:167) is to "*bridge the gap between a fixed idea of what it is to be a manager and how management is actually practised*". The following section attempts to bridge the gap by conveying some sense of the retail manager's role.

2.2.5 Retail Management and Management Skills

The previous section illustrates how difficult it can be to define the concept of management and the nature of managerial work. This section firstly examines the key responsibilities of retail managers within large retail formats and the skills they require before reviewing the qualifications held by managers and the difficulties

encountered by those in the sector with responsibility for the recruitment and retention of management talent.

According to the Office for National Statistics, (2013) there are around half a million managers in retail, hospitality and leisure services in the UK (ONS, 2013). The Association of Graduate Careers and Advisory Services (AGCAS, accessed 26/04/13) provide a generic outline of the key responsibilities of retail managers. *“Retail managers have responsibility for running stores or departments to meet a company’s targets or policies with the aim being to maximise profit while minimising cost”*. Managers have to meet daily sales targets and customer care standards, merchandise and manage promotions accurately and in accordance to company guidelines. Retail managers may also be required to deal with human resources, marketing logistics, information technology, customer service and finance. However, this will be dependent on the size of store, company structure and the level of control exerted by company headquarters. This can more or less control the tangible work that managers do and the autonomy afforded (Andersson et al, 2011). Price (2011) in his study of supermarket employment practices found that management autonomy in the stores has decreased due to the centralization of control to head office. He found that knowledge intensive work was more likely to be concentrated in the companies head offices, with less knowledge work focused on the shop floor (Wright and Sissons, 2012). Although Andersson et al (2011) found that in Sweden, local store managers generally retained considerable discretion regarding local decisions concerning personnel issues (the hiring and managing of employees). This also appears to be the case in the UK from the comments made by AGCAS. Burt and Sparks (2002) also suggest that demands on retail managers have risen dramatically during the past few years, they argue that

the role of the store manager has become more diverse and pressured. A view supported by findings from the Government's State of the Nation Report that stated *"the range of skills and attributes that retail businesses need their managers to possess continues to expand"* (2015: 3). The report comments on the need for managers to be entrepreneurial and possess good people management skills. It claims that by 2020 the sector will need an additional 60,000 managers. People 1st, a Government quango, acknowledge this is going to be a challenge, *"if we don't think differently about how we recruit, develop and retain our managers"* (Insight Report, January, 2015:3).

Currently, 18 % of sector managers are under 30 and 5 % under 25. This is in stark contrast to other sectors of the economy where only 9 % are under 30. The sector is generally less qualified at a managerial level in comparison to other sectors across the UK economy. Only 31% of retail managers are qualified at NVQ Level 4 and above, 18% less than the UK average. There are also a higher proportion of managers with no qualifications in the retail industry this stands at 7%, 3% higher than all other sectors across the economy (People 1st, 2015). However, there has been surprisingly little discussion as to whether many of these jobs actually require higher-level qualifications or, indeed, how far their holders are given opportunities to use the skills they already have (Lloyd and Payne, 2014). Further, retail businesses are finding it difficult to attract the right applicants with the relevant skills, attitude and motivation to fill external vacancies.

The sector has had difficulty shaking off its reputation for being a 'Cinderella' industry, characterised by hard work, low wages, with few qualifications on offer and

little career opportunity. Although, Huddleston and Hirst (2004:20) posit “*the image fails to capture the diversity of the sector and the pace of change within it*”. They contend that in the UK large retail organisations are investing significant amounts of money into training, yet skills gaps amongst managers remain (People 1st, 2015). This suggests again that retail comprises low level rather than high-level work. One of the reported reasons for these skills gaps is the impact of poor retention, resulting in managers not remaining in role long enough to complete their training. Strong management and leadership skills are required, without which store and employee productivity will suffer and together with lower staff motivation, ultimately lead to lower profits, yet on the evidence supplied, the retail sector is plagued by issues of low pay, low skills with managers less highly qualified than those in other sectors, high employee turnover and scarce career opportunities. In addition “*the sector does not deal with the underlying challenges facing the sector in terms of its skill shortages and gaps, its perceived image and its need to attain and retain the brightest and best*” (Huddleston, 2011:124). The diverse nature of management and the issues faced by the retail sector in relation to recruiting and retaining management talent are important when considering how managers are developed. Conventional approaches to management development have tended to be universalistic. However, if management is as diverse as the literature suggests, then it follows that the way in which managers are developed needs to take into consideration this variety, with attention re-directed towards different contexts (Storey, 1990:5). This next part of the literature review examines the concept and purpose of management development and contrasts formal and informal methods of development.

2.3 Management Development

This section commences by reviewing the literature pertaining to management development (MD) before concentrating on workplace learning, which forms the main strand of literature. It is important to consider why organisations invest in MD and the different typologies and methods used to develop managers before narrowing the focus to that of workplace learning, although it is rare for these two strands of literature to feature together in the same text. The field of MD has attracted multiple definitions due to ambiguity surrounding its purpose and application. Cullen and Turnbull (2005) conducted a meta-review of the MD literature and found that the majority of definitions have the following in common; managers are viewed as resources, MD is seen as a deliberate and planned activity driven by functional performance and in the earlier definitions, in particular, MD is focused more on organisational rather than individual needs. Interestingly, only one in five of the definitions surveyed mentioned the word ‘learning’. Many of the most popular types of development retain a universalistic approach (Grugulis, 2007) and feature aspects of functional performance. Functional performance is one of the ten reasons (or faces) presented by Lees (1992) to justify why organisations invest in MD. Other reasons reflect the social, political, emotional, legitimate, psychic or symbolic concerns as well as corporate performance. Cullen and Turnbull (2005) summarize these as resource-based strategies or as tools of ‘*ideological control*’. The intention is to make the organisation more competitive by improving management capability by focusing on aspects of functional performance. Storey (1990) questioned what this could mean for the individual managers taking these programmes.

2.3.1 Contrasting Formal and Informal Methods of Development

Most managers have historically learnt formally through classroom education or training and from the 1980s onwards, there has been increased attention and respect for management related qualifications, thought largely to have resulted in the rapid growth in Business Schools (Poole and Mansfield, 1992). However in recent years, business schools and management education including the MBA, in particular have come under increasing attack (Raelin, 2006) with some writers arguing that business schools fail to develop competent managers (McCabe et al, 2006). Further, it has been suggested that there is a necessity for people to act as managers before they can understand what the role is (Mintzberg, 2004). He contends that:

Effective managing... happens where art, craft and science meet. But in a classroom full of students without managerial experience these have no place to meet – there is nothing to do (Mintzberg, 2004:10).

This has raised questions as to whether management education has a clear and functional relationship to management practice (Grey and French, 1996). A general lack of understanding as to what makes a good manager can only exacerbate the problem although there are calls for approaches to management education that appreciate the contextual variety in management practice, making it easier for managers to transfer whatever is learnt into actionable knowledge inside the organisation (Raelin, 2006). Many typologies of MD are concerned with how MD happens within organisations (Wohkling, 1971, Ashton et al 1975, Mumford, 1997, Holman, 2000). Mumford (1997) for example cited three MD approaches: informal managerial, accidental process and integrated/opportunistic. Informal approaches are

considered the most effective because they occur within managerial activities, although they still have limitations because of the lack of emphasis on reviewing action. Mumford concluded that a well-rounded MD programme is likely to include all three types. MD should not just be confined to planned interventions it should also embrace unplanned and informal ways of development (Storey, 1990). A number of writers have conducted research into the MD needs of front-line managers. Longenecker and Neubert's (2003) empirical research study focused on the preferred methods of development of the front-line managers they surveyed. Methods that scored highly focused on the manager's role, for example clarifying roles, goals and performance expectations, experienced based learning including coaching and mentoring and the use of multi-faceted feedback. They argue that these methods of development must become part of the cultural fabric of the organisation. Traditional methods of MD scored lowest, these included attending in-house training, outside seminars and workshops, directed reading and learning assignments and acquiring additional education. Further studies of line management development suggest that MD will remain relatively ineffective if not sufficiently integrated in terms of the structural and competency configuration of the organisation (Mabey and Gooderham, 2005). The study indicated a range of success indicators: the active management of MD by the organisation, placing emphasis on long-term development and retaining management talent, competency-based MD, promoting from within and individual development. The importance ascribed to MD by the line-managers organisations, a significant precursor to firm performance. Like Longenecker and Neubert they support the notion of developing a MD partnership between the organisation and the individual although still adhere to the functional notion of MD when they state that

this is required to meet organisational goals. They also suggest a move from formal training programs to more hands-on work-based development.

Fox (1997) contrasted two leading approaches to MD: Management education and management development. He states that *'management learning never presumed that management education's content and form were the most appropriate way managers should learn'*. He regarded formal education to be the *'visible tip'* of the iceberg, most learning he argued takes place in practice and communities of practice, in other words *'theory becomes practice'*. His study examines the emergence of management learning and evaluates situated social learning as a concept that highlights the practical and the social. Concerned with how practical and social or *'natural'* learning occurs in (work) communities, he contends that the relevance of situated social learning to management learning is that it emphasises learning processes rather than management development and educational processes. However, learning that takes place outside the standard paradigm has traditionally been undervalued because *"it does not conform to a set of abstract ideas such as concepts and propositions that have universal applicability and can be readily conveyed to others by word of mouth, written documents and/or demonstration"* (Hager, 2004). Further, Billett (2002:28) argues:

If learning is seen as something privileged by practices within educational institutions, rather than a consequence of participation in social practices more generally, (such as those involved in the production of goods or services), this may inhibit understanding about learning generally and learning through work, in particular.

Learning in the workplace environment is still based on formal, educational activities and on-the-job training that is often intentionally planned, largely explicit and has predictable learning outcomes (Hager, 1999; Resnick, 1987 and Eraut, 2004), whereas workplace learning is mostly informal in nature, unplanned and implicit, often collaborative and highly contextualised with unpredictable learning outcomes. Both formal and informal learning have different attributes, seen as weaknesses and strengths. For instance, most formal learning is intended to produce general skills that can be applied and transferred to a variety of situations. Informal learning produces situation specific forms of competence, although it may not always be possible to transfer easily something learnt in one situation to another (Tynjälä (2008:133), although there are some similarities between academic learning and workplace learning. New pedagogical models of learning, delivered in HE institutions, such as problem-based learning, project learning and collaborative learning are intended to close the gap between education and work. Although it is suggested by Cullen and Turnbull (2005) that learning by managers in the course of their everyday work remains a 'blind spot for MD and education practitioners and that the implications for studying the relationship between MD and education and organisational culture are manifest.

2.4 Learning in the Work Place

MD is often used (in this thesis) to describe a planned and deliberate approach to the development of managers through structured training, education and informal learning processes (Thomson et al, 2001), and is closely associated with improving managerial effectiveness (Mumford, 1997) and performance (Lees, 1992). Workplace learning has grown from an interest in the workplace as a source of learning. Therefore, any

definition of workplace learning will potentially be constrained by the perception held of the workplace (Mathews, 1999). Further, workplace learning is considered a multidisciplinary topic, in that it can be viewed from the perspective of a variety of different disciplines, such as sociology, cognitive psychology, policy studies, management theory, adult education, economics, learning theory and industrial psychology (Hager, 1999). The varying research agendas take certain issues to be central, for example, is learning for work or is work for learning? Hager (1999) asks a number of pertinent questions: Which should be the central focus? Is there conflict between the two? Should workplace learning include both informal and formal methods of development? (Hager, 1999).

The concept of workplace learning has existed in various forms since the beginning of formal and informal work patterns, but since the end of the 1990s there has been growing interest in the importance of learning in the workplace. Concern for equity in education, economic considerations, social change, technological factors and vocational issues have significant impact on today's society and work environment. The push for workplace learning has therefore been in response to changes taking place in these environments. Similarly, Stern and Sommerlad (1999) argue that "*it has acquired visibility and saliency*" because "*it sits at the juncture of new thinking concerning the nature of learning about new forms of knowledge, about the transformation of the nature of work and about the modern enterprise in a globalized economy*" (Lee et al, 2004:2). Policy makers are increasingly focusing on workplace learning as a way of improving organisational performance and national economic success through the closer integration of education systems and the economy (Fuller et al, 2004). The fact that 80 % of the people who will make up the workforce of

2020 are already in work today is often cited as an important drive for an increased focus on workplace learning since the skills system must also be equipped to increase the skills of those already in employment (DBIS, 2009).

In the UK, there has been a shift in emphasis from training to skills and this is reflected in changing institutional structures discussed further in the next chapter (Evans et al, 2006). This shift in thinking is evident in many of the definitions of workplace learning. Marsick (1987:4) for example emphasises the importance of contextual influences in her definition of workplace learning:

The way in which individuals or groups acquire, interpret, reorganise, change or assimilate a related cluster of information, skills and feelings. It is also primary to the way in which people construct meaning in their personal and shared organisational lives.

This definition draws attention to the way in which people learn and respond to change, underpinned, by the learning context and the reason for learning. Rylat (1994:10) describes workplace learning as “*a sustained and high leverage development of employees in line with organisational business outcomes*”. He emphasises sustained development and assumes that workplace learning should be broader than training and development for specific tasks. It also assumes that learning is necessary for individual and organisational development (Matthews, 1999). Similarly, the definition provided by the Workplace Learning Task Group goes beyond training and the requirements of purely business needs “*that learning which derives its purpose from the context of employment*”.....but involves “*learning in*

through and for the workplace” (Sutherland, 1998:5). This explicitly addresses the learning needs of a number of different stakeholders in the workplace: employees, potential employees, government and the employer. In higher education there is still much debate about what constitutes workplace learning, a wide range of terms are often used interchangeably (work-based learning, work related learning, vocational learning). This has served to confuse the situation and undervalue the potential of learning in the workplace (Nixon et al, 2006).

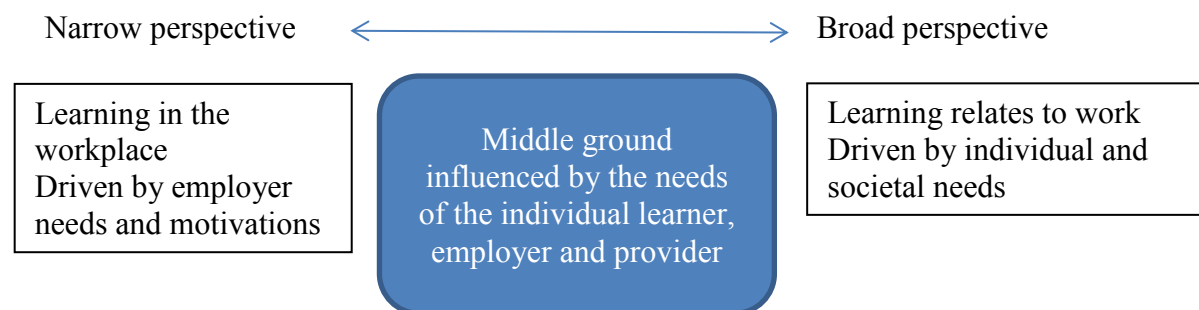


Figure 2.1 Narrow and Broad Perspectives of WBL (Nixon et al, 2006:50)

A spectrum of interpretations therefore exists that has prolonged the debate concerning both what work based learning means and the exact form it should take to best achieve its learning outcomes. Figure (2.1) above illustrates both the narrow and broad perspectives of work-based learning. The narrow interpretation is driven by employer needs and motivations, whereas the broad perspective focuses on learning that relates to work and is driven more by individual and societal needs. Nixon et al (2006:50) argues “*an inclusive approach that accepts the variety of interpretations is a prerequisite to avoid over-compartmentalising provision and strait-jacketing institutions by trying to shape an absolute definition*”. Boud and Garrick (1999:6) discuss the purpose of workplace learning and provide a summary split across three areas: society, the organisation and the learner. They stress that the emphasis placed

upon each will vary and be dependent upon the organisational context. The first focuses on improving learning as a social investment, for citizenship (including the environment), for team or work community (including learning organizations) and for future enterprises (creating the future). The second centres on improving performance for the benefit of the organisation and this includes the individual worker, the team or work community. Lastly, they place emphasis on the individual learner for their personal growth and lifelong learning. These three aspects feature in the forthcoming section.

2.4.1 Taking a Holistic Approach to Understanding Learning at Work

A number of writers have taken a holistic and integrated approach to workplace learning in order to better understand and improve what is offered (Evans et al, 2006, Felstead et al, 2009). The forthcoming section reviews the work of some of these prominent writers including that of Felstead et al (2009:13) who produced the working as learning framework (WALF), and Fuller and Unwin (2004) who have undertaken research into expansive and restrictive learning. The WALF framework “*specifies the links between the broadest system of relationships that shape employment relationships and the nature of workplace learning*” to understand whether learning at work is ‘expansive’ or ‘restrictive’. Both theoretical models feature prominently within this thesis.

Evans et al (2006) argues that at the macro level the wider social structures and social institutions can be fundamental in enabling or preventing effective learning from taking place. Their research suggests that there is an absence of wider institutional structures resulting in weak levels of support for the creation of more expansive

learning environments. Workplace learning is not seen as a priority, private sector organisations are managed and organised to make a profit therefore it represents a third order decision (Evans et al, 2006). First order decisions concern markets and competitive strategy. Second order strategies concern work organisation and job design. In this context, workplace learning is likely to be a third order strategy (Keep and Mayhew, 1999) Ashton (2004) contends that workplace learning has to be located in the context of two components of the productive system. The first is the national system of vocational education and training (VET) including the administrative capabilities of the state and the second is the way in which production is organised, these two components are now explored further with VET discussed first.

2.4.2 Vocational Education and Training (VET)

National VET systems take their determining characteristics from the underlying relationship between the state, capital and labour. In the UK workplace development is seen as the province of employers and individuals and therefore best delivered through the market. According to Ashton (2004) the UK government has only directly intervened in the market in the case of market failure and initial youth training. The major government programme with regard to youth training has been the modern and foundational apprenticeship launched in 1994. Candidates on the scheme are able to work towards national vocational qualifications (NVQ) to level three. Apprenticeship training is funded by the state but completion rates have been worrying low (Grugulis, 2007). In retailing, for example, only 12 % of candidates complete the course (Fuller and Unwin, 2004) yet large numbers continue in employment with the same employer. Moreover, the proportion of employers actually

involved in providing apprenticeship is tiny, accounting for only 5 % of all firms with five or more employees (Brown et al, 2001:40). These problems with work-based learning for the young may be a symptom rather than the disease itself. In most successful national systems of VET, the roles, rights and responsibilities of the various actors (students, parents, the state, education and training providers and employers) are clearly established and well understood but this is not the case in the UK (Gleeson and Keep, 2004). In particular, the role and responsibilities of employers remains 'extremely uncertain, vaguely defined and opaque'. No single National Learning Target (NLT) exists that applies directly to employer activity despite earlier promises by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). There is also an absence of any meaningful public debate about what the role and responsibilities of employers should be (Keep, 2005:537). Some programmes offer healthy skills development and career progression although retail apprenticeships for example appeared '*little different to entry-level work*' (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). Criticisms generally apply to most initiatives of this type: Grugulis (2007) calls into question the way in which training is separate from work and the relevance to industry of such an approach. Similarly, Felstead et al (2004) argues that policymakers (employers and agencies/providers) perceive youth training to be a '*fixed-time activity*' where qualifications are the proxy for job competence and skills (Felstead et al, 2004). Those supplying workforce development have seemingly found it more efficient and cost-effective to 'package' their product into courses (or products in some variety) in the same ways as say a college or university (Unwin et al, 2007). Through 'Train to Gain' (a brokerage scheme), the government have sought to provide impartial advice on training to businesses across England and offer public funding for defined categories of training for employees including higher-level skills in leadership and

management (DBIS, 2009). However, critics of the scheme suggest it is overly bureaucratic and not always compatible with longer term strategic planning. Waite et al (2012:42) in their study report:

Skills for Life 'national strategy has generated a complex 'ecology of learning' at policy level, whereby a byzantine and shifting funding landscape, with its concomitant bureaucracy and strong emphasis on target-bearing qualifications has militated against long-term sustainable provision. Those organisations that have managed to sustain provision have generally succeeded in integrating 'Skills for Life' courses within a broader 'ecology of learning' whereby there is both support and formal recognition for such provision within the organisation as a whole.

There has been the general assumption that learning is beneficial to all those involved, the individuals who receive it, the organisation and the economies of which they are a part. However, fixation by recent governments on the supply of qualifications has meant that organisations and sectoral bodies have focused on the individual and the certification process as a means of obtaining funding. This approach views 'learning as acquisition' as a product with a visible identifiable outcome, rather than learning as 'participation', where learning is a process in which individuals learn as part of social engagement with other people and resources (Sfard, 1998:4). Sfard argues that one of these metaphors is not sufficient on its own. The social nature of learning forms an integral part of this thesis. Earlier in this section, it was argued that workplace learning has to be located in the context of two components of the productive system

(Ashton, 2004), the second component, the way in which production is organised, is now considered.

2.4.3 The Working as Learning Framework

It is argued that the *“The primary function of any workplace is not learning but the production of goods or services and the achievement of organisational goals determined internally and/ or shaped by others such as head offices, parent companies and government departments”* (Rainbird et al (2004 cited in Unwin et al, 2007:334). Felstead et al (2011) state that productive systems comprises the interlinked social networks through which economic activity is organised, and goods and services are produced and consumed. This includes first, individuals who work in small groups through to those who operate in global financial and political systems. Second, patterns of power and control exercised at various levels and by a variety of stakeholders.

To help better understand learning at work Felstead et al (2009), drawing on a four year investigation into the relationship between workplace learning and the organisation of work and performance, devised the ‘working as learning framework’ (WALF). Figure 2.2 shows the structures of production and illustrates how micro to macro stakeholders can be involved in the production of goods and services. The nature and business of the organisation will often determine the number of layers involved. Those lower down the hierarchy will often have less scope for independence and discretion than those above, especially where regulation is driven from the top. Some autonomy may be retained by those in the lower groups but only

by theoretically “*disrupting, blocking or ‘getting around the regulatory impact of the macro influences’*” (Felstead et al, 2011:7).



Figure 2.2 Structures of Production (Felstead et al, 2009: 19)

The steps or stages from the sourcing of raw materials to the consumption of goods by the end user are illustrated in the horizontal axis (Figure 2.3). The locus of control within each sequence can be of crucial significance. For example, large-scale retailers, such as supermarkets may exercise powerful controls over firms engaged in raw material extraction, product manufacture, storage and transport.

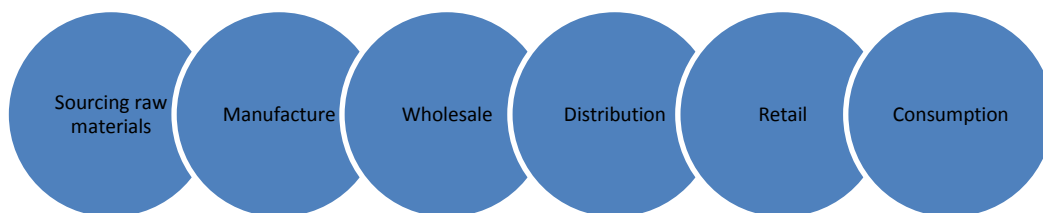


Figure 2.3 Stages of Production (Felstead et al, 2009: 20)

Felstead et al (2011:8) argue that the vertical and horizontal dimensions of productive systems together shape learning at work. They state:

Productive systems differ with respect to the location of the principal levers of overall control within and between their structure and stages, as well as the relative autonomy of their constituent parts. Individuals and groups of workers may well be viewed as a particular intersection of vertical and horizontal relationships. Their learning experiences are shaped by their connection to other workers who are 'earlier' or 'later' in the sequence of commodity production, as well as those 'above' and 'below' in hierarchies of regulation and control.

A number of articles drawn from the same ESRC-funded multi-disciplinary study reveal the extent to which both internal and external factors and influences affect workplace learning. Fuller et al (2007:744) for example observe that where people are placed in the 'political economy' of the workplace affects not only the types of learning in which they engage and the kinds of knowledge that they can acquire, but the extent to, and manner in which, their learning and knowledge are recognised. The position of employees on the organisational hierarchy can also affect the types of learning that are open to them. Those at the higher end are more likely to participate in and value formal sources of learning such as courses and qualifications (Felstead et al, 2005). Unwin et al (2007) use the 'Russian Doll' image to illustrate how individuals in the workplace are part of an organic enterprise that they both help to shape and are shaped by. The various layers comprise the nature of goods or services produced, the types of ownership and culture of the organisation, its viability and

status in the productive market and the extent to which outside forces (including government regulation) can interfere with its activity. They argue that more research is required across a wide variety of workplaces to learn more about the teaching and learning that occurs, and for the most part remains invisible.

Human capital theory has fuelled a very powerful discourse of workplace learning (Garrick, 1999). It provides compelling arguments related to increasing the net worth of workers' skills and abilities (Marsick and Watkins, 1990:20). Marsick and Watkins (1990) suggest that there are enormous human, intellectual and cultural capital benefits of promoting workplace learning opportunities for employees. However, Hart (1993) has criticised the human capital approach as being a form of collusion between management and unions that ultimately serves the interests of capital. He states it makes employees '*economically active but politically passive*'. He argues that production is above all production for profit. Survey evidence provided by Felstead et al (2005) reveals the uneven distribution of learning opportunities across UK workplaces, with economic drivers underpinning employers attempts to 'sweat' more productivity from there human resources (Lloyd and Payne, 2004). Access to learning opportunities can be dependent on a range of factors, for example, employees in weak labour market positions are likely to have limited job roles and restricted admission to training and career development (Felstead et al, 2005). The work environment and the production process is also shown to limit or expand workplace learning. Flexible, less hierarchical models of work organisation '*encourage employee involvement through team working, employee discretion and wider knowledge distribution whilst those organised along Taylorist lines limit workers' learning to gaining the knowledge they need to perform specific and narrow*

tasks. Felstead et al's (2005:752) study illustrates how the introduction of a new point of sale system in a nationwide chain of supermarkets has limited store management discretion to plan their own stock profiles and display stock to customers. However, the way in which technology is utilised and perceived is strongly influenced by the organisational culture generated by contrasting management styles.

Alongside policy interests and the relevance of the productive system there have been intensified efforts to conceptualize workplace learning and shed more light on its multi-faceted characteristics. Many writers have started to explore the phenomenon as a human practice, which has resulted in a new and '*emerging paradigm of learning*' (Felstead et al, 2009). This challenges the standard '*traditional paradigm of learning which asserts that the best learning consists of abstract ideas that are context independent and transparent to thought*' (Becket and Hager, 2002).

2.4.4 Contextual and Social Nature of Learning

A number of authors highlight the contextual and social nature of learning in their research (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Engeström, 2001, Fuller and Unwin, 2004) an outline of their key contributions to the field is provided in this thesis. First, is a review of Vygotsky's work and his theory relating to the zone of proximal development, this is followed by a discussion on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Engeström (2001); both sets of writers were influenced by social learning theory and the research undertaken by Vygotsky.

Vygotsky and Social Learning Theory

Learning theory has emerged about the impact of culture and social interaction on learning; classified as social constructivism. The term ‘constructivism’ arises from developmental and cognitive psychology that proposes, “*each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes*” (Young and Colin, 2004: 375). Although regarded as a complex and divergent phenomena, three strands of constructivism are commonly cited (Gergen, 1999: 59-60). The first, radical constructivism contends that the individual mind constructs reality (von Glaserfeld, 1995). The second, and more moderate constructivism, asserts, an individual mind constructs reality but within a systematic relationship to the external world (Piaget, 1969). Finally, and most relevant to this study is the metatheoretical position of social constructivism. This position, attributed to the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1990) implies that whilst the mind constructs reality, it is the learners or the individuals who are the constructors of their own knowledge generated by interacting with their socio-cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism as an approach is considered individualistic and therefore stands accused of making insufficient reference to social interactions, contexts and discourses (Martin and Sugarman, 1999). Social constructivism has moved some way to address these criticisms.

It is worth noting that situated learning theories, discussed later in this chapter, reside in the paradigm of constructionism and in particular social constructionism. This approach transcends the subject-object dualism, and the associated problems of constructivism (Gergen, 1985) to argue that human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practice (Berger and Luckman, 1966).

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory pertaining to 'communities of practice' in which the individual participates and forms his or her identity in activity in the world are indicative of the non-dualist ontology expressed in constructionism (Hyde, 2016). Interest is therefore in the social process of learning in which knowledge and social action go together rather than the cognitive processes that accompany knowledge, attributed to social constructivism. It is therefore important to be able to distinguish between these two different approaches when referring to social and situational learning theories.

Vygotsky's work, although focusing on child development was concerned with individual potential although he was clear that developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. For him the developmental process lags behind the learning process (Jarvis, 2010). The major premise of Vygotsky's (1978:57) theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition and social learning precedes development:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level, first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.

Vygotsky identified what he referred to as '*the zone of proximal development*'. This is the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the student's ability to solve the problem independently. He argued that not all learning takes place socially, some will be

individual, but the person will be more mentally stretched in the zone of proximal development. Engstrom based some of his thinking on Vygotsky's work. He regards the zone of proximal development as a space for creativity, this he applies to all forms of activity and learning in both adults and children. Vygotsky refers to '*the more knowledgeable other*' in this process. This is anyone who has a better understanding, or a higher ability level than the learner with respect to a particular task or concept. This could be a teacher, coach or older adult, but could also be peers, a younger person or computer. Illeris (2002:51) argues that Vygotsky's approach opens itself to the adult controlling the process of development, and therefore to teacher centred education. Billett (2002) however contends that more experienced co-workers can be instrumental in assisting learner's development through managing the pace and the sequencing of activities for learners.

Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). He believed that surrounding cultural values and practices play a key role in fostering and promoting learning, or indeed in stifling learning (Stewart and Rigg, 2011). One principle of his theory proposed that tools (artifacts within a culture such as speech and language) are used to shape the way people interact with the reality and reflect the experiences that other people have had when trying to solve similar issues. Therefore, tools within a culture are shaped and reshaped, as is the knowledge about how they should/might be used. The use of tools is a way for social knowledge to be accumulated and transmitted, affecting not only the external behavior of people but also their internal cognitive processes. Both Dewey and Vygotsky share similar ideas about the relationship between activity and learning/development, especially the roles everyday activities and social environment play in the educational process (Burke et al, 2009).

Social constructivism has also played a significant role in more recent learning theory development such as that proposed by Engeström (2001).

Engstrom's Activity Theory

Engeström (2001:138) argued the need for an approach that can dialectically link the individual and the social structures and developed his ideas of expansive learning within the framework of cultural-historical activity theory based on Vygotsky (1978) and Bateman's (1990) theories of learning. Engeström (2001:17) reasoned that the behavioural and social sciences have cherished a division of labour, which separates the study of socio-economic structures from the study of individual behaviour and human agency. *"The individual may be seen as an acting subject who learns and develops but somehow the actions of the individual do not have any impact on the surrounding structures"*. Vygotsky presented an approach to learning based upon vertical development towards *'higher psychological functions'*.

Engeström (2001) constructed a complementary perspective that involved horizontal or sideways learning and development. In Engeström's study of a medical practice in Finland he distinguished the variety of conceptions that doctors may have of their activity. The findings illustrate that doctors in the same medical practice may be enacting different conceptions of health care and efforts to refocus priorities may not be easy to achieve. Hampered by the resource system in which the doctors operated were attempts to reorientate priorities. The division of labour between doctors and other health care professionals proved inflexible. In addition, the way in which patients were randomly allocated to doctors in the Finnish health care system created problems of continuity of care and the bio-medical concepts and techniques that the doctors had become accustomed to using encouraged them to continue treating health-

care problems as bio-medical problems. In the analysis of this and other work settings Engeström explicitly avoids separating the individual from the collective and of the social from the technical. Fundamental to this approach is the unit of analysis he adopts, namely to the socio-distributed activity system, shown in figure 2.4. The arrows crossing the model show that activity systems are in constant movement and are internally contradictory. These contradictions, expressed through disruption and ordinary improvements, offer possibilities for expansive developmental transformations. He discusses such transformations as proceeding through ‘*stepwise cycles*’ of expansive learning that begin with questioning standard practice. The contradictions then need to be analysed before new visions for its ‘*zone of proximal development*’ can be modelled, examined then implemented in practice. Engeström suggests, “*new forms of work organization increasingly require negotiated ‘knotworking’ across boundaries. Correspondingly, expansive learning increasingly involves horizontal widening of collective expertise by means of debating, negotiating and hybridizing different perspectives and conceptualizations*’ (Engeström, 2001:960).

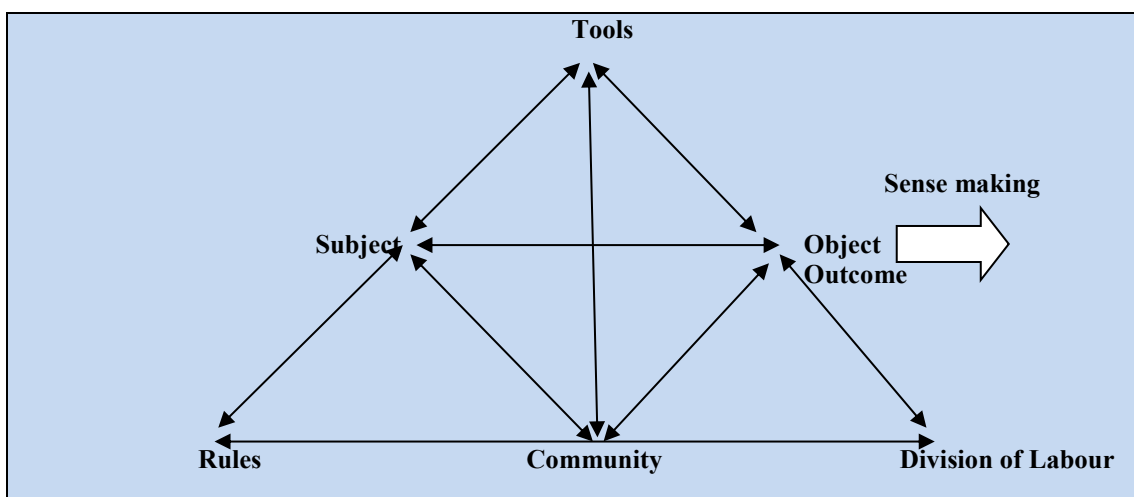


Figure 2.4 The six elements of an activity system (Engeström, 2001)

According to Engeström, (2001) people and organisations are learning all the time, although learning is not stable or even defined in advance therefore, it is necessary to learn new forms of work activity that are literally learned as they are being created. In this context, standard learning theories have little to offer in understanding these processes. He cites situational learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as offering a ‘*satisfactory starting point*’ when exploring why individuals learn, taking the example of novices gradually gaining competence in relatively stable practices. However, Engeström (2001) expounds “*motivation for risky expansive learning processes associated with major transformations in activity systems is not well explained by mere participation and gradual acquisition of mastery*” (Engeström, 2001:142). Engeström has shown a keen interest in how people learn, but has been criticised for jumping too quickly from this concern to a preoccupation with organisational transformation. Fuller and Unwin (2004) suggest that he has a tendency to read across from the type of (organizational) learning taking place to forms of work organization and activity, although, his work does further highlight the dynamism of workplace contexts (Felstead et al, 2009). Engeström showed interest in exploring the circumstances in which communities may enact new conceptions of their activities. Lave and Wenger (1991) concentrate on the processes through which people develop shared conceptions of their activities to develop a model of socialization that also considers the way people learn from social groups and social participation.

Situated Learning Theory and Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) contend that learning is at its most meaningful when it is ‘situated’. Rather than focusing on the individual as the unit of analysis, they have focused their research on the ‘community of practice’. Early forms of situated

learning theory again arose from Vygotsky's work. Situated learning theory argues that individual learning should be thought of as emergent, involving opportunities to participate in the practices of the community as well as the development of 'identity' which provides a sense of belonging and commitment (Handley et al, 2006). Knowledge within this domain is regarded as being provisional, mediated and socially constructed, not abstract and symbolic (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Blackler, 1995). Situated learning theory positions the 'community of practice' as the context in which an individual develops the practices (including values, norms and relationships) and identities appropriate to that community. Wenger (2007:1) defines a community of practice as "*groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly*". According to Wenger, three characteristics are crucial to determine what constitutes a community: the domain, the community and the practice. For a community to function it needs to generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories (Smith, 2009).

Theories of social learning (e.g. Vygotsky) have a tendency to predict the smooth reproduction of communities over time. By contrast, situated learning theory calls attention to possibilities for variation and even intra-community conflict. Individuals bring to a community a personal history of involvement with workplace, social and familial groups whose norms may complement or conflict with one another. This possibility of conflict reflects a later interpretation of situated learning theory. This section will firstly review the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) before presenting theories pertaining to expansive and restrictive learning.

Lave and Wenger (1991) have sought to develop a theory that moves away from what has earlier been referred to as the standard paradigm of learning (Beckett & Hagar, 2002), where learning is viewed as a discrete cognitive process to one in which the learner is seen as being embedded in the context. In their view (1991:35)

learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in-world.

Lave and Wenger (1991) in their book ‘Situational Learning’ take an anthropological and social constructivist view of learning. They perceive learning as an integral dimension of social practice and therefore participation in social (communities of) practice will inevitably involve learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). They capture this idea in the research that they have undertaken into the way in which apprentices move along a continuum from ‘newcomer’ to ‘old timer’ in a community of practice. This infers learning to be a process whereby over time the newcomers become full participants with attendant identity shifts. Becoming a member of this new community allows participation and therefore learning to take place. The processes, relationships and experiences that constitute the participant’s sense of belonging, underpin the nature and extent of subsequent learning. However, not everyone will aspire to ‘full’ participation. Wenger (1998) suggests that there may be a number of forms of participation including ‘marginal’. Central to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory is the notion of ‘*legitimate peripheral participation*’. Each aspect of this phrase according to Lave and Wenger is indispensable in defining the others and cannot be considered in isolation. It’s “*constituents contribute inseparable aspects whose combinations create a landscape – shapes, degrees, textures – of community*

membership” (1991:35). However, Dirkx et al (2002) view the theory of ‘*legitimate peripheral participation*’ as being rather formulaic and inflexible and not fostering the view that it is possible to progress beyond a given situation.

The work of Lave and Wenger has been useful in shaping understanding, although, Fuller et al (2005) suggest that Lave and Wenger in focusing their learning theory on novices has largely ignored the effects on communities where they import ‘old timers’ from elsewhere. They also criticise the theory for not taking into account the relevance of other forms of participation, such as boundary crossing between multiple communities of practice and off-the-job learning and qualifications (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). In a later paper, Wenger (2007:3) addresses this criticism commenting, “*learning in a community of practice is not limited to novices. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone*”. Wenger (1998) claims that his more general approach covers legitimate peripheral participation as a variation of the ways in which communities of practice reproduce their membership in the same way as they come about, and that legitimate peripheral participation is simply catching up. Brown and Duguid (2001) argue that individuals may participate in loose ‘networks of practice’ across organizational boundaries. It is through and in relation to these communities and networks that individuals develop their identities and practices through processes such as role modelling, experimentation and identity construction. Wenger (1998:159) states:

We engage differently in each of the communities of practice to which we belong. We often behave rather differently in each of them, construct different aspects of ourselves and gain different perspectives.

Wenger's portrayal of the compartmentalization of practice is highly problematic and raises potential for tensions and conflict to arise when individuals participate within several communities each with separate practices and identity structures (Handley, 2008). Contu and Wilmott (2003) discussing situated learning theory more generally, suggest that it has a tendency to neglect the broader social and power relations. These aspects are now considered when reviewing research into learning environments and the features that create expansive and restrictive learning situations.

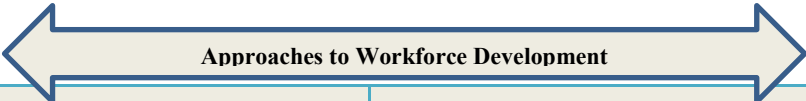
2.4.5 Theories of Expansive and Restrictive Learning

A growing body of research into workplace learning has been focused on two key concepts that of learning environments and learning territories. Felstead et al (2009:27) describe learning environments as:

Bounded networks of social relationships in which people interact with artefacts and devices that are intrinsic to the performance of their work tasks and roles. Such artefacts and devices contribute to the exercise of power and control over other people and things through time and space.

Fuller and Unwin (2003) have developed a conceptual and analytical tool for evaluating the quality of learning environments and for analysing an organisations approach to workforce development according to their expansive and restrictive features (See table 2.1). This approach highlights three aspects of participation in workplace learning environments: engagement in multiple and overlapping communities of practice at and beyond the workplace; access to multidimensional approaches to the acquisition of expertise work through the organization of work and job design; opportunities to pursue knowledge-based courses and qualifications relating to work (Fuller and Unwin, 2003 and 2004). These aspects of participation

are extensive and fully realized in what Fuller and Unwin (2004) define as expansive learning environments, whereas these opportunities are limited in restrictive learning environments. They contend that an approach to workforce development characterized by the features listed as expansive will create a stronger and richer learning environment than one consisting of features associated with the restrictive end of the continuum. In their framework, the distinction between the two is conceived as a continuum.



Expansive	Restrictive
Participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace	Restricted participation in multiple communities of practice
Primary community of practice has shared participative memory: cultural inheritance of workforce development	Primary community of practice has little or no participative memory: no or little tradition of apprenticeship
Breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences	Narrow: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks /knowledge /location
Access to range of qualifications including knowledge-based vocational qualifications	Virtually all on-the-job: limited opportunities for reflection
Gradual transition to full, rounded participation	Fast – transition as fast as possible
Vision of workplace learning: progression for career	Vision of workplace learning: static for job
Organisational recognition of, and support for employees as learners	Lack of organisational recognition of, and support for employees as learners
Workforce development is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability	Workforce development is used to tailor individual capability to organisational needs
Workforce development fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing	Workforce development limits opportunities to extend identity: little boundary crossing experienced
Reification of 'workforce curriculum' highly developed (e.g. through documents, symbols, language, tools) and accessible to apprentices	Limited reification of 'workplace curriculum' patchy access to refractory aspects of practice
Widely distributed skills	Polarized distribution of skills
Technical skills valued	Technical skills taken for granted
Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued	Knowledge and skills of key workers/groups under-developed
Team work valued	Rigid specialist roles

Cross boundary communication encouraged	Bounded communication
Managers as facilitators of workforce and individual development	Managers as controllers of workforce and individual development
Chances to learn new skills/jobs	Barriers of learning new skills/jobs
Innovation important	Innovation not important
Multidimensional view of expertise	Uni-dimensional top-down view of expertise

Table 2.1 Fuller and Unwin's (2004:130) Expansive – Restrictive Continuum.

The aim of much of their empirical research has been to identify those features of the environment or work situation, which make the workplace as a whole offer or deny opportunities for learning (2004:7). They have focused on organisations providing apprenticeships, but state it is possible to extend their research to different organisational contexts and levels of employees (Fuller and Unwin, 2006). Their findings indicate that even within one organisation, the environments for different groups of workers will vary. Even those in the same occupation may have different experiences of the learning opportunities afforded, this links back to the WALF research findings discussed earlier. Research shows that an expansive approach to apprenticeship increases the quantity and range of opportunities for participation and therefore for apprentice learning, however it does not automatically produce new forms of work activity. An expansive approach is more likely than a restrictive one to provide synergies between personal and organisational development. They contend that every individual has, and has had access to a (unique) range of learning opportunities that together make up their 'learning territory'. This can be split into different 'regions' for e.g. classroom based learning and qualifications, learning at home and workplace learning.

The character and scope of the individual's learning territory (as well as how they respond to it) influences how he or she perceives and engages with opportunities and barriers to learning at work (Fuller and Unwin, 2004:133).

Felstead et al (2011:9) suggest that expansive learning environments are most commonly found where staff have higher levels of discretion, autonomy and responsibility whereas 'Taylorised' learning has become in some circumstances, the inevitable consequence of 'Taylorised' work relying too heavily on traditional didactic teaching methods in which learners play a passive role. The research findings show that "*all work involves and generates learning but this is not always recognised*" (pp16). It was also found that restrictive learning environments can result from business models following a low-skills trajectory, found in many retail organisations. Eraut (2004, 2007) conducted research into factors affecting learning in the workplace. He summarised his findings by way of two similar triangles, depicting the work context for learning and the main factors that influence learning within that context (see figure 2.5). Eraut (2007:419) contends that much learning at work occurs through doing things and being proactive in seeking learning opportunities, which importantly requires confidence. Support is required from others to take on and meet challenges at work, so a triangular relationship forms between confidence, challenge and support, motivation to learn decreases without these factors being in place.

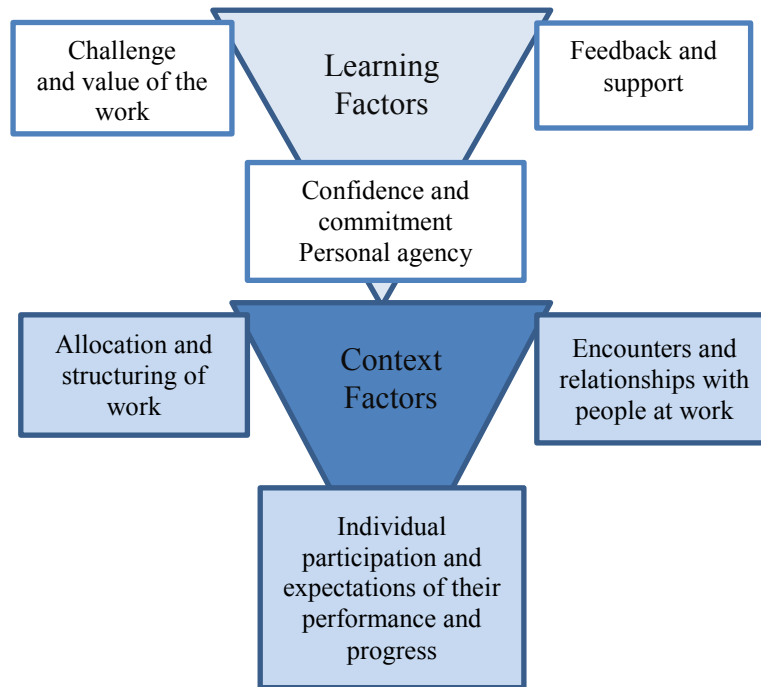


Figure 2.5 Factors affecting learning at work: The Two Triangle Model (Eraut, 2007:418)

The second triangle mirrors the first but focuses on broader contextual factors such as the allocation and structuring of work. This is central to the individual because it affects the difficulty or challenge of the work and the extent to which it is individual or collaborative. Opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside people who have more or different expertise are also important as is forming relationships that might provide feedback support or advice. Eraut (2007) found that formal learning contributes most when it is relevant and well timed, but still needs further workplace learning before it can be used to best effect. His work supports that of Fuller and Unwin in suggesting that workplace learning is enhanced by providing increased opportunities for consulting and working alongside others in groups and being given effective feedback within the context of good working relationships. He also suggests that managers have a major role in developing a culture of mutual support and learning (discussed further in the forthcoming chapter).

2.4.6 The Individual and their Engagement in Participatory Practices

Discussed in the previous section are the factors that promote either expansive or restrictive learning. Developing on from these themes are studies that argue individual agency and the learner's current dispositions to learning can influence engagement and facilitate or restrict learning. Billett (2002:29), as Vygotsky argues, "*guidance by others, situations and artefacts are central to learning in the workplace because the knowledge to be learned is historically, culturally, and situationally constituted*". Opportunities afforded to individuals to participate and learn through work are shaped by workplace norms and practices that are ultimately designed to sustain the work practice. They are also distributed in ways that reflect political and power relationships (Bierema, 2001). This presents one side of the reciprocal process of participation and learning. Billett (2002) argues that individual agency also mediates engagement with activities and what is learned through participation.

Individuals may elect to engage fully in some components of vocational activities, whilst participating less willingly in others. How they engage in and learn from work activities is determined by what they are being afforded as meeting their needs. Of significance is the interaction between individual's agencies and the affordances of the social practice that are reciprocal and negotiated, yet will undergo constant transformation. Studies have found individuals to be most interested when engaging with workplace learning that supports their continuity (e.g. sustained employment, promotion, transfer and personal goals) (Billett, 2004: 235). Tensions arise when the kinds of participation individual's desire are not afforded by the workplace. A worker's pursuit of promotion and learning of the skills required for promotion might be inhibited by workplace practices (pp 238). Engagement in social practice can also

be influenced by the individual's values, beliefs and sociocultural background (Mak et al, 1998). The term Billett uses to illustrate how the workplace affords participation and how individuals elect to participate in that social practice is '*coparticipation*'. He also found that what is learnt in the workplace is not necessarily easily transferable to other contexts and proposed that initiatives be designed to encourage this to happen (see 2002 and 2004 articles).

Other writers argue that a learner's current dispositions to learning (or work) can be better understood through their past lives, including their position in relation to various fields that they occupied, together with their experiences and interactions with others, in the past and the present (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). They suggest that much workplace learning literature drawn predominantly from the participatory perspective focuses primarily on the workplace itself. For example in Engstrom's (2001) writings, the 'subject' is seen as part of the activity system to which he/she/they belong, but the nature of these subjects as people, with biographies and identities developed partly outside those systems is largely absent. Billett (2001) has also been criticised for focusing on those factors within the workplace that either facilitate or constrain individuals' participation in work and consequently their learning. They state that his work does not explore in detail the ways in which already developed and developing worker biographies contribute to their affordances and interdependencies.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003:5) contend that individuals are separate from their places of work, as well as being integrated into it: '*They can and do step outside the workplace, but cannot step outside the social structures that are a part of their habitus and identity. They are thus part of and separate from the workplace*

community'. In an ESRC funded research project titled '*Improving incentives for learning in the workplace*', Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) focus on secondary school teachers' learning and the factors that influence it. Their research illustrates that evolving habitus influences individual current dispositions towards learning. They were interested in how individual teachers learn and primarily focused on the subject department within the school in which the teacher was employed and the place of both within the broader UK policy related to teacher learning. They found it impossible to separate the learning careers of individual workers or the communities of practice they inhabit from the wider contextual issues. These broader contexts provide both tensions and opportunities for communities and their individual members (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003:17). Broader contextual influences as well as the relationships within the community contribute to the composition of community practices and to individual dispositions, therefore have a significant bearing on workplace learning (pp19). Hodkinson and Hodkinson contend there is a need to develop participatory perspectives on learning to accommodate this crucial conjunction.

Some writers however are wary of excessive individualism or voluntarism, they are concerned that an overemphasis on the individual can divert attention from the influence of the organisational and wider institutional context in which work occurs. Fuller and Unwin (2004:133) use the metaphor '*learning territory*' to infer that every individual has, and has had access to a (unique) range of learning opportunities, whether it be in the region of education, home or workplace. They argue that the character and scope of the individual's learning territory (as well as how they respond to it) influences how he or she perceives or engages with opportunities and barriers to learning at work. Evans et al (2006) similarly believe that it is necessary to take a

more holistic and integrated approach to understand and improve workplace learning. This involves viewing workplace learning as taking place at three overlapping scales of activity. The first two concern the context of learning and the third the way in which individual workers interact with the opportunities afforded them. According to some theorists, experience and reflection are fundamental elements of the learning process (Hager,2004; Dewey, 1916, Kolb, 1984). As discussed previously, education can help provide expansive learning opportunities for managers, especially when experience and reflection are designed into the programme of study.

2.4.7 Learning through Experience and Reflective Practice

Learning through experience and reflective practice are central themes in the workplace learning literature. For example higher education experience forms an important dimension of cultivating communities of practice (Wenger, 2006), forming a bridge between what is taught and then later applied in the workplace. Further, it is important to be able to make sense of the learning that occurs. Schon (1983 & 1987) coined the term ‘reflective practitioner’ to help guide individuals to learn from their work. This section examines first the literature pertaining to learning through experience before combining both concepts.

Hager (2004:72) in an analysis of five major interpretations of workplace learning found that two major accounts of learning occurred: the first involves learning from experience, which he argues is fundamental to individual personal development and growth. The second focuses on the need for organisations to have workers with a certain set of broad generic skills. Although potentially in conflict, Hager argues that these two broad theoretical concepts can be viewed as supporting and reinforcing one another. Dewey (1916) argued that education must both engage with and enhance

experience and linked to this education must involve reflection on experience. For Dewey the purpose of education is the intellectual, moral and emotional growth of the individual. He defines education as *“that reconstruction or reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases (one’s) ability to direct the course of subsequent experience”* (Dewey, 1916:74). An experience must include an active and a passive element. Experience is trying something out, experimenting (the active element). The passive involves undergoing the experience *‘we do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return’* (146-7). This involves the basic element of the doing and being done to. Hence, the role of the educator/facilitator is to provide the right type of experience through which the learner may require knowledge and understanding (Jarvis, 2010). Raelin (2008) suggests that students need the opportunity to try out their conceptual knowledge so that it becomes contextual or grounded or in his words *‘do able’*. Reliance on conceptualization alone may limit problem solving because most new or real problems are not yet sufficiently coherent to be organised into a theory. According to Dewey (1916: 140) the function of reflection is to

formulate the ‘relationships and the continuities’ among the elements of an experience, between that experience and other experiences, between that experience and the knowledge one carries and between that knowledge and the knowledge produced by thinkers other than oneself.

Raelin (2008) believes, (based upon the views of cognitive psychologists) that reflection can contribute as much to learning as experience itself, to the extent that learners are active observers. Individuals often learn behaviour from observing others before performing the behaviour themselves and tend to anticipate actions and their

associated consequences. Mezirow (1991) developed three types of reflection: content reflection, process reflection and premise reflection. The first is based upon Dewey's notion of critical enquiry and is underpinned by what we perceive, think, feel and act upon. This involves a review of the way we have consciously applied ideas in strategizing and implementing each stage of solving a problem. Process reflection is concerned with how we go about solving a problem whilst premise reflection goes to a final step of questioning the very presuppositions attending to the problem to begin with. To reflect at this level, adults need to invoke their reflective consciousness. Mezirow (1981) calls this learning transformative because it is learning that takes us into new meanings. Raelin (2008:76) suggests that higher-level learning may not occur naturally, therefore learning opportunities need to be provided within the workplace to provoke critical reflection on current meaning perspectives.

Dewey (1938:25) was of the belief that all genuine education comes about through experience but that does not imply that '*all experiences are genuinely or equally educative*'. Foregrounding practical experience in particular calls into question the primacy of theory over practice (Jarvis, 2010). Knowles (1978) also draws attention to the value of experience in adult education, one of his four main assumptions that differentiate andragogy from pedagogy relates to experience. Knowles argues that individuals accumulate an expanding reservoir of experience that becomes an exceedingly rich resource in learning. He strongly believed that adult education should be learner centred. According to Kolb (1984:41) '*learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it*'. Kolb's constructivist learner centred approach has been criticised as over-simplifying and decontextualizing the learning process as it appears not to take into account the

learners' situation or their personal biographies. Further, Moon (1999:35) questions the orderliness of the experiential learning cycle and the role of reflection in learning when applied to the individual. She states:

even a simple application in a practical situation will indicate that, in reality, the process is 'messy' with stages re-cycling and interweaving as meaning is created and recreated.

Similarly, Fenwick (2001) argues that Kolb's model has been unsuccessful in acknowledging the significance of multi-dimensional experience of individuals, she states that '*issues of identity, politics and discursive complexities of human experience*' have largely been ignored (Fenwick, 2000:244). Other writers argue that the model does not give due recognition to both perception and construction and the finer detail that is required when learning new skills (Sennett, 2008). Although it has remained popular in the educational arena, Kolb's model does not do justice to the complexity of work-based learning (Jarvis, 2010).

Schön (1983) popularised the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' arguing that reflection is a critical step in professional development. Dewey and Kolb proposed that learning is dependent on the integration of experience with reflection, and of theory with practice. Each writer argues that experience is the basis for learning but learning cannot take place without reflection. Schön (1983) proposes two models of reflection: 'reflection-on-action' and 'reflection-in-action'. The first reflection-on-action is reflection after the event, often consciously undertaken and documented. This form of reflection is similar to that which occurs as part of a learning cycle that then leads to further action (Kolb, 1984 and Mezirow, 1997). However, underlying reflective practice is reflection-in-action. In reflection-in-action, doing and thinking

are complementary. Doing extends thinking in the tests, moves and probes of experimental action, and reflection feeds on doing and its results. Each feeds the other, and each sets the boundaries for the other (Schön, 1983:280).

Schön (1983) presents a sample of vignettes of practice in which senior practitioners try to help junior practitioners learn to do something within communities of practice through reflection-in-action. This reflects the situated context of learning discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and the social aspects of learning elaborated on by Vygotsky (1978). It is suggested that competent practitioners will often know more than they realise thereby exhibiting a kind of knowing in practice, most of which is tacit. According to Schön practitioners often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action when coping with uncertain, conflicted situations of practice (1983:8-9). Schön's work is not without critique. Eraut (1995), for example, suggests that his most important contribution is reflection-in-action although believes that he weakens his argument by '*seriously overgeneralizing and overextending it*'. Eraut is not convinced that knowledge creation is, as a result of reflection-in-action rather than a more deliberate reflection out of action. Moon (2001:3) suggests that there is some inconsistency in his writing; nonetheless, he has had great influence on stirring debate on the nature of professional knowledge and the role of reflection in professional education. Miller and Boud (1996:9-10) present five propositions upon which learning is based and that enable experiential learning to be understood more widely, first they suggest that experience is the foundation of, and stimulus for, learning. In addition, they contend that learners actively construct their own experience and that learning is holistic and socially and culturally constructed. Further, learning is influenced by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs.

Boud and Miller's work links to the work of Vygotsky and that of Lave and Wenger on communities of practice.

Throughout this chapter, the contextual, situational and social nature of learning has been brought to the fore. The work of Lave and Wenger (1991), and Engstrom (2001) for example, directly counter the view that learning is context independent (Beckett and Hagar, 2002) and conceptualized through qualifications as the proxy for skill and knowledge (Felstead et al, 2009). Instead, they promote the situated aspect of learning through participation in communities of practice and the wider activity system rather than emphasising the individual as the unit of analysis. Their work, amongst others highlights the holistic, transformative and complex process of learning in the workplace.

However, there are factors both in the workplace and outside that can inhibit or expand learning opportunities. Fuller and Unwin (2003) have developed a framework that enable the characteristic elements of a learning environment to be measured along an expansive/restrictive continuum, whilst Felstead et al (2009) draw attention to the way in which the structures and stages of production influence learning. For example, the retail sector for a long time has suffered from an image problem, characterized by low-skilled jobs, poor training, limited career prospects and long hours (Harris and Church, 2002) which, the Sector Skills Council for Retail and many employers have failed to address. Large retailers have continued to invest in formal training programmes, especially for those seeking to move up the career ladder, but have invested little in qualifications. This may partly be due to the nature of managerial work within this context. Studies by Gilbert and Guerrier (2006), Bolton and Houlihan (2010) and Grugulis et al, (2011) all report concern over lack of managerial

autonomy in retailing, using terms such as rigidity, control, powerlessness, little scope for discretion to describe the role of lower level managers within store environments. Grugulis et al (2011) reported, in her supermarket study that she evidenced small elements of leadership, espoused by head office, when it came to the management of people and Keep and Mayhew (2011) reported that managers were not without agency as their role involved '*the enactment of local knowledge*'. Yet, key strategic decisions were concentrated within head office. The Labour government and industry bodies have stressed the need for more graduate level skills citing the performance benefits it could bring (People 1st, 2009; UKCES, 2011). However, lower level managers in the supermarket sector appear to have little space for the exercise of high-level knowledge, judgement and analytical skills, this raises long-term concerns for the Government's initiative on Foundation Degrees in the retail sector as outlined in the forthcoming chapter.

Chapter Three: The Research Context

This chapter sets out the research context for Foundation Degrees generally and the FdA in Retailing in particular, in order to address the research questions and ascertain whether Foundation Degrees work? Considered first is the history of Foundation Degrees taking into account their inception, key characteristics and points of differentiation. Employer involvement in higher education, a key characteristic of Foundation Degrees is then appraised prior to introducing the Foundation Degree in Retailing (FdA in Retailing) and the delivering higher-education institution. The New Labour government when they came to power in 1997 had ambitious plans to make higher education more accessible and in so doing forge stronger links between the sector and employers. Foundation Degrees were at the heart of this initiative, being two-year degrees intended to provide education that was vocationally relevant. The hope was that universities would be able to develop strong links with employers for these degrees and that students would be in employment, however, it is now questionable as to whether this type of provision can meet expectations.

The British post-secondary vocational sub-degree sector is small in comparison to that of other countries, in particular Austria and Germany where it accounts for almost 50% of the youth cohort, yet employers complain of shortages in technical skills and knowledge. In England, there has been a steady decline in all higher education qualifications apart from bachelor's degrees. During the period, 2009-2013 FD student numbers fell by 40%. The aim of the succeeding coalition Government was to make academic and vocational attainments equally valid. In so doing, they chose to promote higher-level apprenticeships rather than Foundation Degrees to address the vocational sub-degree gap. So, do Foundation Degrees still hold a valid place within

this new political landscape? Presented first in this chapter is the New Labour government's vision for Foundation Degrees and higher-level skills, based initially on the findings of the Dearing Report (1997) and later on the Leitch Review (2006). What subsequently emerged was a more demand-led skills system where employers were required to provide information on their skills requirements.

However, the UK does not have a strong history of employer collectives especially within the retail sector therefore, an approach where employers had to identify their own skill requirements presented many challenges. The employer was central in helping to develop and deliver Foundation Degrees though there have been issues around engaging employers to participate in vocational education and training; reasons for their reluctance are explored in the second part of this chapter, which expands to cover work based mentoring and the students experience of studying for a FD. The final part of the chapter presents the FdA in Retailing, the delivering institution and the pilot organisation.

3.1 History and Development of Foundation Degrees

Sir Ron Dearing (1997) mapped out his vision for economic prosperity and a new learning society in his report entitled 'Higher education in a learning society'. He stated, "*Over the next 20 years, the United Kingdom must create a society committed to learning throughout life*" (1997:1). Commitment would be required from a range of key stakeholders that included the state, employers, providers of education and training and individuals. He saw historic boundaries between academic and vocational education breaking down with increasingly active partnerships between higher education institutions and the worlds of commerce, industry and public service.

Dearing advised on the development of a new sub-degree and recommended future expansion of higher education in this form of study. HEFCE (2000) argued that Foundation degrees had the potential to forge new alliances between universities, colleges and employers to raise the skill level of the workforce, particularly in new industries, bring more people into higher education with a richer mix of backgrounds than ever before and fuse the academic and vocational paths to high-level qualifications.

David Blunkett, the then Secretary of State for Education announced plans to introduce FDs in 2000 in his 'Facing the Global Challenge' speech. Blunkett, believed that 'Higher education should not be a 'one off' experience' His desire was to create a continuum of learning where it was possible for people to move in and out of education throughout their lives. Foundation degrees were placed at the heart of the Government's agenda on lifelong learning (Department for Education and Employment, 2000:3). They were also intended to supply graduates, needed in the labour market to address shortages in particular skills and contribute to widening participation. The Government White Paper (2003) set Foundation Degrees the challenge of "*breaking the traditional pattern of demand*" for higher educational programmes and raising the status of vocationally orientated, two-year higher educational programmes and this was intended to give employers an important role in designing Foundation Degrees and in undergraduate curriculum development. Employers have been involved in programmes such as Investors in People, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and past apprenticeship schemes. These have enjoyed "*some success but have failed to provide the consistent and high level skills development seen elsewhere*" (Grugulis, 2009:70). Considered too limited,

vocational education and training (VET) has offered little in the way of guidance to employers unfamiliar with the process yet, the intention was for Foundation Degrees to be employer based, linking employers to further and higher education.

Foundation Degrees are located within level five of ‘The framework for higher education qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland’ (FHEQ). In the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) the award is equivalent to level 5 (of 8) (QAA, 2010:1). Applying the credit accumulation and transfer system (CATs), and FD is equal to 240 credits². Progression to a bachelor’s degree with honours would typically take one year of further full-time study at level 6. Foundation Degrees are classed as being:

Appropriate for people working as higher-grade technicians, professionals or managers...they combine academic study with workplace learning to equip people with the relevant knowledge, understanding and skills to improve performance and productivity (Skills for growth, the national skills strategy 2009:70).

The educational, economic and social drivers for FDs are: to increase the number of skilled technicians and associated professions, develop the right blend of skills that employers need, contribute to widening participation and progression for under-represented groups and provide flexible modes of delivery, including distance learning and part time study to enable students to ‘earn and learn’. FDs have the following core components (DfEE, 2000:57): A programme that delivers the specialist

² The UCAS tariff is a means of allocating points to post-16 qualifications used for higher education. For example, an A at ‘A’ level is worth 120 tariff points, whereas a C is worth 80 points. Some universities will state how many tariff points are required to gain entry on to their HE programmes.

knowledge, which employers require, yet underpinned by rigorous and broad based, academic learning; accredited key skills; credits for appropriate qualifications and experience; active links between a student's work experience and academic study and guaranteed arrangements for articulation and progression to honours degree courses.

No single structure has been proposed for FDs as they are dependent on institutions and labour market needs (Wilson et al, 2005). However, there is a requirement that they are clearly identifiable and possess distinctive characteristics including, *“accessibility, articulation and progression; employer involvement; flexibility; and partnership”* (QAA, 2010:7). An integral part of Foundation Degrees is work based learning that is ‘authentic and innovative’ (QAA, 2010:7). Students should be able to learn and apply the skills they have acquired as well as learning through more conventional academic study. Available as full-time, part-time or mixed mode courses, the FD aligns with different methodologies and levels of public funding and is marketed to employers seeking to develop and upgrade workforce skills and fill skills gaps as well as to individuals. Part of the remit was to appeal to a wide target audience from school or college leavers pursuing vocationally oriented progression routes from level three to people with non-traditional entry qualifications wanting to access higher education and those in work requiring vocationally oriented progression routes from work based level 3.

Nelson (2006:62) and Edmond et al. (2007) have collected data on students studying Foundation Degrees and point to two distinct clusters of students of roughly the same numerical size. The first is predominately male aged 25 years or under, *“who entered the Foundation degree programme directly from education or training, possessed ‘A’*

level GCE/VCE qualifications as their highest recorded qualification on entry, and were enrolled on full-time programmes". The second cluster is predominantly female, aged over 25, "studying on a part-time basis who entered the Foundation degree programme from employment or other non-educational/training activities and were less likely to possess any academic or vocational qualifications".

In addition, FDs have a higher proportion of older entrants than for undergraduate study as a whole, although exact figures appear unavailable to support this claim (HEFCE, 2010). Part of the Government's manifesto pledge was to increase HE participation, by 18-30 year olds to 50% by 2010. In the Government's White Paper entitled the 'The Future of Higher Education (DfES, 2003), it identifies FDs as providing the main route for expanding participation and ensuring that closer ties develop between employers, HE, FE colleges, and the Sector Skills Councils (QAA, 2004). The next section discusses the Government's skills agenda with regard to Foundation Degrees.

3.1.1 FDs and Higher Level Skills

Leitch (2006) in his Review of Skills and Prosperity for all in a Global Economy advocated a more industry led qualifications system that delivers what employers and individuals need within a national framework, and that future expansion in higher education should be based on programmes offering specific job-related skills such as FDs. In 2007, the Government published its response to the Leitch Review setting out a programme to make the UK become a world leader in skills by 2020. By 2014, the aim was to have 36% of adults qualified to level four and above. The Government's response to Leitch had special recommendation with respect to FDs:

“Employers working with their Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) should articulate their priorities for high-level skills and influence the development of HE to meet their needs... We will encourage SSCs and HE institutions to extend their Collaborations” (DIUS, 2007:42). Further policy aims of foundation degrees are to address shortages of intermediate level skills in the national and regional economies and enhance the employability of students.

The Labour government launched its national skills strategy in 2003. In a review of this strategy in 2009, the Government placed skills at the forefront of economic recovery. The Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills states (DBIS, 2009:2):

The country’s future can only be built by educated, enterprising people with the right skills; the skills demanded by modern work in a globalised knowledge economy. Skilled people are more productive, they are more innovative, and they build stronger businesses.

The Labour government strongly believed that there was a direct correlation between skills and productivity and following the Leitch Review (2006) put in place a “demand led’ skills system that they stated ‘responds to both the needs of employers and individuals’”. This involved the development of a complex, multi-level planning system, managed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) that sought to ensure that vocational and educational training (VET) providers tailored their programmes and courses to existing and projected employer demand at national, sectoral, regional and

local levels (Keep 2002). The system required retailers to provide information on their particular skill needs into this system via Sector Skills Councils (SSCs).

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)³ have been at the centre of the government initiatives to address skill shortages and articulate the views of employers. The SSCs alongside UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) are responsible for generating labour market information and producing sector qualification strategies. In addition they negotiate with funding agencies and providers to produce Sector Skills Agreements (SSA) to realise these strategies. They elaborate and regularly update a detailed qualitative description of their specific skills needs in the National Occupations Standard and have the right to approve or reject qualifications to be included in the Qualifications and Credit Framework⁴ (Halasz, 2011). People 1st (who acquired the key assets from Skillsmart retail to provide apprenticeship certification services) are the Sector Skills Council for the hospitality, leisure, travel, tourism and retail, However, there appears to be little inter-agency working in relation to skills. Keep (2014: 255) contends that there is very limited interaction between HEFCE and the Skills Funding Agency and between the various government departments with responsibility for skills:

The relationship between the two government departments in England with prime responsibility for skills, the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), is not always

³ There are 21 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) across the UK, these are employer-led skills organisations represented by the Federation for Industry Sector Skills and Standards. SSCs cover approximately 90 % of the UK workforce and work with over 550,000 employers to define skills needs and skills standards in their industry (<http://fiss.org/about-us/>, accessed 10/06/15).

⁴ Qualifications and Credit Framework enables qualifications to be broken down into smaller pieces of learning units which allow people to accumulate credits as they learn.

characterised by close co-operation. Given that the sourcing of skills is often about making strategic choices about substitutability and different routes and skill creation mechanisms (for example, between primarily work-based apprenticeships and further and higher education), this makes the costs and benefits of different skill provision mixes harder to define and calculate and coherence in provision much harder to achieve.

In addition, Payne (2007) argues that an approach where employers have to identify their own skills needs confronts many problems, not least of which is the ability of employers to communicate a clear message to providers in a country where the weakness of employer collectives has traditionally made such mediation difficult. The Government has also been responsible for the setting up of public service agreement (PSA) targets, independently of employers, for the proportion of the workforce holding qualifications at various levels, in particular level 2. The underlying assumption being that whichever country amasses the biggest stockpile of qualifications by 2020 will ultimately triumph in terms of economic competition (Based on the findings of the Leitch Review, 2006). Keep (2006: 12) argues strongly:

The country is being treated as a 'undifferentiated' unit of analysis, producing blanket prescriptions for publicly funded up-skilling which pay little attention to the underlying structure of employer demand, the specific needs of particular firms and sectors, and the fundamental issues that skills must be utilised if they are to deliver economic gains.

Payne (2007) suggested the two approaches discussed are extremely difficult to reconcile and can often be in tension with one another. VET itself is difficult to define especially when described as a multidimensional concept that varies between countries and over time (Nilsson, 2010). In the UK, the VET system has been in a continuous state of flux (Grugulis, 2007) and as a result, the VET process has meant a *‘limited half-life for major institutions, qualifications, inspection regimes and programmes, with associated problems of stability and recognition’* (Keep and Ashton, 2004:2).

In contrast, the German dual system (general and VET) has remained relatively stable and attractive to other countries due to the provision of highly skilled workers and smooth transition from school to work. The VET system comprises the pre-vocational training system (Übergangs-system), school based vocational training and the dual system proper (apprenticeship). The student’s general education level and choice of sector determines entry to specific VET fields due to educational stratification and occupational segmentation (Powell et al, 2012). VET offers qualifications across a broad spectrum of professions, however, there is increasing competition between HE and VET since the implementation of the Bologna Process. In the new BA courses, competencies and educational objectives are defined with a view to the demands of the labour markets (KMK & BMBF, 2007:11) with elements of vocationally specific training being merged into previously academic general programmes through in-firm internships. One of the consensual goals of German education and training policy has been to make skill formation systems more flexible, more transparent and more permeable, both within VET and HE as part of the European Union (EU) lifelong learning initiatives.

The Leitch Review (2006) highlighted the poor standing of the UK compared to other countries in relation to the countries skill base. The New Labour Government sought to increase the level of people with higher-level skills through increased employer engagement and workplace development (Greenwood et al, 2008). The Foundation Degree was the first major qualification introduced in England since the Diploma of Higher Education in the 1970s (Parry, 2006) to directly address the skills deficit. The characteristics of the FD when combined made the qualification a unique offering. However, the Government's ambitions for the award were far reaching when considering the social, economic and political requirements set out. One of the greatest challenges for the qualification discussed in this chapter was the reliance of the qualification on the UK VET system. The system, since its inception has been in a constant state of flux (Grugulis, 2007), government changes and new skills initiatives have not allowed time for the new qualifications to embed; this has meant that too few employers know or understand what FDs are. Further, there appeared to be little interaction between the various government departments with responsibility for skills and HEFCE (Keep, 2014), which makes skills provision harder to achieve, especially when employers have also found it difficult to communicate the skills they require. The forthcoming section features the central role of the employer in the design and delivery of Foundation Degrees.

3.2 Employer Engagement and Participation in Foundation Degrees

Successive governments have tried to introduce a more demand-led, rather than supply-led education provision, encouraging employers to invest in workplace development as a way of increasing competitiveness (DIUS, 2007). However, engaging employers in education and training has been problematic. Organisations

place economic performance first, so emphasis is placed on training that is relevant to business needs rather than on qualifications (King, 2007). This section first considers how employers can contribute in the design and delivery of the FD and the issues encountered with regard to engagement and participation. This discussion then expands to include workplace mentoring and finally the student experience in studying for a Foundation Degree as it was found that aspirations and drivers for the employee can differ from those of the employer.

In the QAA (2010:7) it states that “*Foundation Degrees are intended to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills that employers need*”. To achieve this it is suggested that employers need to be involved in the design and review of FD programmes and where possible in the delivery, assessment and monitoring. Thurgate et al (2007:216) describes the “*philosophy of FDs (as one which) demands...fusion of academic and vocational paths in an HE qualification*”, and one which crucially involves employers playing a central role in developing and delivering the new initiative. The importance of employer engagement is outlined in the Foundation Degree Forward Strategic Plan, 2008-2011:

Projected expansion of FD numbers would not be achieved without significant progress being made in increasing employer involvement with FDs...what is now needed is a step change if this crucial issue for the future of FDs is to be tackled successfully.

Employers are able to contribute to FDs in a wide variety of ways, including the design and commissioning of live briefs and projects, Work Based Learning (WBL)

opportunities; student support (including mentoring); and formative (and sometimes summative) assessment (Benefer, 2007). Further, the Foundation Degree Task Force report (2004:28) suggests three strands to employer involvement: involvement in development and design; delivery and assessment; and supporting students and employing Foundation Degree graduates, with a view to giving credibility to the Foundation Degree qualification. The Government makes the requirements of employer involvement explicit, but does not present clear guidance on the extent to which involvement by a single employer may be required. The Centre for Higher Education, Research and Information (2008) found the design and development stage fell into three categories with employers taking an active, passive or none existent role. Active participation tended to be by those running bespoke programmes that entailed close working with the university to develop the degree.

There was extensive literature on Foundation Degrees and issues around engaging employers in education and training and the challenges this poses, although most of the literature tended to provide recommendations on best practice rather than discuss some of the more fundamental issues around employer involvement in VET. It is suggested, to achieve industry led FDs it is necessary to get key players on board and clearly identify local, national and international industry needs (Mason, 2004). Madell (2006:60) also made this point when recommending the co-operation of local employer and employee markets in the design of FDs to ensure they met required needs. A select group of large retailers were part of the consultation group in the design of a degree framework for Retail Management and Leadership in 2001/02. More recently retailers worked with the Sector Skills Council for Retailing and

professional bodies to develop assessment standards and assessment approaches for the new apprenticeships, due to be rolled out in 2017/18⁵.

This indicates that retail employers have been willing in the past to work in collaboration to influence decisions on VET at the sector level. Further, there are now discussions to develop a new framework that identifies the range of retail roles that require digital skills. The requirements are set out in a Government briefing document entitled 'A Strategy for Future Retail' (2013). This document strongly implies the necessity for government, industry and skills providers to work together if retailers seek the right people with the right skills at all levels of the business. However, involvement of employers with higher education was cited as good practice in only 25% of cases (QAA for Higher Education, 2005) as it was found organisations take a fundamentally different approach to training and development. Research undertaken by King (2007) suggested organisations place emphasis on quality and relevance to business needs with delivery methods that suit the company rather than the HEI. Even those organisations that took the 'high road', where priority was given to employee skills and performance, still required tailored educational provision to ensure that learning was specific and to some extent 'non-transferable' to avoid 'poaching' of trained staff (Gleeson and Keep, 2004).

A number of researchers have presented reasons for non-engagement. Edmond's et al (2007), for example suggested that employers within the private sector have resisted engagement in education because their main activity was to run successful businesses

⁵ Retailers involved in the consultation process included AS Watson UK, Asda, B&Q, Boots UK Ltd, British Retail Consortium, Debenhams plc, Goulds Dorchester Ltd., HTA The Horticultural Trades Association, John Lewis plc, Oasis and Warehouse, Ryman, Sainsburys, Screwfix Ltd, Tesco Stores Ltd, The Co-operative Group, and Travis Perkins

that make a profit, therefore organisational aims take precedence over workforce development. Wedgwood (2007) further argued that organisations (the market) will not buy services that do not suit its purposes. She states, “*the current culture does not, in general, engender confidence in HE’s ability to deliver effectively courses and services that bring clear, direct benefits to the employer and the employee*”. Her findings illustrate that the most significant thing employers seek is value for money and an identified return on their investment.

A number of writers have made comment about government subsidies made available to employers who support FDs. Fuller (2001) for example suggests that FDs may be a subsidy to employers in specific sectors who would otherwise have funded workforce development. Gibbs (2002:202) takes this one stage further when he comments:

these degrees seem to be programmes that are constructed to transfer value from the university through the student to the employer. This is likely to be achieved with little respect for the individual as a person but as a unit of utility.

However, there are those that argue the government should be providing employers with “*real financial incentives to support and release workers to study*” (Stuart-Hoyle, 2007:89). Lashley (2011:132) however, questions the whole notion of employer engagement in the design of FDs in hospitality and tourism:

In an Anglophone culture, such as the UK, employer views have been elevated to exclusive heights and alongside this ‘mono-stakeholder focus, comes a

perception that education provision should be primarily concerned with meeting the needs of industry'. Whilst this mind-set is dominant, it is also fundamentally flawed. First, it assumes that employers know what they want, or will want in the future. Second, it assumes that all employer needs are uniform and that there is homogeneity amongst employers.

Lashley (2011) argues that academics must remain professional and in control of the educational experience and curriculum. This reinforces Payne's earlier comments regarding the difficulty employers have in identifying their own skills needs. It is also worth noting that HE qualifications are just one of several options open to employers. Alternative approaches range from internal or private training to organisations making use of HE to run short courses that may not lead to certification. Therefore, what incentives are there for employers to engage in higher education, when educational qualifications are highly portable in the labour market therefore increasing the risk of organisations losing employees (Mason, 2014)?

Although, conversely, studies have shown that organisations are investing in HE as a means of retaining valuable employees. Two further characteristics of Foundation Degrees are flexibility and partnership. A brief review of flexibility suggests that it is an organisational requirement to comment on what they require in terms of delivery mode. Partnerships are discussed in more detail in the following section when consideration is given to why employers form partnerships with HE, the value of partnerships and the barriers that can hinder their success.

3.2.1 Flexibility and Partnership

The Labour government placed flexibility at the heart of their skills agenda stating that there “*must be flexible access to skills training at every level*” (BIS, 2009). These objectives also underpin the framework for higher education, ‘Higher Ambitions’ published in November 2009. The Task Force report (2004) underlined flexibility as an important factor in accessibility. When applied to FDs it broadly included the delivering institution, the learner and the employer (Taylor, 2012:51). According to the QAA (2010:10), these requirements are likely to include:

Flexible delivery modes and study patterns, including full-time, part-time, distance, work-based, and web-based learning, with the flexibility to study in reasonable limits, when and where it best suits the learner

Challis (2005:18) suggests that flexibility in the context of Foundation degrees is a “*difficult issue to pin down*”. She argues that “*truly flexible provision is built around specific and identified needs of prospective learners on the programme*”, suggesting that it is the responsibility of employers when designing and developing the programme to identify the specific needs of the target group, for example shift patterns and travel arrangements to be accommodated, computer literacy levels to be taken into account. Challis identified many ways in which delivery can be made flexible, a small number of these include: face-to-face teaching and tutorials; blocks of attendance; visual learning environments; blended learning (a mixture of modes of delivery); supervision, mentoring in the workplace and workplace assessment.

There is growing discussion in the literature on education partnerships forming between universities and corporations to deliver customized corporate education programmes to support the development of their managers. Ryan (2009) conducted primary research with 79 senior managers involved in university-corporate education programmes and revealed that the major reason for establishing these types of partnership is to provide a recognised university award programme to complement existing in-house education programmes. Further reasons included expanding the range of subject areas for participants to study, rather than confining their learning to just the organisation's subjects and for universities to provide objectivity and challenge traditional thinking and paradigms within the organisation.

The New Labour government regarded partnerships between HE and employers as central to high-quality FDs. Highly developed partnerships can make a significant contribution to the on-going currency and viability of the FD (Benefer, 2007). However, a number of writers have commented on the '*risky business*' of FD development especially in relation to partnership (Foskett, 2003; Brain et al, 2004; Rowley, 2005 and Reeve and Gallacher, 2005). Rowley (2005) suggests that working in partnership is not easy, especially when the partnership has a number of dimensions. She contends that partnerships need to operate at both strategic and operational levels and this means that senior managers, tutors, team leaders in all parties need to engage effectively with others across their own organisation and that of their partner. A partnership agreement typically specifies procedures for allocating funding, staffing and resources, the role of each partner, quality issues. (p8). A successful partnership requires clear objectives, strong commitment and well-defined articulation of responsibilities. She argues that individuals from different

organisations need to learn how to work effectively together which requires amongst other things effective communication, persistence in managing the partnerships and appropriate resources. Reeve and Callacher (2005) suggest that there is limited evidence to suggest that employers wish to engage in partnership with universities. Similarly, to Rowley (2005) they point to the problems arising from the different cultures of the potential partners and in particular to different understandings of 'learning and knowledge'. They argue that the quality assurance agenda within HE reduces the influence of employers in vocational programmes. This has led them to conclude that the emphasis placed on partnership may be hindering rather than helping the development of work-based learning in HE.

In a review of public and private sector Foundation degrees, Foskett (2003) has identified a number of potential barriers to good partnership development including cultural disparities and the diversity of expectations by stakeholders. Foskett also suggests that employers may be 'suspicious' of the educational sector and irritated by what appears to be the overly slow development time for awards to come on stream. Potential rivalries between employers have also been evidenced. She therefore suggests that it is important for partners to have complementary aims, compatible missions, good personal relationships, clear responsibilities, trust with each other and be prepared to sign up to a common agreement on respective roles and commitments. The reality of bringing all these factors into alignment is not necessarily as easy as the rhetoric of employer engagement and work based learning might imply (p 2). She places importance on conducting market analysis and scoping the views of those working in the area prior to curriculum development, and emphasises the value of

trust and transparency in developing relationships between the different partner organisations (2003:7):

It is clear from this study that the success or failure of the partnership depends as much on the unstated aims. These may be emergent aims, which are slowly revealed as the project develops and as trust between the partners grow, but which are not stated at the start. As in all relationships, people are more likely to be honest and reveal their true motives to old friends rather than new acquaintances...The most successful partnerships occur where institutions have similar value systems. The partnership needs to be ready to recognise these emergent aims and work with them or risk weakening or jeopardising the partnership.

According to Foskett (2003:9), it helps if there is already some pre-existing working relationship between partners, some “*cultural capital*” that can be drawn upon during the development process. “*It is in reality trust between individuals...which will ensure sustainability*”. Mason (2004) wrote of the advantages of working with a large employer when developing a FD at Kingston University, but comments on essential success factors as being the clear identification of a local, national and international industry and the identification of key players and getting them on board to ensure the programme was industry-led. He also stressed that the programme would not have developed without prototype funding and that a clear staff development programme was essential. The importance of good communication, regular meetings and a close working relationship with other industrial partners was important during development and operation. Full implementation of the FD

characteristics could render the degree programme a unique educational offering to those who would not previously have entered higher education (Taylor, 2012:20). However, it is clear these characteristics present challenges to FD design and delivery and the quality of the FD student experience. Although research has been identified that provides recommendations for effective action in developing partnerships and securing employer engagement. There is still a view that collaboration and partnership is an under-theorised area (Harvey, 2009)

3.2.2 Work Based Mentoring

Mentoring featured strongly and was a crucial element in most FD programmes, it was also a key factor in retaining students on work based learning programmes and involving employers (Benefer, 2007). Harvey (2009) states the role of the workplace mentor is to familiarise themselves with the programme of learning and facilitate learning in the workplace. The mentor oversees the employer investment in the process and undertakes a key role in employee development by making the learning motivating and challenging. When effective, the mentor role should benefit the student, mentor and workplace; as confirmed in a number of studies (Snape and Finch, 2006, Taylor et al 2006). Having a mentor was vital to the student experience but a number of factors influenced the success of the mentor-student relationship. Knight et al (2006) state that the relationship can be difficult when students and mentors are unclear about the role of the mentor, which they link to the provision of mentor training, limitations with written material explaining the role and variable contact between HEIs and mentors. Other factors cited included the time the mentor had available to support the student in the workplace; willingness to perform the role; experience and knowledge of the mentor, personal attributes and rewards and personal

benefits for those providing the support. With role conflict being a possible feature of the workplace, mentor (Edmond et al, 2007:176). They argue that learning agreements and contracts between workplace mentors and partner organisations were difficult to enforce when the mentor was less than supportive. Wareing (2008: 536) in a small scale study expressed concerns about the mentoring process. The study involved five nurses, employed by the National Health Service, studying for a FD. He adopted the concept of “*communities of practice*” to argue his point and suggested that as these students were experienced health and social care workers and not novice apprentices, “*not being prepared for practice, but for performance*”, they required to be both coached and mentored.

3.2.3 Student Experience of Studying for a Foundation Degree

Research undertaken on the student experience is largely restricted to specific regional or national programmes, or experiences of Foundation Degrees in a single institution (Harvey, 2009). There have been calls for more research to better understand students undertaking the Foundation Degree and their relationships with their employers (Wedgwood, 2007:16-17). Beaney (2006:3) comments:

Given the centrality of innovative forms of learning (work based, flexible, blended and reflective learning) to Foundation degrees it is confounding to find that the learner’s experience of engaging with the new qualification is so under examined.

It is recognised that the needs aspirations and drivers from employees are not necessarily the same as, or in line with the employer. Employees do not always have

the full support of their employers and may not seek or want it. The situation for them is multi-faceted. They pursue HE for a multitude of reasons ranging from being a leisure activity to linking it with career progression where portability or transferability is important. They generally have concerns that relate to confidence, time and costs. Rowley (2005:7) comments that many students enrolled on FDs would not otherwise have considered HE, and do not come from family or community backgrounds in which there are models or expectations of HE. She found that many may have little experience of education beyond compulsory education to age 16, and may have found that experience aligned poorly with their approaches to learning, development and life. The mass HE approach that HEIs have embraced to survive in a regime of reducing per capita student funding is unlikely to accommodate this diversity well, which in turn, has implications for resource models for responding in this market place (Rowley, 2005:7). Rowley (2005:14) comments that the student experience is one element in retention and achievement.

In recent years, withdrawal rates on some HE programmes have been an increasing source of concern. Widening participation appears to have escalated concerns about withdrawal. She states that the group of students likely to be enrolled on FDs will be especially vulnerable to withdrawal. They come from a diverse group and from communities with limited experience of higher education, many studying part-time and in blended modes. All of these factors make students more vulnerable to withdrawal.

Those involved with the Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree (EYSEFD) have undertaken qualitative research on the student experience. Details of the results,

although particular to the sector, are indicative of key issues for mature, Foundation Degree students (Harvey, 2009). The findings show that those students who completed the course were generally satisfied with their experiences of the course.

Most students agreed that participation on the course was beneficial to their work. More than three quarters agreed it had made them more enthusiastic about their work, given them more confidence at work or given them a deeper understanding of their work (Snape and Finch, 2006:39)

Commonly, students were satisfied with the content and work based elements of their programmes but retention remained an issue. Nelson (2006) explored available data on progression, completion and attrition and noted that around one-sixth of enrolled Foundation Degree students withdraw from their programme of study. He found that part-time students had a slightly higher withdrawal rate than full-timers. Students withdrawing from the EYSEFED programme cited multiple interrelated factors for the decision to leave (Harvey and Drew, 2006). These included feeling unable to meet the requirements of the course; feeling depressed or stressed, barriers in the workplace to participating on the course; deciding the course was not right for them; moving to a job incompatible with the course and problems achieving a balance between the course, family and work. Most students had found the decision to leave a difficult one, reporting that it had been several months from the point when they had first contemplated leaving to the point when they had finally done so (Knight et al, 2006). Dodgson and Witham (2005) in their study of FD students also found that female students cited family responsibilities and problems adjusting to higher education after a long period away as reasons for early withdrawal.

3.2.4 Is There a Place for FDs?

When the FD launched, there was scepticism that the qualification was merely a re-launch of the Higher National Diploma (HND) as the two appear to occupy a similar qualification space. Both are located at level 5, one level below a Bachelor's degree on the framework for higher education qualifications. Both courses, take two years to complete when studied full-time, are vocational and can be topped-up to a full degree through completing a final year of study at level six. There appears therefore to be a great deal of synergy between the two, however, the FD Task Force (DfES, 2004:49) have been keen to point out the differences and have advised providers to adhere to the key characteristics of the FD. Wilson (2005) contends that the current situation is one of transition with the government wanting to organise an orderly change from HNDs to FDs. It does however raise the question as to why there was a requirement for FDs in the first place. Perhaps one of the reasons is that student numbers for HND programmes have been steadily declining, although, the Scottish Higher qualification has continued to thrive.

Statistics produced by HEFCE showed a slow but steady rise of entrants onto Foundation Degree programmes from their launch in 2001/02 to the peak in 2009. However, from this period onwards the numbers of students enrolling onto FD programmes has fallen by over 40% between 2009 and 2013 (HEFCE, 2014). HEFCE reported that these results mirrored the continuing fall of all undergraduate qualifications except first degrees and suggested the way in which higher education institutes (HEIs) record students when entering university and not attaching formal credit to short courses may have depressed the results, although this could not account for changes on this scale. The HEFCE Chief Executive stated:

The decline in undergraduate courses other than first degrees is stark. Explaining the declines, though, is not simple. A wide range of factors have affected these courses over a long period of time. The challenge in the future will be to support and develop high-quality higher education that meets the needs and aspirations of a diverse range of potential students and employers (Atkins, 2014:)

As undergraduate programmes, apart from Bachelor's degrees, have been in decline, apprenticeship programmes have seen an increase in numbers especially within the retail sector at level two (equivalent to GCSE). However, according to Lewis et al (2009) retailers have not used government-sponsored apprenticeships as a means of securing a supply of skilled labour at level three. Instead, they have preferred to carry out their own induction training and use existing in-house programmes to develop employees at this level, as and when necessary. Retailers have also been slow to adopt the Higher-Level Apprenticeships (level four). Launched in 2009, the Higher-Level Apprenticeship is intended to attract those of 18 years or older with a minimum of two A Levels or who have previously undertaken an Advanced Apprenticeship, although previous work experience can be taken into account. The intention was to provide individuals with advanced skills and qualifications that may ultimately lead to a FD, HND or Bachelor's degree. One of the key features of FDs is defined progression arrangements to a Bachelor's qualification. However, both the QAA Report and the Task Force Report note that there is still considerable work to be done in this area at both an institutional and national level. Instead, a number of large retailers have chosen to offer their employees tailored Bachelor's degrees rather than FDs (Pollitt, 2014). Interestingly, since Foundation Degree Forward (FdF), the

Government quango with responsibility for marketing and promoting FDs, ceased trading in 2010, no further funding has been spent promoting the qualification.

A number of the key characteristics of the Foundation Degrees are examined within this section. The first, employer engagement, required employers to be fully involved in the design and regular review of Foundation Degree programmes (QAA, 2015). However, levels of engagement by employers varied markedly from high to low levels of involvement with the issues presented not significantly different from those described over 20 years ago (Greenwood et al, 2007). Nevertheless, it was a key objective that Foundation Degrees be delivered in partnership with employers, HE and Sector Skills Councils. This has proved more difficult than the rhetoric on employer engagement might imply as it involved breaking down cultural barriers and markedly different understandings of learning and knowledge. Further, there was little evidence to suggest that organisations wanted to engage in partnerships, or support students whilst they studied. This was particularly evident when reviewing workplace mentoring arrangements (Knight et al, 2006) and the experiences of students studying for a Foundation Degree. Retention of students has been a problem with one sixth of students withdrawing from their programme of study. The findings show that employers within the retail sector have preferred to invest in their own training and development initiatives rather than in vocational qualifications. The FdA in Retailing was one of the more recent Foundation Degrees to be launched, just three years prior to the cessation of FdF.

3.3 The Foundation Degree in Retailing

This section traces the origins of the Foundation Degree Award (FdA) in Retailing from its inception in 2007 to 2012. A number of major organisations formed a consortium to deliver the FD and this section provides a brief introduction to the key members alongside an outline of their roles and responsibilities in the design, rollout and management of the programme. Also provided is detailed information on course design and structure. A review of the case organisation is presented in the final part of this chapter.

3.3.1 University North

University North was granted full university status in 1992 under the provision of the Further and Higher Education Act of the same year. The university comprised of eight faculties spread across five campuses one of which was the School for Business and Law based in the heart of the city centre. With approximately, 4000 undergraduates and 1,000 postgraduate students, the Faculty for Business and Law was one of the largest business schools in the UK, supporting industry and commerce since 1889 (University website, 2014). In the 2000/01 review by the UK Government's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) it was awarded 23/24 (excellent) for the quality of teaching. The University has also been steadily rising in the research rankings and in 2014 achieved 53rd place in the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

University North was the first university to introduce a full-time degree in Retail Marketing Management over twenty years ago, a sandwich programme that provided a year's placement in the third year and gave students opportunity to develop retail

management and marketing skills. The Marketing and Retail Division have held an annual conference in ‘Contemporary Issues in Retailing’ that reflects and informs current thinking within this sector and have collaborated exclusively with J.Sainsbury to provide the first degree in retailing to be delivered by distance learning. University North engaged in a wide range of commercial activities and worked with organisations to design and develop tailored programmes that reflected the needs of the organisation and their employees. They also worked in partnership with local colleges of further education to offer foundation degrees and access to National and Vocational Qualifications to provide opportunities for individuals at different stages of their business and management careers.

3.3.2 The Foundation Degree Award in Retailing

Research undertaken by University North identified a number of recommendations that have guided the development of the FdA proposal. A summary of the definitive document states that the intention was to ensure that it adds value to the sector and contributes to the narrowing of skills gaps whilst rewarding retail employees with improved chances of career progression, both within and outside the industry.

To allow for the harmonisation of FdA’s between University North and other faculties the FdA in Retailing was added to the definitive document of two other foundation degrees that were validated in 2006 (FdA in Business Management and the FdA in Business Information Technology Management). The final date of validation was 15th May 2007. The University had experience in the development of corporate programmes as they had also collaborated with McDonald’s to deliver a two-year Foundation Degree Award in Managing Business. This programme launched in 2010

and was accredited by University North (the delivering institution), however delivered by McDonald's. This FD was delivered through the company's in-house training systems so did not share the same delivery mode as the FdA in Retailing. Foundation Degree Forward (FdF and DfES) provided funding to develop the electronically supported FdA in Retailing this included bespoke on-line units, learning resources and learning logs. A consortium of five organisations steered the initiative from its conception. These comprised of FdF, University North, University South, a York based learning and Technology Company and ELH (the case organisation). The consortium met formally every four to six weeks. (For all pseudonyms see page 134)

In essence, the two university partners jointly developed parallel programmes that are identical in content yet respect the regulatory differences of their respective institutions. The intention being that the student will receive the same overall educational experience regardless of their delivering institutions, thus facilitating national accessibility to a consistent foundation degree programme across the sector” (Dewhurst, 2009:36).

In 2007, the first pilot cohort of learners from ELH enrolled across the two institutions. The two advisory partners comprised of Skillsmart Retail Ltd and The Retail Academy Ltd. The initial objective of the consortium was to develop a FdA in Retailing, aligned to the Skillsmart Retail Foundation Degree Framework (see Table 3.1), which was intended to meet the higher level workforce development needs of the retail sector.

FD Retail Framework	FD Retailing: Generic Core	FD Retailing Tailored
Self-managed performance	Personal and professional development 1	Mixed multiples
Understand retail consumer behaviour	Consumer behaviour	<i>Level 4</i>
Manage retail operations	Retail operations	Retail environment
Manage retail information	Managing information	In-store marketing
Manage and lead people in retail management	<i>Level 5</i>	
Develop people in retail	Personal and professional development 2	
Manage retail stock	Manage and develop people in retail	
Understand laws relating to retail management	Retail law	
Manage retail customer service	Manage retail customer service	
Undertake independent research into retail	Leadership in retail	
	Supply chain management	

Table 3.1 Foundation Degree in Retailing Programme Framework (Dewhurst, (October 2009), Forward, London 19: pp 37.

The programme content comprised of a collection of stand-alone modules to develop retail employees, initially in supervisory/junior management positions in specific aspects of their job role, whilst flexibility existed in the programme to customize the learning and development specifically to meet the needs of sponsoring employers, so that the modules supported staff development towards strategic and/or operational objectives. Delivery of the programme took a blended learning approach supported by the use of technology-assisted learning delivery and the use of work based learning activities and projects. This was so that learning and development could be undertaken at times and places that suited the learner but still have recognisable impact on business performance. The qualification was estimated to have cost Retailer A £1,048 each term including three days off for study and tutorials (Linton, 17th August 2009, Manchester Evening News). However, the pilot programme was heavily subsidised by Foundation Degree Forward.

Programme Overview and Structure

The programme was vocationally orientated and contained a high degree of work-based learning. It focused upon the achievement of employer specific needs and designed to enable graduates to demonstrate knowledge and vocational understanding of the retail industry and the principles that drive retail developments. The three main themes threaded throughout the programme were business improvement, customer loyalty and technology. The course learning outcomes taken from the [University North] Definitive Document for the Foundation Degree in Retailing were:

- Demonstrate a knowledge and vocational understanding of the retail industry and the principles that drive retail developments
- Articulate, verbally and non-verbally, an understanding of key themes and issues that have a practical impact on the retail industry
- Apply critical thinking to the analysis of a range of retail situations and operational methods
- Critically evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving practical problems within a retail management context
- Effectively communicate information, arguments and analysis using a variety of methods to a range of audiences
- Propose creative yet practical solutions to complex problems within a retail management context
- Make appropriate and effective management decisions within a retail business
- Demonstrate key skills, including people management that will enhance your career opportunities and achieve business development goals
- Take responsibility for personnel development and become an autonomous and reflective learner

Course Structure and Credit Framework

The FD in Retailing was a two-year stand-alone course structured over a three-term university academic year (see Figure 3.1). The degree carried 240 credits and students studied two 20-credit units concurrently each term. The delivery pattern was designed to suit the needs of employers in terms of trading patterns and employee workloads thereby avoiding the heavy trading periods of Christmas and Easter and the difficult to cover summer holidays (Dewhurst, 2009).

Year 1	PPD 1 (20 CATS)	Retail Environment (20 CATS)	Retail Operations (20 CATS)	Managing Information (20 CATS)	Consumer Behaviour (20 CATS)	In-store Customer Marketing (20 CATS)
Year 2	Personal & Professional Development 2 (40 CATS)		Manage & Develop People (20 CATS)	Retail Law (20 CATS)	Manage Retail Customer Service (20 CATS)	Leadership in Retail (20 CATS)

Figure 3.1 Breakdown of units studied with CATS points

Students were required to complete 400 learning hours across a 13-week term to achieve 40 credits. Each unit commenced with a one-day face-to-face intensive workshop, after which students were expected to complete 8 hours of online learning, 6 hours of peer networking and 14 hours of work-based learning and reflection each week. Employer mentors and tutor guidance through the online classroom supported student learning. All students were full-time employees so the hours were considered ‘notional and an on-average estimate’ of the individual effort applied (Dewhurst, 2009:37). Course delivery combined a range of learning experiences, including e-learning and interactive learning with staff and other students at interactive workshops, as well as further reading and application of learning in the workplace.

The last section in this chapter provides a brief overview of the case organisation, ELH.

3.3.3 The Case Organisation - ELH

ELH was one of the world's biggest supermarket retailers trading in 12 countries and employing over 530,000 personnel worldwide. The UK operation was the largest in the group with approximately 3378 stores and 310,000 employees (June 2015). They were the market leader in the UK, with over 61% of sales generated in this marketplace and one of the first retailers to pioneer grocery home shopping in 1997 with online sales in 2015 achieving over 2 billion pounds. ELH, a multichannel retailer has sold everything from banking services to mobile telecommunications. Their aim was to maximise space in the larger format stores to create more compelling retail destinations with restaurant chains featuring in future plans. Staff development was through an in-house Options Development Programme for every level of employee and through the apprenticeship scheme and Foundation Degree, David Potts (2007), the Retail and Logistics Director elaborates on this:

A successful retailer needs a workforce that is motivated, focused and trained to be able to work hard to deliver what our customers want. As a principle we try to recruit from within wherever possible. This makes our qualification-based training essential (Woods, 2008).

80 % of management, roles were through internal appointments. ELH were selected as the retail partner for the FD pilot programme and formed part of the consortium that designed the FdA in Retailing, prior to its launch in 2007. At the FdF annual

conference in July 2007, representatives from Universities North and South and ELH spoke about why their organisations had become involved with the Retail Consortium.

Anita Mardell from ELH commented the:

Biggest challenge facing [ELH] today is the rate at which we can recruit and develop the right people. If any one factor will affect our growth it is the ability to recruit the right people and train them quickly enough to meet our corporate development programmes (Lockley, 2007:48).

Mardell (2007) explained that it was necessary to keep pace with the rapid pace of change in the retail environment, understanding the sector, competitor analysis and innovation were key to success. She stated, new managers need to acquire skills and knowledge in these areas as quickly as possible commenting that the company had a clear strategy for spotting and developing talent in its workforce. The FdA in Retailing was seen as a key component of the programmes supporting this initiative. The qualification was also deemed a way of aiding staff retention.

The Operations Personnel Director, argued that the FD in retailing gave employees the ability to '*learn while they earn*', and stated, you don't need a string of A-levels or months away from the shop floor to gain a qualification (Woods, 17th August 2009, HR Magazine). The FD generated much publicity for the organisation, when the FD launched in 2007 and later when the first cohort of students graduated in 2009, the company were keen to promote the benefits of the qualification as illustrated in the comments made by the Operations Director during the launch of the qualification:

helping design the FD to fit the needs of the company through student selection, course content and delivery model, students are already telling us how it meets their individual needs (Potts, 2007)

the degree has been designed by business, for business and the company is proud to be continuing to shape the future of training for the wider retail sector (Potts, 2007)

The qualification became synonymous with the organisation, with early publicity re-branding the title of the Foundation Degree to incorporate the company name (Dewhurst and Lockley, 2011). When the qualification launched the organisation heavily promoted the fact that they were the first major retailer to provide the degree. However, in recent years there has been little comment publicly about the FD.

In summary, University North had experience delivering HE programmes in collaboration with industry so were ideally placed to design and deliver the FdA in Retailing, a qualification designed to be employer led. However, the government's ambitions for Foundation Degrees assumed that all sectors of the workforce, including retail, had a need for level 4/5 skills equivalent to that of a higher-grade technicians or professional managers. When in fact, demand for skills in the economy was lower than policy often assumed (Keep, 2012). For example, Green observed (2009:17):

Britain has long been caught in a low-qualification trap, which means that British employers tend to be less likely than in most other countries to require their recruits to be educated beyond the compulsory school leaving age.

She suggested that British employers placed less emphasis on higher-level skills than other major competing regions in Europe such as Germany and France. Further, skills policy in the UK has tended to treat all employers as one simple undifferentiated group when they clearly are not (Keep, 2006). It is therefore unsurprising to find that many employers have shown reluctance to engage fully in the Government's skills initiatives. Employer engagement has been shown to be a tricky business with employers displaying reticence to fully engage with HE and the Sector Skills Councils to deliver Foundation Degrees. Employers are tasked with supporting the student in the workplace, however a review of workplace mentoring has illustrated that students and mentors are unclear about their respective roles and contracts between both parties have been difficult to enforce (Knight et al, 2006). Students have also found it difficult to balance the competing demands of work, study and home life. The government did reach its target of 100,000 Foundation Degrees students to be enrolled at any one time however, HEFCE have invested over £100 million to enhance employer engagement capabilities of universities as part of its workforce development programmes (HEFCE, October 2010, HEFCE Funding on Foundation Degrees to End). Yet, the literature provides a very mixed account of Foundation Degrees and their intended purpose of meeting future skills needs at technical and associate professional levels.

Chapter Four: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed account of the research process undertaken to complete this thesis, structured around Crotty's (1998) four elements of social research: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. The first part of the chapter discusses how the chosen philosophical paradigm of critical realism provides a viable alternative to positivism and social constructionism when exploring the experience and effectiveness of management learning through a Foundation Degree. This involved answering questions about ontology and epistemology. Ontology is concerned with the nature of being or what is said to exist whereas epistemology is the study of knowledge or justified belief, how we know what exists (Mason, 2002, Seale, 2004). The answers to these questions are important to determine as researchers use as a guide the systems of belief by which they generate and interpret knowledge claims about reality (Chau, 1986; Myers 2009). Following on from epistemology and ontology is the theoretical perspective. Critical realists are able to draw upon quantitative and qualitative data although; the nature of the research problem and the issues addressed, generally determine the theoretical perspective. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate for this study as it illuminates complex concepts and relationships and enables identification of causal mechanisms. The methodological framework chosen was an intrinsic case study. The organisational context was an integral layer of research alongside the broader context of government (economic/political) and the micro layer of the individual. To explore these layers, three methods of data collection have been used, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence. The chapter concludes with data analysis and ethical considerations.

As mentioned the paradigm of critical realism has informed this study. This philosophical approach offers broad recommendations about how organisational and management research is contemplated and approached (Sayer, 2004). It holds the view that an objective reality exists that is independent of *“people’s perceptions, language or imagination and part of that world consists of subjective interpretations which influence the ways in which it is perceived and experienced”* (Edwards et al, 2014:14). Therefore, critical realism rejects the positivist view that only phenomena confirmed by the senses can truly be regarded as knowledge and that of the social constructivist, who assert that reality consists of discourse and constructs. Instead, critical realists view the social world as a highly complex social system where institutions and organisations are a product of human action and exist only in and through human activity. Institutions and other kinds of structures brought about by socialization in turn shape human behaviour (Ackroyd, 2010:3). Crucially for this study, critical realism offers a notion of causality through addressing the underlying ‘why’ questions frequently posed in organisational research (Bhaskar, 1978, 1998). The following section presents a case for critical realism by comparing and contrasting it to other philosophical domains of positivism and social constructionism.

4.1 Critical Realism: Epistemology and Ontology

Critical realism (CR) rests upon three core ontological domain assumptions that set it apart from other research paradigms such as positivism and social constructivism (Reed, 2005:1630): First, the phenomena to which scientific research and explanation are directed are the underlying structures and mechanisms that produce empirical events rather than, as claimed by positivists, the empirical events or regularities in themselves. Second, underlying structures and mechanisms are not directly accessible

to sense experience and have to be theoretically constructed and modelled through a process of conceptual abstraction and retroduction (Blackie, 2000). Third, theoretically reconstructed models and explanations of underlying structures or mechanisms that contingently generate actual events and outcomes offer provisional descriptions and accounts of phenomena and are always open to revision and reformulation. Positivists take the view that the way in which researchers conceptualize reality, actually directly reflects that reality, whereas in CR any conceptualizations are simply a way of knowing that reality (Bryman, 2012). Bhaskar (1998) described this as a shift from epistemology to ontology and within ontology, as a shift from events to mechanisms. He regards attempts to couple ontology with epistemology as other research domains have done as ‘epistemic fallacy’, because they confuse that which exists with the knowledge we have about it.

One major reason for selecting critical realism is that it is able to distinguish between the real, actual and empirical levels of reality of particular interest when exploring the experiences and effectiveness of management learning through a FdA in Retailing. As mentioned previously the starting point for this longitudinal study began by questioning why student dropout rates, on the pilot programme, were extraordinarily high. This in turn prompted further questions about the rationale for the FdA in Retailing which took the study beyond the individual managers to examine the wider contextual issues, which also have a bearing on management learning. Working within a stratified ontology of the real, actual and empirical gave opportunity to identify and move between three inter-dependent levels of analysis the political and economic, organisational and individual with the intention of identifying how the dynamics of one can affect the others. The organisational level forms the ‘interaction

order' that emerges from the individual level, which in turn is over determined by the political and economic level of emergent socio-cultural relations. The organisational level creates the mediating link between individuals and the structural properties of social systems (Creaven, 2001). These three levels are represented in the research questions set out below:

The Macro (government) level: to explore how the FD in Retailing is succeeding to integrate the worlds of academia and work to meet employer specific needs as well as those of individual managers in the retail sector.

The Meso (organisational) level: applying the working as learning framework to examine how the interrelationship between the wider contextual pressures and the organisation's systems and processes influence workplace learning.

The Micro (individual) level: to investigate the relationship between individual learner's position within the productive system and their dispositions to learning, learning expectations and learning for work.

For the critical realist researcher, the task was to explore the realm of the real to see how it relates to the realms of the other two domains by investigating and identifying relationships and non-relationships between what is experienced, what actually happens and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events (Danermark et al, 2002:21).

4.1.1 Agency and Structure

The interaction between agency and structure is significant in CR, structure conditions action and action reproduces or transforms structure, both are distinct yet equally real in an ontological sense. Bhaskar (1989) writes:

All social structures – for instance, the economy, the state, the family, language – depend upon or presuppose social relations...The relations into which people enter pre-exist the individuals who enter into them, and whose activity reproduces or transforms them; so they are themselves structures. And it is to these structures of social relations that realism directs our attention (1989:4).

Critical realists define structure as the “*set of internally related objects or practices*” (Sayer, 1992:92). These constitute the real entities that researchers seek to investigate in a given contextual situation. Some examples of the social structures that apply to this study include the political, economic and educational context (larger structures) and the organisation (including certain sub-sets). These structures have ontological value as they are relative to a particular time and culture. They do not exist independently of social activity and therefore empirically cannot be identified except through such activity (Syed et al, 2010). Contributing to Bhaskar’s (1978) Transformational Model of Social Agency is Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic model this emphasises the dualism of structure and action. The outcome of this model is the morphogenetic cycle that covers structure, culture and agency, “*each of which has relative autonomy and yet interacts with the others*”. For critical realists the concern

is with how they “*emerge, intertwine and redefine one another*” over time (Horrocks, 2009:39-40)

Causality and causation are important features of critical realism. Causality refers to the relationship between a thing (cause) and the outcome (effect) it generates. Positivists assume causation is about regularities amongst events, whereas, critical realists are required to identify the factors and relationships that cause a phenomenon to occur (Gregor, 2006). In critical realism, theory is used to propose (what are largely) hidden causal mechanisms or generative processes. Once these are identified, it is then possible to isolate them from other features. Empirical data provides evidence of causal mechanisms at work and the ways in which these are integral and separate from the social pattern in which they occur (Ackroyd, 2010:5). Figure 4.1, using data from this study, illustrates how structure and contextual conditions can create generative mechanisms, which can have an effect on the individual students learning experience.

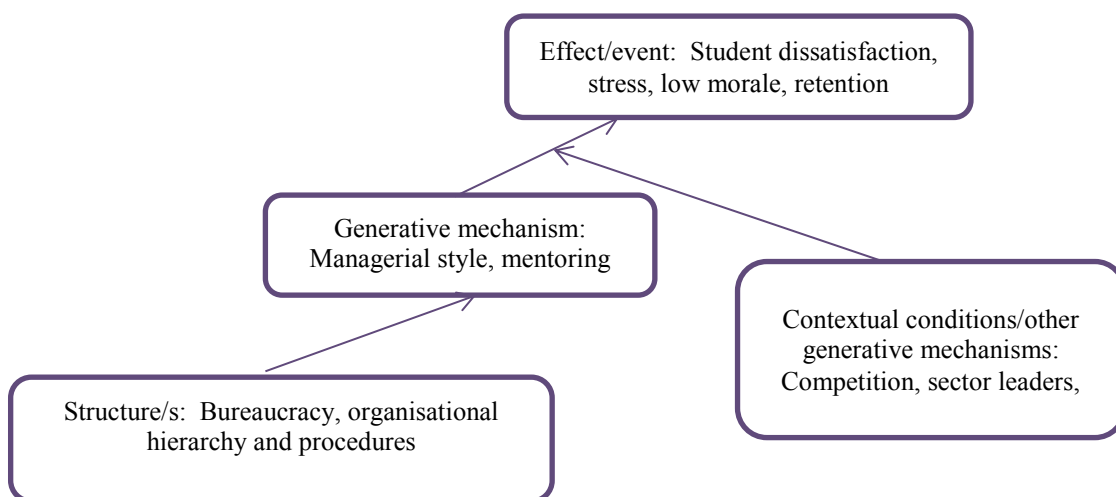


Figure 4.1 The Creation of Generative Mechanisms Model, Adapted from Sayer, 2000:15

Agents (directors, managers, lecturers, administrators and students) are causal mechanisms in themselves acting on their reasons and motives although pre-existing social structure of roles and expectations always condition or shape activity. Activity in turn transforms or reproduces the social structure. Mechanisms according to Bhaskar (1975:14) are “*nothing other than the ways of action of things*”. Integral to social structures they enable or limit what can happen in a given context (Sayer, 2000), whereas an event can be defined as an “*act or an action*” resulting from the performance of one or more mechanism (Hartwig, 2007:189). For critical realists events are ontologically distinct from the structures and mechanisms that generate them (Bhaskar, 1975). What is experienced are those events that are directly observable.

Critical realism defines scientific knowledge as having both transitive and intransitive dimensions (Bhaskar, 1975). The intransitive dimensions include elements of the world critical realists seek to explain. These are largely independent of our senses and experiences. The transitive dimensions include observations, as well as theories about the independent world that have developed as result of scientific enquiry (Collier, 1994). This is distinct from positivism, which depends on logical inferences from theoretical postulates (i.e. deduction) or generalisation from evidence (i.e. induction). Critical realists move from the empirical to the real using two distinct explanatory logics of abduction and retroduction. For example, Edwards et al (2014) used observational data and semi-structured interviews in their study to re-describe the observable everyday objects of social science in an abstracted and more general sense to describe the sequence of causation that gave rise to observed regularities in the pattern of events. They used observations in tandem with theory identified in the

literature to produce the most plausible explanation of the mechanisms that caused the event. Causal explanation is most likely to be realised through a process of retrodution. When applying the principles of retrodution critical realists seek to determine what the world (i.e. the broader context) must be like in order for the mechanisms observed to be as they are and not otherwise. Reed (2005:1631) describes retrodution as:

A mode of inference that aims at discovering the underlying structures or mechanisms that produce tendencies or regularities under certain conditions through a process of model building, testing and evaluation in which complex and time-consuming procedures are required to unearth them.

Retrodution requires critical realists to identify and verify the existence of underlying and unobservable structures or mechanisms theorized to have generated the phenomena under study. In order to achieve this it is necessary to ask the ‘what if’ questions to identify patterns over periods of time and in different contexts to identify the hidden causal mechanisms. When conducting research into workplace-learning, Lee et al (2004:34) asked how/why do individuals take up opportunities and participate (or not) in learning at work? In answering this question, they found the structure/agency dynamic to be particularly important noting both, cannot simply be seen as separate considerations. The core objectives for this thesis therefore centred on how/why questions in order to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience and expectations of studying for an FdA in Retailing. This entailed using multiple methods of research and theoretical perspectives to support causal analysis and overcome perceptual limitations. The research questions are as follows:

- Does the FdA in Retailing meet the skills needs of the retail sector
- Do FdAs help promote expansive learning?
- How does studying for an FdA in Retailing affect the individual manager?
- How is the FdA in Retailing meeting student expectations?

The next section discusses the decision to take a qualitative theoretical perspective to address these research questions.

4.2 Theoretical Perspective: Taking a Pragmatic Approach

For many writers quantitative and qualitative research differ with respect to their ontological and epistemological foundations and can be seen to form two distinct clusters of research strategy (Bryman, 2008). These provide two opposing ways in which we view the world and acquire knowledge of it. The first incorporates the practices and norms of the natural scientific model associated with positivism which, embodies a view of social reality as an objective, external reality. This involves taking a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research with emphasis placed on the testing of theories. In contrast, qualitative research typically takes an inductive approach that emphasizes the generation of theories. This approach is often associated with social constructionism (Perry et al, 1997) which views reality as socially constructed through discourse, rather than naturally given. Unlike positivists and social constructionists, critical realists are not wedded to the use of a particular methodology or method, by adopting a dualist ontology critical realism is able to bridge both the quantitative and qualitative divide (Alverson & Skoldberg, 2009) as shown in table 4.1.

Element	Paradigm		
	Positivism	Constructivism	Realism
Ontology	Reality is real and apprehensible	Multiple local specific 'constructed' realities	Reality is 'real' but imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible
Epistemology	<i>Objectivist</i> : findings true	<i>Subjectivist</i> : created findings	<i>Modified objectivist</i> : findings probably true
Common methodologies	<i>Experiments/surveys</i> : verification of hypotheses, chiefly quantitative methods	<i>Hermeneutical/dialectical</i> : researcher is a 'passionate participant' within the world being investigated	<i>Case studies/convergent interviewing</i> : triangulation, interpretation of research issues by qualitative and by some quantitative methods

Table 4.1 Three categories of scientific paradigms and their elements (Perry et al, 1997; based on Guba and Lincoln, 1994)

However, critical realists have been accused of spending little time focusing on methodology, which has to date been regarded as relatively unimportant in relation to more philosophical issues (Sayer, 1992, Layder, 1993, Yeung, 1997, Ackroyd, 2010). This leaves critical realism with no methodological blueprint to follow (Purcell, 2014) and therefore it is generally the nature of the research problem and or issues to be addressed that determine the choice of methodology (McEvoy and Richards, 2006). For Ackroyd (2010:8) "*methodology tends to be an under-labourer to theory*" with all research taking place against a background of a particular construal of existing knowledge. Methodology is required to account for the aspects of explanation required by realist research, for example whether the target is to discover a mechanism, find out more about it or find out more about the contexts in which mechanisms are operative. Generative mechanisms are below the surface of presenting events hence research is required to assist the search for evidence and uncover them. Critical realists review this research process as a constant digging in the ontological depth of reality. As reality is layered, it is necessary to carefully select research approaches that provide depth unlike positivism and social constructivism which have a tendency to linger at surface level and depart from what is empirically given (Alverson, 2008). Successful research therefore depends on finding out what

is required not just following methodological rules (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014). Critical realists are therefore able to draw on qualitative and quantitative data, suitable to the requirements of the research although, the importance of the different kinds and mix of data sources may shift as the study becomes more extensive in scope. Qualitative methods of data collection were selected for this study which included semi-structured interviews and participant observation. These proved ideal for abstracting the causal mechanisms that quantitative/statistical methods are oblivious to (Yeung, 1997). In addition, they helped illuminate complex concepts and relationships that would not have been captured using standardized quantitative measurements. Further, from a critical realist perspective, qualitative methods are open ended (McEvoy and Richards, 2006). This enabled themes, not anticipated in advance, to emerge through the course of the data collection using a case study methodology, outlined in the following section.

4.3 Research Methodology

The research strategy selected for this study is premised on the search for explanation through gaining a deep understanding of the various dimensions that constitute the phenomena of management learning through an FdA in Retailing. Case studies are widely used as a research methodology in organisational studies to examine retailing and workplace learning (Billett et al, 2004; Eraut 2007; Felstead et al, 2009; Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Grugulis et al, 2011). For Yin, (1994) a case study constitutes an enquiry into a real life context as opposed to the contrived contexts of experiments or surveys and although this methodology accommodates both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, it is a favoured methodology used by qualitative researchers (Cresswell, 2007:73). To meet the research objectives a single ‘intrinsic’

case was selected (Stake, 1995). Described by Stake as exploratory in nature and favoured by critical realists as it places emphasis on the case itself rather than on the issue or concern (Benyon, 1973; Delbridge, 1998), the aim therefore is not to generalise between cases or extend theory. The 'single case' was the large multi-channel retailer selected to pilot the new FdA in Retailing qualification, anonymised for research purposes and given the name ELH. Yin (2003:54) argues that in situations where a case is unique and longitudinal, (the study spans a four year period from 2008-2012), it is appropriate to select just one case. In addition, realist comparative research accepts there are going to be differences between cases and that the generative mechanisms will be unique to the context in which they are at work. Therefore, critical realist researchers like Easton (2010) argue that one case is sufficient to uncover reality:

If one accepts a realist view, one case is enough to generalise: not generalising to any population but to a real world that has been discovered...One case can create and /or test a theory to the extent that it uncovers reality (Easton, 2010: 121).

As stated, the purpose of this study is not to generalise to other cases or to populations beyond the case unlike in survey design. Instead, the focus is concerned with complexity and the particular nature of the case in question with the aim being “*to provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied*” (Hartley, 2011:323). The intent was to utilize the detailed causal explanations of the mechanisms at work in the case organisation to obtain insights into how and why similar mechanisms could lead to different or perhaps

similar outcomes in a different setting (Becker, 1990). This places this case study firmly in the inductive tradition where specific explanations are sought, rather than the deductive method where multiple cases are used to develop hypotheses or propositions (Ghuari et al, 2008). The following section discusses the techniques used to select the research participants and outlines the recruitment strategies employed. For more information on ELH, refer to the contextual chapter (Chapter 3.).

4.3.1. Research Participant Selection

At the heart of this study is the student, however, to explain detailed aspects of their learning experiences and expectations whilst studying for the FdA in Retailing, it was necessary to widen the study to include other actors, including those administering and teaching on the programme to gain a detailed account of what caused particular events to occur. For a full set of research participants see table 4.2. Participants' names have been changed to protect their identities although job titles and tenure remain unchanged.

Key Stakeholders	Job Title	Tenure	Code
FdF	Director of FDs in the private sector	2006 – 2010	Caspian
University North	Project Manager	2006 – present	Simon
	Programme Coordinator (1)	2007 - 2009	Ivan
	Programme Coordinator (2)	2009 – present	Carol
ELH (Large multichannel retailer)	Manager Education and Skills	2008 – 2010	Lisa
	Manager Education and Skills	2010 – 2012	Michelle
	Group Format Manager (Small stores)		Amy
	Group Format Manager (Medium stores)		Nancy
	Store Manager (Mega stores with		Tom

	700+employees)		
Students (ELH) Including cohort and role when interviewed	2007-2009		
	Security Manager		Roger
	Checkout Manager		Leia
	Store Manager (Smaller formats)		Andy
	Distribution Manager		Des
	2008-2010		
	Bakery Manager		Tina
	Compliance Manager		Kara
	Clothing Manager		Ember
	Store Manager (Smaller formats)		May
	2009-2011		
	Grocery Manager		John
	Customer Service Manager		Adrian
	Store Manager (Smaller formats)		Mike
Personnel Manager		Dave	

Table 4.2 List of research participants including job titles and tenure in role (management team)

A purposive sampling approach was used to select students for the study with the criteria fixed a priori (Bryman, 2008). The initial intention was to select a small sample from those who graduated from the pilot programme. However, the number of students who successfully completed the course and were available when the research commenced, totalled four. Only five students graduated out of a cohort of 22. This sample of four students proved adequate for the first round of research as a means of starting to understand the issues. Following this, small samples were then purposively selected from the next three cohorts. The launch of the FdA in Retailing was heavily publicised both within the organisation and externally. Some students

had featured in publicity campaigns for the new qualification and participated in research undertaken by Reflexxion (an external consultancy employed by the organisation) and Foundation Degree Forward (FdF). Further, Andy, (Store Manager, Smaller Format) had been tasked by his Area manager with promoting the programme, which involved spending two days away from his store visiting other stores within his group in Southern Ireland. Therefore, the first group were distinctive from those that followed. It is difficult to assess whether this influenced their responses when interviewed, although they appeared on the surface to be more open and willing to express their opinions of the programme.

It became far more difficult to recruit students to participate in the study after completion of the pilot stage. The research schedule coincided with the economic downturn (2009-2012), which may have contributed to some of the issues. The company underwent a major structural change in 2009/10 and embarked on a fierce pricing war with its competitors. During the pilot programme, students were released from their responsibilities in store to promote the new FdA in Retailing, the managers that followed were not afforded these same concessions, and were therefore reluctant to relinquish what limited time they had available. As a result, it was necessary to deploy different recruitment methods including administering simple one-page questionnaires. Intended as a recruiting tool rather than a method of data collection, the questionnaires had reply slips attached which students could complete if willing to participate and five students completed these.

Additional methods included contacting tutors to obtain permission to drop-in to final workshops and approaching students at assessment centres where they were invited to

talk to potential new FdA in Retailing applicants. This latter more informal setting proved the best means of recruiting participants. However, as with most educational research, the student sample overall represented the successes, those who graduated from the programme and therefore was not representative of the whole cohort. Those managing, teaching or administering on the pilot programme formed the second group of key informants, located in the case organisation, host institution and Foundation Degree Forward (FdF). Participants from the case organisation initially included those overseeing the programme from within head office. One project manager and two programme co-ordinators participated in the research from the host institution.

The selection of further participants, within this second tranche, took place using a snowball technique whereby those initially involved in the research proposed other participants who were previously unknown to the researcher. This technique proved instrumental in the selection of key informants with the experience and characteristics relevant to the research. These consisted of two Group Format Managers, representing the North and South of England, with responsibility for the FdA in the stores. A store manager with special remit for employee development in the North West of England and a director from Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) responsible for funding and overseeing the launch of the FdA in Retailing. Selecting and securing the involvement of the non-student sample proved easier than that of the student sample. This was thought to have been due to the researcher's involvement in teaching on the FdA in Retailing.

Shaping the pursuit of truth is the philosophical principles and personal ontology of those conducting the research, which makes the whole area of participant selection and research ethics less than straightforward. Tensions are likely to arise when a researcher is attempting to balance the demands of the research with the rights of the research participants. Collecting informed consent involved explaining to participants the aims of the research, the kind of information sought and time required. Responding to all questions was a voluntary act as was their participation. In addition, informed consent involved preserving the anonymity of participants and making them aware of who would have access to the data once collected (Gray, 2004: 59). The ethical frameworks published by research organisations endorse many of these points. For example, the ESRC framework for research ethics states that research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion. I sought to develop secure ethical codes of practice that attempted to put into place a system to protect the interests of participants. Consent was initially sought from those with responsibility for the FdA in Retailing within both the case organisation and the delivering institution. These were the “*sponsors, officials and significant others who have the power to grant or block access to and within a setting*” (Walsh, 2004: 229). Through their consent, I was able to visit students in their stores, talk to their store managers and attend important events held by the case organisation such as assessment centres. Managers in the Education and Skills Department were also instrumental in helping to recruit students to participate in the study and identify other key stakeholders.

4.3.2 Longitudinality and Case Study Methodology

A key aspect of this study is its longitudinal design that involves the collection and analysis of data over time (Menard, 1991; Ruspini, 1999). Longitudinal designs are appropriate for use within a case study methodology (Merriam, 1988) and a strategy favoured by CR researchers (Archer, 1995; Dobson, 2001). This is because many CR researchers strive to achieve multi-level description within their research where it is necessary to account for the vertical explanations as well as the horizontal (Archer, 1998:196). For example, this cross-sectional study takes into account what transpired prior to the launch of the qualification as well as what happened during and after the pilot programme had finished. Giving consideration to the past, present and future proved instrumental in unravelling the emergent properties of various structures and capturing the full range of contextual influences involved in activating often hidden causal mechanisms (Edwards et al, 2014). This involved tracking the student journey from the assessment centres, induction and through the first year of the programme, through the PPD 1 unit (explained further later in the chapter), for which I was unit leader. The final part of the process culminated in the student interviews once they had graduated from the programme.

It is common when conducting a longitudinal study for the researcher to be a participant of the organisation (Bryman, 2008). I had connections to the organisation through teaching on the FdA in Retailing as Unit Leader for the PPD1 unit, from the launch of the pilot programme in 2007 to 2012. The four-year study (2008-2012) proved a feasible period-of-time to identify and verify the existence of underlying structures or mechanisms when exploring the experiences and expectations of those studying for the FdA in Retailing. The decision was also a pragmatic one, as time had

to be given to writing up the thesis. There are many reported advantages for conducting longitudinal research. According to Holland et al (2004) longitudinal research can help to develop effective practices as well as effective policies, so in terms of FdAs they can establish whether they work or not. However, longitudinal studies can be very time consuming and resource intensive. Maintaining links with the organisation and the programme, especially during the data collection period was an important consideration as it made it easier to gain access to the relevant participants. Whilst data was being collected, two managers, one from the case organisation and the other from University North changed roles in quick succession meaning that new relationships with their successors had to be developed. In addition, each new manager had a different approach to the management of the programme. Researching the programme over time enabled the observation of these approaches together with the impact they had. The following section outlines the three methods of data collection used in this study, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence (See Appendix A).

4.4 Methods used in the Collection of Data

In case design it is usual to use multiple methods of data collection which can be either quantitative, qualitative or both. *“The choice will be governed by what is thought to be required to establish a plausible causal mechanism, constrained by what data can actually be collected in the research context”* (Easton, 2010:124). Denzin (1978) argues that multi-method research or triangulation is achieved through using various combinations of data sources, which in turn increases understanding and explanation of the causal factors and relationships and removes personal bias to improve validity (Campbell and Frisk, 1959). Using multiple methods can also

produce a more complete, holistic and contextual portrait of the object under study (Ghurani et al, 2008:8). The methods chosen for this study comprise of the following: semi structured interviews; participant observation; direct observation and documentary analysis (company documentation and student learning logs). The following section provides an evaluation of the most important methods of data collection commencing with semi-structured interviews, this method was considered paramount as it provided direct access to interviewees, both in terms of the attitudes they hold and to provide an account of their experiences (Elger & Smith, 2014).

4.4.1 Semi Structured Interviews

Interviews have proved popular in case study research within the realism paradigm to achieve a level of depth and complexity not available to other more survey based approaches (Byrne, 2004). Elger and Smith (2014) suggest:

Interviews provide an interactive method where meanings, explanations and emotions articulated by researchers are taken seriously thus the interview as a process of human interaction involves the mutual construction of knowledge about experiences, events and activities (Elger & Smith, 2014: 27)

Interviews are typically categorised on the extent to which the interviewer controls the conversation, through questions and prompts, on a continuum these can range from structured to unstructured. Cohen and Manion (2007) propose four different types of interview: the structured interview, the unstructured interview, the non-directive interview and the focused interview. Positivists generally prefer tightly controlled structured interviews consisting of standardised questions. This type of interview was

considered inappropriate as more than yes/no answers were required to gain an in-depth understanding of management learning through a FdA in Retailing. Although interpretive researchers favour both semi-structured and unstructured interviews, I chose the former as they are flexible and fluid but offer enough structure to avoid any aimless rambling (Wragg, 1978). Commonalities exist between critical realist and interpretive approaches to interviewing. Each recognises the significance of meaning construction and communication among human actors. However, critical realists seek to utilize interviews both to appreciate the interpretations of the participants and to analyse the social contexts, constraints and resources within which these participants act, thereby providing the competing accounts of social reality that emphasise its layered and complex character (Elger & Smith, 2014: 27). The semi-structured interview is usually organised around an aide memoire or interview guide (Mason, Jennifer, 2002), in this instance, a set of questions (themes) formed the basis for each interview but the structuring of the questions remained loose to ensure flexibility. This gave the opportunity to move between themes and follow up on areas as the conversation developed with the interviewees, enabling the interview to be shaped by the interviewee's own understandings as well as the researcher's interests, and unexpected outcomes.

Selecting Interview Themes

The themes for each set of interviews were derived from the literature and tailored to the various groups of participants, their specific organisational contexts and job roles (See Appendix B and C for examples of the interview questions) as this was likely to determine the kind of insight the respondent was likely to have (Kvale, 1996). Pawson and Tilley, (1997) contend that interviews should be explicitly “*theory-*

driven” in the sense that the subject matter of the interview is the researcher’s theory rather than the subject’s thoughts and deeds. The interviewer therefore remains the expert about the issues under investigation (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). To achieve consistency, the main themes remained the same when interviewing the student population, they only altered for the management interviews.

The interviews comprised a list of open questions to encourage elaboration although there was sufficient flexibility to change the order and ask further open and more probing questions, in response to significant or interesting comments from the interviewee. The structure of the interview went from easy to complex questions with the opening questions purposely more general and designed to place the interviewee at ease. The student interviews lasted approximately one hour, interviews with management teams with responsibility for the programmes spanned one to two hours in length. Student transcriptions when transcribed, totalled 18 to 35 pages. This was often because those in more senior positions gave longer, more detailed accounts than those in more junior posts. Interviews with those accountable for the FdA in Retailing in both the case organisation and delivering institution were conducted face-to face in their suggested location. The majority chose to be interviewed in their places of work, incurring a number of trips to the outskirts of London. Some participants selected less formal settings such as coffee shops and staff refectories, although these busy locations made it more difficult to hear the participant’s responses and record the interviews. Interviews with students had two specific aims:

- To ascertain whether the FdA in Retailing was meeting student expectations for the qualification.

- To find out what effect studying for a Foundation Degree had on the individual manager

Two students participated in face-to-face interviews in their own stores but the remainder were reluctant to be interviewed in-store and selected in preference a phone interview, scheduled away from the workplace and held in the manager's own time. This was an unexpected outcome of the research and not one initially envisaged. Face-to-face interviews can take advantage of social cues such as voice, intonation, body language and as they are synchronous there is no delay between question and answer. Furthermore, the interviewer and interviewee can directly react to what the other says or does. Nonetheless, research shows that there is little difference in the kinds of response researchers get when asking questions by telephone rather than in person. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) conducted a study using both methods and concluded there was no noticeable difference between the quality, nature and depth of participant responses.

In addition, Irvine et al (2010) noted that interviewees when using the phone tended to talk for longer although, I personally preferred the face-to-face interview. Irving (2010) produced a useful toolkit for conducting phone interviews that provided guidance. Phone interviews conducted for this study presented a highly successful means for gathering rich data. The lecturer/student relationship that had existed between the interviewer and interviewee was less apparent when not in physical proximity, resulting in the interviewee providing more honest and open answers. It also eased geographical access to respondents based in the South West of England and the Scottish Highlands. In the synchronous interview, some social cues were

restricted although this did not appear to hinder the interview process. There was little opportunity to create a good interview ambience and standardize the interview setting, (Mann and Stewart, 2000) although this would have proved problematic even when conducting face-to-face interviews as each interview was set to be held in a different location. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed using Dragon naturally speaking software; this enabled some of the transcription to take place using voice recognition; however, it was found that the transcriptions had to be double-checked for accuracy as words could be misinterpreted if diction was not sufficiently clear. Later interview findings were cross-referenced with results compiled using other research methods.

Ethical Considerations when Conducting Interviews

The research agenda and parameters of the questions were discussed prior to the interview, with the intention of focusing participants and managing research boundaries. Nonetheless, two senior managers, the director from FdF, and one programme manager from the case organisation still attempted to lead the interview. These were both managers experienced in addressing public media. On occasion, the director from FdF was also inclined to provide polished, strongly edited accounts of his views and activities (Elger & Smith, 2014). For instance, to ensure he gave an accurate response to one question, he read from a script that he had just written for a conference speech. In such instances, it proved helpful to conduct more than one interview. Two interviews were organised with this director, the second taking place one week after the first and both purposely carried out towards the end of the process, rather than at the start. Most of the data had been collected, by this point and analysed, which meant questions could be more usefully honed to answer any

outstanding questions or probe answers already given, thereby making the most of the opportunity. The students typically being junior managers had a more limited view of contextual issues than those in more senior positions, so the role and status of those being interviewed was given due consideration when planning the interview themes. In total twenty-three interviews were conducted, eleven with senior managers and twelve with students who had graduated from the programme.

Interviews as a research method are not without their limitations, as those being interviewed come with their own preoccupations, vantage points and sets of interests (Elger & Smith, 2014). This is of particular relevance when interviewing managers as they may feel under pressure to speak positively of what is going on in their organisation, whether through a sense of corporate commitment, or a sense of fear. Further, they may have important occupational identity issues. *“To play out the social identity of the manager the individual is likely to feel it necessary to present themselves as a rational, strategic person who ‘knows what they are doing’ and ‘who is in control’ in their jobs”* (Watson, 2010:211). Some researchers regard interviews as *“manufactured data”* so suggest conducting multi-method research where interviews are combined with ethnographic work (Silverman, 2007), whereas other writers regard interviews as an indispensable starting point to social enquiry (Bhaskar,1998). Archer (2007) exploring reflexivity argues that interviewees in saying what they do, endorse a belief in their own subjectivity and that this reflexive deliberation affects their actions within the objective social situation (in which) they find themselves (Archer, 2003: 14). She emphasises the autonomy of human agents, with interior thoughts that belong to them alone, but also that such agents reflect upon themselves in a relational fashion, in relationship to others and society. Archer argues

that it is therefore important for the interviewer to draw out and analyse human reflexivity, individual reasoning and their grounding in the ‘inner conversation’. A key skill of a researcher when interviewing is the ability to listen, without helping or prompting, what the participant wants to say and importantly what they do not. Summarising aspects of the interview also proved helpful when checking for understanding of the topics and terms used, McClelland (1965) and Mangham (1986) found this avoided ambiguous answers and confusion. For example, respondents were asked to define the term culture in their own words, before providing examples to illustrate the type of culture that existed in their organisation.

4.4.2 Participant Observation

Interviews can be a very effective method of gathering information (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). However, not all knowledge or information can be recounted or constructed in an interview situation (Mason, 2006). Another favoured method used in CR research is that of participant observation (Ackroyd, 2009). Participant observation was selected as a method of data collection because it offers the opportunity to get closer to the action and the people involved in organisational practices (Watson, 2011). In addition, direct observation of particular situations allows groups of actors to reveal their characteristic ways of behaving (Ackroyd, 2004). Watson (2011:204), a reluctant ethnographer argues there is a need to “investigate the realities of how things work in organisations”, he states:

I have always believed, whether I have liked it or not, that we cannot really learn a lot about what ‘actually happens’ or about ‘how things work’ in

organizations without doing the intensive type of close-observational or participative research that is central to ethnographic endeavour.

Participant observation can range from the performance of nominal and marginal roles to the performance of native, or insider roles (Junker, 1960, Gold, 1969) and can take the form of overt or covert research, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the difference between that of ethnography and participant observation. Bryman (2012) for example positions ethnography as including participant observation and discusses six field roles, the first two of which, covert and overt full membership are more traditionally associated with ethnography the latter categories including those below with participant observation:

- *A participating observer*, participates in the group's core activities, but does not become a full member of the group
- *Partially participating observer* is the same as a participating observer although observation is not necessarily the main source of data (Bryman, 2012:441-445).

There appear to be similarities amongst all four and six-fold participatory models, however those most pertinent to this study are that of the researcher as employee (Easterby-Smith, 2002) and the participating observer and partially participating observer (Bryman, 2012).

The Researcher as Employee

The role of researcher as employee provided a unique perspective as it provided a prearranged insider role, within the delivering institution rather than one that required negotiation. However, it did raise a number of ethical issues about conducting

research within a work environment rather than as a full-time researcher. McAreavey (2008) when writing about her own ethnographic study draws attention to some of the issues she encountered such as overemphasising personal identity and participation whilst marginalising the structural context and academic environment. Other aspects included the impact of social structures and professional and pragmatic research pressures. The following section examines the multiple roles of the researcher from being part of the social world being researched (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) to that of researcher in the field.

As a lecturer on the FdA in Retailing I participated in the principle activities of the university in designing and then later delivering the Personal and Professional Development Unit (PPD 1) (for a more detailed description see page 113). Once the pilot stage of the programme was complete, I made known my research interests to those managing and overseeing the programme within the academic institution. Thus, I was in the position of being in the field before research commenced, so had what Gummerson (2000:57) refers to as “*pre-understanding*”. This implies I had understanding of the organisational culture, policies, procedures and politics and therefore knew how to obtain information in the academic institution. Although this level of understanding did not transfer to the case organisation, affiliation afforded some advantages, for example, cooperation from managers when requesting interviews and increased access to students on the programme, ensuring the role assumed was not one of detached insider (McAreavey, 2008). Thus, what essentially began as covert research later transferred to an explicit role within the delivering organisation. This approach offered the maximum flexibility without engendering the ethical problems that may reside in covert research.

Many ethnographic researchers strongly value longitudinal studies that include significant periods of observation (Watson, 2011) rather than what Bates (2003) refers to as “*jet plane ethnography*” where researchers conduct no more than a series of flying visits. After the pilot programme, there were three distinct periods of participant observation from 2009-2012. The first was during the induction of students onto the programme, which took place over a two-day period at the beginning of September. The second period was throughout the delivery of the unit (10-week period from September to December) and the final opportunity was at the assessment centres which were generally held over a five day period each year at the beginning of July (an outline of the assessment centres is provided on page 188)

Changing Roles: The Many Hats of the Researcher

During the assessment centres, a “*participating as observer role*” was more appropriate as I was working alongside managers in the recruitment of new students. The advantages of observation as a participant are numerous and well documented. It enabled me to obtain an accurate picture of the culture of the case organisation and its workings by approaching the research from a local’s point of view (Narayan & Pebley, 2003). This gave access to the interior, seemingly subjective aspects of human existence, and although still an outsider, I was able to observe and experience the meanings and interactions of the people present at the assessment centre, which would otherwise have been unattainable. In addition, it helped develop rapport with key personnel such as head office staff, field and store managers and students who had graduated from the programme and with informants prior to interview, thus easing the interview process (Hamersley and Atkinson, 1995). Finally, it offered a means of triangulating data with interviews and documentary evidence.

The relationship between the participant as observer, the people in the field setting, and the larger context of human interaction is one of the key components of participant observation, so it was important to sustain access and maintain relationships with people in the field. The character of field relations can heavily influence the researcher's ability to collect accurate, truthful information (Jorgensen, 1989). I took on an additional role teaching on an accredited programme to maintain access to the case organisation. The programme was designed for managers within the case organisation to gain accreditation for studying a small number of 20 credit units without having to enrol for the full FdA in Retailing⁶. In addition, I was able to spend extended periods of time observing participants in their work environments, when conducting interviews to gain a fuller understanding of how structure and culture impinges their working lives.

Participating in these activities provided a rich and deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and heightened my awareness of significant social processes, particularly when combined with interviews and documentary evidence. However, being a privileged researcher (Milburne, 2000) provided some challenges. Taking on the multiple roles of employee, researcher and individual was not always comfortable, especially when moving between the academic institution and case organisation. This was particularly the case when participating at the assessment centres. Although present in a work capacity, the research objectives were to collect data and recruit students to participate in the study, therefore I had to make an

⁶ Selected students on the A level Options programme were invited to attend a two day workshop at the University. They were then given access to the e-learning platforms for the units included (PPD1 and Retail Environment) to enable them to complete a work based project. If successful, the students gained accreditation for the 40 Credits studied. In theory, this then entitled them to be fast-tracked through certain units if later admitted onto the programme.

informed judgement on what the predominant role should be. At the assessment centres, my work role was that of assessor. I was working alongside other assessors who included, store managers and field personnel including area and group personnel managers. The assessors were responsible for evaluating each candidate's performance and suitability for the programme during the daylong event, which was comprised of a range of activities including an interview, case scenario, presentation and group exercise. However, as a researcher my interest was to collect information from those running the assessment centre, the assessors and past students invited to talk at the event. As an individual, I was keen to create a good impression whilst representing the Business School and wanted to fit in well with the rest of the assessment team. Successful impression management at these events helped to alleviate some potential conflict (Goffman, 1959) however, the insider-outsider role still on occasion proved challenging. Whilst some fret about taking on dual roles and marginality, others like Van Maanen (2010:231) celebrate it:

One might argue that it is the very marginality of the craft – being on the edge of (at least) two worlds – that makes it valuable to the field of organization and management. Much move in either direction will neutralize its strength.

Many writers stress the importance of reflexivity when undertaking participative observation as the researcher can never be free of culture, discourse or existing theory (Alvesson, 2008). Although realist researchers unlike social constructionists are not required to reflexively deconstruct their own representational practices, they may be “*internally reflexive*” by critically scrutinizing their behavioural impact on the social settings under investigation and their associated field roles and deployment of

particular research protocols (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Being close to the research phenomena through taking on the role of researcher as employee, can lead to questions of observer bias. Saunders et al (2003: 230) suggest this cannot be avoided, they state “*all we can do is be aware of the threat to reliability it poses and seek to control it*”, using multi-methods enabled questions to be raised about the validity of the findings. Further, it is essential for those conducting participant observations to record what they see, because anything not recorded is lost or wasted (Delamont, 2007). The field notes taken, during this study, provided detailed observations and included my initial thoughts and reflections (Bryman, 2008). When conducting periods of participant observation, I would make jotted notes, inconspicuously during the event or immediately afterwards. These were later written-up as full field notes (thick description of the setting and the actors in it) and analysed along with documentary data received whilst participating in events. Below is an excerpt taken from the field notes:

6th July 2009: This morning, following on from the assessor briefing session, four members of the assessment team, including myself were discussing the issue of widening access of the FD to non-management students. I raised the point that many students were finding it difficult to gain the support of their store managers and felt that this would exacerbate the issue. The consensus amongst the assessors was that it was the student’s responsibility to ‘win’ the support of their store manager. One store manager commented (strongly) “*I would expect them to knock my door down to get my attention*”. Clearly suggesting candidates should have the necessary attributes to be able to action

this if selected for the programme, however junior managers in larger stores tended to find their store managers intimidating.

4.4.3 Collecting Documentary Evidence

Documentary evidence refers to the use of documents in social research. These provide a record of the social world (Macdonald and Tipton, 1993) and consist of written documents such as notices, correspondence, minutes of meetings, reports to shareholders, diaries, transcripts of speeches and administrative and public records (Saunders et al, 2003). Documentary evidence can also include: newspapers, magazines, television programmes, films, other mass media, virtual documents and company documentation (Bryman 2012) and can be useful in corroborating and augmenting evidence from other sources (Yin, 2003). For example, Pettigrew when conducting a case study of ICI combined interviews with documentary evidence taken from the company archives.

A range of documents were collected whilst teaching on the FdA in Retailing as an employee as researcher. These comprised course documentation produced by the delivering institution and included degree and unit specifications, course handbooks, student handbooks and unit information and evaluation some of which was available on the programmes visual learning environment. Promotional and course documentation produced by the case organisation and evaluation reports paid for by the case organisation but researched and compiled by external consultants. All examples, provided a distinct level of ‘reality’ in their own right and reviewed in terms of the context in which it was produced and who it was written for, its implied readership (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011). All documents were therefore checked for

their authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott, 1990). For example, the documentation produced by Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) during the launch of the FdA In Retailing was clearly intent on conveying the qualification positively, it focused purely on the success stories and ignored any negative representations, the same could also be said for promotional documentation produced by the case organisation.

Also included, was documentation produced by students whilst studying the Personal and Professional Development 1 (PPD1) unit. This included a reflective learning log. The log was not assessed, however students were encouraged to draw out extracts when writing their two assessed pieces of work; a portfolio and reflective report. The portfolio was a two-part report, the appendices contained examples of work produced by students whilst studying the unit. The main body of the report was a reflective account of how they were able to apply the theories, ideas and concepts studied to their workplaces. For the reflective report, students were required to reflect back over the whole year to select four significant events/activities, from across the programme that contributed to their learning and development both internal and external to work. Students were encouraged to keep an on-line reflective learning log, built-in to the visual learning environment, throughout the ten-week period whilst studying the PPD 1 unit. It is usual for academics to use diaries or learning logs for the purpose of reflection on learning by the student (Patterson, 1995). In these instances, the participant is both the observer and informant, providing the researcher with the “*view from within*” (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977:484). However, there are at least two major concerns regarding using this type of evidence. First the factual accuracy and second whether they do in fact report the true feelings of the writer (Scott, 1990). The

on-line learning logs provided a deeper insight into how the students perceived their reality, both within the organisation and external to it and provided some very honest accounts of the challenges they were facing: For example, one student wrote in her learning log:

I know I want to complete the degree so that I can improve my knowledge, find a career that I enjoy and find challenging...I would like to understand why I have not yet achieved my potential. I know, I have put off opportunities, but why? What am I afraid of - change? Why am I stuck in my comfort zone, and why is my first thought when I meet a hurdle to give in? (AC)

Completed voluntarily and only reviewed and commented upon by the unit leader, they provided a more credible source of data than the two assessed reports that counted towards the credits achieved in their first year of study. In general, these documents comprised more considered responses, that were often aligned to the rhetoric of the organisation. It was not clear whether the students considered these to be more public documents, and therefore able to be read by their managers/senior managers. To illustrate, when discussing the difference between management and leadership, a student in her response quoted what she referred to as a well-known organisational saying “*remember the saying between a boss and a leader; a boss says ‘go’ and a leader says ‘let’s go!’*” (CO) At times, it was difficult to distinguish between the views of the student and that of the organisation, as some aspects of the organisation’s culture appeared deeply engrained. However, these differences became less apparent when combining documentary evidence with other sources of data collection, for example the semi-structured interviews.

Case Company Documentation

Documentation compiled by the case company featured briefing documents about the FdA in Retailing for store personnel, supporting material for assessment days, company policies and procedures. The documentation also included support material for students. In 2010, ELH produced a glossy Foundation Degree Year Planner for students, this contained key dates for 2010-11 however, when checked the dates were incorrect, so the planner had to be withdrawn. The company employed an external firm of consultants, Reflexxion, to evaluate the first year of the programme. A summary of this document was included along with an evaluation report completed by FdF in 2011. Both un-published reports contain empirical data generated through interviews with students and managers within the case organisation. The report by Reflexxion used mainly quantitative data to evaluate the performance of units studied in the first year at three levels: learning, behaviour and results. Recommendations draw on quantitative and qualitative research, although the sample is small for a quantitative study (approx. 40 students) and qualitative findings have been limited to brief sentences. The report produced by FdF uses Phillips and Phillips (2008) four level model of evaluation to measure the return on investment of the programme. The findings generated from mainly qualitative data present a much positive account of the qualification and return on investment to the organisation. For instance, when encouraged to share their main thoughts and experiences about the programme in their own words, the students all responded positively: *“I found the course extremely interesting”*; *“I feel the course helped me develop in my role”*; *“A fantastic opportunity”* and *“I would really recommend the course, even for an employee with a lot of years of experience”*. Prior (2008) contends, documents are typically viewed as something to be worked on and their substantive meaning to be unravelled, not just

taken at face value. Both documents provided different perspectives that the authors wanted to communicate so therefore, are not entirely free from error and distortion (Scott, 1990). Interestingly, both reports highlight issues with the FdA in Retailing that have been further examined in this thesis.

When interpreting documents, Bryman (2008) proposes three methods: content analysis, semiotics and hermeneutics. Content analysis was one of the methods considered before the decision was taken to use template analysis; an examination of both is provided in the following section.

4.5 Analysing the Data

The problem when analysing the data was how to condense highly complex and context-bound information into a format, which tells a story that is convincing to the reader. The study generated many hours of raw data from transcripts (ranging from 10 to 35 pages in length), interviewer notes, observations and documentation. The philosophical background to the study and research objectives were both considered when researching the best method to use to analyse the data. Data analysis techniques reside on a continuum in terms of the level of transformation of data required from descriptive to interpretation (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003b). For instance, content analysis 'tests' theory, as the codes are drawn from theoretical ideas (deductive coding) and therefore considered descriptive. Grounded analysis explores new links as codes are drawn from the data itself (inductive coding), thus providing more detailed interpretation of the data. Themes derived from theory enable the researcher to replicate, extend or refute prior discoveries whilst inductive themes are often useful in new areas of research (Boyatzis, 1998). For the purpose of this study, some a priori

codes or themes were drawn from the conceptual framework that comprised the work of Fuller and Unwin (2003); Felstead et al, 2009, but it became clear once the data was transcribed that it would also be useful to work with themes drawn from the data itself. This prompted the search for a flexible method of data analysis that combined both deductive and inductive coding.

4.5.1 Template Analysis

A relatively recent development in organisational and management research is that of template analysis (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; King, 2004; Waring and Wainwright, 2008). It can be used within a range of epistemological positions, including realist qualitative research (King, 2004) although is unsuitable where quantitative and qualitative data is combined, as it may appear to produce coded segments which could simply be treated as units of analysis for content analysis. The attaching of codes to segments could also prove limiting to discourse analysts who want to explore the meaning and ambiguity in the use of language. A more detailed description of template analysis follows below.

Template analysis refers to a varied but related group of techniques for thematically analysing qualitative data (King, 2004). It has emerged from more structured approaches such as grounded theory and phenomenological analysis (Waring and Wainwright, 2008) and may be used to analyse any form of textual data including diary entries, interview transcripts, electronic text etc. However, it is less prescriptive than grounded theory, in that it does not specify procedures for data gathering and analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). It provides a more flexible technique with fewer specified procedures, permitting researchers to tailor it to their requirements. King

(2004) suggests this type of analysis works particularly well when the aim is to compare the perspective of different groups of workers within a particular context (King, 2004).

When using template analysis the first stage was to develop a coding 'template'. The epistemological position of the researcher will often influence the selection of codes. A 'half way' position was chosen to select the codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994; King, 2004). This involved starting with some a priori codes taken from the interview template and strongly expected to be relevant to the analysis. In this instance taken from the literature review and my experience of teaching on the FdA in Retailing, these codes were then refined and modified during the analysis process (Crabtree and Miller, 1999:167).

The next step involved transcribing the interview recordings and other primary data taken from observation, researcher notes and documentation. Voice recognition software was used when transcribing interview recordings. Transcribing the interviews verbatim was important as it facilitated familiarisation with the data prior to starting the coding process. Thereafter each transcript, field note and observation record was read line-by-line in order to identify potential themes and thoughts, comments were attached to each. This proved very time consuming but was a necessary and valuable part of the process. The next step comprised initial coding of the data. Realism research is not interested in every detail of all the perceptions of respondents, like constructivism research, instead they are only interested in those perceptions relevant to the external reality (Sobh and Perry, 2005:1204), only relevant parts of the transcripts were therefore highlighted. This served to pull together and

categorize a series of otherwise discrete statements, events and observations. NVivo 9 software was used in the early stages to aid the process of data analysis, selected over other packages as it works well with large data sets in retrieving and coding data (Jones, 2007). Guidelines for using computer aided data systems were followed, this involved gaining a good understanding of how the system operated by attending NVivo software demonstrations (Blismas and Dainty, 2003; Welsh, 2002). The use of technology for data analysis purposes has received criticism as some fear it will take over the analytical process when it should be the researcher's responsibility to extract key codes and concepts (Mason, 2002), furthermore, computer software may reduce sensitivity to important aspects of realism research that emphasize relationships, connections and creativity (Carson and Coviello, 1996). NVivo 9 provided a useful depository for the interview transcripts and proved helpful in the early stages of data analysis. However, problems using this software started to emerge when writing-up the findings chapters and at this point it was unclear how best to communicate and present the wide range of data collected. It took three iterations to organise these chapters, prompting the search for a new data analysis strategy that acknowledged the existing literature while simultaneously remaining open to possible new findings, what Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to as a mix between analytic and emergent categories. From this point, the data was analysed manually.

When identifying codes manually it was necessary to record the relevant code, in the margin of the transcript using different coloured highlighter pens. An A4 notebook proved useful in recording where codes could be found across the data set. Participant's names were listed across the top of the page so that when codes were later identified in relation to each participant they could be added to the column

below. The recorded information comprised page numbers, from transcripts, observation notes and documentation, and a phrase or two for clarification. If a section of data encompassed one of the a priori themes then it was appropriate to attach a code. In instances where no relevant theme existed, a new one was added or an existing code was modified (See Appendix D, for the template used on the theme of support). Changing the template to accommodate the text made analysis more inductive. As the process continued more themes emerged, this resulted in going back to previously coded data to see if there was any evidence of information previously not recognised as significant, this avoided the risk of missing information about the underlying structures and mechanisms. The coding exercise was initially undertaken independently, however later modified as different iterations of the findings chapter emerged during the write up stage.

4.6 Reflexivity, Ethics and Validity

This section is divided into two parts; the first considers the process of examining oneself as a researcher, and the research relationship. The second takes into account the ethical considerations that have guided this study from inception through to completion.

It has now become common practice for qualitative researchers to attempt to be aware of their role in the (co)-construction of knowledge, by aiming to “*make explicit how intersubjective elements impact on data collection and analysis in an effort to enhance the trustworthiness, transparency and accountability of their research*” (Finlay, 2002: 211). Johnson and Duberley (2003) propose three generic forms of reflexivity: the methodological, the hyper or deconstructive and the epistemic. Of the

three modes, epistemic reflexivity most closely aligns to my philosophical position. Based on a realist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, this mode requires researchers to develop a critical consciousness, which promotes itself in political and practical action to promote change (Grundy, 1987: 154). This requires the researcher to work at the nexus of theory and practice to assess critically their role in promoting change. Alvesson and Skolberg's (2009) four level model has been used to guide the process of reflexivity. Methods of data collection and data analysis incorporate; the first two levels of reflexivity.

The first stage involved problematizing the empirical data, this prompted reflection on the data generation process including the design of the data collection tool/s and data gathering methods (refer to pages 143-157). The second level of reflexivity concerned asking questions and reflecting on the way in which the data was analysed and included the selection of a priori themes and codes (refer to page 163). Reflexive commentary, relating to these two levels can be found in earlier parts of the chapter by referring to the page numbers given. The third level of reflexivity included clarification of the political-ideological context. Using reflexivity, I was able to examine my own stance, values, and role in the research process before contact was made with the research setting, during the field research and the period afterwards when analysing and writing up the findings (May, 2004). In my professional capacity as a senior lecturer, I had experience and insight into the phenomena under consideration prior to commencing the study. Firstly, as part of the development team accountable for the PPD 1 unit, this granted me access to those teaching and managing the programme. Second, when teaching on the unit I was in the position of being able to discuss, observe and assess aspects of the students learning. Finally, at

the end of the pilot, I was part of the team responsible for evaluating the programme. The academic role gave privileged access to information that would otherwise have been unobtainable to an outsider and resulted in the research problem emerging from the field rather than from the literature. Issues raised by the students with regard to organisational and management support and the high dropout rate at the commencement of the programme piqued my interest to gain a better understanding of the phenomena. The role of professional insight into the research process is highlighted by Sandelowski and Leeman (2012), they contend that a researcher's professional experience and background can enhance sensitivity to the data and enable connections to be identified although, alternatively, this insight could block differing understandings and perceptions. Therefore, the first task of researchers working within the domain of phenomenology is to 'bracket out' existing knowledge, understandings, suppositions and assumptions by engaging in reflexive analysis. However, for those working in the domain of critical realism, transparency and honesty are encouraged, as they can help identify any preconceptions held or imposed by the researcher. For example, the prologue to this thesis and the section on reflexivity provide information that identifies and contextualizes how the research purpose evolved.

In addition and to further aid reflexivity in the research design and implementation, a separation between agency and structure was maintained where appropriate, to examine the interrelationships that mutually shaped each (Archer, 2003). Agency, for the purpose of this thesis, "*operates in a world shaped by the previous actions of other actors that present actors with structures that both constrain and enable their range of actions*" (Mutch, 2007: 1128). Archer (2000) places strong emphasis on the

embodied nature of the person and their emotional commitments suggesting prime concern is on 'ends, not the means'. This she argues leads to very different forms of internal conversations. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis Archer (2007), presents four categories of reflexivity: the conversationalist, autonomous, meta-reflexive and the fractured reflexive. Of particular interest to this study were the internal conversations of the autonomous reflexive characterized by:

the lone exercise of a mental activity, which its practitioners recognise as being an internal dialogue with themselves and one which they do not need and do not want to be supplemented by external exchanges with other people (Archer 2003: 210).

Participants from the student population best fitted into this category, as they were pursuing change and their own personal projects that ultimately brought them into conflict with existing structures. Although, aware of the constraints and enablement's the existing structures afforded, they sought to work with or change them to suit their own requirements. As illustrated in the findings chapter, a small number of students did manage to instigate change at the local level whilst others who were unsuccessful were looking for new opportunities in either the head office environment or elsewhere.

Archer's notion of the '*internal conversation*' was also of relevance when in dialogue with academic colleagues from the host institution, whether it be those managing or teaching on the programme. As a population, they were more diverse and difficult to categorize. For example, the second programme co-ordinator was inclined to provide

carefully constructed answers making her appear guarded when interviewed although, she appeared far more open when conversing informally. Had I not been able to converse with this individual in a number of different contexts, I would have conceptualised her as a ‘conversational reflexive’. A ‘conversational reflexive’ seeks to maintain continuity of context rather than change it. However, the informal conversations also revealed her as a ‘meta-reflexive’ as she spent time whilst monitoring and evaluating the programme reflecting on the process itself. This reflexive process does not necessarily lead to change but did result in her becoming somewhat disillusioned with the structural confines of University North and the Client Organisation. Although Archer’s work on the internal conversation has been criticised as minimizing social factors (Caetano, 2014) it does help explain how different people exercise reflexivity, important when identifying the interplay between structure and agency. However, I was conscious as an ‘insider’ researcher that my role granted me access to ‘internal conversations’ that I would not otherwise have had access to. I was therefore mindful of the information received and how it was analysed and reported.

Vincent and Wapshott (2014) argue that it is advantageous for research designs to be sensitive to the organisations history in order to understand the emergence of causal powers and their antecedents. They argue organisations are made of people that form the ‘parts’ of emergent organisation structures; therefore, there was a requirement to understand the ‘parts’ of the organisation under investigation. Working alongside the case organisation whilst developing and delivering the FdA in Retailing gave the opportunity to deepen understanding of the case organisation and their involvement in piloting and supporting the qualification. Aided by knowledge of the department and

key employees, the department's current structure and its antecedent and its relationship with the operations function. This introduced a necessary historicity into explanation, along with a recognition of the layering of social phenomena (Rees and Gatenby, 2014)

Critical realists recognise that *“human agents are neither passive products of social structures nor entirely their creators, but rather are placed in an iterative and naturally reflexive feedback relationship to them”* (Davies, 2008:26). The opportunity to work, at times, closely with the case organisation provided grounded and contextualized accounts of ‘how the social world works’ (Watson, 2011). The subjects own accounts provided a starting point for the study especially in the early stages of the research process. Whereas participant observation provided the opportunity not only to describe but also explain these events by identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency. My retailing credentials comprising a fifteen-year career in retail management, proved beneficial in developing a rapport with participants from the case organisation. Having insider knowledge of retail work meant that I was not purely seen as an academic but someone who could talk about retailing having lived that experience.

Consideration to questions of representation and authority characterize the final level of reflexivity using Alvesson and Skolberg's (2009) model. How writers present their material reflects their approach and purpose of the report (Engward and Davis, 2015). In realism research, it is important to illustrate why observations occurred. These observations should focus on contingencies, structures and mechanisms (Sobh

and Perry, 2005). My task as a researcher was to communicate answers to the how and why questions, particularly relevant when writing-up the findings chapters.

4.6.1 Ethical Considerations

Ethical practice and the moral integrity of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the report findings are trustworthy and valid. To enhance “ethical literacy” requires a researcher to understand and engage with ethical issues as they emerge throughout the research process (Wiles, 2013). Therefore, ethical considerations formed an important part of the substructure of this thesis from the inception of the problem when writing the RD2 documentation (internal transfer report from MRes to MPhil) through to the final write-up stages. Engagement with the ethical dimensions involved asking several important questions, for example, what moral principles guide the research; what ethical issues affect how the research is conducted. Four guidelines for directing ethical conduct are proffered by Christians (2011:65) these include: informed consent; deception; privacy and confidentiality and accuracy. Apart from brief episodes of covert research these codes were adhered to in order to produce a valid and trustworthy thesis. A brief synopsis of the project was given to participants before their consent was sought (See Appendix G). All participants agreed voluntarily to participate with no attempt made to coerce individuals. In addition, no deceptive practices were engaged in to entice individuals to participate or used when gathering information. Interview dates and times were organised in advance and arranged to suit the participants. A general outline was supplied in advance of the interview and interview protocol, including gaining consent to tape record the interview, to accurately record what was said and make transcription easier. Participants, on completion were reminded of their right to

withdraw and their right of edit over the transcriptions (Yin, 2003), then thanked for their time and involvement. A copy of the consent form is available in Appendix F. Further information has been provided on informed consent in the sections pertaining to research methods and data analysis. The ESRC (2014) framework on research ethics acknowledges that there must be respect for the confidentiality of information supplied by the research subjects and the anonymity of respondents. Great care was taken to anonymize records and to report findings in a way that does not allow the identification of individuals. Names of participants were anonymised and locations undisclosed, although this was of less concern to the individuals involved than the researcher, in fact some students, in particular, were keen to speak about their experiences of studying on the FdA in Retailing. Patton (2002:411) suggests that some respondents want their identities known especially when their stories may become a catalyst for change, although the Data Protection Act (1998) introduced in 2000 requires anonymity and privacy to be both a legal and ethical consideration for the researcher.

This chapter presents an outline of the research methodology constructed and carried out for this study. First introduced was the philosophical paradigm of critical realism, contrasted with that of positivism and social constructionism critical realism provided the opportunity to conduct research within a stratified ontology of the real, actual and empirical (Bhaskar, 1978). This approach was integral to addressing the research problem and objectives that spanned three different levels of analysis, the economic/political, the organisation and the individual. The research objectives dictated the theoretical perspective taken. As generative mechanisms operate below the surface of reality, it was necessary to select a research approach that provided

depth. Therefore, a qualitative single, intrinsic case was chosen for the research methodology because it provided a better understanding of the case context rather than offer some abstract construct (Stake, 1995). The methods selected, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence, are commonly found within this type of methodology and sit well within critical realist paradigm yet, the researcher as participant role was far from unproblematic. Discussed are the opportunities this unique role presented but also the difficulties of “wearing too many hats” as a researcher whereby objectivity and rigour had to be balanced against ethical considerations. How to best present a convincing explanation using the data collected raised further challenges. Mason (2002) argues that all qualitative research should be formulated around an “*intellectual puzzle*” that is unravelled throughout the research process. In Part-Two of the thesis the unravelling process begins when the findings are explained, commencing with the formation of the FdA in Retailing.

Chapter Five: The Formation of the FdA in Retailing

As outlined in Chapter 3 the FdA in Retailing was established to meet the needs of the retail sector (see page 116). A Government funded body Foundation Degree Forward (FdF) had responsibility for supporting the development and validation of Foundation Degrees (Forward, 2005) including the FdA in Retailing in partnership with other appointed members of the steering committee, the case organisation who piloted the programme, the delivering institutions and software designers. The three findings chapters trace the FdA in retailing from the programmes launch in September 2007 to the autumn of 2012, although reference is made, in the contextual chapter, to earlier periods when Foundation Degrees were first founded. The findings form three consecutive chapters. The first explores the broader macro context, the formation of the degree and launch of the pilot programme, induction of students onto the FdA in Retailing and student expectations for the programme. The second chapter examines the challenges faced by students going through the programme. The final chapter evaluates the merits of the programme from an organisational and individual perspective. The central findings concerning the broader macro context and establishment of the degree come, primarily from an interview conducted with an FdF Director just prior to the abolition of FdF in October 2010. Added later in the section are the findings from other stakeholder groups. The findings revealed that ELH, were unable to adequately position the qualification within their existing talent development strategies for store management, raising questions as to why ELH would pursue a qualification which clearly added little value.

5.1 Establishing a Foundation Degree for the Retail Sector

Foundation Degrees were designed in association with employees to equip people with the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to achieve academic results as well as improve performance and productivity in the work place. Their remit was to increase the professional and technical skills of employees within a particular job or profession (UCAS, 2015). A number of large employers already provided FDs to their employees including; NHS, Network Rail, RAF, Rolls Royce, TUI, in fact FDs can be found in most sectors of employment. However, less apparent were the difficulties encountered when trying to establish a Foundation Degree that meets the needs of a particular sector rather than a standalone organisation. The FdA in Retailing was benchmarked against the Skillsmart Retail Foundation Degree Framework, developed in partnership with major retailers and the Sector Skills Council. According to Caspian (FdF Director) the document was “*quite substantive*” and included “*a wide interrogation of employer needs*” (Caspian, FdF Director) as outlined in Chapter 3. However, he found the majority of retailers reluctant to collaborate; share information and trial work based learning initiatives, unlike those of other sectors such as engineering and information technology. Historically, both these sectors have a good record of accomplishment when it comes to investing in training and development but he also found that companies including; BT, Vodaphone, O2, HP, Akina and Erricson had “*no great worries about sharing information*” and working collectively on educational provision for their sector. According to Caspian, these organisations acknowledged they were going to get labour mobility across the sector, but if training and education provision was right then everyone gains. Both engineering and IT competed in global markets where collaboration amongst large and small companies is normal. Thus cooperating at national level on strengthening

the skill base was not surprising. In addition, the sectors referred to belonged to established professional bodies that encouraged collaboration, for example the Engineering council. They, for example, stated that all aspiring engineers and technicians should have access to world-class education and training programmes to help them develop industry-relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours. The Council worked closely with the Government and Higher Education bodies to ensure that standards of UK engineering degrees were maintained within the European Higher Educational arena as part of the Bologna Agreement. The sector skills council representing the retail sector was People 1st⁷ after they acquired two of Skillsmarts retail assets. Compared to its engineering counterpart, People 1st do not have the same professional standing or academic influence. Reflected in the comments made by Caspian's (FdF Director) when describing the retail sectors attitude to education and skills:

Dare I say as a sector it is not very mature about understanding this agenda.....they are all a bit bullish, they think what they are doing is really unique...but in reality they are doing pretty much the same stuff (Caspian, FdF Director).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, UK VET has had a chequered history; it has been successful in some sectors, for example engineering however, in the retail sector there has been no tradition of vocational learning, jobs are predominantly low skilled with employees being less qualified than in other sectors.

⁷ People 1st are a charitable organisation set up by the government (quango) to identify employers needs and work in partnership with them to develop solutions that increase performance through people in the hospitality, tourism, leisure, travel, passenger transport and retail industries.

UK Retailing split across eight different areas (grocery, fashion, department stores home and DIY, electrical, health and beauty, general merchandise and entertainment and generalists) appear to have concerns about the sharing of information relating to education and skills. For example, there has been brutal competition between supermarkets, with the major four scrambling to maintain market share whilst also competing with the discount retailers (Smith, 2014). It has therefore been price and service rather than skill and innovation pushing the sector forward, thus making collaboration less likely. In addition, there appears little likelihood of cross sector collaboration between different retail groups:

Having been in the sector five years or so I think that there is resistance to something that is derived from the grocery retailing sector as being seen as fit for purpose for the others (Caspian, FdF Director)

Rather than promoting the FdA in Retailing to other retailers, the former FdF Director suggested that a separate dialogue was required to address their skill needs so that something new could be developed specifically for them. He acknowledged that there had not been transferability to fashion or to department store retailers such as John Lewis or Marks and Spencer, or to that of small retailers:

There has not been and never will be in my view transfer across to small retailers, I think we would just be really optimistic if we could hit small retailers with a provision of this type (Caspian, FdF Director).

When establishing the FdA in Retailing the FdF Director maintained his organisation did try to create a programme that had wider sector appeal however admitted, “*you are always caught between the devil and the deep blue sea*”. Small retailers undertake very little training, so this would automatically rule out large numbers of employees eligible to study for this qualification. Rather scathingly, the FdF Director suggested that employees within this group would be better suited to Mary Portas⁸ type training. Next considered, is the selection of the pilot organisation and the ramifications of choosing just one organisation to lead on a qualification supposedly designed for the retail sector.

5.2 The Pilot Organisation:

‘Caught Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea’

The two key stakeholders in the design and delivery of the FdA in Retailing are presented within this section. Explored is how and why they came to be instrumental in the rollout of the Foundation Degree starting first with ELH before moving on to University North. Being employer-led Foundation Degrees are developed in conjunction with the Sector Skills Council or governing body overseeing the qualification, the FdA in Retailing was no exception. However, unlike other Foundation Degrees just one organisation was involved at the pilot stage. The decision to use only one organisation to pilot the FdA in Retailing was taken by FdF. They presented two reasons, first; they admitted that it would require “*sheds loads more funding*”, to pilot the programme with a wider cross-section of retailers, although Caspian (FdF Director) agreed this should have taken place. Second,

⁸ Mary Portas is a retail consultant and broadcaster, known for her retail- and business-related television shows, and her appointment by David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, to lead a review into the future of Britain's high streets.

securing ELH to pilot the programme was a major achievement. FdF maintained involvement of ELH was crucial to the success of the degree and strongly suggested involving other retailers in the pilot might have jeopardised that relationship:

It would have probably turned off [ELH] from the provision anyway, because they did not want to share it. When you have a big name like that signed-up, you cannot ignore that...it would be at your peril to ignore it in terms of establishing a new qualification for the sector. I think the work to be done is work that Skillsmart retail should be doing rather than FdF (Caspian, FdF Director).

As mentioned in the contextual chapter, the intention for this Foundation Degree was to add value to the sector and contribute to the narrowing of skills gaps, whilst rewarding retail employees with improved chances of career progression, both within and outside the industry (Definitive Document for the FdA in Retailing, University North).

ELH considered themselves to be the ‘number one retailer to pilot the programme’ as they were approached directly by the New Labour government to participate in the development and launch of the qualification in 2005 (Lisa, Manager, Education and Skills). The FdA in Retailing generated extensive publicity for the organisation when first launched. Although, it was alluded that without FdF funding to establish the consortia and pilot the programme, the organisation may have declined to participate (Caspian, FdF Director). The opportunity to acquire a tailor made Foundation Degree programme, funded at the pilot stage by HEFCE was difficult to refuse. The cost of

the FdA in Retailing when first launched in 2007 was approximately £3000 per student for each year of the two-year programme, subsidised during the Pilot stage by the Sector Skills Council and later paid in full by the organisation.

The delivering institution, University North were unclear how ELH had joined the consortium, but surmised, that background conversations had taken place at a higher level between FdF and senior managers in the sector because they commented “*when FdF arrived, they arrived with ELH*” (Simon, Project Manager).

The company provided four reasons for offering the FdA in Retailing (Foundation Degree Programme, 2010: 1): The first, to support staff development through to store management roles. Second, to provide managers with a broad understanding of the retail sector and the skills and knowledge needed as a store manager. The third was to extend the suite of qualifications offered by the company, the document states: “*It is our aim that at every level, people will be able to gain a qualification whilst working for us*”. Finally, it was important to be the first major retailer to offer a HE qualification against the new standard. The Programme Manager within the delivering institution University North concurred with some of these reasons:

To say that you will not only be trained as a [ELH] manager, but you will have a transportable qualification, that was a big attraction to them. They bought in to the idea of making training and management development and the fast track into management positions more attractive, and ultimately that evolved to make it more attractive to the market place (Simon, Programme Manager).

Importantly, the long term strategic vision for the Education and Skills team in ELH was to create a seven-year, fast track programme to store management incorporating A levels and trainee management Options programmes (in-house management training scheme) and the FdA in Retailing, further outlined in chapter 7.

The Delivering Institution: University North

According to ELH, University North was one of six universities who pitched for the contract. They won the bid because of previous experience delivering FDs and FdF's recommendation. One of the Education and Skills managers commented, "*I think you guys delivered foundation degrees before, so it felt like a natural fit*" (Lisa, Manager, Education and Skills). This was not actually the case as University North had not delivered Foundation Degrees previously. The project manager at University North explained the idea for the Foundation Degree dated back to a European funded project that ran from 2002-2005. Drawing on previous experience they had found that attendance based courses for retail employees did not match what employers needed, so began to develop e learning and CD Rom learning packages for small retailers at NVQ Level 2, mapped to a National Qualification Framework. When the University started to develop a higher, FD level qualification the Project Manager stated "*we already knew that blended/e-learning was the best model to use*" (Simon, Project Manager, University North). Work started on developing a FD in Retailing with University South and a technology provider based in the North of England, but the project initially stalled through lack of funding. Later HEFCE stepped into the breach followed by FdF who brought funding for the consortium (Simon, Project Manager, University North). The consortium consisted of FdF, University North, [University South], the technology provider and ELH. The project manager for University North

explained that the objectives for the steering committee were two-fold (Simon, Project Manager):

1. Produce a generic technology assisted workplace learning foundation degree in retail
2. The programme of which was to be based on the SkillSmart Framework for FDs in the Retail sector (matching of learning outcomes). The sub-objective was to contextualise the said generic FD in Retailing for ELH.

The Project Manager was of the opinion 70 to 80 % of what was designed were “core products” consistent with the SkillSmart Framework, the other 20 to 30 % could be adjusted to meet the needs of a new employer. He stated “*there was a clear desire to have consistency of product*” (Simon, Project Manager). He argued the programme was based on consultation with employers so was reluctant to undertake any further consultation commenting “*we decided that 70 % of it was fit for purpose...and that by and large seems to have been a pretty good judgement*” (Simon, Programme Manager).

In conclusion, government funded FdF was tasked with responsibility for establishing a new FD qualification to meet the needs of the retail sector, however from the outset the requirements of the sector as a whole appeared to have been misunderstood or ignored. Perhaps the government should have stated that the FD was only for large multiple retailers as the qualification was clearly never intended for the majority of small organisations within the sector. Further, does the sector actually require higher-level skills and qualifications? The evidence suggests not, as price and service rather

than skill and innovation were the prime areas of concern. Although, when offered a tailor made qualification, funded partly by the taxpayer, what retailer could refuse? Additionally, employers have become increasingly ‘savvy’ at securing public monies to pay for training requirements (Payne and Keep, 2011). However, when designing a demand-led qualification for the sector, surely, it would have made sense, at the very least to have consulted more than one retailer on the design of the FD, even if retailers have found it difficult to articulate what they require in relation to skills. The next section appraises why managers apply for the FdA in Retailing and how the programme was populated.

5.3 Applying for the FdA in Retailing

This section investigates why managers applied for the FdA in Retailing taking into account their motivations and expectations for the qualification. First, to be considered is the students’ past academic attainment and prior workplace experience as it is argued, evolving habitus can influence individual dispositions to learning (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). The findings show that student expectations are varied, but in the main fall into three main overlapping categories: career progression, personal goals and the opportunity to learn whilst in employment.

5.3.1 Exploring Why Managers Apply

Small accounts have been provided by each student to illustrate why they applied to study for the FdA in Retailing. In ELH graduates were restricted from applying as they already had a HE qualification. Four of the managers interviewed had studied in higher education previously but had not completed their courses. One student, employed for three years in the company left to start a full-time degree in Retail at

The University of Colerain. He did not enjoy the programme so went back to ELH, enrolled on the Options⁹ programme and immediately recruited for the FdA in Retailing pilot programme. His intention was to return to Colerain University at the end of the FD but remained with the company (Roger, Security Manager). Des, (Distribution Manager) embarked on an Open University programme in maths and computing whilst working full-time for ELH. The subjects both related to areas of personal interest but a family bereavement prevented him from completing his studies. The FD gave him a way out of a job he felt disillusioned with, and gave him what he described as being a “*step up*”.

Kara, (Compliance Manager) attended Glasgow Caledonian University to study Business. In her opinion she failed to give the degree the commitment required, she did not like the setting, suggesting it was more akin to college than university. She moved back home and joined ELH on the ‘A levels Option programme’. She was talent spotted by the manager responsible for the qualification and asked if she wanted to go to the assessment centre. She commented: “*this gave me the chance to stay with ELH and still achieve what I wanted*” (Kara).

Ember, (Clothing Manager) took four A-levels at college; Sociology; Psychology; Media Studies and English Language. She took a gap year before going to John Moors University to study sociology. Whilst studying she obtained a part-time job with another large supermarket chain and found work more stimulating than university, commenting: “*I got quite bored with it*”. She did not regard herself as the ‘stereotypical student’ she had already moved in with her partner and did not tend to

⁹ An internal tailor-made training programme intended to develop employees at every level of the business with leadership and general operating skills, courses last between six months and two years.

socialise much with other students. When she left the company and joined ELH she was accepted onto the A level Options programme and like Kara, was asked if she would like to do the FD. She commented:

The idea of university did not thrill me but the idea of gaining knowledge of what I am doing in my job role is really important and they were saying that it would help me when I want to become senior team, store manager, group roles. Having that knowledge from a different perspective and not just being completely corporate is a different spin that really intrigued me (Ember).

Gaining a greater understanding of retailing and career advancement were two of the key reasons students applied for the programme. For example, Andy, (Store Manager – Smaller Formats) wanted to learn more about retailing but also saw the FdA in Retailing as a means of advancing his career. Similarly, Roger (Security Manager) wanted to progress his career in ELH, but further motivation was “*actually having that nice qualification*” (Roger). Two students were disappointed with their academic attainments. John (Grocery Manager) stated that he never had a clear career path. He joined ELH whilst studying for his A Levels on ‘twilight shifts’. This involved work that started as he finished school and continued into the early hours of the morning. He suggested long hours working meant that his ‘heart’ was not in his studies; he was disappointed with his academic attainment knowing that he could have done better. He enrolled on the programme to gain “*greater knowledge of the retail sector*”. Tina (Bakery Manager) obtained a Diploma in Business and Secretarial Studies but again felt that she had underachieved whilst in education commenting she had not really achieved anything for herself:

Having not achieved academically has pushed me forward and it has made me work harder to become a manager and succeed within the career that I have chosen (Tina).

She cited two reasons for applying for the FdA in Retailing, the main reason was personal in that she wanted to prove to herself that she could achieve academically, the second was work related, remarking the degree “*will help me in my chosen career*”. She was apprehensive about returning to education but spoke positively about the advancements she had made. Initially, Leia (Checkout Manager) was also worried about returning to academic study but observed “*things clicked into place at the end of the first year*”. She, like Ember took a gap year after completing her A’ Levels, during this time she commenced work with ELH and decided not to return to full-time education. When enrolled on the A Level Options programme she received a letter inviting her to apply for the programme. Her Store Manager, also her in-store mentor noted:

I think there is always a bit of [Leia] that said she wanted to do a degree, she wanted to do more study and was not finished with education. This is just a very convenient route back into it...it must be quite daunting for someone who is in a managerial position to say, ‘I am going to give the salary up and go back to full-time education’ ...This provided the balance for her. Yes she could do some education but then she could also keep a good salary and keep doing the job she enjoys (Tom, Store Manager – Large Format).

The FdA in Retailing gave managers the opportunity to study whilst in full-time employment. Student expectations of the programme varied although it is evident that some clearly viewed the programme as a ‘fast-track’ to promotion and more senior management roles. Des (Distribution Manager) for example undertook the programme because he understood it to be a “*fast-track option*” that alleviated the need to undertake the Options programmes or other management training. He remarked:

Because if you are capable of doing the FdA in Retailing, you pass it then you are pretty much guaranteed a sort of promotion, as if it were the next step up. Get through all of this, do that, go through the process and you are done, but that never materialised at all (Des).

The FdA in Retailing was promoted within the company as being for the students own development, an “*exclusive opportunity*” but problematically it was also regarded an “*easy ride to promotion*” (Michelle, Manager Education and Skills). Michelle commented, the FdA in Retailing should aid development and ensure that managers who completed the programme were in a better position for promotion, but it is not going to get them there:

I know it is very difficult, maybe because their profile is raised a bit and they just get a bit big for their boots...it comes down to not what you know, but who you know. It is all about changing that ethos isn't it? (Michelle, Manager Education and Skills).

Michelle admitted this was a difficult, if not impossible situation for her to manage from head office. She believed the best way to promote this information was through the store mentors and past students sharing their experiences. One reason she stated for inviting students to the assessment centres was to “*dispel these myths*” so that potential applicants would not be left feeling disappointed (Michelle). The Education and Skills team endeavoured to change the ethos and manage student expectations but whilst the programme remained “exclusive” with limited numbers, they admitted this had been a challenge.

Initially, retailing was not a long-term career option for many of the managers involved in this study. Some had taken retail jobs when studying for a bachelor’s degree had failed to meet their expectations. Others had commenced in part-time work whilst completing A Levels or taking a gap year. However, by the time they were selected for the FdA in Retailing, all had commenced their management training with ELH although, the majority remained disappointed with their academic achievements. Disappointing educational achievement was one reason given when asked why they had applied to study for the qualification. Two further reasons were to gain a better understanding of retailing and the retail context and importantly to gain career advancement, the two in many cases being interconnected. What came through markedly in the findings was that individual objectives to study for the qualification did not align to those of the company. Individuals have been shown to be most engaged with workplace learning when it supports their continuity and career aspirations with regard to promotion and personal goals (Billett, 2004).

5.4 Populating the Programme

A number of different approaches have been used to populate the FdA in Retailing since its launch in 2007, with varying results which will be reviewed in this section. When ELH agreed to pilot the programme, they became an integral member of the steering committee working alongside University North and other key stakeholders to design and develop the qualification. However, it was the sole responsibility of ELH to select appropriate candidates for the programme. No selection criteria existed for the pilot programme, instead, a select number of managers taking A Level Options¹⁰ were asked if they wanted to join, the shortfall being taken up by existing line managers. The company admitted they failed to match the programme correctly at this stage, as at the end of the pilot the organisation reported a 56% dropout rate with only five students from an initial cohort of 22 graduating at University North.

This wasn't the best recruitment for it and this shows in the drop-out rate...but we did just kind of pin-point people and matched it through certain areas, so we weren't a 100 % sure that we had it right, we just brought these people on as our trial cohort (Lisa, Manager in the Education and Skills Department).

After the pilot programme finished, the criteria for selection onto the FdA in Retailing was widened to include customer assistants and team leaders, on Options or due to attend sign-on prior to the start of the programme. Submission also extended to senior team, managers looking for a 'stretch' opportunity and aiming to sign on to Options in the next 12 to 24 months (Foundation Degree Internal Briefing Document, 2010).

¹⁰ An in-house management programme lasting approximately twelve months and only applicable to those with A-Level qualifications

This resulted in students with little or no management experience studying alongside experienced managers, developing to store management roles, the rationale being “*the characteristics of the people...rather than the job’ should be taken into account*” when recruiting suitable candidates for the programme (Lisa, Manager in Education and Skills). In agreement with widening the selection criteria was one of the Format Resource Managers¹¹, she commented: “*It is good to have a mixture of employees because then it can only enrich the dynamics of how it will work*” (Nancy, Format Manager, North). However, the Programme Coordinator from University North was unconvinced by this argument remarking “*ELH does not know how the programme fits into their ladder of progression*” (Ivan, Programme Coordinator 1).

Although willing to trial a number of different options, it was clear the organisation had struggled to position the FdA in Retailing amongst its other management development offerings. In 2010, recruitment scaled back to line managers and managers developing to store manager roles. This was largely due to the launch of a new school leaver programme accredited at National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level three and targeted at 16 to 18 year olds. This decision was justified by a member of the Education and Skills team who commented:

This fits best with the younger population than the FdA in Retailing which supports the more senior population because it goes into more depth. This part of my seven year career path is that they get the NVQ level three at sixteen to eighteen, then they come on to the ‘A Level Options’ and do the

¹¹ Format resource managers operate in the field to support area managers/store managers with HR strategy, responsible for approximately 25 stores within one of the three formats across a geographical area.

accreditation with University North, and then as part of your team we embed the FD (Michelle, Manager Education and Skills).

Although store managers are eligible, they have been discouraged from applying due to the demanding nature of their jobs. This has changed more recently with store managers from smaller formats joining the programme after scrutiny of their roles at the assessment centres. Lack of a coherent recruitment strategy has led to confusion in-store over who is eligible to study for the qualification. The organisation had a well-integrated training programme for managers that provided the relevant skills and knowledge required at each management level. New initiatives like the ‘school leavers programme’ introduced by the Coalition Government in 2010 were integrated into this pipeline yet, the FdA in Retailing, a qualification designed specifically for the organisation remained external. This caused particular problems when it came to advertising and promoting the award.

5.5 Adverting and Promoting the Qualification

This section outlines how the FdA in Retailing was advertised and promoted within the organisation. After the pilot programme ended, ELH moved to an in-store nomination system where candidates had to submit a formal application if they wished to be considered. The system involved the Education and Skills Department sending out an internal communication document to each store via the Format Personal Managers. This document, outlining the recruitment process, would then be pinned to the store notice boards for employees to read. Individual managers had to gain their store managers approval before submitting their application. In essence, this system was straightforward yet, there have been significant problems advertising

and promoting the qualification. The organisations system was antiquated and heavily reliant on key personnel firstly having an awareness of the qualification and secondly knowing who was eligible to apply. The format manager's comments illustrated there was a general lack of awareness surrounding the qualification:

People don't know enough about it, because we don't promote it or sell it enough or talk about it enough. So, if you were to go into the shops and ask about the FD, they might never have been told about it and that is what we have to address (Nancy, Format Manager, North).

It was evident that the head office based Education and Skills department did not wield much influence in the stores and conceded that engaging with over 2,500 stores across four formats had not been an easy task. However, their lack of decisiveness and constant changes over eligibility may also have compounded confusion in-store. Three years after the programme launched, it was evident that uncertainty remained when Michelle a manager from the Education and Skills department commented, "*I don't think they understand it to be honest*" when referring to the store managers, adding:

At the moment everyone has got a bit complacent of the FdA in Retailing. The engagement with the stores, there is a big piece of work that needs to be done around it because the talent that we saw coming through to the assessment centre this year shocked me. I feel that at the moment the Personnel Manager's are not being up-skilled properly on how to talent spot. I think they have got the briefing down on store communications and gone 'anyone

fancy doing the Foundation Degree'?, yes I do, well go to the assessment centre then (Michelle, Manager in the Education and Skills Department).

This resulted in a tranche of unsuitable candidates attending the assessment centres (outlined in more detail in the following section). Unsuitable in the opinion of the assessors, as many lacked the necessary academic and managerial experience necessary for consideration. This was both a waste of company resources and daunting for those managers who had to endure the assessment centre process. The Assessors, laid blame with store management for not sufficiently screening applicants, although it is fair to say there were fundamental issues with the whole process of recruitment of FdA in Retailing students, stemming largely from the way in which the qualification was promoted across the organisation.

5.6 Assessment Centres

The in-store nominations system for the FdA in Retailing commenced in April of each year with a briefing for Group Personnel Managers and Store Managers, followed by the submission of nominations to the Format Resource Managers or Format Personnel Managers. Screening of on-line applications took place in May after which successful applicants had to attend a one-day assessment centre held over a two-week period at University North in June/July. The managers from Education and Skills coordinated and managed the event with the university Gateway team, a department that administered commercial programmes, organised rooms, catering etc. An academic member of staff, who taught on the programme, attended the event to observe proceedings or take an assessor role, with one assessor appointed for every two candidates; there were twelve candidates invited to each assessment centre. The team

of assessors comprised of store and group personnel managers, who all attended a short briefing session at the start of the event. The day commenced with introductions, and an icebreaker, followed by four activities, the department critique contained two elements:

- Department critique: candidates have to select a non-food department in a different store within the same company and provide a critique in the form of a SWOT analysis¹². They have to compile a 1000 word report submitted on the day and present their findings in a ten-minute presentation, using PowerPoint or other visual aids.
- Face-to-face interview: a sixty-minute semi structured interview based on the following criteria; programme fit/motivation, developing self and others, managing change and drive
- Group exercise: candidates each play the part of a deputy manager on Group 50. Working in pairs the candidates have forty minutes to study the information and prepare a business case. They have five minutes to present their findings.

The assessors had guidance and marking sheets for each activity and rotated between candidates. The traffic light system of blue, green, amber and red was used to assess candidates, with blue being the highest attainment and red the lowest. This system featured widely throughout the company so was familiar to internal assessors and candidates but was unfamiliar to University staff. Between activities and during lunch, students who had graduated from the FdA in Retailing were invited to speak frankly to candidates about their student experiences.

¹² A SWOT analysis comprised strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The first two aspects are internal to the organisation, the second two external.

When all candidates left at the end of the day, results were compiled and individual profiles discussed in ascending order. Those running the event decided the cut-off point for consideration, a score of fifteen or above generally indicated acceptance onto the programme although this could vary dependent on the overall cohort. There was no requirement to vary this decision if the numbers eligible were low. Discussions proved detailed and methodical taking into account store location and management team. If store management support was questioned, the option of moving the candidate was proposed. The organisation used assessment centres extensively for recruitment and development purposes especially for graduate recruitment with activities being similar for both the FD and Graduate Training Scheme. The assessment centres ran with military precision, most assessors being conversant with the activities, and selected because of their development focus. The Assessors however, were critical of the recruitment process in the stores, complaining the marketing was not sufficiently effective to attract the right people, as only 25% of candidates were successful from 120 managers who attended the assessment centres each year. Presented in the next section is an outline of the induction and on-boarding event at University North. All students attended this event prior to starting the programme.

5.7 Induction, Management On-boarding & The Mentoring Role

Successful applicants attended an Induction to the FdA in Retailing which took place at University North one week before the programme commenced. The content was similar to that given to full-time Bachelors students but condensed rather than spread across two or more days. The event opened with a welcome by the Dean of the Business School and Associate Head of the Department with responsibility for the

programme. Candidates then received an introduction to the FdA in Retailing, library facilities, on-line classroom, student services and student support.

Explaining the Mentoring Role

At the induction, students and their managers had the opportunity to network with academic and support staff during a buffet lunch. It was important for each student's Store Manager to attend the event as they were able to learn more about the programme and their role as the student's appointed mentor. However, many declined due to pressures of work. When the programme first launched Operational Directors were selected to mentor the students, but the role has subsequently fallen to that of Store or Personnel Managers. This once again illustrates the level of importance given to the qualification across the organisation although on the rare occasion Store Directors have taken the role of mentor. It was also the Store Director's responsibility to assign each student with a '*good*' mentor. A good mentor was someone who could mentor the student for the duration of the programme, regardless of whether they or the Store Manager relocated to other stores or formats (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills). However, as personnel in the stores regularly changed roles, as a matter of course, this became an issue for managers studying on the programme.

The organisation was carrying out substantial work around mentoring. They had established an organisational development sponsorship programme for undergraduates and further programmes for ethnic minorities and female workers. It was suggested these schemes needed broadening to encompass the FdA in Retailing. However, clarity around the mentor/mentee role was required:

We know what mentors need to do, but generally, the candidates don't know what the mentors are there for, it should be what the candidates are needing, so it is kind of up skilling people on what a mentor/mentee relationship should look like, it does not need to be every week, every month. It can be casual, if they have a problem they just need to hook up...If they have got a situation they don't know how to handle that's when the relationship really works well

(Lisa, Manager Education and Skills)

Lisa explained she had a mentor whom she saw every twelve weeks or so, or when seeking advice on a work related problem. She was adamant that both parties must buy-in to the mentoring agreement and spoke highly of the initiative. The mentoring arrangement was for head office personnel. There did not appear to be a similar scheme for those working in-store furthermore, there was no formal training programme for mentors/mentees involved in the FdA in Retailing although informal briefing sessions took place between store managers and managers from Education and Skills during the on boarding sessions (Carol, Programme Coordinator).

Depending upon which briefing document is referred to, the store manager as the student's mentor, were required to review their candidate's performance every period (three months), or four weekly. Included in the review was a discussion on the students' progress in relation to their E-learning, assignments and grades (In-store Foundation Degree Briefing Document, 2010: 4). In addition, The FdA in Retailing, student folder (pp17) stated that Store Managers were required to manage the mentoring relationship and support the student whilst learning enabling them to access work based learning and set activities and exercises.

Providing the students with a mentor was a prerequisite of FD programmes. Lisa (Manager, Education and Skills) explained why she thought the role was necessary:

The FdA in Retailing is really tough, it is really accelerated, so there are going to be times when people are going through what we call the emotional cycle of change...There's going to be a lot of times when they they're going to be in a situation that they have not been in before. They are going to feel very emotional and they need the support, they need someone to bounce off of
(Lisa, Manager, Education and Skills)

However, another manager in the Education and Skills department Michelle, later admitted that on boarding or inducting store managers was very difficult to support as store moves occurred on a daily basis. The Programme Controller University North also found it rare for students to have the same mentor throughout the programme. He found that when store managers changed roles, their replacements often knew little about the qualification which caused significant problems for the student. The Head Office team relied on the students to identify the sponsorship they required, with Education and Skills providing back-up (Michelle, Manager, Education and Skills), this system was often ineffective as the mentor/mentee role was ambiguous and poorly implemented. The store manager and the mentor role in particular were integral components of the Foundation Degrees as they supported and facilitated workplace learning. Student views on this relationship are therefore, examined further, in the next chapter.

Were ELH the obvious choice to pilot the FdA in Retailing? The managers in the Education and Skills department clearly thought so, yet, even when presented with the opportunity to lead on a demand-led qualification, designed by ELH in collaboration with University North and FdF, they failed to integrate it into their existing talent development pipeline. The organisation lacked a long-term strategic vision for the qualification, suggesting they had bought into government subsidies offered to employers to engage in FDs, without considering organisational fit. Further, the organisation, at the pilot stage, was reluctant to collaborate with other retailers in the design and delivery of the qualification, preferring to maintain ownership and revel in the associated benefits of being the first retailer in the country to possess such a qualification. As illustrated in the literature review, the retail sector does not have a strong history of VET. FD qualifications being demand-led had the characteristics to appeal to a wider retail audience but the way in which the qualification was initially piloted and marketed may have deterred other retailers from associating themselves with it. However, lack of organisational fit, the consistently low numbers of candidates selected to study for the award and the lack of awareness surrounding the FdA in Retailing raise further concerns about the requirement of higher-level skills within ELH and the sector as a whole. The issues discussed are interwoven through the proceeding findings (6 & 7) chapters.

CHAPTER SIX: Going Through the Programme

This second findings chapter explores what going through the Foundation Degree entailed for students studying the FdA in Retailing. It commences with a brief description of the process as outlined in the Foundation Degree documentation. An evaluation of the support offered to students whilst studying on the programme is then provided that takes into account the different levels of support offered by the company and the delivering institution. A remit of Foundation Degrees is to widen participation in higher education by appealing to those in the workplace. What is involved in balancing work, study and personal commitments is examined through the lens of those who have studied on the programme, including the way in which the FdA in Retailing has impacted the student's workplace. The findings revealed that there was not the infrastructure in place to support work-based learning as a result students had to make many sacrifices to complete their studies, including suspending any form of career advancement. In addition, the demanding nature of retail work combined with full-time study took its toll on work life balance, creating barriers that prevented deeper learning. Peer support and the development of a community of practice (CoP) was integral to student retention and success, support offered from other sources became less relevant as the peer group evolved.

6.1 Description of the Degree Process

The FdA in Retailing was structured over a three-term academic year (see figure 6.1). Students studied two 20-credit units concurrently each term and were required to complete 400 learning hours across a 13-week term to achieve 40 credits¹³. The

¹³ Each of the units has been allocated a number of credit accumulation and transfer points (CATS points), these are awarded for student 'effort' associated with a programme. Foundation Degrees at

teaching and learning strategy for the FdA in Retailing was based on a blended learning approach, the blend being a combination of both e-learning and face-to-face contact. Each unit commenced with a one-day intensive workshop that introduced the unit topics and assessment criteria. In addition, it was expected that students would complete 8 hours of online learning, 6 hours of peer networking and fourteen hours of work-based learning and reflection each week, as part of the 400 discussed. All students were full-time employees so the hours were considered “notional and an on-average estimate” of the individual effort applied (Forward, 2009:37).

Year 1	PPD 1 (20 CATS)	Retail Environment (20 CATS)	Retail Operations (20 CATS)	Managing Information (20 CATS)	Consumer Behaviour (20 CATS)	In-store Customer Marketing (20 CATS)
Year 2	Personal & Professional Development 2 (40 CATS)		Manage & Develop People (20 CATS)	Retail Law (20 CATS)	Manage Retail Customer Service (20 CATS)	Leadership in Retail (20 CATS)

Figure 6.1 FdA in Retailing programme structure

First year units were introductory in nature with more emphasis placed on directed learning. The second year generally required more self-directed study and the learning outcomes entailed a greater degree of analytical and problem solving ability (FdA in Retailing Student Handbook: 2007:8). Each 20 credit unit was broken down into approximately nine online modules. Each module comprised a range of content that included the underpinning subject matter; interactive activities/exercises; quizzes;

[University North] all share a common structure with regard to their credit framework. There are 120 credits available each year therefore you will need to obtain 240 credits for the award.

podcasts; additional reading; student forums (online discussion rooms) and personal learning logs. Online forums were present to encourage social learning whereas the imbedded personal learning logs facilitated reflective learning both of which were key components of the programme. On-going tutor support after the induction workshop was through the online classroom. A half-day assignment support workshop was held part way through the delivery of each unit to support students with their assessed work. In total, students were expected to attend the university for three days each term, this equated to nine days over the academic year, not very much face-to-face contact with lecturers when taking into account the FdA in Retailing was classified as a full-time course. The expectation of students selected onto the programme was that they would be able to juggle the competing demands of full-time work, full-time study and home commitments. However, many of the managers were not working in nine to five jobs. It was usual practice for the retail managers participating in this study to be working twelve to 13 hour days and still expected to go home at the end of their shift to study. When the programme launched, the first tranches of students complained bitterly that they were misinformed about the amount of work required. The company later tried to rectify this situation by communicating the message more strongly, often by those who had completed the programme during the selection process. However, achieving a good work life balance continued to be an issue for most cohorts exacerbated by a lack of company support for the award.

6.2 Support Given to Students

The support given to students whilst studying for the FdA in Retailing took a variety of forms. This section examines the support provided to Foundation Degree students by the delivering institution and employing organisation. Employer support has been

split across three areas: first, head office support; second the support given in-store by the student's store manager; fellow managers and colleagues and finally the support provided by the in-store mentor, a role considered central to supporting the student's work-based learning. Evaluated at the end of the section is peer support and the formation of communities of practice.

6.2.1 Head Office Support

The FdA in Retailing fell under the remit of 'Education and Skills' a head office based function with accountability for the development of 'high potential leaders of the future'. Recently restructured¹⁴, the department was responsible for graduate recruitment across the UK; apprenticeship programmes for stores and distribution; executive recruitment and the FD programme. The managers with day-to-day responsibility for the FD operated at work level 2, one level below that of a store manager. In-store, this roughly equates to a Deputy Store Manager with responsibility for approximately 150 staff. A large part of their role involved working with the stores to help them identify talented employees (talent spot). Additionally, they were responsible for the recruitment and selection of candidates and overseeing the management of their programmes in-store.

In relation to the FdA in Retailing, the Education and Skills managers had responsibility for the 'on-boarding'¹⁵ of store and personnel managers as mentioned previously in the first section and also organised travel arrangements and overnight accommodation for students who lived outside of the companies agreed 20-mile

¹⁴ Education and Skills at the time of the interview was moving from being a support function to a central role where they take responsibility for the whole of the UK in the areas discussed.

¹⁵ A term used by [ELH] to describe how they recruit managers onto the programme

radius of the university. Students who lived within the set radius had to organise and pay for their own accommodation and travel. The Education and Skills team had a general understanding of the FdA in Retailing through performing the link role between ELH and University North. Operational management of the programme included reviewing and tracking student progress and responding to queries and concerns. The Programme Coordinator at University North was critical of the level of support provided by the Education and Skills team, commenting that this appeared to be a “*big challenge*” for the organisation and not delivered to the satisfaction of the university:

I don't think that (Lisa) is supporting them as well as she could be, maybe that is due to the restraints that she is under because she looks after all these programmes...She seems to have a great deal of students and maybe it's just a resource implication for her...She says that she is willing to offer support if they ask but sometimes you have to be more vocal in providing support (Ivan, Programme Co-Ordinator, University North).

According to Ivan two students had withdrawn from the pilot programme shortly after it had commenced because head office had failed to book flights for them to attend workshops held at the university. As a result, of no flights being booked, the students had to drive for nine hours and failed to turn up when further workshops were held later in the year. The most vocal complaints in the early stages of the programme came from students based furthest from the university. The consensus amongst those interviewed from the university was that students from the South of England appeared better supported largely because they were geographically closer to head office and

therefore better known to the managers in Education and Skills. However, the programme coordinator commented on an overall feeling of dissatisfaction amongst the students regarding head office support and communication.

Issues with Communication

Communicating with the stores and keeping them up-dated on programme related issues was an area of concern for the head office based Education and Skills team. The managers from the Education and Skills department spoke openly about the problems they encountered communicating with over 2,500 stores across four different formats. They suggested that each format has its own strategic priorities with regard to Education and Skills, with some being dedicated to development whereas others more focused on driving sales. The head office managers were reluctant to engage in the organisational politics surrounding Education and Skills, arguing that as they were unable to instigate change they preferred to let each senior manager scope out their own requirements.

Each format also had its own preferred methods of communication. They had been using the Group Personnel Managers, responsible for approximately twenty-five stores across a geographic area, to cascade information relating to the FD to the in-store Personnel Managers. This method had been severely criticised by students as being ineffective as vital information had either, been deleted or not passed to the correct recipients. Whilst other methods of communication were available such as attending 'zone cluster' meetings with store managers or group personnel meetings, these could be utilised, although required additional time, not scheduled into the manager's time. The head office managers argued their roles had expanded

significantly and bemoaned the fact they had to manage increasingly larger projects so were under pressure to perform across a wider role.

Organisation and Management of the Programme

FD students were highly critical of the support offered by head office during their studies. A number of major themes emerged, some of which have been resolved during the period of this study, whilst others are still on-going concerns. Students were highly critical of the organisation and management of the programme by head office staff. As mentioned in the previous section a major issue in the first year of the programme concerned the overseeing of travel arrangements and accommodation. One student who graduated from the pilot programme described the travel arrangements as “*absolutely horrendous*” (Roger, FD pilot student). The appointment of an administrator in the second year of the programme largely rectified this issue.

Communication from the centre has also been criticised. Students protested about not receiving replies when contacting the team at head office, especially if the query did not concern a head office communication. They also objected to not receiving information sent from head office, for example, when study days were introduced in the second year of the programme¹⁶. This relates back to the earlier point made about the methods of communication selected by head office and the heavy reliance on selected group and store managers to convey information. Generally, communication between head office and the stores was better in the smaller formats.

¹⁶ In 2009 FD students were awarded two study days per academic term. This equates to six days across the academic year students can take out of their stores for study.

Students in the second year had to complete a work-based project. The head office team had advised students they would allocate project topics that would be of value to the organisation. However, on one occasion these were only communicated the day before project plans were due for submission, thereby leaving it too late to incorporate any changes. Students therefore had to organise their own project topics rather than use those proposed by the organisation. Complaints of this nature have resulted in the disparagement of head office staff by students for not being aware of what was happening on the programme. The head office team communicated they had regular informal conversations with students; it transpired these took place during overnight stays prior to workshop visits. Students and head office staff would often meet informally during these occasions for dinner and perhaps a visit to a bar or nightclub afterwards. This appeared the norm within the organisation and often resulted in students being rather the worse for wear the following day. Lisa, the Education and Skills Manager considered students to be “*generally forthright*” in reporting what was happening on the programme at these informal gatherings.

The formal feedback mechanism was the ‘periodic review’. This was a four weekly review undertaken by the student’s store or personnel manager. The head office team phoned the stores to collect the results, which were ‘ragged¹⁷’ at blue, green, amber or red (this is the organisations grading system with blue being the highest score and red the lowest). There should have been a follow up system in place if the student receives red or amber as this would indicate a problem. However, many of the students were either unaware that the review was taking place or regarded the whole process as ineffectual. One student provided the following example to illustrate:

¹⁷ Ragging is a term used by [ELH] which means measuring or assessing.

I know that we were getting phone calls, presumably those were from [Michelle from Education and Skills] office asking every period right how are they performing, red, amber or green traffic light system. But, they were asking any manager that was around, and half of the managers didn't have a clue. One day our receptionist turned around and said how do you think [John] and [Other Student] are performing on their programme, red, amber or green. Our receptionist said green, no problem, and that was just our receptionist, she did not have a clue what was going on. (John, Grocery Manager).

The consolidation exercise took place across all of the programmes managed by the Education and Skills team. They were required to rate how the managers were developing but more importantly how the programme was affecting their work-life-balance and performance in store. However, it is clear from the comments made by [Michelle], stated when interviewed in July 2010 that the system had not been working effectively for some time.

Again, you are probably speaking to me before we get the chance to rectify any of the issues. You are probably speaking to me about six months too early...When the correlation started for the trainees it was very accurate, now again, I feel that people have become complacent and aren't actually fulfilling the reviews, so from September we need to step it up and make sure that when it works it works. (Michelle, Manager, Education and Skills)

The head office managers were reliant on the store or personnel managers completing the reviews accurately and on time, but again the methods used to communicate with the stores seemed inadequate for the purpose. The Education and Skills team introduced a glossy wall planner that listed all key dates concerning the FdA in Retailing, however, when first released many of the dates were incorrect. It was subsequently withdrawn and revised. The planner outlined, amongst other key information, the periodic review process for both students and managers. The students had to plot format reviews or conference calls with their area team. An initiative designed to encourage greater participation from the store managers and area team.

The Education and Skills managers provided a centralised support function to the stores. However, increasing work demands have resulted in them spending little time in the stores. They therefore relied largely on antiquated methods to communicate with the different store formats, which is neither adequate nor reliable. The managers appeared well intentioned in their desire to support their trainees but as one student stated she would rather go to her group personnel manager if she had an issue because they are on the ground. Recently promoted to store manager, this student commented about the lack of seniority of the Education and Skills managers and her perceptions of their role:

[Lisa and Michelle] are just people who sit in head office, so a store manager is not going to listen to them anyway. I would listen but I am not sure that I would do anything that they told me to do, because actually I would think that

I am senior to you anyway, I am going to be the one running the store because I know what I need (May, Store Manager, Small Format).

The organisation and management of the programme was an issue from the outset and was one of the major reasons cited for students leaving the programme at the pilot stage. The managers in the Education and Skills department wielded little influence in the stores and appeared disengaged from what was happening as they were operating from a centralised function. In addition, they were overseeing a range of activities, the FD being just one of these. The FdF Director, when interviewed had suggested that ownership of the programme should reside with the Operations function rather than Human Resources. The Education and Skills team vehemently countered this suggestion although, it was clear that reliance on an antiquated communications system and store management to convey and gather information was less than satisfactory. Further, other training and development programmes such as ‘Options’ did appear to be largely managed by those operating in the store environment.

6.2.2 Store Support

The company had a graduate training programme established to fast-track graduates to store management positions. Selecting the correct training stores for these managers was crucial to the success of the programme. FdA in Retailing students were already working in-store when they applied for the programme and in the main commenced, if successful, in their own store. When the assessment centres were introduced in 2009, the suitability of the stores training credentials were discussed, this provided the opportunity to move students if their stores were deemed unsuitable. Store

performance against specific criteria was included in these conversations based on ragged results. This was an important decision as the store or personnel managers were generally the students' mentors. As relocation was a possibility, it was necessary to consult with the student. This section analyses the in-store support given to students by their group managers, store manager or personnel manager, colleagues and peers.

The Education and Skills team were responsible for the 'on-boarding' of store managers as discussed in the previous chapter. However, from their comments they clearly see the student as being accountable for gaining the support they require whilst on the programme.

This is why we make the student fully aware of the support that they need, that the onus is on them. They need to make sure that they have the sponsorship. So, it is sort of flipping it on its back and saying, yes we have engaged the people that are supporting you, but as students you ultimately need to be making sure that you get the support that you need and make sure you are up-skilling your personnel managers. (Michelle, Education and Skills Manager)

The head office managers were of the view that if these trainees want to be the "leaders of the future" then they should be ones driving their own learning. However, one Format Resource Manager did acknowledge that some students may be uncomfortable asking for help. Students on the programme have ranged in levels of seniority from customer assistants and team leaders to experienced managers waiting to sign on to senior team 'Options' (in-house management training programme). The

junior employees have little in the way of management experience when they embark on the programme and on the organisational structure chart can be four to five levels below that of store manager, depending upon format, yet where expected to gain the support they required from their store and/or personnel managers. Nancy a Format Resource Manager recognised the difficulties encountered by student in-store, she suggested: “*Some have it fantastically well, and have great support and others haven’t. So we have to make sure that the right store managers are leading those people*” (Nancy).

The support given to students on the FD programme varied greatly. Those that received what they considered good support from their store managers were in the minority. Good support constituted having regular formal and informal meetings with the store manager or area team. Leia a Checkout Manager and one of the pilot students recounted having weekly one-to-one meetings and quarterly reviews with her store manager, but also reported the informal conversations whilst tidying the shop floor shelves between 4.00 pm and 5.00 pm to be the most useful. She also commented that undertaking “*mundane jobs*” around the store gave her the opportunity to talk to the senior managers, many of whom gave assignment support when required to do so. The store manager also took the opportunity whilst she was on the programme to introduce her to the Store Director, who subsequently conducted two formal reviews. A student from Northern Ireland commented on the excellent support he received from his Store Director and Group Personnel Managers. They rather than his store manager conducted his quarterly one-to-one reviews. He stated that the support they provided was “*fantastic*”, they were right behind the programme. He remarked that other students in England and Scotland were far less fortunate.

Some students had to move stores when not given sufficient support by their store manager.

My store manager at the time did not know what the course was all about, but my area manager and operations manager at the time were really keen. He had been a project manager and had done his degree in retail, I cannot remember exactly what it was, but it was something similar...He pushed me forward and that was when I enrolled in the September. In the October, I got moved to another store because he knew that I needed to be under a store manager where I could be supported as well as deliver my job (Mike, Store Manager, Small Format).

Mike, a Store Manager (Smaller Format), regarded his new store manager at the time as being “*very supportive*”. When later promoted to store manager, his area manager became his new mentor. However, this experience is rare, and not shared by all students. One student had to endure the suspension of his senior team including his store manager whilst he was studying for the FdA in Retailing, while other students commented that their area teams were unaware of the programme or had actually tried to persuade them not to enrol on the programme, arguing “*there was no point to it*” (John, Grocer Manager). A student who had to relocate summarised some of the issues that she was aware of whilst on the programme:

I think that across the stores most store managers are not really interested in the FD. I have heard from other people that their managers make it quite difficult for them...I don't know if it is ignorance, I suppose, to what you can

achieve from the degree. There are definitely quite a few people in the same boat as I was in the beginning where the manager is not interested in what we are doing and sees it as a waste of time. I think the store managers need to be educated better on what it can actually do for them and their stores (Ember, Clothing Manager)

Students on the programme believed that store/personnel managers lacked knowledge and understanding about the FdA in Retailing, and argued that they were far better informed about the other development programmes such as apprenticeships and Options schemes. Available to all internal candidates, the Options programme has to be completed by employees seeking to move on to the next work level, for example line managers moving to senior team. Lack of awareness regarding the FdA in Retailing made it more difficult for students to approach their store managers to discuss the programme, and left them feeling resentful about the lack of recognition they obtained in relation to students on other programmes. One student, however did comment, *“selling the benefits of the FdA in Retailing”* to his store had actually proved beneficial. Having to communicate information and justify the programme had made him deal with issues of support head on, and as a result, he has been able to plan and organise the support that he required himself rather than rely on his Store or Personnel manager. He explained that the FdA in Retailing is seen as being centrally managed so the store has little ownership of the programme and it is therefore important to be able to clarify *“in the right way”* what the course entails and how it can benefit the store (Dave, Personnel Manager). May, a newly appointed store manager (Smaller formats) referred to store managers generally as being *“just a bit out of the loop”* with regard to the FdA in Retailing, so as a result had tried hard to

make sure that her manager understood what she was doing on the programme and why. She did add that her manager was “great”, some students had found the issue of support much harder to manage. Store managers were encouraged through targets to develop their staff. A store manager of one of the larger formats explained this process:

I go along for my development review and two aspects of development are targeted. The number of people who are on a development course of some description, the target for that is one in ten. So, that would be the best part of seventy people who would either be on pre-options at any one level in the store from general assistant; team leader; section manager; line manager; senior team and store manager....Then there are the people that are bubbling under working towards the programme and people who are actually on the programme, that needs to be one in thirty for me. The FD also counts (Tom, Store Manager – approximately 700 employees).

However, it is evident that the support given to students by store and personnel managers can vary significantly across stores and formats. Store management support according to one student can simply be contingent on “*who your store manager is and whether they are interested in you*” (Andy, Store Manager, smaller format). Generally, store managers that have experienced higher education do appear to have a better understanding of the FdA in Retailing and show more support for students undertaking the programme. Factors that could have a negative bearing include the amount of key performance indicators that store managers have to achieve, and the dynamic, fast-paced nature of the business. Store managers stand accused of being

overly reactive and concentrating on the targets that are important to their stores. This is always likely to be a factor in a performance-managed organisation where store managers have to achieve 80 to 90 key performance indicators. Figure 6.2 highlights some of the comments made by students when discussing senior and store management support. Lack of understanding and awareness was a common factor experienced by the majority of students:

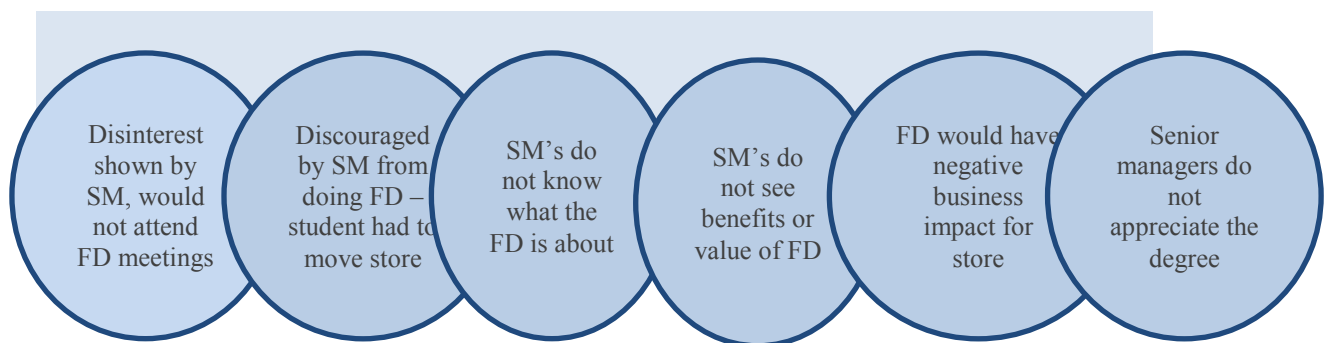


Figure 6.2 Lack of support from senior/store managers

It was general for store and personnel managers to move stores whilst students were progressing through the programme. For one mature student, this caused a major issue that forced her to withdraw temporarily from the programme. Both her store and personnel manager moved store when she was in the first year of her studies. She recounted that the interim personnel manager made it difficult for her to attend university workshops in the summer due to lack of cover in-store, threatening that she would be held accountable if anything should happen whilst she was away. She did not attend the university arguing that she was “*stuck between a rock and a hard place*” (Tina, Bakery Manager). The continuing lack of support throughout the programme resulted in her deferring her studies for the remainder of the year on the grounds of ill health. She felt unable to talk to her store director about the problems she faced and in addition, “*she did not want to bother anyone at the university*”

(Tina). An issue picked up by the Programme Coordinator at University North, who stated:

If they have problems they are not coming to us... We ask them to fill in the mitigating circumstances form, which they do not send back to us, they almost go and hide. We have found this over the last two years, it is almost like them burying their heads in the ground, and whether this is about how [ELH] operates, and how they achieve things I suspect it is part of the culture (Ivan, Programme Co-ordinator).

These findings raised some fundamental issues about ownership of the qualification and resources allocated to the stores. All store managers had key performance indicators for staff development that measured the amount of employees undertaking training programmes over a quarterly period. Store managers were therefore encouraged to identify those that required development when staff had to leave the store to attend training programmes the store received financial remuneration for staff cover. However, this did not apply to those studying for the FdA in Retailing, therefore the store had to incur the loss when managers left the store. Store managers were invariably performance driven, whereby they required people in-store to undertake their roles not attend training courses, this resulted in a conflict of interest between the student and their manager. The reason why the FdA in Retailing was treated differently to other programmes was unclear however, it may explain some of the store management indifference encountered towards the qualification and those studying for the award which, in some instances was mirrored by line management and colleagues.

6.2.3 Support from Line management and Colleagues

The findings show a correlation between the level of support received from the store/personnel manager and that provided by other managers and colleagues:

Colleagues in my current store are very understanding and I think most of it comes from the fact that [the store manager] from day one has encouraged a very open culture within our store. So we can question and challenge each other comfortably...that has made it a lot easier for me to speak to them about it...they are definitely very supportive and understanding (Ember, Clothing Manager).

The support of managers and colleagues is “*invaluable*”, according to one student, especially when you are the one going home on time to study whilst other managers have to stay behind an extra hour or so (Andy, Store Manager, small format). However, a student whose mentor was his Store Director commented, “*There was a lot of jealousy*” shown by colleagues and other managers across the group. Although this may have had more to do with him being talent spotted by his Store Director, nonetheless he was one of the few students to receive better line management and colleague support when he moved store. Support generally consisted of help with assignments and work related projects. Some managers however were less fortunate; one student quoted her store manager as saying, “*the degree was nothing to do with him*” (Kara, Compliance Manager). This student was of the opinion that her manager should have been better informed about the qualification, this in turn would have helped raise her profile with the other managers. Her colleagues wrongly thought that she was studying independently for the FdA in Retailing, and it was therefore not part

of her development in-store. To help keep stores informed of student progress on the FdA in Retailing, the design of the programme should incorporate more opportunities to feedback to managers. For example, it was suggested that each student should prepare a presentation for the store team at the end of each unit to “*obtain their buy-in and increase knowledge*” (Dewhurst and Lockley, 2011).

The support and interest shown by colleagues and team members varied. One student laughed and said that studying for the FD “*was more like a covert operation....it has not affected them whatsoever they have shown no interest*” (John, Grocery Manager). Adrian, a Customer Service Manager, stated that support from colleagues “*does not exist*”, however later added that if he did the FdA in Retailing again he would make more effort to communicate what he was doing. Unfortunately, not all managers benefited from store management support.

Some really do find it hard, the amount of hours they need to put in while working full time...Some have it fantastically well, and have great support and others haven't. Therefore, we have to make sure that the right store managers are leading those people (Nancy, Group Format Manager, North).

As illustrated throughout the last two sections, the level of support students received from their store manager could make a significant difference to the individual student experience. If the store manager was supportive of the award then it followed that colleagues and peers would generally be helpful and accommodating. The store manager was extremely instrumental in shaping the sub-culture that existed within the store. Although in the minority, store managers in ELH that had a leaning towards the

development of employees generally had a better awareness of the qualification and made better in-store mentors. The organisations preference towards more Taylorist approaches to store management however, did not reconcile well with learning through a Foundation Degree, in these instances peer and colleague support was a desirable but not essential element of store life. What proved more necessary was the support received from others on the programme.

6.2.4 Peer-Student Support

The support network provided by students studying on the programme has been essential for some. John commented that he had no support from his store but one 100 % support from his fellow students. Peer support includes developing support networks and friendships and using electronic communication methods to sustain study.

Overnight accommodation prior to workshops is organised for students living outside of the agreed fifty-mile travel radius. Students who stay overnight are expected to share a twin room, a policy not initially favoured by all participants. John a Grocery Manager commented “*it has helped us form bonds...we have become a really strong collective*”. The time together also gave the group plenty of opportunity to discuss shared concerns as one student recalls:

I think it was me at the time who did not know what the assignment was about and what needed completing, someone else, cannot quite remember who it was happened to have the same issue, and we sat all night talking about it (Tina, Bakery Manager).

Students commented on missing the campus based student experience so had formed their own study groups. One student with a young family had found peace and tranquillity to study at the home of a fellow student. The small group would meet for a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon to attend to university work. He commented that once he had forged this support group other methods of support became less important. Students not geographically close to others on the programme used mobile devices and Facebook to keep in contact. One student, based in Cornwall stated “*you feel as though you are very much alone*”, he reported spending a lot of time phoning members of the group. From his perspective, it was good to learn that other students felt the same as he did and enjoyed talking to other students with the same drive and passion. He formed a network with students based in St Andrews (Scotland) and London, and while on annual leave took what he called ‘a tour’ so that he could spend time with them (Dave, Personnel Manager). The majority of students preferred to communicate electronically. A Facebook account was organised by the students so that they could purportedly keep in contact with each other. This system had a range of uses, for one student it provided a sounding board, whilst the majority used it to share information around assignments and submission dates. Students reported that this easy to access method of communication had helped provide reassurance and comfort. It made them feel better knowing that other students shared similar issues and concerns. The personal tutor, a trusted academic who did not teach on the programme, from University North was the only person granted access by students to use the Facebook resource. Other tutors used on-line forums and email when communicating with students.

It was quite common for cliques to form within the cohorts although there was still a sense of collegiality across the whole group. Des (Distribution Manager) for example could not recall a single instance where someone failed to help another person whilst studying. Roger outlines the importance of the student network:

You need those people to bounce ideas off, if you are having any problems, or if you do not understand something. Because sometimes it is easier to speak to people you are working and studying with than the lecturers (Roger, Security Manager).

Tina (Bakery Manager) was able to discuss with her fellow students the problems that she was encountering in-store. She stated that she was on the point of leaving the FdA in Retailing when one student advised her to talk to the programme coordinator at the university. She commented that talking to other students allayed her fears, “*it made her feel better and look at things differently*” (Tina, Bakery Manager). John discussed helping an FdA in Retailing student based in the same store. He recalled her being under stress about sitting an exam in the first term. He said “*I had to literally drag her out of the house because she was just going to phone up and quit the course that day*” (John, Grocery Manager). He further commented:

It might sound daft but when you are in the depths of the lowest of the low there are people there with you. That does form quite strong connections
(John)

Students used words like “*fantastic*”, “*vital*” and “*a necessity*” to convey the importance of the networks and friendships that developed across the groups. As these communities developed the importance of university and organisational support diminished. Like students on more traditional programmes, candidates reported that these relationships had endured after their studies finished.

6.2.5 Support Provided by the University

The Programme Coordinator at University North was of the opinion that ELH were seeking managers who “*could operate at a high level, be independent and manage their own destiny*” (Ivan, Programme Co-ordinator). The high drop-out of students on the first year of the programme prompted the following comment ‘*if you hold somebody’s hand too much they are not going to develop, but if you don’t hold it enough they might disappear*’ (Ivan). University North in consultation with ELH increased the level of support they provided to students in the second year of the programme to help improve retention. An experienced senior academic was selected to be the students’ new personal tutor, he was not teaching on the programme so was regarded as a “*friendly academic*” (Ivan). Entrusted with providing the insider/outsider role he was someone who liked working with students. He was able to gain the trust of the students and join their ‘Facebook’ site but according to the Programme Co-ordinator, “*contact was still not great*”. A student commented:

I don’t know of anyone who emailed [Name of tutor] directly but he did put a number of useful comments on Facebook around handing in dates and I think that someone had an issue with being late...he put up some useful comments about handing stuff in late or things like that (Des, Distribution Manager).

The university had also adopted a more proactive stance when addressing student problems; this appeared to have had a positive impact on retention. Time was set aside at the start of workshops and support days to allow students to air their concerns.

Sometimes this has taken ten minutes, sometimes it has taken a full hour to discuss their problems...Some employees more than others had problems which are discussed openly in a fair and balanced manner, not necessarily taking the students or the employers side, taking an impartial view, because that is what we are really. (Carol, Programme Co-ordinator)

Carole explained that this reduced time set aside for teaching, but those that received poor line management support were quite vocal in the group discussions, so it was important to give them the opportunity to voice their concerns. The issues discussed could range from travel arrangements to issues with in-store support and attendance at workshops. Students who lacked these kinds of support then received additional support by the university. The university raised concerns about retention rates and in-store support for students and provided information on the FdA in Retailing for use in information packs produced and distributed by head office to store managers. The Education and Skills team had responded positively to the university's concerns, however as discussed in the previous chapter their initiatives have had varying degrees of success in the stores, yet the university has found that in-store support can improve the attitude of students whilst studying (Ivan, Programme Co-ordinator). Feedback from students on the support provided by the university has been very positive ranging from "fine" to "fantastic", although some raised concerns about

online teaching support. One student commented that the online forums “*died away*” in the second term. This was not a problem for him as he had already developed his own support network nonetheless he did feel sorry for other students who said “*they had no one to talk to*” (Adrian, Customer Service Manager). According to Dave, (Personnel Manager) students stopped using the learning logs when no feedback was forthcoming from tutors. This illustrates the role tutors can provide in creating opportunity for social learning.

One student suggested that the university had been overly supportive of some students. She had observed the different cultures and work practices that existed across the two organisations and commented:

Some people should have been forced off the course because it is frustrating for those keeping up with assignments, or not sat the exams and the university is sorting that out for them. They have been given the opportunity and they get on with it. Some people take the mick with handing work in. They have really been supportive whereas [ELH] would not have put up with it (Leia, Checkout Manager).

The university had a tendency to be more lenient with those studying on commercial programmes understanding the demands placed on students who were working and studying full-time. However, all students had to follow the same procedures with regard to exceptional factors. Further, the university were concerned about the retention figures (pilot programme) and the support offered by ELH to students studying for the award. The university together with ELH took steps, discussed in

this chapter, to remedy the issues although organisational support remained a problem throughout the research period.

6.3 Balancing Work and Study

All participants on the FdA in Retailing were full time employees contracted to work approximately 36-hours a week, although to meet the requirements of their roles, it was common for managers to work beyond their contractual hours. Balancing demanding jobs with study has proved difficult for some students especially when taking into account seasonal fluctuations in the retail sector. The experiences of students juggling work and study are explored in this next section, including the issues encountered, and the way in which these have been dealt with by the organisation and delivering HE institution.

Employees were encouraged to move stores when undergoing development and/or taking on a new role, but being settled in a job whilst studying for the FdA in Retailing was considered by ELH as important in achieving a good work life balance, as students who were familiar with their role are able to plan their time more effectively. Roger's (Security Manager) Regional Manager advised him, in advance of joining the programme, to be realistic in his expectations of what he could achieve whilst studying. He was due to move to senior team within the first year of embarking on the FD, but admitted that this would not have been possible and potentially could have damaged his prospects in the longer term. Very few managers were fortunate enough to receive this level of guidance before embarking on the programme and as a result claimed that the FdA in Retailing had delayed or held back their career progression into more senior roles. Ember (Clothing Manager) for

example discussed the demands of her job and the long hours involved. She commented that whilst studying, she was working a minimum of twelve-hour days, 5 to 6 days a week. She argued that from a practical point of view this left little time for study or quality time. Her aim, now that she has completed the programme was to focus more on her career and learning in work.

Leia (Checkout Manager) had a challenging new role as compliance manager when she first started on the FD. She argued that the economic trading conditions in 2008/09 had made her job even more demanding. The company at this time were in the midst of a 'price war' with the competition, as a result Laura and her team had to make up to 1,500 price changes daily throughout the store. Her store manager (also her mentor) had discussed the possibility of Leia relinquishing certain aspects of her role, when he realised that she was struggling to balance work and study. She had refused but later confided to him spending an additional 20-22 hours a week outside of work on her studies. Her manager commented:

We are in retail, we all like to think that we do 36 hours but we don't, so the fact is that she was doing an awful lot of hours in work and then going home and carrying on studying which nearly broke her if we are being honest (Tom, Store Manager – Large Format).

After six months in her new role, [Leia] transferred to a position that she had previously held, thereby removing the burden of having to learn a new job whilst undertaking the FdA in Retailing. The impact of studying on Leia's work life balance was significant. She stepped down in her role and relinquished much of her free time

and holidays to complete the programme. Two other managers in her store contemplating doing the FdA in Retailing have since had second thoughts when they saw the amount of work involved and the difficulties of balancing this around family life and job commitments. Since the restructure in 2008/09 students have complained about their roles becoming more arduous. Adrian, (Customer Service Manager) who worked in one of the larger formats explained how the changes affected his role:

Payroll has been cut so we now have less and less staff in stores, and our jobs get bigger with more KPIs to manage, ...ultimately you just end up having to put in over and above the hours...to get stuff completed. They know you are going to do that because if you don't...you are not going to get your performance reviews right...you are going to lose your job and people recognise that....they have moved the bar so much, now it is quite tricky
(Adrian).

Many students complained about the long hours that they had to work with eleven to twelve hour shifts being the norm. It was therefore unsurprising that students with young families found it the most difficult to juggle all of the competing demands on their time. One student with two young children and a new baby stated that life was “chaos” whilst he was studying (Mike, Store Manager, Small Format). He did learn how to prioritise but felt that his studies had suffered. Andy (Store Manager, Small Format) a student who successfully completed the pilot programme would not recommend the course to anyone with young children unless they were able to pay for additional childcare. He had two young children when he commenced the programme and was already spending most of his days off child minding: “I was having to do

work when the children had gone to bed, and it was too hard to be honest with you. Are the rewards good enough? No, I do not think they are” (Andy). He started the FdA in Retailing as a compliance manager but towards the end of the programme gained promotion to store manager in one of the smaller formats. He stated that the FdA in Retailing was ideal for someone in a duty manager role, but felt the store manager position was too taxing to study alongside. The programme allowed store managers to apply but was restricted to those employed in the smaller formats.

Students complained they were misinformed about the amount of work required in completing the FdA in Retailing. Kara (Compliance Manager) for instance was told that she would need to dedicate approximately eight hours to study each week, she could not recall one week where she did not exceed this figure but stated *“it is up yourself how much you put into it”* (Kara). She along with others argued the need for better information on the programme and the work required. In the evaluation document compiled by Reflexxion (2008:38&40) the consultants recognised that students needed to put in substantial amount of self- directed study time.

1. *“It was pitched at five hours a week but with reading it is more like ten hours”*
2. *“If I had one final comment it would be that we need more time to do the course”*
3. *“I put in two hours at the end of each day but I still need to do more”*

Students argued that additional study leave would have had a beneficial impact on the success of the course. The Education and Skills team in response agreed to award one study-day to each student per term. The introduction of study days received a mixed reaction. It appeared that some students were already being given additional time to

study before the initiative was introduced, whilst others argued “*additional study days are not effective as many students did not take them*” (John, Grocery Manager). Some students were unaware that they had this entitlement whilst the majority argued that demands in-store had prevented them taking their full allowance. A student who had only taken one study day across the two years suggested that this time could be more useful if added to periods spent at university. Perhaps making it easier for him to justify time spent away from store. He described the allowance as being more of a token gesture than a practical solution.

The evaluation of the pilot programme raised a number of issues in connection to programme design and the organisations trading cycle. In the evaluation report, one student commented:

My major issue is the term dates as they clash so badly with trade, and as supportive as my manager is, I can't have time off over Easter and Christmas to do my assignments. It is so frustrating and I know that others think so to, I hope that they look at that for next year (Reflexxion, 2008:38).

Roger (Security Manager) admitted that he had lost focus on his studies throughout December because it was “*just so busy*” and in January, you recover” (Roger). The delivering university in consultation with the organisation responded by bringing term dates forward so that students commenced their studies in mid rather than late September, thereby avoiding peak trading periods around Christmas and Easter. The university had a wealth of experience to draw upon when working with commercial clients, therefore set expectations accordingly. The Programme Controller stated,

“Clients that have full-time jobs and families simply do not have the time to do the learning as you would expect or as you would hope” (Ivan). This was evident in the on-line forums that slowly petered out after the first term, when lecturers became less insistent on the need for student reflection. Also evidenced in the way students selected work based projects, they would select projects that were already completed or were underway in-store rather than extend their learning by devising new projects. However, the results were more striking at the end of year when the exam boards sat, at this stage it was common to find 50 % or more of the students with work still to submit before they could proceed or graduate. The programme co-ordinator from University North stated he would have liked greater participation from students on the FdA in Retailing although, in his opinion, there was little to separate part-time students from those studying full time although, a mature manager reflecting upon her role had a different view:

I’ve fallen into the typical student mode...but you go into the degree knowing full well that you have to manage your job, and your home life and it’s not anything that anybody has put upon us, because we know that we have got to do that so you’ve only got yourself to blame if you do not do it. It is no one else’s fault, it’s not the companies fault. It is us as individuals, we do it to ourselves (May, Store Manager, Small Format).

In summary, the manager’s job role and career progression were closely scrutinised by ELH when the selection of students was taking place, nonetheless the issue of work life balance had ramifications for the organisation, delivering institution and more significantly the individual manager. The idea of gaining a qualification whilst

working was attractive, however, many managers felt misinformed by ELH about the amount of work required to complete the programme. Further, rather than supporting career enhancement, examples have been provided that illustrate the negative consequences, in the short-term, of studying for the FdA in Retailing. These illustrate how managers have had to take backwards career steps to lessen the workload of studying for the award. The long hours demanded of retail work were not always compatible with study. The organisation took steps to address these issues though, for example, the introduction of additional study days in 2009, although considered no more than a token gesture, as managers when informed about them were unable to take more time away from their demanding jobs. The long hours and nature of retail work affected the student's ability to participate fully in learning activities, reflected in online forum participation and engagement in the e-learning modules.

6.4 Applying learning to work

This section examines how students have been able to apply to their workplace what they have learnt whilst studying for the FdA in Retailing. The first part draws on findings from two unpublished research documents conducted on behalf of the case organisation. The findings illustrate a clear correlation between applicability of content studied to job role and performance. Students most enjoyed studying subjects that related to what they did or sought to do in the future and had little time for what they regarded as unrelated areas of study.

The 12 students interviewed were in the main positive about how they were applying the skills and knowledge gained whilst completing the first year of the programme, although they viewed some units as having a greater impact on job performance than

others. Personal and Professional Development 1 (PPD1) was rated the most critical to student's job performance. Consumer Behaviour and Retail Operations were also highly ranked. Students were able to provide a range of examples, from these units, to illustrate how they had been able to apply what they had learnt in their workplace. For example, Ember (Clothing Manager) at her stores regular Monday morning meeting asked fellow managers to complete Belbin's team roles questionnaire, an online exercise completed whilst studying the PPD 1 unit. This provided the opportunity for knowledge sharing and sparked a debate on team role preferences. In addition, the PPD 1 unit helped students improve and hone their management skills. Students studied the "art of reflection" and were encouraged to keep a learning log. Andy (Store Manager, Small Format) stated "*the ability to reflect and then balance yourself, make sure you are thinking rationally*" was the most important thing he had taken from the course, whilst John (Grocery Manager) was prompted to reflect on the way he communicated with people, and the changes he needed to make to improve as a manager.

Students were able to apply theories and models studied in the first year marketing and consumer behaviour units. They recollected an online exercise that involved tracking two in-store customer promotions that involved moving signage and products to different locations in-store to see how this affected sales. Leia (Checkout Manager) commented this unit "*helped her do her job*" and involve her team in her studies:

I would explain to my team that if we move it to the front it can be seen better by the customers, and they may pick up things out of the bargain bin because it is in the most profitable area of the store (Leia).

Kara (Compliance Manager) stated that she drove her family mad because she was visiting competitor stores to view their displays and take photographs, whilst on holiday. The photographs were discussed with her team when she returned to the store. The Retail Operations unit applied similar teaching strategies to encourage students to engage in exercises and share experiences. Evaluation conducted by FdF found Managing Information to be the least likely to be applied in the workplace. John (Grocery Manager) stated:

I felt it was not easily transferable...I think it was the way it was delivered to us, everyone came out of our first lesson and felt like their brains were bleeding...it was like being given a jigsaw...we were obviously missing parts so we could not connect everything together (John)

One of the Education and Skills Managers stated “*we always struggle with Managing Information, so we know that unit needs to be relooked at*” (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills). One particular student however was keen to gain a better understanding of the business and how different parts of it functioned, in his words he wanted to obtain the “bigger picture”, this prompted him whilst studying the unit to research different aspects of the business including the distribution system. He was then able to share information on how the system operated with his own stock control managers (Dave, Personnel Manager). The ‘bigger picture’ metaphor is regularly used within the company, but has been criticised for only applying to what happens within the organisations ‘four walls’ rather than retail as a whole (Dave).

Respondents were more positive about applying the skills and knowledge gained from the units studied in the second year with ‘Leadership in Retail’ and ‘Manage and Develop People in Retail’ having the greatest impact (Reflexxion, 2008). John (Grocery Manager) copied on-line content from the Leadership unit to design a development plan for a night manager who had been unsuccessful in applying for senior team for reportedly lacking the required leadership skills. John (Grocery Manager) commented:

I was able to sit down 1 – 2 hours with her. I copied all of my e-learning and talked her through it. I was able to help her reflect on where she is now and where she wants to go.

In Personal and Professional Development (PPD) 2, students were required to identify a work related issue to research, Mike commented:

I don't know if you have seen my project but it actually increased my sales, on my department, across my fresh department, which is what I based it on by £4,000 so it was really worth doing (Mike, Store Manager, Small Format)

Those studying the unit were encouraged to discuss project work with their store managers/mentors. Kara (Compliance Manager) noticed that her manager, who previously had not been supportive of her studies, showed far greater interest in this assessment. The FdA in Retailing Project Coordinator commented that many students were already undertaking projects in their workplace so just chose to work on

something that they would have worked on anyway, rather than thinking more strategically about the assessment (Ivan, Project Co-ordinator).

What they are tending to do is more operational stuff. So for example, they might be looking at something like wastage, and in a particular store how they can get wastage down...Some of the students might even have done that before and are writing the project on what they have done, instead of from a more academic/project management angle (Ivan).

Few students were able to apply the Retail Law unit in the workplace, but the small number who required the information for their job role found the content useful. One manager, undertaking an internal management programme, ‘the Management Academy’, whilst studying the course, found synergy between the two programmes in the second year and singled out PPD 2 as being of a similar level to the in-house management programme. The FdA in Retailing also runs allay to the in-store Options Programme. A store manager stated the FdA in Retailing was an ideal route into management/store management because the content is relevant. He considered those who completed the programme to be “more rounded” than graduates who undertake other programmes (Tom, Store Manager, Large Format).

When students were asked to quantify how much of their work time was spent on tasks that utilised the knowledge and skills acquired through the FdA in Retailing, the responses were much more varied, with results ranging from 100 to just 10 % of the time, with the majority clustered around 50-60 %. The Education and Skills team

considered some units to be of more relevance and easier to apply than others, dependent on the student's job role:

Retail law is brilliant for a compliance manager, managing information might help them with their KPI sheets that come down and to understand what they mean...PPD obviously helps with their career progression. Retail customer marketing is of help around the customer, what distribution do, how the products look on the shelves and the importance of 'rubble' ...making sure you have your staff in the right place at the right time (Simon, Project Manager, University North)

The units rated most highly by students were those considered most relevant to their work roles. A customer services manager said that the programme provided the "finer detail" that can be missed when working every day for the same organisation. In addition, he commented that it helped fill some of the skills gaps not covered by the management training framework (Adrian, Customer Service Manager) however, some experienced managers were more critical of the programme content:

For me personally, I thought the stuff we were taught was quite low level...If you have been a manager at [ELH] for five to ten years you should know about 90% of what was in the course. Not the actual models, names and that kind of stuff, but what they actually do and how they do it, you should already know that. There is no way you should survive and be a half decent manager, retail manager, people manager and not know the bulk of what is already there (Des, Distribution Manager).

Another experienced manager found little value studying some units such as Retail Information, Law and Managing Information because he had already covered the content whilst in his current job or previous roles (Andy, Store Manager, Small Format). Others struggled to separate new learning from what they already knew (Adrian, Customer Services Manager). Some students were surprised how well the programme applied to their in-store roles but also spoke of their disappointment in the lack of interest shown by management (Kara, Compliance Manager). One student mentioned the resentment felt by her manager because she was not on the programme, whilst another complained that established managers think they know everything (John, Grocery Manager), yet this did not prevent some students from starting to question and challenge company protocol:

Studying Retail Environment has given me wider knowledge of what goes on, you very much become consumed with [ELH], and you think [ELH] is the only way and right way. If [ELH] is doing well then everything is fine, but you realise that is not the case (Kara, Compliance Manager).

The following student questioned accepted procedures seeking to influence change:

It also enables me to question what we do and can be done differently. To a degree, things are drummed into us to do things in the [ELH] way...but the FD has given me the opportunity to consider whether things can be done differently, in a different way, make suggestions to the right people and influence change (Leia, Checkout Manager).

The Education and Skills manager described work in the stores as being “*very processed*” suggesting you can change routine but ultimately you have to follow procedure (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills). Head office personnel have far more freedom but FdA in Retailing students are predominantly store-based. The FdA encourages students to think “*wider*” about the topics studied, but the Programme Coordinator questioned whether the organisation required or wanted this of its managers, “*maybe all they want is someone who can dot the t’s and cross the i’s and set structures*” (Ivan, Programme Co-ordinator). The FdA in Retailing provides a more expansive learning opportunity only available to a select group of managers. Whilst studying in higher education these managers are encouraged to apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate the topics studied. This has proved problematic and frustrating for those who have spoken out and challenged existing practice:

Managers are restricted and that causes a lot of frustration between managers because they could probably see the way it should work but are being told this is the way you have to do it, and that is quite stifling to people’s creativity. This is one of the problems with this degree, store managers with other people are being difficult or not supportive because it is not corporate, so what we are learning on this degree goes against pretty much everything that [ELH] say we should do and we are bringing back to store and trying to implement it. So we are coming up against barriers with store managers who are very corporate who are saying we cannot do it that way because this is the way [ELH] does it. I honestly do not know how we are going to break away from that because so many store managers are already set in that way (Ember, Clothing Manager).

A Group Format manager, a graduate herself, spoke positively about students who have completed a higher education programme suggesting they have a different way of dealing with things. She implied “*it is a real skill to see things from different angles*”. However, admitted that you need to be a “*bit of a maverick*” to challenge the status quo as “*it is the [ELH] way, we have our routines and procedures and we have a certain way of doing things and woe betide if you have moved away from any of those*” (Nancy, Group Format Manager, North). She accepted some managers would respond well to this whilst others would not. Two students described how they had challenged the organisation’s routines and procedures. May (Store Manager, Small Format) learnt when studying shrinkage how to find and address the root cause of a problem. In her opinion, this was something the organisation struggled to do so the problem would continue to resurface, she illuminated:

We went to head office for a business plan launch, one of the speakers was talking to us about shrinkage and we had just done John’s unit. I remember saying in front of this huge crowd of people, about the statistics, I said, it is great that you have come up with this plan for us but you have not talked about the how, how are we going to deliver it? Because it is all well and good saying there is a manual, these are all things that are wrong, these are all the things you need to do, but where are we addressing the how? How are we going to deliver it and how are we going to sustain it? (May)

Roger (Security Manager) similarly was able to challenge management thinking in his store:

I would challenge the mind-set of management...When walking around with the store manager, I would challenge the jargon or the line [ELH] would take. I would really ask them to think about where the ideas came from, not to just think [ELH], but to make them think about the customer and what is best for the company without the [ELH] look on it (Roger).

Time pressures prevented one student being able to share what he learnt on the programme with managers and colleagues:

FdA in Retailing has probably helped me in my job role. I don't get the time to pass the benefits on to anyone, in all honesty I would like to but I don't always have the time to spend with the staff because there is always so much else going on, I can see that only getting more difficult to do as the years progress (Adrian, Customer Service Manager).

Students valued and enjoyed studying subjects they could apply to their work context, but were less enthusiastic to learn about unrelated topics which links strongly to the reasons given for students wanting to study for the award. However, some more experienced managers found the content quite ‘low-level’ and not sufficiently challenging, arguing the company training programmes covered much of the same information. One of the major themes to emerge in this section was that students, through participating in higher education, were starting to challenge the organisational “mind-set”. What the students were learning clashed markedly, in some cases, with the process driven routines that dominated in the stores. The intention of the FD was to develop the skills that employers required but would also equip the individual with

the necessary transferable skills. Could it be that these intentions were not necessarily in unison? The findings illustrated that ELH sought conformance in its in-store managers whilst the Foundation Degree was developing managers to think critically and look beyond the confines of the organisation. This section therefore links back to the previous section on store support (pp 210). Perhaps the confidence instilled in these managers and their newly found questioning insight proved too much for those that had only participated in ELH training programmes designed and delivered by ELH.

This chapter illustrates that going through the programme, was not only challenging for the student but it also required a great deal of self-sacrifice, endurance and commitment. The expectation for those chosen was that they would be able to study full-time whilst holding down full-time jobs in busy retail stores. The company afforded them very little extra allowance to help them do this. The demands were such that some managers had to step back into previous roles or refrain from taking promotion while studying. Some managers had complained that they would have received promotion faster had they not embarked on the programme. Whilst others thought, the competing demands of family, work and study too great and not worth the effort. University North was accused of being too lenient in supporting the students which, contrasted sharply with that afforded by ELH. Store managers, a key stakeholder in the programme, were generally unaware of the requirements of the award and their role of student mentor. Some store managers deliberately made it difficult for managers to attend workshops at the university, which resulted in one manager taking sick leave on grounds of anxiety and stress. It was therefore unsurprising to find that students had formed their own support networks amongst

their peer group which, when established, had reduced the need for company and university support structures. This chapter raised a number of fundamental questions in relation to student support, balancing work and study and applying learning to work that relate back to wider contextual issues. These concern the need for higher-level skills within the organisation/sector, ownership of the programme and managing competing expectations of the organisation versus those of the individual student.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Reaching Completion

This chapter provides an evaluation of the FdA in Retailing from an organisational and student perspective. Findings drawn from a report commissioned by ELH to evaluate the first year of the pilot programme are used to triangulate research with other methods of data collection such as semi structured interviews and participant observation. Extracts from the PPD1 reflective report, completed by students at the end of the first year, demonstrates how candidates were able to apply what they have learnt in the workplace. The FdA in Retailing experienced high dropout rates during the first year and explanations for poor retention figures were provided by students who graduated. ELH did not conduct exit interviews with candidates who left the programme therefore other forms have data were used to verify these accounts. The final part of this chapter explores what happened to the students after graduation. The higher than average withdrawals and a failure to grow and expand the programme to other areas of the business have raised questions about the value of Foundation Degrees and the Labour Governments objective to increase the levels of intermediate level skills and meet employer requirements.

7.1 Assessment

This section presents a review of the assessment process, detailing the methods used to assess each unit on the first and second year of the programme. Students had to complete from one to three assessments for each unit. Unit weightings and assessments varied dependant on content and CATS points (E.g. PPD 2 is a 40 CAT unit). The two tables (7.1 & 7.2) below outline, the methods used for summative assessment of each unit studied in both the first and second year of the programme:

Year 1 Summative Assessment Method	PPD 1	Retail Environment	Retail Operations	Managing Information	In-Store Customer Marketing	Consumer Behaviour
Portfolio of Work	X			X		
Learning Log	X					
Time Constrained Questions		X				
Individual Written Report			X			
Group Presentation					X	X

Table 7.1 Methods of assessment – Year 1

Year 2 Summative Assessment Method	PPD 2	Manage & Develop People in Retail	Retail Law	Manage Retail Customer Service	Leadership in Retail
Project Proposal	X				
Learning Log	X				
Written Essay		X			
Individual Written Report	X			X	X
Group Presentation				X	
Multiple Choice Questionnaire			X		
Business Game					X

Table 7.2 Methods of assessment – Year 2

As discussed, the cohort of students for the pilot programme were selected from both the line manager population and the A Level Options programmes. When the programme was evaluated at the end of the first year both groups showed consistent levels of performance with little to separate the two. Students achieved their highest results in their first term of study, 73 % of students passed the first terms units and

achieved a 60 % mean for PPD 1 and 63 % for Retail Environment. However only 63 % of students passed both units in term two at 40 % or above and in term three this figure fell to 53 %. Retail Operations and In Store Customer Marketing only achieved pass rates of 54 % and 53 % respectively. When managers first commenced their studies, they were keen to impress yet by the end of the first year the reality of the workload was evident in the unit results. However, students also found some of the units more challenging than others. As part of the evaluation process students had to rate the first year units. PPD 1 and Retail Environment were rated as “*fit for purpose*” modules whilst Managing Information (MI) and Consumer Behaviour were graded “*challenging*”. Students reported the MI tutor could not relate the subject to the organisation although specific support was requested, CB was considered too “*long winded*” by students, as it reportedly had a far heavier workload than other units studied. There was no overall editor so it is unsurprising there were issues with design and production.

ELH commissioned a firm of external consultants [Reflexxion] to help evaluate the first year of the programme. They allegedly paid £54,000 for this report; University North received a summarized version (Ian, Programme Coordinator). Reflexxion did not conduct any further evaluation at the end of the second or ensuing years. Instead, ELH relied on University North to evaluate the programme. Evaluation took place at level one of Kirkpatrick’s (2006) model of evaluation, that of reaction by learners to the event (Ivan). Students had to complete an anonymous feedback sheet before leaving each workshop. The programme office compiled the results before sending them to the programme team. Managers from education and skills reviewed the information when visiting the university. ELH used this information to evaluate the

level of content covered and lecturer performance. This information reinforced other forms of evaluation that ELH used such as student feedback although, student work was rarely, if ever reviewed by the organisation. The managers in head office never asked to review the student portfolios and learning logs although they did have access to the online learning platform.

7.1.1 Student Portfolios and Learning Logs

Built into the online teaching classroom for each unit was an area for student reflection, divided into two parts, one part for students to reflect generally on any aspect of the unit, the other for reflection and answers to teaching exercises and activities. This section drew on excerpts from portfolios students' compiled using information from their learning logs. The portfolio was one of two equally weighted reports used to assess students studying the PPD 1 unit in the first year of the programme. The assignment brief asked students to produce a 2,000-word portfolio report to demonstrate what they had learnt whilst studying the first year of the programme. Students were limited to three main learning experiences, so had to select carefully their examples from units studied. In addition, they had to reflect on their personal development plan, supplied as part of their first assessment, in which they had to set new development goals and write an overall reflection on their first year of study. The learning log entries (see table 7.3) illustrated how students were able to apply what they had learnt whilst studying the unit in their workplace. The majority of students selected parts of the PPD 1 unit, Consumer Behaviour and Retail Operations to reflect upon as these often resonated with their roles in-store. The table provides extracts taken from student learning logs pertaining to each unit:

Unit Studied	Extracts taken from student learning logs
Personal & Professional Development 1 (PPD 1)	<p>Upon reflection, the greatest insight for me has been with regard to my self-confidence. Reflection has enhanced my self-awareness of my strengths and weaknesses which, I can consciously use to my advantage, or manage and overcome...I am no longer specifically focused on building my confidence, but I know that by using reflection and being self-aware, confidence will follow (G, 2011).</p> <p>I see myself as a good listener, I have people approaching me to talk about work and personal issues, but does that make me a good listener?...I have started to look at how people listen and I have found only a few managers have good listening skills. I have witnessed people being interrupted, no eye contact with a noticeable vague look on their expression. I had not noticed this before and it concerns me to the extent of me wanting to develop good listening skills (J, 2010).</p> <p>Prior to starting the course I thought my knowledge was concise and that the main benefit of completing the course would be to gain a qualification, however reflecting back on this early assumption I realise just how inaccurate it was. Although I have now worked in retail for almost 10 years I still have a lot to learn...The first year has taught me I have personal development needs that I must focus as much time and energy on as developing my department (L, 2007).</p>
Consumer Behaviour (CB)	<p>The concept of perception really made me think about what our consumers experience as they move around our store, in particular how I could impact their experience and make it a more favourable one. I particularly liked the idea that our sense of smell was our most memorable. I thought, I could build on this to try to stop consumers moving to our competitors within the town...Due to this knowledge I always try to make sure we are baking cookies during busy times rather than first thing in the morning when the store is closed and consumers cannot appreciate the smell (T, 2011).</p> <p>I now have a greater depth of understanding around CB, the unit has given me an insight about consumers from a psychological point of view from the moment they enter a store to the end when they leave. This knowledge has allowed me to influence the team to implement changes in-store to enhance the consumers shopping trip, by ensuring visual displays are eye catching and located in prominent positions (P, 2011).</p> <p>Promoting Mothering Sunday products and overcoming queuing problems in-store: I presented a solution to my store manager that placed Mother's Day flowers, the perfume cabinet, chocolate, music and CDs together with a dedicated till, at the front of the store...The project was a huge success with highest sales for the company (C, 2010).</p>
Retail Operations	<p>Completing the VLE and further reading on retail crime for the RO module gave me a wider understanding of shrink and how it can be tackled in my job role as Operations Manager. I perceived my understanding to have been quite high level. However, where I feel I have really developed is my knowledge in understanding the non-deliberate causes of shrink...This widened my awareness of the possible losses and enabled me to grasp the opportunity to up-skill individuals of my findings and how they can educate their teams to keep errors to a minimum (M, 2011).</p> <p>I reflected on a short film from the 1940s about retail and considered the implications and practicalities for my department and the company. This was the first time I felt I could relate the FD and my studies to my management role at [ELH]. It was an important moment as I realised the connection between theory and practical work, how they could complement each other...I also took on the theory that a customer who complains shows us our faults, which is just an opportunity to improve (A, 2010).</p>
Concluding	I have increased my profile with senior managers resulting in being invited to the

comments taken from the reports	<p>Deputy Manager Academy (C, 2011).</p> <p>I have enjoyed the first year of the FD and feel I have taken a lot of key learning from it...I believe in myself a lot more and put it into my everyday experience (D, 2007).</p> <p>Overall, I have developed my skills substantially and I am still learning from my experiences. I now view everything through the bigger picture without simply focusing on me and my department (D, 2010).</p>
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Table 7.3 Extracts from student Learning Logs

Generally, comments about the units studied were positive. The extracts were taken from reports intended for assessment purposes; therefore, it can be assumed that students were keen to portray a positive image of their development to their lecturer/organisation although, never reviewed by head office management. Nonetheless, they provided insight into which aspects of the course students found most beneficial and applicable to their job roles, in fact many were surprised by the relevancy of content covered. It was evident that some experienced managers thought they had little to learn from the FdA in Retailing when they first embarked on the programme, but later acknowledged their previous development and experiences were limited to that of the organisation. PPD1 proved the most popular first year unit as it focused on personal development, content was applicable to all managers so it was unsurprising the majority of students chose to reflect on learning from this unit. They were also encouraged to post learning log entries whilst studying the unit, these petered away as the course progressed, and as lecturers on other units failed to encourage students to use this medium, students also keen to have their workload reduced did not complain. When reflecting, students often commented on the added confidence they had acquired whilst studying. They were also keen to provide examples of where they had been able to share knowledge with colleagues and managers and apply what they had learnt to improve department/store profitability and performance. However, this did not deter some students from withdrawing from

the programme. Examined next are the high dropout rates of students experienced during the pilot of the programme.

7.2 Drop Outs

The high dropout rates experienced during the pilot stage of the FdA in Retailing prompted this research study. This section examines some of the reasons why students left the programme. The research findings draw on independent research funded by ELH as well as additional primary research. Forty-four students, across both Universities (North and South) started the FdA in Retailing in 2007. 18 students or 44 % had withdrawn by the end of the first year. Out of 22 students recruited for the pilot at [University North] only five graduated in July 2009. The project manager stated they had experienced a very early dropout, within the start of the first term, with no apparent reasons provided.

you know a store shut down...the manager would not let the student come for six weeks, or a family/work life balance issue...but the kind of dropout without us knowing why always happened in the first term, never really beyond
(Simon)

The independent consultants (Reflexxion) appointed by ELH were supposed to have been conducting exit interviews, but no information was forthcoming (Simon, Project Manager). He commented, *“it has sort of gone a bit grey, ELH are sort of hiding that from us I suspect”*. The high dropout numbers prompted both ELH and University North to take a number of preventative steps the first focused on recruitment and early support for the student. ELH introduced a more rigorous recruitment process that

included a full-day assessment centre (outlined on page 188). Secondly, the company initiated learning contracts, which were to ensure that students on the programme remained with the organisation for an agreed period after they graduated. The agreement stated if students left the programme, they were required to pay the organisation back its investment as well as having an exit interview. Third, University North increased induction from one day to two and appointed a personal tutor for first year students, an impartial and trusted academic whom students could go to if they had a problem with any aspect of their studies.

The programme coordinator had noted that students from ELH did not tend to voice their concerns as students had done from other retail organisations suggesting this may be a cultural issue for this group of managers. It was rare therefore for University North to know why students failed to attend workshops or left the programme. ELH's internal evaluation documents stated a number of students who dropped out of the FD had done so to join other organisations (Reflexxion, 2008).

Those who had graduated from the programme were generally unsympathetic of those that had left. One pilot student stated she was “*absolutely disgusted*” with the behaviour of those students who did not turn up for days at the university or dropped off the course. Inferring the University approach to these issues was in stark contrast to that of ELH:

At [ELH] we would have had our first, second and third verbal warnings because we have not done something we signed up to do...Some people should

be forced off the course ...they have been given the opportunity they should just get on with it (Leia, Checkout Manager).

A further pilot student commented on how embarrassing the high dropout rate must have been for ELH. He commented that too many students thought the FdA in Retailing was going to be easy. He spoke derisively about why people had chosen to leave, saying “*probably because of the type of people they are, no staying power, lack of drive, lack of enthusiasm, lack of self-motivation*”. He added, “*the selection process needs to be very slick*” (Adrian, Customer Service Manager).

A small number of students cited lack of knowledge and understanding about the FD as a reason for the high dropout rates. Kara (Compliance Manager) did not feel it was fair to people who had applied and were not accepted but would have been able to cope with the workload. At the assessment centre, she had spoken with a number of potential applicants who “*did not have a clue what they were in for*” adding “*that is not good*”. She was told when she applied for the course she would need to dedicate about eight hours a week to study but could not remember one week where her studies had been limited to this amount of hours (Kara, Compliance Manager). John (Grocery Manager) also argued for transparency and detailed information on the FdA in Retailing, he said:

I think if the selection criteria was good, was specific, if the course content was well detailed and they were honest about the end achievements, the end goals, then I feel that would have resolved a lot of the dropouts (John).

He surmised that lack of career progression through undertaking the programme was further reason for the high dropout rates and gave the following example:

I think eight or nine people dropped out in the first week...Two or three had store or area managers who had actually come up to the people and said look I don't know why you are doing this. If you want to progress there are quicker ways of doing it, you don't need to go through all this hassle (John).

One of the managers referred to was located in the same store as John, she stayed on the programme, whilst those situated in Scotland both left. He assumed, those who remained were doing the degree for reasons other than career progression. John was part of the 2011 cohort, so he had signed the learning contract when he enrolled and was surprised when those who had left the programme had not had to pay back their fees. There was plenty of speculation, amongst students, surrounding student fees and methods of calculating the amount owed. The Programme Manager at University North verified students would pay back fees on a sliding scale if they dropped out.

The difficulty in targeting the FdA in Retailing has resulted in confusion in-store as to who is entitled to apply. One student argued the degree would be better suited to newer managers wanting to step up to the next level, rather than having a mix of new and very experienced managers (Des, Distribution Manager). A store manager with responsibility for mentoring a pilot student held strong views on who would be most suitable for the course:

Someone like [Leia] who has a few years on the clock, is an established manager and comfortable in their environment. Able to take on the extra burden combined with all the extra learning rather than stretching someone too far and them falling off the course...That did happen with some people who thought this was all a bowl of cherries that everything was going to be easy and glamorous because you got to get a degree and raise your profile. They did not realise that it would be bloody hard work and actually, they also had a full-time job to do (Tom, Store Manager, Large Format)

He took the unusual stance of arguing the programme would be “*a hell of a lot better*” if managers were taken out of their existing job roles whilst they completed the FdA in Retailing. He discussed the possibility of “*circumnavigating their day jobs and creating an environment of learning where they would be less accountable*” (Tom). He regarded people on the programme to be experienced managers who did not need the practice of managing a department but instead required the opportunity to “*think broader, learn and apply new things and become more business savvy*”. He had to move his student from the position of compliance manager to a less demanding role whilst completing the FdA in Retailing, so perhaps this shaped his opinion.

No definitive data was available on why student dropout figures were so high when the programme first launched. Company documentation assumed that some of these managers moved to other organisations (Reflexxion, 2008). However, the findings indicate that there were also additional reasons. For example, some managers were still encouraging students to progress through more traditional routes such as the ‘Options’ programme, rather than apply for the FdA in Retailing, as it was unclear

how the qualification would aid career progression. There were also concerns about the amount of work required to complete the programme and the impact this would have if managers took on more demanding roles whilst studying. The organisation and University took steps to improve the recruitment and selection process and made early support for students more robust. These measures, according to the Programme Co-ordinator have improved the calibre of student applying for the FdA in Retailing and aided retention figures (Carol, Programme Co-ordinator). The table below (table 7.4) illustrates the numbers of students graduating from the programme, withdrawals and suspensions and average grades attained in the first and second years.

	Students enrolled in Year 1	Students graduating	Average grades across year 1 & 2	Number of students re-sitting units so unable to graduate	Number of students suspended studies/ withdrawn
2007 2009	22	5	/50	2	15 withdrawn
2008 2010	21	15	51/54	1	2 suspended 3 withdrawn
2009 2011	32	15	56/57	2	2 suspended, 13 withdrawn
2010 2011	34	-	54/		3 suspended, 1 withdrawn – <i>based on year 1 figures only</i>

Table 7.4 Suspensions and withdrawals

The pilot programme lost 68 % of the cohort prior to graduation and achieved average marks for the second year of 50 %. However, these figures took into account one student who only submitted one piece of coursework. Retention figures improved the following year although withdrawals and suspensions still stood at 24 %, nearly a quarter of the cohort. This indicates measures taken by the organisation and delivering university had improved retention, although dropout figures were still higher than the University would have liked. Figure 7.4 also shows the average grades obtained across all units in years one and two. No student achieved a

distinction during the four years accounted for in this study. The ability to study whilst earning was one factor drawing students to the award although the main reason most students gave was career progression; this proved a difficult subject for the company to navigate.

7.3 Career Progression or Career Regression

As discussed in chapter six, career progression featured as one of the main reasons students embarked on the FdA in Retailing. However, admittance to study for the qualification did not automatically result in career enhancement. Marketed as a distinct stand-alone qualification, managers through nomination from their store or field manager could apply for the programme. From the outset, there was no automatic financial or non-financial remuneration available for students who graduated from the FdA in Retailing. The qualification was viewed by ELH as an enhancement to the students' working life rather than a fast track to promotion. It was the student's responsibility throughout the course to ensure they were performing at the top of their Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) with RAG ratings required to be consistently Green or even Blue (Reflexxion, 2008). The company made no definitive promises to students about career progression other than informing them "*they were going to be the store managers of the future*" (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills). As discussed in the previous section, students appeared to be discouraged when they realised there was no clear progression route to store management. [Des] (Distribution Manager) stated:

They need to specifically have it that when you are doing this course you are practically guaranteed moving up, whether it be a [ELH] placement or

something else, so you are doing this course because you are deemed worthy of promotion (Des)

The Programme Coordinator at University North concurred stating: “*the company need to outline, at the application stage what will be on offer when students complete the FdA in Retailing*”. He argued that in some instances the degree appeared to have hindered rather than aided the careers of those on the programme because they had been unable to apply for other posts whilst studying. Two students, ignoring company advice took on larger roles; as a result, they ended up suspending their studies thereby affecting completion rates (Carol, Programme Co-ordinator). A pilot student also found the pressure of her job and study too demanding, after a discussion with her store manager she took the decision to take on a less challenging, more familiar role whilst she finished the course. Kara (Compliance Manager) also felt that it was important to stay settled in role whilst studying. Adrian however, believed the FdA in Retailing had held back his promotion to Store Manager, a role he now holds:

It was sold to us that it would get us to the next level but you still have to go through the same process as you would have without it and I probably would have been here doing this job two years ago without doing the FdA in Retailing (Adrian, Customer Service Manager).

However, he later added that what he had learnt on the course had helped speed up his progression to the next work level. There was much discussion by the Education and Skills team about aligning the qualification to their in-house ‘Options’ suite of programmes.

Developing a Talent Pipeline Through to Store Management

The Education and Skills department were leading on a new initiative that would mould, shape and develop those with 'raw talent' at 16, into store managers by the age of 23 (Lisa, Manager, Education and Skills). The plan entailed far larger numbers of students undertaking the FdA in Retailing on the development pathway to store management. Lisa a manager in Education and Skills outlined the plan in early July 2009:

It does not matter what level they are, whether they are senior team, team leader, line manager or whatever, they start the programme in the first year, they go on what you call 'sign on'. So you go to an interview and are recommended to start working towards the first promotion job, they would work on that Options programme in the second year alongside the FdA in Retailing. They would finish the FdA in Retailing in the May and then in June to September they would go on their placement...kind of the end of their programme. They are stepping into that job, so by the September at the end of the two years they are signed-off (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills).

It was suggested by the Programme Co-ordinator from University North that other programmes such as A' Level Options and the Graduate Programme had a clear ladder of progression to senior management, he stated, "*I don't think the FdA in Retailing does that yet*" (Ivan, Project Manager). At the time, the strategy was outlined, managers who were eligible for the programme had two choices, study for the qualification or develop in-store. However, if you selected the first option there

was the possibility that you would miss opportunities for career progression via other routes. The Education and Skills department wanted to change this perception:

I guess that is what is changing in the future the FdA in Retailing will fit within development, rather than you choose to do the FD and put development on hold” (Michelle, Manager, Education and Skills).

When implemented in 2010, the new plan contained no mention of the Foundation Degree in the new outline. Instead, school leavers, planning to go into management, would gain three A’ level equivalent qualifications by completing the NVQ level 3 and Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award before completing the wider trainee management scheme. Therefore, the increased numbers for the Foundation Degree never materialized. Further, and more significantly the organisation has never met its original target for the qualification of 100 students per year (Ivan) a number quoted back in 2008 shortly after the programme first launched.



Figure 7.1 Number of Students Recruited on the FdA in Retailing

The diagram (figure 7.1) above shows student numbers recruited onto the programme from the pilot in 2007 onwards. The pilot programme consisted of 44 students split across two educational institutions Universities North and South. The two universities worked together to design the programme however University South only delivered the two-year pilot so subsequent numbers only reflected those studying at University North. Overall numbers declined in 2008 (at the start of the economic

recession) but then increased and remained constant at around 30 students. However, these figures when compared to the 310,000 employees working in the ELH stores were miniscule.

When the plan for the FdA in Retailing failed to materialise in the form outlined, ELH instead focused on gaining accreditation for some of their in-house development programmes. To achieve accreditation in-store training was mapped against three FdA in Retailing units PPD 1 and 2 and Retail Environment, totalling 60 credits. In theory, this allowed A Level Options candidates to choose the 26-week A Level Options programme and then move on to the FdA in Retailing for eighteen months, reducing time and financial commitment. It also should have enabled managers to achieve the same position as a graduate trainee in three years instead of four however, only a handful of candidates applied to take this route. All other development initiatives within ELH such as Options was aligned to a development pathway and it was therefore unprecedented for the FdA in Retailing to be offered simply as an enhancement to the students' working life. The Education and Skills team had tried to remedy this situation when they discussed incorporating the qualification into the talent development pipeline though the approved plan featured the NVQ Level 3 qualification instead. Are level 3 qualifications more desirable to retailers than level 4/5? They certainly fit better with government-subsidised apprenticeships. The question of cost and different funding models for the qualification is next considered.

7.4 Self-Funding and Top-Up Degree

Divided into two parts; this section first examines an ELH initiative to allow students to self-fund the qualification. The second part relates to one of the characteristics of the FD, that of providing a top-up to the award so that students can attain a full Bachelor Degree.

Self-Funding

In 2010, the option of allowing managers to self or part-fund the FdA in Retailing was considered. This would have enabled student numbers to increase without the organisation incurring the full costs of the qualification. The ideas, at the time, were still in their infancy but there was clearly much to consider before embarking on the scheme: A member of the Education and Skills team commented:

There are two sides of the coin, there are arguments that say let everyone do it and have the opportunity to self-fund, but then are they going to get a bit annoyed with I guess those being funded? (Michelle)

She suggested that clear criteria would need to be in place for those allowed to self-fund, as the long-term organisational aim was to keep the programme “*quite exclusive*”. Additionally, the company stated there would be cost implications attached to each option. For example, managers self-funding would still require study leave, in-store support and central management. The aim at this stage was to continue to increase student numbers. Additional strategies included trialling the FdA in Retailing with distribution staff and opening the programme to head office personnel although nothing concrete was in the pipeline.

Top-Up Degree

A key characteristic of Foundation Degrees is the top-up element of the qualification. Top-up degrees were for those who had successfully completed a Foundation Degree and wanted to study further and progress to the final year of an honours degree programme. The idea of a top-up year for the FdA in Retailing was raised at a steering meeting prior to the launch of the pilot programme in 2007. The Programme Co-ordinator observed:

It is certainly on the agenda, but I do not think it is at the top of the agenda, if you know what I mean. Students can obviously progress onto our Retail Marketing Management Degree, full-time or part-time degree, but obviously, this is in the traditional mode, so it would have to be something whereby they took leave for six months (Ivan, Programme Co-ordinator).

The top-up degree featured in the company's learning and talent development strategy in 2009 for a new talent pipeline to store management. The Education and Skills manager stated:

we want to work on doing a top-up as well, so actually a further degree, whether it be a BA or Masters, however it works, we are not actually sure, it's early doors at the moment (Michelle, Manager Education and Skills).

Talks between University North and ELH began in 2010 with a view to launching a top-up degree in September 2012. The Education and Skills team had started to discuss this opportunity with students who had completed or were completing the

FdA in Retailing, the company's main concern being that large numbers would apply. They were therefore considering limiting spaces *"to those who scored the highest"*, adding *"if this is loads then we are going to have to think of some selection process, which will be really difficult"* (Michelle, Manager Education and Skills). No precise numbers were discussed, although Michelle stated they would need to ensure they requested budgets for the initiative otherwise these would not be released. The top-up degree, although not publicised was discussed widely within the company. Roger (Security Manager) stated his Group Personnel Manager was pushing for the top-up and challenging him to go for it if advertised. He stated he would have to say *"yes because the opportunity to go on and finish and get a full honours degree part-time would be something worth considering"*. May (Store Manager, Small Format) also affirmed she would be *"daft"* not to do a top-up if the opportunity presented itself, and cited *"personal achievement"* and a *"full degree"* as her motivation:

I think I have done what I need to get recognised by the company and being able to manage all the things I have done, but yes wanting to achieve the best I can achieve, I think. It is great to have this degree, but I can't get it out of my head now that it isn't quite a full degree, and when people ask what did you get I want to say I got a 2:1 or 2:2 or a first. I am not in a position to be able to say that at the moment...Yes I would like to say that and finish it off (May)

Unlike a full bachelor's degree, there were only three classifications for a Foundation Degrees; fail, pass or distinction. Students like May who achieved results between 60-69% complained that they had only achieved a pass rather than a merit, they

thought the distinction between the two should have been acknowledged on the certificate.

The top-up degree was a desirable qualification to hold according to Adrian (Customer Service Manager) and Mike (Store Manager, Small Format) as it could enhance their profile and status within the organisation. Adrian had striven to achieve the best result possible because he said he knew that there would be a selection process for the top-up. Although, he planned to take a year out before embarking on any further study he understood that anyone wanting to be a store manager would be required to do the top-up. Mike similarly wanted to establish himself in his current role before taking on any more study but said:

I want to do the top-up because I know the company recognise it as doing additional. So the company offers something, you take advantage of it because it will help me and my development (Mike).

John (Grocery Manager) was unaware the company were contemplating offering a top-up until he spoke to the lead manager of the programme when helping at an assessment centre. He stated:

I spoke to [Lisa] at the assessment centre, she said it was something they were contemplating doing, however with the Government changes they are doing a lot of cutbacks, so where the FD at the moment is being highly supported by Government funding, or is funded through a tax benefit, in the future that

might not be the case. They are not finalising anything until the Government puts out its full spending plans (John).

He and a fellow graduate were exploring the option of self-funding a top-up degree externally. John stated he wanted to leave retailing and embark on a career in Further Education. This had not been his intention prior to starting the course but the degree had given him the opportunity to “*reflect on university life and the learning environment*”. Not all students however were as keen to continue their studies. Adrian maintained he would not go back in to education. He was one of only a handful of students juggling the demands of a young family with work and study. Another student without children found the time constraints difficult to manage. Des (Distribution Manager) believed the third year of the programme would be a lot harder and more in-depth than previous years, therefore “*physically*” did not think he would have the time to do it. Time and work demands proved difficult for Ember (Clothing Manager) who assumed the third year would not be as practical as the first two years, although declared:

I am glad that I have done it, and it helps me but from the end of this now my next move is to progress in work, so to do that I will need the free time, to be able to go into work and learn, that is what I will be looking at now (Ember)

Leia (Checkout Manager) also claimed she had enjoyed doing the course and would look back on the experience fondly but affirmed, “*she'd had enough at the minute*”. Although she did state she would resume her studies in the future if it would help her achieve the role of Personnel Manager.

The top-up degree may not have been at the top of the organisation's Education and Skills agenda but evidently, there were discussions with managers in the organisation and with students who had completed the programme. The scheme was set to launch in 2012, but those leading the programme were concerned, after initial consultation, large numbers would apply if offered. Some students were keen to obtain a full bachelor's degree for either personal reasons or career advancement. However, others would have declined the opportunity arguing competing pressures of work and personal commitments would hold them back. Some students held strong opinions on what the final year of study would entail and the lack of a clear outline appears to have dissuaded some. Student opinion proved purely academic, as the organisation did not launch the top-up degree in 2012. ELH were reportedly losing interest in the FdA in Retailing and were starting to make tentative enquiries about a two-year Bachelor Degree (Carol, Programme Co-ordinator). Carol thought the idea of students working full-time and studying part-time for a full bachelor's degree in two years was "*ludicrous*" although, she stated the decision was not hers to make. Nonetheless, the fact this idea was even considered raises concerns about the way in which ELH viewed higher education; they clearly had little understanding of the demands placed on managers expected to work and study full time, although they had been responsible for managing and evaluating the programme. The next section although entitled 'Evaluating the FdA in Retailing', considers not only whether the qualification has met organisational expectations but also those of the individual student.

7.5 Evaluating the FdA in Retailing

For lack of a better title, this section is entitled 'Evaluating the FdA in Retailing'. Provided first, is an evaluation of the qualification against company objectives set for the award when first launched. The company contended the "*FdA in Retailing offered students the opportunity to take a development journey that sets them apart from their peers and would give them the skills and knowledge demonstrable in the work place that illustrates their learning and abilities*" (Reflexxion, 2008: 7). The impact of the FdA in Retailing was evaluated against the following: performance, career advancement, job satisfaction and security. The Education and Skills team were responsible for monitoring performance and career advancement of FdA in Retailing candidates whilst they were on the programme and kept progress sheets for all candidates. These showed most managers when they had completed the programme, had either moved sideways to bigger roles or been promoted. As mentioned previously, career advancement was not promised to those that had graduated with the award however, comments made by Lisa, a manager accountable for the programme, clearly implied it was considered:

So, what we want to do is underpinning it and say right, this is a necessity, these are the people that you are supposed to be looking after, and therefore it is a necessity (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills).

However, without head office intervention 77 % of those who had completed the FdA in Retailing had gone on to higher managerial roles, with statistics demonstrating impact on promotion and managerial skills (Michelle). Michelle, who took over the management of the programme from Lisa in 2010 stated, the company, in her opinion,

had achieved its aims for the qualification and she had seen a performance improvement in every single student who had been on the programme whether it be in leadership, technical knowledge or the student's own personal development. The company did not appear to conduct any further evaluation beyond ragging student performance in-store and tracking students' progress whilst studying and after graduation.

The following part of this section presents an evaluation of the programme against student expectations for the award commencing with recognition and reward, followed by personal development and the acquisition of higher-level skills. Managers who had completed the programme appeared more confident, developing confidence and transferable skills are discussed prior to considering how the skills acquired whilst studying for a FD can be reconciled with those of the organisation.

Recognition and Reward

Career advancement featured heavily when discussing the benefits of studying the FdA in Retailing. Mike, promoted to managing his own store after graduating knew that senior management were "*watching him*" whilst he was studying, stating, they were keen to know how the degree was affecting his role in-store, which encouraged him to try harder. Another student appointed to store manager, after graduating stated, "*the FdA helps your profile in terms of getting promoted*" (May). She now has her sights set on a group personnel role. Ember still has ambitions to be a store manager, but felt confident she could now achieve her goal in half the time she had originally planned.

However, not all students believed the FdA in Retailing had aided their careers. “*I don’t think anybody thought more of me because I was doing the FdA in Retailing, I don’t think they now think I am better at my job, or better equipped to do certain things*” (Des, Distribution Manager). After graduating Des took, a sideways step into distribution thinking this would be an ideal way to escape his previous role. He now commented he had less responsibility and more money but “*finds it hard to put a positive spin*” on the FdA in Retailing. Adrian also thought the degree would have had greater impact on his career. He argued that those in the South of England (closer to head office) had benefitted more in terms of it “*moving their career along and promotion*”. Like Des, he did not think anything had changed since he was awarded the qualification, though added, he was now more confident to apply for head office roles if they should become available in the future. Further benefits of studying for the FdA in Retailing are now considered.

Personal Development & the Acquisition of Transferable Skills

The FdA in Retailing brought added benefits including job enrichment and satisfaction. Roger (Security Manager) stated he had enjoyed the whole FdA in Retailing experience and spoke about how the degree had raised his profile. He commented on the value he was now able to add back into the company and stated “*the people that I have met and the opportunities have been absolutely amazing*”. He spoke glowingly about his experiences of being an FD student. Most students had benefited in some way from being on the programme. Learning how to reflect was widely discussed, a topic taught on the PPD1 unit. Andy in particular found learning how to reflect “*invaluable*”, stating it was now a daily part of his routine whilst Leia discussed the value of learning academic theories that underpinned what she was

doing in her management role. Tina and Dave had used what they had learnt to evaluate the methods used to manage, influence and develop their teams. For others, it was just realising that it was possible to complete a Foundation Degree and balance the competing demands of work, family and study. This in particular came as a real surprise to May, who did not have the inclination to take on a store manager role prior to the FdA in Retailing, but stated the degree offered her the challenge she needed to “*grow as a person*”. Kara (Compliance Manager) also acknowledged she had grown-up whilst on the programme, and now knew that it was a retail career she wanted to pursue. She felt confident to explore wider opportunities in and outside the organisation, whereas John was starting to investigate new career opportunities in teaching. Interestingly, the team evaluating the pilot programme had interviewed students wanting to leave the organisation. They considered those able to see beyond the boundaries of their current employer, “*visionary students with strong ambitions for their future*”, and therefore not a poor reflection on the employer/employee relationship (Reflexxion, 2008).

Developing Confidence and Higher-Level Skills

Confidence was a major theme that emerged when discussing the benefits of undertaking the FdA in Retailing. Leia’s store manager believed the FdA in Retailing provided validation for what she already knew. The “*added confidence comes in when you are able to apply what you have learnt*”. In the second year of the programme her store manager noted a real change in her behaviour: “*she had really come out of her shell, she is naturally a quiet girl, but she has been a lot more challenging and has become readily accepted as one of our senior team*” (Tom, Store Manager, Large Format). One of the Education and Skills managers also observed

how students who had completed the programme appeared more confident, stating they were “*snapped up*” to do project work (Lisa, Manager Education and Skills). Roger, Mike and Adrian were each assigned group projects. Mike for example was responsible for installing a new sales based ordering system in the in-store bakery department. He rolled-out the new systems across the group and tracked productivity during the launch. His Operations Manager had “*pushed him forward*” for this task because he was doing the FdA in Retailing. Dave (Personnel Manager) believed the degree had helped him “*grow up and move outside the little bubble of [ELH]*”. He came to recognise there was a wider world outside his organisation, “*you still have to deliver what is asked of you in the retail company but it is not just [ELH] making that decision, it is being impacted upon by Government and competitors*”. Other students commented on the additional skills and knowledge acquired and how this enabled them to make more informed business decisions to “*deliver what the company is looking for*” (Roger, Security Manager).

A Format Resource manager remarked on her FdA students having the ability to “*think a lot more broadly*” when they had completed the programme, “*instead of just seeing [ELH], they are thinking about other companies and how they apply different things when back in the stores*” (Amy, Group Format Manager, South). A pilot student endorsed this view:

I think it has helped me manage the business more effectively, and I don't just think around figures. I think around the environment, the community, energy costs and the current climate that we are in going through a recession. I now

think more out of the box to deliver a better business I suppose (Andy, Store Manager, Small Format).

Nancy, a Format Resource Manager from the North of England, claimed the FdA in Retailing produced “*more grounded managers*”. She added, “*it is easy in [ELH] to be very blinkered in your thought process because of the way we do things. I think just by opening people’s experiences make people into better more rounded leaders, which is what [ELH] really want*”. Do organisations like ELH really want more rounded leaders as this manager suggests? She seems to imply they do although she refutes this view in the next section.

Reconciling FD Benefits with Organisational Aspirations for Junior Managers

Do ELH really want managers with level 4/5 skills that encourage them to question and critically evaluate? The findings are contradictory on this issue as a Format Resource manager also confided when referring to the store environment, “*we have our routines and procedures, a certain way of doing things and woe betide if you have moved away from any of those*”. A view supported by Tom a (senior store manager) who commented:

[ELH] systems are kind of gospel and we do not go away from that, because we are not encouraged to. Conform and comply is our motto, what we need to do is what it states on the tin, that is kind of what we are governed by, it kind of ensures consistency (Tom, Store Manager, Large Format)

Throughout this study, it was evident that managers within the stores had to adhere to strict rules and procedures to ensure consistency across the four formats, yet the FdA in Retailing encouraged students to challenge and question. This has significant implications for the success of the programme within ELH and for the student experience, some found the opportunity of study at this level liberating, opening their thinking to broader perspectives whilst, others were left feeling disappointed and frustrated. John's comments illustrate how the lack of a clear career path and the inability to apply what he had learnt had left him feeling disillusioned:

[ELH] are a good company to work for they have given us a free reign of thinking, self-confidence and drive to say look what I can do. People coming off this course are on such a high and have such strong belief. But now we have hit the end of the road and like I was saying there is no path to follow with [ELH] ...I want to put everything I have learnt and know to good use, but feel stifled in terms of what I can do and where I can go (John, Grocery Manager).

The FdA in Retailing enabled students to undertake a development journey that set them apart from others in ELH, managers who would normally follow a prescribed training and development route within the company had the opportunity to study in higher education and gain a retail qualification. The programme has allegedly improved job performance and met company expectations. In addition, students have gained new higher-level skills and knowledge that they have been able to apply in the workplace. Confidence has been a central theme running through this section. Students have illustrated how the programme has given them confidence to expand

into bigger roles and undertake project work. In spite of these success stories, a number of underlying tensions exist. These relate to balancing work and study, programme exclusivity, and recognition of higher-level skills. Students found managing the competing demands of full-time work and study immensely challenging in many cases having to choose between the two, resulting in career regression. The organisation actively sought to keep the programme 'exclusive', whether this was in relation to cost was unclear as after the pilot stage, ELH incurred the full cost of funding. Keeping the programme exclusive had a number of consequences; those on the programme had a heightened sense of their own self-importance yet promotion of the programme and career opportunities were limited, which may have been a deliberate attempt by ELH to restrict numbers. Some, managers, especially those who had studied in HE valued graduates and higher-level skills however, they were in the minority as work in ELH, like other retail organisations was predominantly routinized and standardized in the stores therefore, leaving very little room for individual discretion. This realization had prompted some managers to leave the retail sector to commence careers in other professions.

7.6 Concluding Comments

Since the launch of the FdA in Retailing in September 2007 numerous changes have occurred. The data collection period (2008-2012) coincided with what since has become known as the 'great recession' (2008-2013) when changes in the economy brought about much weaker levels of sales in the food sector in relation to non-food (Anagboso and McLaren, 2009 Office of National Statistics). Retailing along with manufacturing and wholesale also saw the greatest loss of jobs from 2008-2011 (Campos et al, 2011, Office of National Statistics) and during this period ELH went

through a restructure of its stores that resulted in a management layer being removed. Further organisational changes during this period and beyond can be seen in the timeline below (see figure 7.2):

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of FdA in Retailing - pilot programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-company change of programme manager [ELH] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation of in-house training against FdA in Retailing units • New programme co-ordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major board changes • Change of programme manager • Abolition of fdf (October) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A second large supermarket chain joined the programme • Change of programme manager [ELH] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change of programme manager [ELH] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final year of accrediting in-house training against FdA in Retailing units • Change of programme manager [ELH] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation discussed possibility of a full Bachelor's degree programme

Figure 7.2 FdA in Retailing Timeline

Frequent changes to the ELH management team with day-to-day responsibility for the programme have occurred during this period most noteworthy were those at major board level. The significant departure (to oversee operations in the Far East) was that of the Retail Sales and Logistics Director in early 2010. He was considered the organisation's official champion¹⁸ of the FdA in Retailing and instrumental in its launch. It was his vision to develop the fast-track programme through to store management for those who left school at age 16. The FdA in Retailing was intended to provide the necessary theoretical knowledge to offset the managers' limited workplace experience. He started his career with the organisation, as a trolley boy so firmly believed in the notion of 'growing your own managers' from the bottom of the organisational hierarchy to the top (Michelle. Manager, Education and Skills). Caspian a Director at FdF stated:

Senior level people like [provided names of senior managers] are very keen to see learning and development as part of their strategy, but what the L&D team come up with are often very simple solution, a very simple product, that will

¹⁸ Generally, senior managers who have shown an interest in people development approached by Education and Skills to sponsor and promote training programmes across the organisation.

do the business so to speak. But, I actually think there is a need to develop much more tailored solutions to meet the need of workforce development rather than short injections of not very purposeful training (Caspian, FdF Director)

Caspian regarded senior managers to be quite influential and committed to development and argued ownership of the FdA in Retailing should reside with the operations function rather than HR. Further changes to the senior management team with responsibility for the FD occurred in 2010. The People Operation Director left the company to join a rival multichannel retailer whilst another senior manager took a key role in southern Ireland. It was usual practice to assign senior managers to promote all major development programmes, but since 2010 to the end of the research study, the FdA in Retailing remained without an internal champion. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the FD programme appeared to be losing its appeal and discussions had commenced with University North to replace the FD with a full bachelor's qualification. Was developing and designing an FD merely a 'tick-box exercise' for the organisation and delivering institution as suggested by the Programme Co-ordinator?

We would all like to think we are doing the FdA in Retailing because we would like business improvement for [ELH], and that is what they are saying they want, but the reality is organisations want to tick the box on the educational thing and we want to tick the box that we are working with employers. We are not necessarily going for that pure learning for learning's sake. If they tick

the box and get a Foundation Degree, then they are not really bothered whether they are better managers (Ivan, Project Manager).

The FdA in Retailing was designed in consultation with ELH and was therefore tailored to the organisations requirements. The programme blended formal methods of development with work based learning to deliver a range of modules that ELH stated they required in addition, learning was facilitated by store managers, the assigned student mentor. Students whilst studying on the programme were able to broaden their retail knowledge and attain employer relevant technical and interpersonal skills at university level 4 and 5. The qualification therefore provided, for some managers, a unique and expansive learning experience, that they were not required to fund themselves. Yet, the FdA in Retailing has failed to flourish in ELH, the programme has experienced unprecedented dropouts in excess of 60 % and has failed to grow numbers, even to the miniscule target of 100 the organisation had originally set. Was the FdA in Retailing simply a tick box exercise as suggested by the Project Manager at University North and if so what implications did this have for the success of the qualification? These points are unpicked in far more detail in the discussions chapter that follows.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Discussion of Findings

This chapter presents a discussion of the research findings and considers the effectiveness of the management learning, student employees experienced as well as the success of a UK Foundation degree in retailing. In doing so, it documents the experiences of students who have undertaken the Foundation degree and graduated from the programme. It also draws on the views of those managing the programme within the case organisation ELH and individuals with responsibility for overseeing the programme within the store environment. These are supported by findings from the delivering institution University North and a director from Foundation Degree Forward (FdF), who had direct responsibility for the FdA in Retailing, during its inception and subsequent rollout. To assess whether Foundation Degrees work, the discussion is broken down into three levels of analysis that comprise of the macro (government), meso (organisation) and micro (individual). At the macro level, the discussion centres on VET policy for skills development and the role of Foundation Degrees in bringing about a ‘skills revolution’ based on investment in higher-level skills. Employer involvement was central to this policy. When Foundation Degrees were first introduced, it was assumed that employers would be able to articulate their skills requirements, have a need for higher-level skills, and be willing to form partnerships with HE to design and deliver FD programmes. This section draws on the Working as Learning Framework (Felstead et al, 2009) to reveal problems associated with each of these assumptions. At the meso level, the discussion centres on the creation of expansive / restrictive learning environments (Fuller and Unwin, 2003, 2004) and the introduction of a new framework for Foundation Degrees. Emphasis has therefore, been placed on workplace approaches that support situated learning such as recognition and understanding of the qualification, supportive

management that facilitate workplace learning and processes that foster the development of communities of practice. The study findings show that from an educational, economic and social standpoint, Foundation Degrees had much to offer however, the lack of demand for highly skilled managers demonstrated by the organisation resulted in them not valuing the skills they were developing. The organisation did not have in place the necessary infrastructure to support workplace development. The award did not lead to career advantage. Because it was an intensive programme, student employees were actually at a disadvantage in terms of promotion because they lacked the time to take on more demanding jobs. The findings of this study are therefore not dissimilar to the ‘house of cards’ idiom, in that Foundation Degrees, within the retail context, have been built on shaky foundations, remove one card and the whole pile will topple.

8.1 VET Policy and the Shaping of a Foundation Degree

When first introduced in 2000/01 Foundation Degrees had a wide remit to address social employment and economic challenges including globalisation. The intention was to make higher education more accessible through forging stronger links between employers and higher education in providing vocationally relevant qualifications, argued as necessary to develop a more flexible workforce to address perceived skills gaps (QAA 2004). The QAA had rather noble ambitions for the Foundation Degree however; it assumed that employment sectors and organisations would have a requirement to invest in higher vocational qualifications at level four and above. The retail sector is significant in terms of its contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) so was clearly a key area for Foundation Degrees. However, as the literature review made clear, retailing in the United Kingdom (UK) has never had a strong history for

collaborative working or for engagement in vocational education and training. Further, for many firms, trading on the stock exchange, explicitly forbids certain types of collaboration. Therefore, first discussed is retail VET in relation to qualifications with comparisons drawn between the UK and Germany. The notion of skill in relation to retailing is then considered.

Retailing, as commented upon in this thesis, has had a poor reputation for education and training and this without a doubt, is partly due to a changeable UK VET system. The system has placed emphasis on a market for qualifications that enables individuals to enhance their employability through certification of sets of competencies acquired through either work experience or courses in a modularised system. It has been the market mechanism and the individual that have determined the nature and type of skills required. Whereas the German VET system has focused attention on education of a person for an occupation (*Berufliche Bildung*). Courses and qualifications have been developed in negotiation with social partners so that theoretical knowledge can be integrated with workplace learning (Brockman, 2008). For example, in Germany 81% of retail employees have completed two to three year retail-specific apprenticeships that involve compulsory college attendance (Tilly and Carre, 2011). In Britain, retailers have relied predominantly on their own internal training schemes supported by a range of non-compulsory national training initiatives such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and apprenticeships. It is unsurprising therefore, that countries such as Germany and France have far surpassed the UK when it comes to educational attainment, as have other sectors of employment in the UK.

The type of employer organizations that underpin training in countries like Germany are largely absent in the UK (Steedman et al, 1998). The government funded sector skills councils were established in the UK to oversee VET. Their role entailed bringing interested parties together and developing qualifications (Grugulis, 2007). However, they have been found to be fragmented and weak (Keep, 2009) The sector skills council for retail was able to bring together a select number of retailers to develop the skills framework for the sector, although they appeared to wield little influence, as the state sets their agenda rather than employers (Keep and Ashton, 2004). In Germany, qualifications were developed by groups of employers, through the Chamber of Commerce acting in collaboration with others. Whereas, the retail sector has been accused of being “*rather bullish*” and “*immature*” when it comes to cooperating on matters of VET, as demonstrated when ELH declined to collaborate with other retailers in the design and development of the FdA. ELH preferred to take sole lead on a qualification that was ultimately designed for retailing as a whole and later, when ELH refused to let their managers share a classroom with those from another, large multi-channel retail organization, claiming they were worried about the poaching of staff. Thus, the initial aim to make the FdA in Retailing a demand-led qualification for the retail sector never came to fruition. Further, not considered were the wider demands and requirements of the sector (Keep, 2006). The findings showed it was never the intention to market the qualification to smaller retailers, thereby excluding the largest majority of employers in the sector, regardless of whether they would have benefited from a qualification of this type or not. The different requirements of the six other sub-sectors of retailing (excluding grocery) also failed to be taken into account although, the qualification, when designed, mainly comprised of generic units of study appropriate to all retail organizations, with only one third

contextualized to specific organizational requirements. Lack of retail involvement in VET has raised further questions regarding qualifications and skill requirements of retail employers that are now considered.

Foundation degrees were part of the Labour Government's initiative to support higher-level skills. Therefore, both ELH and University North acquired government subsidies to design and develop the qualification, with ELH stating they wanted the programme to support development of employees through to store management by equipping managers with the skills and knowledge they required. This leads to the supposition that ELH required its store managers to possess higher-level skills. Yet, from the outset ELH have failed to incorporate the qualification into their existing development pipeline and as a result, the FdA in Retailing has remained a standalone award. The reasons for this are numerous and examined in the forthcoming section starting with a discussion on government subsidies of VET.

8.1.1 Following the Money

When the Coalition Government came to office (May 2010), they vowed to tackle the growing UK debt crisis that had grown to being the third largest in the world (Froud et al, 2011). As a result, the Government prioritised level 3 apprenticeships arguing they provided clearer pathways to level 4 apprenticeships and higher education (DBIS, 2010) whilst, other forms of skills development funding was radically scaled back. This included the abolition of FdF in 2010, the government quango with responsibility for overseeing the growth of FDs. ELH launched its level 3 apprenticeship programme in 2010, contending this better suited the younger population, referring to those who had just started in the organisation whilst, the FD

would target those in more senior store roles. The growth of the apprenticeship programme has seen a rapid rise in numbers, whereas FD numbers have remained stagnant. This rather suggests that ELH have become quite shrewd in securing public money to fund and deliver training and development of their workforce thereby, discarding other initiatives when the funding runs out (Payne and Keep, 2011). Evidenced by the way in which ELH have been conscious throughout of the cost implications of rolling out the FdA in Retailing to wider numbers across the organisation.

Both the Labour and Coalition Governments believed that employers would invest in the skills of their workforce if, the quality of the training could be assured and it was geared to their needs (DBIS, 2010). ELH were part of the consortium that had responsibility for designing the FdA in Retailing yet, the miniscule numbers of ELH managers on the programme would not support government thinking on this issue. This therefore leads to further questions about the skills required of retail in-store managers, discussed in relation to Felstead et al (2009) stages of production where retailing is positioned one stage before that of consumption.

8.1.2 Retail Work – How Highly Skilled Is It?

The White Paper on Skills acknowledged the importance of skills utilisation in the workplace when it stated, *“we will not achieve sustainable growth unless people are able to make full use of their knowledge and skills in the workplace”* (DBIS, 2010: 44). This thesis has drawn attention to the way in which skills acquired on the FdA in Retailing have been able to be utilised in ELH. However, what becomes strikingly obvious is that the organisation has not valued or required the full range of skills and

knowledge the programme has delivered. The reasons presented for this reside in two different areas of the WALF framework, namely the stages of production and the organisation of work (Felstead et al, 2009). The first takes into consideration the retail context, the second the role of the lower-level retail manager.

The Problematic Retail Context

Characterized by low pay, relatively high levels of labour turnover and a workforce comprised mainly of part-time female workers, the picture painted of the retail sector has been problematic. Retailers have had to endure increased competition, customers that are more demanding and fall-out from the economic crisis that affected food retailers more than other sectors of employment in terms of job losses (Campos, Dent, Fry and Reid, 2011, Office of National Statistics). The result has been regular periods of reorganisation and change that has led to intensification rather than a departure of bureaucratic controls (Hales, 2001:53). In 2009, ELH undertook a restructure of their stores, which resulted in the removal of one management layer that intensified the work of those that remained. Work in the store environment was described by Hales (2001) as rationalized and routinized as core organisational competences such as HR, logistics, purchasing have been centralized within head office functions (Keep and Mayhew (1999). The findings of this research were similar to those of Hales (2001) as the findings revealed that virtually all aspects of the lower level manager's job in ELH were tightly controlled through systems, routines and procedures. Referred to as *gospel* by one store manager, who stated that the store motto in ELH was to *conform and comply*. For example, during 2008, managers had to action, almost daily, reams of price changes, requested by head office in order to price match those of its competitors. Although, tensions existed between those who believed the organisation

ought to be allowing managers greater freedom to use their initiative and challenge the preferred way of doing things. Managers, in ELH, who were able to use their own discretion and challenge customary practice were referred to as *mavericks*, and were clearly in the minority as the majority were more inclined to follow a more bureaucratic approach to management.

What Do Lower-Level Managers Do?

Centralized decision-making and standardized processes have led to greater rigidity and control in the store environment that has limited the autonomy afforded to store and lower-level managers. Bolton and Houlihan (2010) refer to the powerlessness of front-line managers in addressing structural failings and problems pertaining to service delivery. The managers featured in this study did not perceive themselves to be powerless, although they did acknowledge they were continually monitored against key performance indicators (colour coded, green blue, red and yellow). They did however, have more “discretionary space” when it came to the people management aspects of their roles. They gave examples of how they were able to use discretion when allocating hours and work schedules (Lambert and Henley, 2012), and when motivating, coaching and developing their people to improve performance. However, the type of leadership to which they referred was very different to the variety discussed in the leadership literature (transformational, inspirational and visionary). Nevertheless, many managers bought into this rhetoric, as it formed a central strand of the internal development programme for managers although, little part of their role could be considered strategic. Further, the work of the junior retail has become more diverse and pressurized (Burt and Sparks, 2002).

Almost all managers in the case organisation, reported on a worsening retail situation. They talked of staff shortages intensified by a ban on recruitment, constant change, evidenced by restructures and exceedingly long hours of work (12 hours or more each day), with some even coming in to the workplace on their days off. In addition, their role was such that they were constantly mediating the divergent interests of employees, senior management and customers. Yet, they were certainly not all treated by the organisation as the ‘ghostlike’ figure to which Bolton and Houlihan (2010) refer. Those that had graduated from the FdA in Retailing were determined to gain recognition and reward for their effort and made it clear they would look elsewhere if this was not forthcoming in ELH. This leads to a key question, of whether retail managers require a degree level qualification to deliver performance gains.

8.1.3 Is a Degree Necessary?

The literature appeared to suggest that there was not a need for people in customer facing roles to possess higher order qualifications. Attitudes towards qualifications in retailing have remained ambivalent (Huddleston, and Hirst, 2004). Retail work is less well qualified than other sectors with only 18% having attained level four qualifications or above. The majority of managers interviewed in ELH were of the opinion that store managers did not require a degree, or equivalent qualification to carry out their role effectively. The reason for this was evident when examining the work organisation of the front-line manager and the restrictions placed upon their role. In the WALF framework (Felstead et al, 2009), relationships of trust and discretion reside along both the horizontal and vertical lines of the productive system. For example, it was evident that managers based in the head office environment of ELH

had far more autonomy than those based in the stores and generally were more highly educated (Price, 2011). ELH had considered expanding the qualification to distribution although; this did not include head office employees. This planned expansion was never instigated, more fundamentally, it remained unclear how higher-level skills aligned to junior managers as their skill requirements, used in practice, appeared to be rather basic (Lloyd and Payne, 2014). However, there was evidence to suggest, that after graduation, a limited number of managers were selected for head office based project work or more senior management tasks. This suggests that the skills developed were better suited to this type of work rather than that of first-line manager. Skill demand and utilisation is therefore an issue within ELH when it comes to the development of their junior managers and to those employed in other low-skilled sectors. The State of the Nation report, *Ambition 2020*, produced by UKCES (2009) stated, “*there is little value to an organisation having a skilled workforce if the skills are not used well*” (pp 11). Like other large retail organisations, ELH were investing in the skills they required their managers to have (Huddleston and Hirst, 2004). However, as discussed further in the next section, they illustrated a preference for their internal development programme ‘Options’ for their mainstream management training.

8.1.4 Using MD to Embed Corporate Culture

The case organisation, ELH, took an agricultural approach to the development of managers within its stores (Doyle, 2000). This inferred, using Doyle’s metaphor that the organisation preferred to grow its own managers rather than recruit talent from outside the organisation (Doyle, 2000), with the majority of those commencing at the age of 18 with A level qualifications. Stories regaled in ELH about how senior

personnel had successfully worked their way through the management ranks, from trolley boy to member of the board. These stories inferred anything was possible if you worked hard. This was an important message for ELH to communicate as the majority of retail managers had come up through the ranks of hourly paid work, rather than taking the academic route. To assist this pathway, the organisation had an in-house development scheme for every level of store management, referred to as 'Options'. This programme, although centrally managed was largely delivered in the store environment through on-the-job training and shadowing. The programme of development took a narrow perspective towards workplace development, as employer needs and motivation took precedence over individual and societal needs (Nixon et al, 2006). However, it illustrates how ELH were designing tightly structured development programmes to meet their skill requirements, interspersed with other forms of training such as apprenticeship programmes and fast-track management initiatives that incorporated an NVQ at level 3.

ELH were keen to give employees, at all levels, the opportunity to gain qualifications whilst working for the organisation and this was one of the major reasons given for ELH forming a partnership with University North to pilot the FdA in Retailing. This emotional and social concern for employees supported the findings of research conducted by Ryan (2009) as to why employers invested in qualifications and developed partnerships with higher education. However, Cullen and Turnbull (2005) argued these resource-based strategies were nothing more than tools of "*ideological control*" as the ultimate intention was to improve functional performance. This came through strongly in the findings of this thesis, as ELH on one hand wanted to reward their managers with the opportunity to gain a qualification but at the same time,

desired these managers to work even harder in store. In the literature, there was widespread support for employer engagement with higher education (Bolden et al., 2010) although there were still concerns that what employers really sought was value for money and an identified return on their investment (Wedgwood, 2007). This relates back to the point made earlier about organisations using government subsidies to fund training and development. In addition, the findings illustrated that, beyond using qualifications as a means of employee reward, employers had found it difficult to articulate what they wanted from higher education (Lashley, 2011).

In summary, this section has shown how the wider social structures and institutions have been fundamental, in shaping policy decisions relating to vocational education and training that have had implications for Foundation Degrees and more specifically the FdA in Retailing. Three aspects of the WALF framework (Felstead et al, 2009) have helped form the discussion around the structures and stages of production and the organisation of work.

In relation to the productive system, two components were considered in this section, the first related to the government's policy on VET and second, the role played by sector regulatory bodies (Sector Skills Councils and Foundation Degree Forward). As discussed, Foundation Degrees were at the heart of the New Labour government's investment in a demand-led system for VET. However, when introduced the Labour government assumed there would be a requirement for higher level-skills, that employment sectors would work together to identify skills requirements, and employers would, after initial subsidy, use their own money to fund higher-level skill development. What instead, has transpired, is that many sectors, such as retailing,

have no demand for higher-level skills, retail work is predominantly low skilled with work being highly rationalized and routinized and labour treated as commodity, especially in the store environment (Price, 2011). Further, management roles, rather than being at the level of the ‘skilled technician/professional manager’, were extremely limited in terms of autonomy and decision-making influence (Lloyd and Payne, 2014). It is hardly surprising therefore, to find that sectors such as retail have a poor history of involvement in VET. The findings showed that the retail sector is highly competitive, with certain key retailers taking the lead on shaping VET policy, to the detriment of other sub-sectors. Also found was an unwillingness amongst large retailers to share information and collaborate on skills development. This illustrates that large organisations such as ELH, are not only becoming more savvy in pursuing government subsidies to fund their training and development but are also using these opportunities to promote their standing in the wider business community, as ELH wanted to be the first retailer to offer a Foundation Degree to its employees. Yet, ELH failed to increase the numbers of managers they placed on the programme or integrate the award into their talent development pipeline through to store management. These findings raise a number of important questions for this study. Was ELH purely taking advantage of ad hoc government funding? If this was the case, there was little incentive for the organisation to adapt its systems to accommodate the FD, as ELH would have realised that government funding would only have been available for a limited time. The organisation could have made minor changes to accommodate the programme but decided against this measure. More fundamentally, the findings suggest that organisations like ELH do not need to have staff trained to level 4 and above. Both of these points had serious consequences for

the individual student in terms of their experience and expectation of studying for the award as discussed later in this chapter.

8.2 The Organizational Context

The first part of the chapter, has focused primarily on the broader retail context to examine how wider contextual pressures, such as the Labour governments educational policy and the social networks of the retail productive system have influenced organisational decisions on workplace learning. The following section examines the organisational context and the way in which the FdA in Retailing was located within this environment. As outlined in the previous section, the company failed to align the FdA in Retailing successfully to its other management learning initiatives, thereby leaving it as a standalone programme, which had serious implications with regard to how the qualification was perceived and therefore supported within the organisation. The degree of company support for the FdA in Retailing and those studying on the programme are discussed in the following section, these aspects amongst others are shown to help or inhibit workplace learning in the creation of expansive or restrictive learning environments. The findings show that certain stakeholder groups such as senior and store management are influential in providing barriers or opportunities for learning.

8.2.1 Supporting FD Integration and Growth

As the literature review made clear, senior management support is integral to the success of management development programmes, and is a strong force behind employee engagement in learning activities (Sonnentag et al, 2004). A member of senior management was assigned to each development programme in ELH. The

appointed sponsor of the FdA in Retailing was the Operations and Logistics Director. He was instrumental in launching the award and creating a long-term vision for its integration and growth. This system appeared to work well as it supported the work undertaken by the Education and Skills department and heightened the profile of the initiative in the store environment and externally. According to the orthodox literature, leadership and management development (LMD) should link to and be driven by organisational strategy (Holbeche, 2008). In the case of ELH, their intention for the qualification was to improve organisational performance by creating a 'fast track' development pipeline so that junior managers could progress to store management roles more quickly. The findings revealed that support by those in senior positions within the organisation had a crucial impact on the success of the programme (Mabey and Ramirez, 2004) alongside systems and structures. This endorses the findings of Garavan et al (1999) who considered senior management support to be one of the key characteristics of strategic human resource development. A further illustration of the importance of senior management support is evidenced in the short case study featuring Retailer B, (in this thesis).

However, as discussed in the findings chapters, within 12 months of the launch of the award, the senior management team in ELH had moved on to pastures new. The managers who took over the programme lacked authority and influence in the stores to instigate change. This raised two issues with regard to the management of the FdA in Retailing within ELH. The first relates to matters of power and influence, likened to Mintzberg et al's (1998) 'power school' of strategy. The second issue relates to perceptions of the FD qualification within ELH. The Education and Skills managers clearly had ideas on how they wished to develop the programme, yet they failed to

persuade the Board to finance the proposed changes, they did not have the power or influence to secure stakeholder support or acquire friends or allies to support their initiatives. Further, there was also a requirement to communicate the relevance of the qualification, especially to those in the stores with responsibility for facilitating management learning. This proved equally difficult, as the findings revealed a general ambivalence towards the award and qualifications generally. The literature found that in retailing and most service industries, managers were undereducated in respect to other sectors, which may have resulted in little value being placed on educators or education by the majority of the established store managers (Lashley, 2011), a point extended further in this chapter. Further, the skills that appeared to be valued in the stores reflected current employment needs and the competencies required for particular roles (Green, 1998) rather than the development of higher level skills such as critical thinking and analysis (Keep, 2009).

The findings illustrated the importance of securing senior management support for management learning as these managers helped to launch the programme and ensure that those in the store environment in field and store management roles were conversant with the qualification. The cessation of senior management sponsorship suggested there was no long-term strategic plan to support the growth of the award. However, during the period of research (2008-2012), ELH embarked on a series of restructures within its stores, in response to the economic recession. Consequently, short-term operational needs may have overtaken the company's longer-term commitment to support educational provision.

8.2.2 Creating Expansive or Restrictive Learning Environments

In the previous section, the discussion centred on the need for senior management support in creating a culture favourable to learning and the negative effects of short-termism when developing a new qualification. In this section, a theme in the WALF framework (Felstead et al, 2009), ‘workplace learning’, is used to discuss the situated nature of learning with respect to its expansive and restrictive features (Fuller and Unwin, 2003, 2004). Unwin et al (2007), use the learning metaphor ‘learning as participation’ to understand workplace learning and suggest that each workplace will offer distinctive opportunities for employees to learn (pp. 72). Organisational recognition and support for learners, discussed earlier, features on the expansive side of Fuller and Unwin’s (2004) expansive/restrictive continuum. However, the removal of these features can serve to restrict learning opportunities as found to be the case in [ELH]. The expansive – restrictive continuum developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004) has been adapted for the FdA in Retailing in the development of front-line managers (see figure 8.1: 300). The discussion commences with the store management support offered to students studying for the qualification.

Store Management Support and the Role of the Workplace Mentor

Context and supportive leadership were identified by Fuller and Unwin (2004) as important features of workplace learning. ELH acknowledged the importance of both in the selection of a suitable store/mentor for the FD candidates. However, the research found large variances in the support offered across different stores and formats, attributed, in the main to a lack of understanding and awareness of the qualification, differing priorities, self-interest and resentment. In some instances, store managers were three or four levels higher on the organisation structure chart

than the student. This posed further problems for those in more junior management positions as they felt intimidated and removed from the store manager assigned to mentor them. The virtues of mentoring were extolled by ELH and appeared to work well in the head office context and for a small number of ethnic minority groups within the stores. However, no formal training programme existed for the store managers mentoring the FD students or for those studying for the award. The findings showed there were very few instances where the mentoring arrangement worked effectively for those on the programme. Yet, the store manager was supposed to provide a supportive framework for learning to help remove what Barnett (2001) refers to as the “*existential anxieties of learning*”. Many students were concerned about studying in higher education, so this was important. The findings also revealed that mentoring was a key factor in retaining students on work-based learning awards and in engaging employers (Benefer, 2007).

Eraut’s (2007) two-triangle model (discussed on page 294) depicts the factors affecting learning at work and emphasised feedback and support as critically important for learning, retention and commitment and importantly developing confidence in the individual learner. Eraut argued that feedback should occur in the context of a good working relationship however, periodic reviews for the student, completed by the store manager, were cursory, if completed at all. The managers in the Education and Skills department believed that more work was necessary upskilling store managers, as they acknowledged the support given was less than satisfactory. However, the fact these managers were responsible for staffing their stores and under heavy pressure to reduce staff costs was not discussed,

The findings showed that store managers had a major influence on workplace learning and culture that Eraut et al (1998) argue extended far beyond their job descriptions. He suggested the manager's role was to develop a culture of mutual support and learning, not to provide all the support themselves. The short case study of Retailer B in Chapter 6 (page 295), illuminates the role of the manager as an enabler of learning although, takes support to a different, more extreme level when the manager with responsibility for the programme elected to undertake the award herself so that she could better support the student. Nonetheless, the encouragement provided along with the additional study days and support workshops, all helped to facilitate the transfer of learning into the workplace. This contrasted significantly with the support offered by the students store manager / mentor in ELH, where line management and learning support priorities appeared to be in conflict (Edmond et al, 2007). The fast-paced nature of retailing and the demands of retail work did not naturally support the contextual factors of learning to which Eraut (2007) referred. Further, the findings revealed a direct correlation between support offered at the most senior levels of management and that offered by managers and colleagues lower down the hierarchy. Opportunities to work with colleagues and form relationships with those who might provide feedback, support or advice were constrained or enabled by the positions that the managers occupied in the wider context of the format and store (Lee et al, 2004), and the cultural support for learning evident in both domains (Bishop et al, 2006). However, good support from the store manager/mentor served to expand rather than restrict learning opportunities. Further, one student had been able to expand his own learning territory by finding innovative ways of acquiring the support he required from his store manager and colleagues which in turn developed his confidence as he felt he had earned their recognition.

Managing the Basic Hygiene Factors

An important dimension of employer involvement cited in the literature is “*employer readiness to support learning*”. Effective employer organisations are therefore, those who are supportive of training partnerships and have what could be termed as a learning culture (Edmond et al, 2007: 176). This implies that they have the systems and structures in place to support workplace learning. The assigned gatekeepers of the FdA in Retailing programme within ELH, were the managers based in the Education and Skills department, a centralised head office function. They had responsibility for recruitment and selection of managers, general day-to-day administration that included tracking student performance and evaluation. They also performed an important link role between head office, the stores and University North. These managers firmly believed responsibility resided with those studying on the programme to obtain the necessary support they required, whether from their field sales team, store/personnel managers. They argued that if these managers wanted to be the ‘leaders of the future’ they should be driving their own learning. This proved possible for experienced managers however, most of the employees on the programme were junior managers, supervisors and for a short period, sales assistants with no management experience. These employees were much more reticent about asking for support and often failed to do so, which supports Bierma’s (2001) findings that political and power relationships can often determine how opportunities to participate in and access support for workplace learning are distributed as it limited their learning experience.

In addition, the junior managers administering the programme were, clearly stretched in terms of capability and resources. As evidenced when students had to organise

their own travel arrangements (transportation and hotels) when attending workshops at the delivering institution when the task had not been undertaken by head office personnel. Unfortunately, workplace barriers such as lack of communication over travel arrangements were some of the major reasons students withdrew from the pilot programme (Knight et al, 2006). The total number of student withdrawals from the pilot programme totalled 73%. This figure was significantly higher than the one sixth of enrolled students that withdrew from other FD programmes (Nelson, 2006). Although, a bespoke designed FD for Call Centre, run by First Direct experienced 65% attrition (Drake et al, 2009). Communication between students and head office and the general organisation of the programme also proved restrictive to learning. Students argued that head office personnel did not respond to their communications or keep them updated on key dates and events although, students based in the South of England, closest to the organisation's head office, seemed marginally better informed. The organisation kept no withdrawal data, so only the empirical findings illuminated reasons as to why students had withdrawn with one internal document inferring that some students had later left the organisation.

The Role of the Delivering Institution in Supporting Workplace Learning

The delivering institution, University North, had a long history of delivering work based learning programmes, for example working with Sainsbury in the 1990s to deliver their graduate development programme and forging long-term partnerships with large employers such as McDonalds to provide bespoke Foundation Degrees. It was their work around designing distance learning programmes that brought them to the attention of FdF, and ultimately to delivering the FdA in Retailing. The university was able to draw on its retail credentials when designing the units for the new award,

as many of the academic team had either worked in retail or taught on the retailing undergraduate programmes. Partnerships between employers and institutions were central to the delivery of high quality FDs, the partnership developed between ELH and University North worked well at the strategic level, thereby contradicting Reeve and Callacher's (2005) claim that there was little evidence to suggest organisations wished to engage in partnership with universities. In fact, the opposite could be said to be true as both the employer and university, benefited financially from the arrangement as it was the Labour Government's policy when the FdA launched, in 2007, to publicly fund the supply of qualified labour. However, this type of partnership arrangement does place certain organisations in the privileged position of dictating what they want from HE (Keep, 2009) therefore, forging good partnerships at the operational level was never going to be straightforward, as revealed in the next section.

At the operational level cultural disparities and diversity of expectations by stakeholders (Foskett, 2003) were evidenced. Managers in the Education and Skills department felt both intimidated and irritated by their academic counterparts and the different cultural environments of the two organisations. This was apparent by the way in which they discussed the different use of language, pace of work and the decision making process. From the aspect of developing a workable partnership, it proved essential to have both teaching and administering the programme, academics who had a good understanding of the retail context (Foskett, 2003). Further, to speed up the decision-making process, one main point of contact within the University also proved essential.

The challenges encountered at the operational level affected the quality of experience of those studying on the programme. University North were highly critical of the lack of support offered by ELH to its managers studying for the FdA in Retailing, as a result they made a number of changes to their programme delivery to compensate for what they regarded as organisational deficiencies. When the programme first launched, the university provided time at the start of each workshop for students to voice their concerns to the programme co-ordinator, the issues discussed were later, communicated back to ELH. The major problems concerned transport arrangements and in-store support. The high dropout rates at the end of the first year prompted the university to provide students with a personal academic tutor/mentor, an experienced and trusted academic who could liaise with students outside of the classroom. Some students used this resource, although others, when evaluating both organisations considered University North overly supportive especially when it came to extenuating circumstances and extending assignment deadlines, which again illustrates the cultural differences that existed and the differing views held by those in more senior store positions, as those lower in the hierarchy appreciated the help provided.

The strategic tri-partnership between FdF, ELH and University North worked well at the strategic level especially as all organisations benefited from HEFCE funding. The problems encountered were located more at the operational level. At this level, the divergent cultures and aspirations for the programme differed markedly. It has been suggested, that in developing demand-led, bespoke, qualifications the employer becomes the 'customer' rather than the individual (Keep, 2009) and the university had to bend to the requirements of the employer whilst maintaining the integrity of the Foundation Degree qualification and university benchmarks (QAA, 2010). Although

student numbers on the programme had not increased, the longevity of the partnership between ELH and University North suggests, there must be some mutual benefit to this arrangement although to acquiesce too far to employer demands may not be advantageous to Higher Education in the longer term.

M A C R O C O N T E X T	Expansive	Restrictive
	Strategic vision for FdA in Retailing and organisational fit	Lack of strategic vision for FdA in Retailing and no organisational fit
	Opportunities for career progression evident	Lack of opportunities for career progression
	Managers as facilitators of workforce and individual development	Managers as controllers of workforce and individual development
	The FdA in Retailing is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and organisational capability	The FdA in Retailing is only tailored to meet organisational capability
	Opportunities to participate and access support and guidance are widely available, designated mentor allocated	Limited support and guidance from store manager / mentor
	Participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace	Restricted participation in multiple communities of practice
	Dual status as learner and employee: explicit company recognition and support for those undertaking the FdA in Retailing as learners and employees	Status as employee dominates: ambivalent company recognition and support for those undertaking the FdA in Retailing as learners
	Primary community of practice has shared participative memory: cultural inheritance of workforce development in partnership with HE	Primary community of practice has little or no participative memory: no or little tradition of development through HE
	Breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences	Narrow: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks/knowledge/location
	Technical and interpersonal skills valued	Technical and interpersonal skills taken for granted
	MD fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing	MD development limits opportunities to extend identity: little boundary crossing experienced
	Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued	Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed not valued
	Educational attainment and qualifications valued	Limited value placed on educational attainment
	Cross boundary communication encouraged	Bounded communication
	Chances to develop conceptual and meta skills. Innovation and creativity important	Barriers to learning new skills, innovation and skills unimportant

Figure 8.1 Expansive / Restrictive Approaches to the FdA in Retailing. Adapted from Fuller and Unwin's (2004:130 – see page 72 for the original continuum).

The factors discussed throughout this section served to either create expansive learning environments or restrict opportunities for learning for those studying on the programme. First discussed, was the role carried out by senior management. The findings illustrated how their role was integral to promoting a learning culture and creating a strategic vision for programmes such as Foundation Degrees. Qualifications such as the FdA in retailing needed to be incorporated into the long-term strategy for management development whereas short-termism and constant change to address operational requirements were not conducive to effective learning and served to undermine the value of the programme, as did poor in-store support from the students store manager / mentor and from those administering the programme. Managing, what are referred to in this thesis as 'hygiene factors' (Hertzberg, 1987) were found to be of paramount importance because; their mismanagement was partly shown to be responsible for the high dropout rates of students. It was necessary to have the correct structures and systems in place to manage things like transport, accommodation and communication between head office and the stores. The store manager was the students' assigned mentor and as such had a significant role to play in facilitating learning yet, role conflict, prevented many managers from conducting their role effectively. The continuously changing and fast-paced nature of their job, key performance indicators that placed emphasis on functional performance and an overriding bureaucratic structure, did not always align well with the development of their teams. The findings therefore served to illustrate how the organisational context, in the case of ELH, inhibited rather than expanded the

learning of those studying for the FD award. The next section moves on to discuss the final level of analysis, that of the individual.

8.3 Individual Agency, Personal Histories and Subjectivities

At the micro level, the aim was to investigate the relationship between individual learner's positions, their dispositions to learning and learning for work to ascertain whether the FdA in Retailing was meeting student experience and expectations. At this level, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) work was drawn upon to expand the theoretical framework, to include individual agency. The section commences by discussing why managers elected to study for the award and how student expectations did not always align to those of the organisation. Following is a discussion on the competing demands of work and study. The findings revealed that working and studying full-time could be detrimental to health and well-being although, peer support could alleviate some of the pressures encountered and provide a wider support network, beyond that of the organisation or university. The final aspect discussed centres on the application of learning to work and methods of assessment.

8.3.1 Differing Stakeholder Expectations

One of the key intentions of Foundation Degrees was to contribute to widening participation of underrepresented groups in higher education (DfEE, 2000). Four of the managers had already experience of higher education prior to the FD, so unlike those in Rowley's (2005) study, four participants had already embarked on study in HE, although had failed to graduate. In fact, the majority of participants in the study did not align to the stereotypical FD student identified in the literature. Also apparent were the differing aspirations and drivers for the qualification; two major incentives

for those who had embarked on the programme were the ability to learn whilst earning and gain career advancement. For many students the overall expectations were multi-faceted and not necessarily in line with those of ELH (Wedgwood, 2007). The organisation presented the qualification as an 'exclusive opportunity', a way of rewarding certain employees. However, those applying for the qualification saw it as a means of gaining career advancement, a transportable qualification and broader retail knowledge. Billett (2004) refers to these different agendas as '*coparticipation*', as they illustrate how the workplace affords participation in learning and how the student, elected to participate.

Consistent with the arguments presented by Gleeson and Keep (2004) and Hillier and Rawnsley (2006), the findings revealed that all three major stakeholders had conflicting learning requirements. The majority of students sought to advance their careers and so were concerned with performance and occupational competence; they understood their performance was being monitored as they studied, so were keen to create a good impression on gatekeepers who could provide progression opportunities (Edmond et al, 2007). ELH suggested they wanted to use the programme to give their managers retail knowledge, specific to organisational needs whilst they developed the necessary technical and 'soft skills'. University North as mentioned previously sought to uphold QAA standards and sustain the educational remit for the award as well as expand their portfolio of corporate programmes. However, expectations relating to career advancement presented enormous challenges for ELH, as they had failed to align the award to any talent development strategy. Consequently, there was not the infrastructure to adequately support the programme, the students well-being or their career advancement.

Those working in the Education and Skills function had tried to dispel what they referred to as “*myths*” surrounding the FD with regard to the belief that the award would increase promotional opportunities although, this proved difficult due to poor communication between head office and the stores. Further, to intensify the problem, most other development programmes that ELH offered, such as ‘Options’ resulted in career advancement. Students on the FdA, quickly became discouraged when they realised they were undertaking a two-year, full time programme of study with no form of recognition, other than a certificate. University North was firmly of the opinion that ELH should have outlined, from the beginning, what would be on offer for students when they completed the programme. They believed this could have aided student motivation and retention. However, it further supports the argument that ELH had no requirement for higher-level skills and qualifications in the store environment and therefore place limited value on the qualification.

8.3.2 Balancing Work, Life and Study

A key feature of Foundation Degrees was its flexible delivery mode and study patterns designed to suit the learner (QAA, 2010). In the case of the FdA in Retailing term dates were brought forward into the summer term and workshops and assignment submissions were diarised to avoid busy trading periods such as Christmas and Easter. Nonetheless, the expectation was that students would complete up to 400 learning hours across a 13-week term. This equated to full-time programme of study that students had to fulfil over a two-year period alongside, full-time work in a store environment. Most managers were working a minimum of 12-hour days, five to six days a week. The demanding nature of retail work, with varying shift patterns and long hours left very little time for study let alone relaxation. It was therefore not

surprising that managers complained bitterly about the hours of study required and commitment involved, claiming that ELH had misinformed them about this aspect of the programme. The organisation did take steps to remedy this situation by inviting past students to the assessment centres to speak openly and honestly about the work demands and the sacrifices required, for those applying for the FdA in Retailing. This resolved problems concerning miscommunication, yet other fundamental issues such as time off for study remained.

Additional study days, were later awarded by ELH to students studying for the award to balance work / study / life demands however, the majority of students failed to use their entitlement as they had either not been notified of the additional allowance or were worried about their KPIs. They feared time spent out of store could lead to missed targets, which, ultimately would result in poor reviews. This situation also applied to time spent away from the store to attend university workshops and support days. It was the responsibility of the student to ensure they provided sufficient cover and account for any shortfall in performance during their absence. It was evident that workplace affordances for learning were not evenly distributed (Ashton, 2004) as stores were reimbursed if students attended other types of training activity away from the store, although this did not apply to the FdA. This illustrates how “*workplace factors structure and distribute opportunities for participation and hence, the prospects for learning*” (Billett, 2002:62). Further, store managers were instrumental in providing students with the supportive learning environment they required. When this was lacking, it resulted in students becoming stressed and/or anxious when trying to manage the competing demands of work and study that ultimately led to some students having to take a leave of absence from work. Additionally, students with

young families strongly advised others in similar situations to consider their options before applying to join the programme as this further added to the demands on their time.

What also became apparent was the detrimental effect the degree had on career progression. Many managers were actively discouraged from applying for more challenging roles, whilst studying, as the Education and Skills team felt the extra demands of this type of move, would prove too much for the individual. In addition, some managers, who had started larger, more taxing jobs before embarking on the programme, were encouraged to take a step back into more familiar roles until they had completed the qualification. This caused resentment as those on other programmes such as 'Options' continued to advance in their careers whilst completing their training. The majority of students were reluctant to speak to their store managers or head office personnel about the issues they faced preferring instead to voice their concerns to other students studying for the award. In these circumstances, the support of other students proved essential.

8.3.2 Peer Learning and Developing a Community of Practice

The FdA in Retailing attracted managers from across the United Kingdom, which meant that they could be geographically located across the length and breadth of the country, many students therefore had significant distances to travel to the University. Students commented they missed the campus based experience and more regular contact with fellow students as the group only officially came together to attend workshops and support sessions twice a term. However, one of the key findings of

the research has been the importance placed by all students on peer support and collaboration. In this context, Boud (2002) suggests peers are:

Other people in a similar situation to each other who do not have a role in that situation as teacher or expert practitioner. They may have considerable experience and expertise or they may have relatively little. They share the status as fellow learners and they are accepted as such. Most importantly, they do not have power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities.

Much of the literature relating to the topic of peer support overlaps with that of peer learning (Boud, 2002) which can take many forms from informal gatherings to mentor-mentee relationships. The model most similar to that discussed by the students is that of a 'learning cell' as described by Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbatt, (1995). A learning cell involves students on the same course forming partnerships to assist each other with both course content and personal concerns. Whilst studying on the programme students used a range of methods to communicate with each other including Facebook, phone and text. Facebook was the most popular method and proved useful when working on assignments and sharing information. Students found they had similar issues and concerns therefore; members of the learning cells were able to provide reassurance and guidance. Although, a strong sense of community existed across the cohort there were examples of smaller cliques forming as well.

Notions of peer learning overlap with theories of social learning that, conceptualise learning as a social process these include Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of

learning (CoPs). The three characteristics of CoPs, the domain, the community and the practice (Wenger (2009) were evident in the informal group the students had established. The shared domain of interest that brought the students together was the FdA in Retailing; each student was fully aware of the need to pass each unit to acquire the final qualification, therefore assessment became a main focus of attention. The community formed by the students proved vital to their experience on the programme; it gave them a sense of belonging, with many reportedly seeking help or advice from their peer group rather than academic staff or colleagues when faced with a problem. Something also supported by Herrera et al (2015) who found that Foundation Degree students studying to be pharmacy technicians rarely interacted with their work based tutors, surmising that this was because students most enjoyed the peer-learning element of their programme. The findings of this thesis also illustrated that other forms of support became less important as the community evolved. Although peer learning (learning cells) and social theories of learning (CoPs) both apply to the support network the students described they do not go far enough to explain the significance of this type of group. The group were able to use peer mentoring, coaching and counselling effectively to provide knowledge, experience, emotional, and practical help. The benefits of peer support are well documented in the literature however, the findings of this research showed that this type of support not only promoted psychological well-being and more supportive social relationships it also enhanced independent learning and improved retention. As some students had reported, it was only by talking through their issues with fellow students that persuaded them to remain on the programme.

8.3.4 Applying Learning in the Workplace

The FdA in Retailing was divided into one forty and eleven, twenty credit units, studied over a two year period. The challenge from the outset was to design a work-based programme that would enable the knowledge, skills, competence and expertise acquired in the classroom and through the e-learning modules to be transferred effectively into the workplace. The partnership arrangement between the institution and ELH enabled managers in the Education and Skills department to be part of the consultation team during the design stage of the units. They also took responsibility for reviewing content and evaluating workshop feedback, as the supposed purpose of FDs was to provide students with the knowledge, understanding and skills the employer needed (QAA, 2010), in this respect, the transfer of learning should have been improved.

However, as Eraut (2006) posits, there is a distinction between deep and surface approaches to learning. This study provides many examples to illustrate how students were able to apply their learning in the workplace. In some instances, students had tried to understand the underlying meaning of what they had learnt by experimenting in the workplace or conducting further research, for example one student had visited other stores, within the group, to compare store displays. This enabled them to evaluate the merits of what they had learnt in a particular context to illustrate aspects of deeper learning (Biggs, 1993). Often their intrinsic motivation came from studying subjects that were particularly relevant to their occupation such as PPD1 and Consumer Buying Behaviour. These units scored most highly when evaluated. However, students appeared uninterested in studying any subject that involved delayed application, thereby supporting Billett's (2004) research findings. One unit

that was heavily criticised by the students was Managing Information as the topic was less relevant to most managers' job roles and therefore the content was unfamiliar and difficult to assimilate. In such instances, it was important for the educator to be able to provide the right type of experience through which the learner could require knowledge and understanding (Jarvis, 2010) thereby, forging a bridge between the taught element of the programme and application in the workplace.

Regardless of whatever strategies tutors employed to encourage the transfer of learning, students quickly learnt how to survive and maximise their return on their academic effort, pursuing grades rather than learning for its own sake. This was particularly evident in the project work students elected to undertake. Rather than devise new projects to deepen their learning they chose to focus on existing work-based projects. Entwistle (1992) suggests that most teaching and assessment regimes encourage surface approaches to learning although the organisational context can also restrict or prevent deeper learning from taking place. As the findings show educational attainment was not highly regarded within the ELH store environment therefore, the majority of students lacked support from senior management and colleagues. Students, in the main, were not encouraged to share what they had learnt nor did the demanding nature of their work allow time to practice the new skills and knowledge they had acquired. Nevertheless, there was evidence that a small number of students were starting to question workplace practices or what Engeström (2001) refers to as the "*order and logic of their activity*", that forms a central tenant of what he refers to as expansive learning. Students also acquired increased confidence (Knight et al, 2006) and felt empowered to contribute more to their jobs.

Earlier in the section, the design stage of the FD was referred to, and the involvement of ELH in this process. The QAA benchmark (2004:5) specifies that employers are fully involved in the design and regular review of FD programmes. It also suggests that it is beneficial for employers to be involved in the delivery, assessment and monitoring of students. The literature suggests that there are challenges and tensions in the implementation of FDs and employer engagement in vocational education (Edmond et al, 2007). ELH took an active role in the pilot stage of the FD yet their involvement in the delivery of the programme has been marginal and in stark contrast to that of Retailer B. ELH have advocated minor changes to the content of the e-learning modules and feedback from students has prompted the removal of two tutors from the teaching team however, they have shown little sustained interest in the delivery or evaluation of the programme. Further, the different knowledge cultures of University North and ELH have become increasingly apparent. The university valued theoretical and methodological knowledge as well as practical skills whereas ELH valued codified knowledge and skills required for competence in a range of activities for performing work-related roles (Eraut, 2004). ELH had successfully managed to identify what they required from their own training programmes although, found it tremendously challenging to articulate what they required from HE in relation to the development of their junior managers, in the store environment. The literature suggests there is no requirement for higher-level skills in customer facing roles. This may account for why retailers and other service sectors such as hospitality and tourism have been reluctant to engage with higher education. Still, this calls into question the very notion of Foundation Degrees, as they were intended to not only meet the skills needs of employers but also to increase the number of people qualified to level four and above. There are also those in opposition to employer engagement

argue that it is academics not employers who should be in control of the educational experience and curriculum (Lashely, 2011). They suggest this would help to ensure some degree of homogeneity across the sector and leave employers free to advise on skills policy, thereby developing stronger sector skills councils more akin to the Chambers of Commerce found in Germany, where not only large organisations are represented but also smaller companies and entrepreneurs.

8.3.5 Evaluating the Success of the FdA in Retailing

This section considers the views of four key stakeholder groups, the representative from FdF, a government quango established to market and promote FDs, the case organisation ELH, the delivering institution, University North and the FD students who had achieved the FdA, to discuss their experiences and what they considered the programme had achieved. The first discussed are the expectations of FdF. FdF undertook extensive evaluation of their FDs however, when interviewed the FdF Director considered different measures of return-on-investment to be overplayed. He preferred to measure the qualification against two criteria:

- The take up of the qualification by organisations across the sector
- The extent to which the award reflected the organisations measures of performance. There was no measure of individual success.

In relation to the first measurement, only six organisations had at different times, signed up for the qualification during the research period (2008-2012) at University North. A miniscule number when the size of the retail sector is considered. The second measurement relates more to organisational performance than education. The

FdF Director stated explicitly that qualifications should lead to improved performance; therefore, he suggested it was a requirement of the individual to demonstrate what they had learnt which, in turn would accelerate their promotion, not the qualification. Although the qualification raised the profile of some students many, suggested they would have been better off, in terms of their career progression, had they not embarked on the Foundation Degree.

The case organisation, tracked students whilst they were studying for the award and measured the success of the programme by the numbers that gained promotion upon successful completion although, they stated all candidates had invariably demonstrated improvement in some aspect of their role whether it be technical competence, leadership or personal development. Tracking information, during the research period was not made available by ELH nevertheless, the Education and Skills managers categorically stated their aims for the FdA in Retailing had been met regardless of the failure of plans to extend the qualifications to other aspects of the business. This suggests either, expectations for the programme were only partially met, or the organisation had not set specific targets for expanding the qualification to non-store areas of the business. Further, it was evident the organisation was concerned about the cost of expanding the qualification in-store and had discussed options of managers self-funding if numbers ever became too great. This suggests that the performance of those running the programme was also subject to scrutiny and cost controls, calling into question the impartiality of their views.

It is unclear as to whether University North were aware of the organisation's plans to expand the award although, they were highly critical of ELH's involvement in the

delivery of the programme. The university had a direct comparison in Retailer B (See Appendix F), a mid-sized grocery retailer who they described as exemplary in the support of their managers. When contrasting the two organisations they noted differences in terms of the support offered by senior management and the time and resources allotted to students on the programme. Senior managers from Retailer B were involved in every level of the programme from induction through to graduation. In the case of ELH, no representatives came to the university to help assess final year work based presentations; in fact, the company did not have the resources to supply project work on time for students to complete.

There were no clear government guidelines on the extent to which a single employer should be involved in the design and delivery of FDs. Nonetheless, University North were of the opinion that ELH had no real interest in the FdA in Retailing and had simply signed up to pilot the programme because the Labour government had asked them to do so and had subsidised their involvement. When the FdA in Retailing launched in 2007 ELH was one of the UK's most celebrated retailers, the then Chief Executive Officer was an advisor to the Government and the company was expanding into America. The retail sector is very different today from what it was nine years ago. ELH are retrenching, with reports that there may be further job cuts to come in 2016 as they adapt to falling sales and competition from the discount retailers (Ruddick, 2016,). It is difficult to surmise if ELH would embark on the FdA in Retailing today or whether in 2007, when the programme launched, they were merely ticking the qualification box as University North suggested. Nevertheless, they have been disinclined to grow the number of managers on the programme or support students in line with university expectations.

The qualification invariably raised the profile of those studying on the programme, especially when first launched. Further, the FdA in Retailing was shown to have an impact on the confidence of managers who had successfully completed the award. It was also beneficial to their development as it gave them a deeper understanding and knowledge of their work thereby supporting the findings of Snape and Finch (2006). However, the research findings deviated on a number of points: not all managers were completely satisfied with their experiences of the course nor were they more enthusiastic about their work as a result. The rhetoric surrounding Foundation Degrees and career advancement was ultimately misleading (Dunne et al, 2008) as some managers were so demoralized with the lack of company support and career opportunities they had started to explore work prospects outside the organisation (Harvey and Drew, 2006). Further, a key characteristic of Foundation Degrees was to widen access, implying positive benefits to those studying for the award, although similarly to Dunne et al (2008) this study found studying for the FD could have a negative impact on work, life and general wellbeing.

However, on a more positive note, there were also benefits to studying the award. Some managers spoke of developing higher conceptual skills that gave them the confidence to question existing values and norms and think more creatively about their work, this in turn encouraged double loop learning (Agyris & Schon, 1974). For others, it had broadened their horizons, alerting them to opportunities not previously considered. Most were appreciative of the organisations investment in their education and the opportunity to study whilst working. However, cultural values and practices within the student's domain played a key role in fostering or stifling learning (Stewart and Rigg, 2011). The findings showed that higher order skills in the store

environment, were not valued or promoted. Support from senior management and store managers was very variable yet a key factor in whether the programme met student expectations, closely followed by recognition and opportunities for career progression. These themes are strongly linked and feature on the expansive side of Fuller and Unwin's (2004) expansive/restrictive continuum, shown on page 72.

It could be argued that in offering the opportunity for students to study for the FdA in Retailing, ELH were creating more expansive learning opportunities. The programme enabled managers to engage in multiple, overlapping communities of practice and undertake a work based qualification (Felstead et al, 2009). However, expansive learning environments are ones in which aspects of participation including, the organisation of work and job design in the acquisition of expertise in work, are extensively and fully realized and this was not the case in ELH. A valid argument was presented by ELH for offering the FdA in Retailing to a select group of its managers. However, by not adequately addressing how they were going to utilise the award, link it to their existing management development programmes and support managers adequately whilst studying, they unwittingly restricted learning opportunities which, invariably contributed to the high drop-out rates encountered during the pilot stage of the programme. The final chapter in this thesis re-visits the research questions to provide conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER NINE: Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter is purposely shorter than previous chapters, as its main aim is to conclude on what has gone before. The first part of the chapter presents the outcomes of this research, in relation to the four research objectives set out in the introduction and methodology chapter (Chapter 1. & Chapter 4.), reflecting on each in turn and synthesizing the various issues raised throughout this thesis. The chapter then concludes with the main contributions to theory and practice, limitations to the study and recommendations for future research. The objective of this thesis was to explore the generative mechanisms in a retail managers' learning through a UK Foundation degree in retailing. At the macro level, Foundation Degrees were part of the Labour government's plan to improve national economic competitiveness through the growth of a knowledge society. Their aim was to meet a perceived shortfall in the numbers of people with intermediate higher technical and associate professional skills, and widen participation by providing a new and accessible route into higher education (HEFCE, 2007). However, Foundation Degrees have failed to prosper, resulting in a steady decline in student numbers from 2009 onwards. The findings show that employers, particularly in the service sector have low demand for higher-level skills especially in customer facing roles and, as a result, placed little value on qualifications even when taking into account their work based learning pedagogy. This has serious implications for policy makers and for those designing and delivering Foundation Degrees as explained throughout the proceeding sections of this chapter, when re-visiting the research objectives of this study.

9.1 Does the FdA Meet the Skills Needs of the Retail Sector?

The simple answer to this question, would be no, the FdA has not been able to meet the skills needs of the retail sector, the reasons for this are set out in the remainder of this section. In the context chapter (Chapter 3.), it was suggested that Foundation Degrees were planted in difficult terrain as they were intended to meet a wide range of economic, social and educational objectives. However, expanding the award into retailing was always going to be a challenge when considering the diverse and problematic nature of the retail context, as described in Chapter 2, of this thesis. This does not imply there was no requirement for skills development, as large retailers were investing heavily in functional training for the task or role although, the sector, as a whole was less well qualified than other sectors. Further, retailers expressed concerns over what they described as a shortfall in management talent. With organisations, such as ELH, beginning to consider how they could accelerate the progression of school leavers into store management positions although, the findings revealed, junior management roles to be quite low skilled and tightly controlled affording little room for discretion (Lloyd & Payne, 2014). The contextual factors highlighted in this thesis, including a reticence by employers to engage in wider skills issues, weak sector skills councils and lack of demand for higher-level skills and qualifications, have therefore been fundamental in determining whether the FdA would succeed or fail within this terrain.

A main characteristic of Foundation Degrees was that they were employer led in order to meet specific skills needs (QAA, 2015). Although the FdA in Retailing was based on the retail skills framework devised by a retail consortium, take up of the qualification has remained in single figures. The findings show that retailers,

particularly those in grocery, were reluctant to work in partnership to address skill shortages and gaps. The sector was highly competitive therefore; retailers were concerned about employee mobility and the poaching of staff and this deterred them from investing in the development of transferable skills. In addition, this study raised questions about the transferability of the qualification to other sub-sectors in order to meet the government's widening participation agenda. The findings revealed that the intention was never to extend the qualification to that of the smaller retailer. Further, the way in which the qualification was developed and piloted, dissuaded retailers from other sub-sectors from engaging with the award although, it was in essence a generic retail qualification.

Further, government quangos such as the Sector Skills Council for Retailing with a key role in developing a more demand-led and employer-led education and training system in tandem with FdF, before its expiration in 2010, appear to have done little to address these concerns. Their short-term, stop-go approach has failed to allow retail institutions to mature so that they can create their own viable institutional frameworks (Keep, 2006). Instead, the government have continued to invest in new initiatives, such as intermediate and advanced level apprenticeships to address perceived skills shortages, rather than tackle the underlying issues relating to the organisation of work and the utilisation of skills. Organisations, such as ELH, have invested in government VET schemes that promote skills supply through ever increasing government subsidies and levies, and have shown a particular shrewdness for securing public money to pay for training, that they would otherwise have funded themselves (Payne

& Keep, 2011), without questioning the long-term implications of such a strategy on their employees.

Improving management and leadership ability is clearly an important issue for ELH and Britain as a whole (UKCES, 2009) although, flexible and de-regulated labour markets and the maximisation of short-term shareholder returns have not proved conducive to raising employer ambitions to enhance skills supply. However, the retailing landscape is changing. The national living wage (NLW), set to reach £9.00 per hour by 2020, will reportedly cost the industry an additional £3bn per annum. This increase, according to a British Retail Consortium (BRC) report (2016), is likely to have a significant impact on jobs, with the workforce contracting by as much as a third. Remaining work, as a result, may become more productive and rewarding with greater investment given to employees. At this early stage, it is unclear whether BRC predictions will come to fruition and employee investment may not necessarily lead to better job quality and professionalization. However, the increase in the minimum wage may start to highlight some of the criticisms commented upon in this thesis in relation to the self-reinforcing employment regime of retail work.

9.2 Do FdAs Help Promote Expansive Learning?

As discussed in the thesis, the term expansive learning comes from the work of Fuller and Unwin (2003 and 2004) and their research into expansive / restrictive learning environments. They argue that the teaching and learning of concepts, skills and practices takes place in a variety of ways that together constitute a learning environment. Fuller and Unwin's (2003) framework or continuum (as shown on page 72) has been used in this study to facilitate the identification of learning activity in the

workplace, and the sorts of relations and identities that are promoted within it. The findings have enabled a new conceptual framework to be devised specifically for Foundation Degrees (see figure 8.1). This thesis argues that a Foundation Degree characterized by the features listed as expansive will create a stronger and richer learning environment than those comprising features associated with the restrictive end of the continuum. In summary, the institutional features of the Foundation Degree include:

- A clear vision for the award, aligned to career development and progression, supported and championed by senior management
- Explicit recognition and support for managers studying for the award as employees and learners, with store managers assigned to act as facilitators of workplace development
- Mechanisms to enhance the development of communities of practice that foster peer and more autonomous learning

The research findings have enabled the features on the expansive side of the continuum to be presented in order of importance, something not previously undertaken by Fuller and Unwin (2003, 2004), when they compiled their original framework for apprenticeship programmes. Listing the expansive features, in order of importance, was particularly relevant for Foundation Degrees, as the findings revealed that some features on the expansive side of the continuum were able to compensate for those not present. Conversely, limited access to some of these features could result in managers leaving the programme and ultimately the organisation. The weak institutional infrastructure, limited field and in-store support and lack of internal

commitment to other expansive features of the model have resulted in restrictive learning opportunities for managers studying for the award. However, as indicated, this is not the case for all managers. For example, those who experienced strong field management support, were able to surmount the problems encountered in-store and with those administering the programme. This indicates that it is not necessary for all expansive features to be present, as just a small number can make a significant difference to the experience of the individual learner.

The evidence, presented in this thesis, indicates that the FdA in Retailing is currently doing little to expand the managers' learning territory or career progression to store management; indeed the findings reveal that the qualification can be detrimental, not only to career advancement in the short-term but also to health and general wellbeing (Dunne et al, 2008). Yet, ELH has not deliberately set out to be restrictive; in fact, by providing access to knowledge-based vocational qualifications, the organisation was providing expansive learning opportunities for its junior managers. Nevertheless, strongly influencing the organisation's approach to workplace development (expansive or restrictive) was the historical, socio-cultural, organisational and economic processes (Fuller and Unwin, 2003) discussed in the thesis. It proved difficult for an externally conceived and essentially a bolt-on qualification, to penetrate these different contextual layers. Foundation Degrees have the potential to form a bridge between education and the workplace, and to provide learning that is more expansive, and develop the skills and knowledge required of the sector / organisation. However, the proliferation of low-grade managerial jobs in the service sector and the way in which work is organised has served to restrict workplace

learning and the delivery of higher managerial qualifications, such as Foundation Degrees.

9.3 How does Studying for an FdA Affect the Individual?

The aim of the third objective was to examine what effect studying for a FD had on the individual learner / manager. Much of the literature on workplace learning has been drawn predominantly from a participatory perspective that focuses largely on the workplace itself (Lave and Wenger, 1991 & Engeström, 2001). Individuals are conceptually located as being part of the activity system or community of practice, yet their individualised and detailed perspectives are underplayed (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2003). The mutually constitutive interrelationships between the individual student dispositions, the organisation for which they work and the wider policy and management issues related to the organisation and VET, have been examined to better understand how contexts shapes individual learning.

As discussed, the company initially selected managers who were on the A Level Options programme or those in existing line manager roles. The programme then widened to include customer assistants and team leaders to constitute a new community of practice within the wider community of the organisation. Lave and Wenger (1991:8) defined a community of practice, as a *'set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential .and overlapping communities of practice'* in which emphasis is placed on the movement from newcomer to old-timer through the process of *'legitimate peripheral participation'*. This definition applied to those new to the organisation (customer assistants and team leaders), who were just commencing their retail careers. However,

most managers were established 'old timers', who had been with the company five years or more. This suggests that the majority of managers were already experienced employees and therefore legitimate peripheral participation was not the dominant component of learning in the wider community of practice. It was the FD student community that provided the supportive and stable learning environment, rather than the wider community of the student's workplace, where disruption and change were the norm or the unfamiliar university context. The managers constructed different aspects of themselves within each community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and presented themselves as most 'at home' when with their peer group, or within the smaller sub-groups that had also formed within the wider CoP (Wenger, 2001). The study found that peer learning and support was instrumental to group and individual development when other forms of support failed to materialise or meet the student's requirements. In fact, as these CoPs evolved, reliance on other forms of support diminished. Students claimed that these CoPs led to improved emotional well-being aided social relationships and enabled the sharing of experiences and learning. They provided a safe haven where students could speak openly about their concerns and not feel judged.

Within the store environment, affordances to participate in workplace learning could vary enormously whether students were 'old timers' or new recruits, as affiliations and demarcations constituted a base to provide or restrict opportunities (Billet, 2002). For example, some store managers were supportive of their students, giving them sufficient time to study and attend university, whilst others offered little or no support. These assigned gatekeepers determined how students could access opportunities to learn and interact with co-workers and so had a marked influence on learning. In

addition, the store manager was also the assigned student's workplace mentor, a role rarely carried out to the student's satisfaction. However, in cases where it was, the level of support was both appreciated and instrumental for the learners concerned. The findings revealed the importance of students being located in a context (store environment) that supports and encourages workplace learning, as unsupportive work contexts affected not only the students' performance on the programme but also their general wellbeing.

Even when workplace support was forthcoming, students did not elect to participate equally across all units of the Foundation Degree programme. The findings illustrate that these managers, rather than being passive learners were electing to engage with the skills and knowledge they found most accessible and useful to their current roles (Billett, 2002). For practice, this suggests that those designing workplace initiatives need to have a clear understanding of what managers do (Hale, 1999; Lloyd and Payne, 2014) and the broader activity system (Engeström, 1999), in order to design programmes that are meaningful and worthwhile to the individual and the organisation.

9.4 How is the FdA Meeting Student Expectations?

A number of notable writers in the field of workplace learning have been dismissive of formal qualifications (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Beckett and Hagar, 2002), referring to them as 'inauthentic' or 'disembodied' yet, Foundation Degrees had a number of unique characteristics that should have addressed some of these criticisms. For example, it was employer led and provided flexibility, thereby giving those in work the opportunity to study whilst they earned. The characteristics of the FD are

venerable if the sector / organisation is one that demands higher-level skills. Unfortunately, retailing is one of the customer service sectors caught in a low-qualification trap (Payne and Keep, 2011). The findings revealed that lower managerial jobs, within the store environment were structured to ensure the smooth functioning of rules and procedures therefore, the demand for higher-level qualifications was low. Consequently, there was a general ambivalence towards the FdA and considerable confusion as to how the qualification could best be positioned and promoted within ELH. Recognition of the qualification by those in positions of influence, management support, flexibility and work life balance, career progression, applying learning to work and basic administration of the programme all had a positive or negative influence on the student experience.

Essential to success was the support and guidance provided by the students store manager / mentor (Harvey, 2009). Examples have been provided to illustrate the excellent support some students obtained although, the findings revealed that store management support and mentoring arrangements generally, in ELH were far from satisfactory, with little being done to facilitate workplace learning. Students also complained they had been grossly misinformed about the amount of work involved in studying for the award whilst juggling the competing demands of work and home life although, flexibility and manageability had been considered when the programme was designed, as flexibility was a key requirement of FDs (Greenwood et al, 2008). The study found that students not only required support with their studies, but also emotional and practical support thereby extending research undertaken by Tierney and Slack (2005) and York and Longden (2010).

The findings discovered that, unlike other management development programmes delivered by ELH, there was no reward or recognition for those that successfully completed the programme. In addition, managers had to choose between career advancement or studying for a Foundation Degree, as they were deterred from applying for promotion whilst on the programme. The sacrifices, for some, did not always justify the reward. Many of the factors discussed were found to overlap, for example, competing roles and lack of time resulted in students identifying how they were going to assign their effort. As the programme progressed, students elected to focus on assessed work to the detriment of wider and deeper learning. Further, administrative errors involving transportation arrangements and hotel bookings prevented students attending university workshops. These issues may appear minor in relation to other factors discussed although, when compounded with lack of store management support became major barriers to learning, which ultimately resulted in students withdrawing from the programme.

The study revealed several factors that were restrictive to learning however, not all student experiences were negative. The findings illustrated that most students valued the opportunity to study whilst earning and were appreciative of the investment in their education. A further benefit was the added confidence gained from studying on the programme (Ooms et al, 2011). For many, learning provided validation for the work they were already undertaking. For others, it gave them the opportunity to grow and develop as individual learners, with one student commenting it had helped him *“grow up and move out of the little bubble of ELH”* (Dave, Personnel Manager). Whilst others felt better informed to make business decisions and manage more effectively. In fact, most students could discuss the benefits they had reaped whilst

studying for the award. Some students had been fortunate in progressing to roles that were more senior after graduation however, as career advancement was not a precursor of the programme, the challenge for the majority was how to utilise the new knowledge and skills they had acquired. As Felstead et al (2009:204) contend, the more capability an individual has, the more discretion they are likely to crave. This final chapter has presented a range of findings that contribute to knowledge of management learning through a Foundation Degree, a discussion of the key contributions are given in the forthcoming section.

9.5 Contribution to Knowledge

The question asked throughout this thesis, when examining the experiences and effectiveness of those studying for a Foundation Degrees is, 'do they work'. The qualification had many commendable and distinctive features however, with regard to retailing and the case organisation they have clearly not succeeded. This is an important finding for policy makers, who have been fixed on treating the workplace as undifferentiated when it comes to skill development (Keep, 2006). Further, successive governments have been intent on stockpiling qualifications rather than focusing on skills utilisation, as the findings show organisations such as ELH only, value skills that are relevant to work. The FdA was regarded as a 'nice to have qualification' but it was not a requirement of the junior line management role therefore, the organisation remained ambivalent towards the award to the point that they did not integrate it into their development pathway to store management. Under these circumstances, it was highly unlikely any qualification, whatever its intrinsic worth, would have succeeded.

The question regarding whether junior managers within this sector require degree level qualifications remains a moot point although, organisations such as the CIPD (2016) have started to question the cost of such initiatives to both employers and employees. They suggest that graduates are increasingly finding themselves in careers that do not meet their career aspirations and argue this skills mismatch could ultimately lead to lower levels of employee engagement and loyalty. The findings in this thesis expand the literature on Foundation Degrees in relation to the value placed on the qualification by employers (Ooms et al, 2011), important for both policy and practice.

Two conceptual frameworks have been drawn on extensively within this study, the first is the WALF framework (Felstead et al, 2009) the second, is Fuller and Unwin's (2003, 2004) theory on expansive / restrictive learning. Applying the WALF framework to the retail context has led to the illumination of causal relationships that advance understanding of working and learning. For example, when examining the horizontal structures of production, the findings revealed senior / store management support and facilitation of work based learning to be integral to the success of Foundation Degrees yet, the organisation of work in the store environment had a detrimental effect on the ways in which managers were developed and the autonomy afforded them.

This aim of this study has centred on gaining a better understanding of the generative mechanisms that influence a managers' learning, both positively and negatively. Fuller and Unwin's (2003, 2004) expansive / restrictive continuum has been helpful in explaining how structure (embedded practices and relationships that pre-exist agents)

affect the actions of the managers (agents) as they learn and develop. Application and later adaptation of their framework, specifically to take account of the findings of this research has helped identify patterns of contextual causality that may usefully be applied to students studying on other FD programmes and within the broader context of management development. The next stage is to test these causal configurations to see if they have a tendency to produce similar outcomes in different settings as illustrated in the research undertaken by Kempster and Parry (2014) into leadership development.

Grugulis and Bozkurt (2011) suggest retailing requires more focused scholarly attention. This in-depth, multi-layered study of learning through a Foundation Degree, within a large multi-channel retail organisation, has set out to meet this requirement, thereby contributing to the literature on retail work. Further, it expands the existing, but limited, literature on the process of learning through Foundation Degrees (Herrera, et al, 2015). The expansive features of Foundation Degrees and the relevance of peer learning and wider communities of practice should be of particular interest to all those designing and delivering FDs and work based learning programmes. In addition, the findings suggest the UK Commission on Education and Skills could do more to stimulate underlying demand for higher-level skills and qualifications by focusing on job design as well as the utilisation of skills within sectors such as retailing. This will be a far more difficult task but necessary if they are ever going to tackle the fundamental social and economic challenges confronting the UK (Payne and Keep, 2011).

9.6 Limitations to the Study

This study has sought to explore the experience and effectiveness of management learning through a UK Foundation Degree in Retailing, to gain an understanding of the generative mechanisms present in a retail managers' learning. As stated in Chapter Four, a critical realist approach was selected that takes account of three different levels of analysis, the macro (government), meso (organisational) and micro (individual). A rigorous and robust, qualitative research design was followed that incorporated three methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis however, as with all research studies, there are going to be limitations that need consideration. The 'puzzling facts', that sparked this study into management learning through a FdA, came from observations of the pilot programme and issues surrounding student retention (Gold et al, 2011). The individual students therefore formed the core of the study that widened to take account of those managing the programme within the delivering institution, University North, and the pilot organisation, ELH.

The first limitation involved the selection of the student sample. Only those who had graduated from the FdA were included in this study. As only five students graduated from the pilot programme and one was unavailable for interview, the original sample comprised of just four students out of an original cohort of 22. Therefore, this sample was biased towards success, a problem encountered with educational research generally, although, the original intention was to also interview students that had withdrawn from the programme. However, the company had collated no exit information so these students proved impossible to trace. The longitudinal aspect of the study provided opportunity to mitigate this limitation. Interviews conducted with

further cohorts of students and those administering and managing the programme within ELH and University North, as well as observation of practice were able to illuminate the issues students encountered whilst studying for the FdA, such as exceptionally high workloads and lack of support from ELH. In addition, ELH permitted access to a document compiled by an external firm of consultants Reflexxion, which contained some information on student withdrawals that was useful for triangulating the findings.

The second limitation involved the case selection. When the study commenced a second organisation, Retailer B joined the FD programme (see Appendix G for a short vignette on Retailer B). Although a grocery retailer, it was a much smaller organisation with only 29 stores in the North of England. Retailer B had kindly given permission to be included in the study. However, after careful consideration, just one ‘intrinsic’ case was selected as the aim was to concentrate on the case itself and provide depth to the findings, not to generalise, in a positivist sense, between cases or extend theory. It would be useful, in the future, to apply the expansive / restrictive framework to organisations such as Retailer B.

Qualitative studies are useful in securing rich descriptions and examining the constraints of everyday life in the social world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). However, there are general limitations when it comes to qualitative work that, also apply to this study. This thesis has provided a detailed account of management learning through an FdA in a small number of worksites but it does not necessarily provide much information about the wider universe. In this instance, the FdA in Retailing was shown to be a failure in ELH but a success in organisations such as Retailer B (see

Appendix F). However, the findings of this thesis suggest that organisations, such as ELH, are more prevalent in the sector than organisations, such as Retailer B, which does not bode well for the FD. In the wider context, employer engagement with other government initiatives, such as Retail Apprenticeships are also entering troubling waters yet, in other sectors, such as engineering, apprenticeship programmes are continuing to grow (Lanning, 2012). This suggests that Foundation Degrees are much more likely to flourish in sectors that place a higher value on skills and qualification attainment. As with most research studies, this thesis has revealed some areas that would benefit from further research attention.

9.7 Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

This study revealed the first line managerial role to be quite basic in terms of skill requirement, with little part of their work considered strategic or involving autonomous action (Lloyd and Payne, 2014). Further empirical studies that focus on the relatively neglected figure of the first line manager would help illuminate the complexities of their work and the skills and qualifications required. In relation to small retailers, this study discovered they were neglected when it came to wider VET policy and Foundation Degrees although, they dominate the retail landscape. Research on the role of the manager in this context would help facilitate a more nuanced debate around their skills requirements.

It would be valuable to conduct further research on organisations delivering Foundation Degrees, using the revised expansive / restrictive continuum to test the robustness of this revised model. Organisations like Retailer B, although in the minority in the retail sector, would present an interesting descriptive case (Yin, 2003)

in which to examine learning through a Foundation Degree. A small vignette has been included in Appendix F, which illustrates some of the fundamental differences between the two cases.

Further, it would be useful to expand the study to other sectors of employment to illuminate how different contexts influence management learning. This study also revealed that issues pertaining to individual learning through studying for a Foundation Degree would benefit from empirical study. The FD combined both learning as acquisition and learning through participation. However, the findings revealed an apparent lack of integration between work-based and academic learning (Herrera et al, 2015). Finding a means of strengthening the transfer of learning from the academic setting into the workplace would be useful to both research and practice. Further, this research identified the importance of peer learning and CoPs on student well-being and retention. Future research on peer support is required to understand the benefits of this type of learning and how it can be used to better support students' undertaking work based learning programmes.

In relation to practice, the findings of this research concur with that of Beneffer (2007) in suggesting that tutors, teaching on Foundation Degree programmes should be encouraged to spend time in the employer organisation. When this occurred in University North, it strengthened relationships between the HE institution and the organisation considerably. It also enabled those teaching on the programme to gain a better understanding of the workplace as a learning environment, develop more effective partnerships and greater collaboration that could be mutually beneficial.

9.8 Reflexive Commentary on Researcher Involvement

The aim of this study was to explore the generative mechanisms in a retail managers' learning, when studying for a Foundation Degree Award in Retailing (FdA in Retailing), within a large multi-channel retail organisation. The principle participants in the study comprised of students who had completed the award and those managing, administering and teaching on the degree programme from University North and the case organisation ELH. University North, the organisation for which I work, was selected for this study, because it piloted the award and subsequently delivered the FdA in Retailing. This section provides a reflection on my dual role as a researcher and member of the programme team delivering the FdA in Retailing.

My academic role on the programme was that of lead tutor on one of the core first-year units, PPD1. This role meant that I had insider knowledge of the research context and had established relationships with some of the participants prior to the commencement of the study. Burns et al (2012) regard this as an advantage when conducting research, as they state it could help ease access to the study setting and with rapport building. Gaining admittance to the case organisation and participants within both University North and ELH was relatively straightforward. I was conscious colleagues within my own organisation might have felt obliged to participate, although all were genuinely supportive of my research and interested to read my finished findings. Within ELH, the case organisation, it was necessary to build and maintain relationships with the assigned gatekeepers of the programme, these were the managers within the Education and Skills department, unknown to me before the programme commenced (Fetterman, 1998). They introduced me to other key stakeholders and once trust was established, provided a useful bridge to further

cohorts of students and managers. My academic role had eased my access into ELH. The management team willingly participated in the study although, did not ask any detailed questions about the purpose of the research beyond what they had been told. Further, at certain times, I felt like a ‘spy in the camp’, especially when attending the assessment centres, where some participants were not fully aware of my dual role as researcher and member of the programme team (Simmons, 2007), this is further commented upon in the methodology chapter (pp. 337).

The data collection period spanned four years and often took place during the quieter periods in the academic calendar, during the summer months. Maintaining contact with the case organisation, throughout this period, was therefore of the utmost importance. The emic (insider) role enabled me to teach on additional accreditation programmes, which strengthened and maintained contact with the case organisation and with participants from University North. This was equally important as I was seconded to teach on the FdA in Retailing from another department in the Business School. The dual role was not without its challenges. Two challenges regularly reported in the literature relate to role confusion and over-identification with participants (Adler and Adler, 1987: 17). They describe how over familiarity in an area might result in the loss of ‘analytical perspective’. Attempting to observe with an ‘outsiders’ lens whilst researching as an ‘insider’ did pose some issues (Allen, 2004). For example, I had a close relationship with certain members of the programme team, some of which spoke critically of ELH and the support offered to managers studying for the award, drawing comparisons between ELH and one other organisation (Retailer B¹⁹). These comments were often off-the-record when engaged in informal

¹⁹ Retailer B features Appendix G

conversation therefore; it proved useful to try to probe some of these areas more deeply in the recorded interviews so that the merits of the information could be reflected upon when analysing the data. Interviewing colleagues proved easier than with participants from the case organisation because of the shared culture and language although, it was important to keep the interview tightly structured to avoid moving into areas unconnected to the research topic, as there was a tendency to veer into other teaching matters (Toffoli and Rudge, 2006). There are continuing debates as to whether it is better to conduct research from the perspective of an 'insider' or whether it is preferable to be an external researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Both clearly have their merits and limitations although, when undertaking research within my own organisation it was important to have an awareness of the complexities of the 'insider' role and how professional relationships and position can influence the study (Simmons, 2007).

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Appendices

Appendix A – Outline of the different types of data used in the research study (referred to on page 143)

Appendix B – Interview questions for a manager from the Education and Skills Department in ELH, with responsibility for the FdA (referred to on page 145)

Appendix C – Interview questions for students who had completed the FdA in Retailing programme (referred to on page 145)

Appendix D – Template used to show variations on the theme of support (referred to on page 165)

Appendix E – An outline of the research project given to participants (referred to on page 171)

Appendix F – Research consent form (referred to on page 172)

Appendix G – Short vignette (Retailer B) illustrating possible further research (referred to on page 337)

Appendix A

Different Types of Data Used in the Longitudinal Study

Semi Structured Interviews

Managers/Academics University North:

Project Manager (Simon)
Programme Coordinator 2006-07 (Ivan)
Programme Coordinator 2009-present (Carol)

Students:

2007-2009 Security Manager (Roger)
Checkout Manager (Leia)
Store Manager - small format (Andy)
Distribution Manager (Des)
2008-2010 Bakery Manager (Tina)
Compliance Manager (Cara)
Clothing Manager (Ember)
Store Manager - small format (May)
2009-2011 Grocery Manager (John)
Customer Service Manager (Adrian)
Store Manager - small format (Mike)
Personnel Manager (Dave)

ELH Managers:

Manager – (E&S) 2008-2010 (Lisa)
Manager – (E&S) 2009-2011 (Michelle)
Group Format Mgr - Small Formats (Amy)
Group Format Manager - Medium Formats (Nancy)
Store Manager - Mega Stores (Tom)

Foundation Degree Forward (fdf)

Director of FDs – Private Sector (Caspian)

Participant Observation

(From May 2007 – September 2013)

Design of the Programme (Pilot):

May 2007- September 2007. Programme evaluation 17 July 2008

Programme Induction/ Managers Day:

One day per year, approximately one week prior to the start of the programme in September

PPD 1 Unit Delivery:

Each year during term 1: Mid-September – Mid December. Delivered using a Blended learning approach whereby the students attended a full-day introduction to the unit followed by a 12 week programme comprising of interactive on-line learning modules

Assessment Support Workshops

Two half-day sessions: October and February

Yearly Assessment Centres

Duration one week, generally held in May/June at University North

Accreditation Workshops (2011-2013):

Two days in May repeated across two cohorts

Documentary Evidence

University North:

FdA event guide 15 May 2007
Programme Handbook for FdA in Retailing
Student Assessed Work for PPD 1, Portfolio and Reflective Reports
Electronic student learning logs (VLE)
Student evaluation for PPD 1
Degree and unit specifications
Exam board documentation
Evaluation documents sent to the university from ELH

ELH:

In-store promotional documents
Student calendar
PP slides presenting ELH's core values
Assessment Centre Documentation including exercises and mark sheets
Evaluation documents from Reflexxion (external consultancy)
Emails trail whilst corresponding with Education and Skills Managers

Foundation Degree Forward (fdf):

Evaluation of the pilot programme completed by FdF in 2011 (Dewhurst and Lockley)

Appendix B

Interview Format & Questions: Manager, Education and Skills

Notes for the Interviewer to discuss with the participant before the interview commences:

1. Provide a brief explanation to the purpose of the research and nature of the interview
2. Use of audio recording for the production of transcripts and how the data will be analysed and participant validation
3. Assurance of complete anonymity, confidentiality and data protection including ethical implications, trust and indemnity
4. Consent form

Interview Questions	
Date:	Name of Participant: Job Title:
Location:	Time:
Contact Details: (Email and telephone number)	
PUTTING THE PARTICIPANT AT EASE:	
Could you start by telling me a little bit about your role: What are your key areas of responsibility?	
GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAMME:	
History: How did ELH become involved in the Foundation Degree in Retail (FdA) pilot programme? What was the rationale behind the decision?	
How is the FDR perceived within ELH? Do perceptions differ between HO/Store personnel?	
How is the programme advertised and promoted within ELH?	
What level of manager are you trying to attract?	
How are candidates selected for the assessment centre?	

Where does the FdA reside in relation to other internal programmes and what are ELH expectations for managers undertaking the programme?
Could you describe the culture within ELH?
What skills/knowledge do you most value in your line managers?
How involved have ELH been in the development of course materials, modules studied and in the assessment of learning outcomes?
What changes have been made as a result of your on-going involvement? (Ask for examples where possible)
What do you consider to be the advantages/disadvantages of using a blended learning approach in the development of line managers? Do managers have the opportunity to apply what they are learning in the workplace?
How do ELH support FD students whilst on the programme?
How is higher education regarded in ELH? How would you describe your continuing relationship with the MMUBS?
THE FUTURE: In your opinion what lies ahead for the FD programme?
Is there anything that you would like to ask me about my research? CLOSE THE INTERVIEW AND STATE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Appendix C

Interview Questions: FD STUDENTS

Notes for the Interviewer to discuss with the participant before the interview commences:

- Provide a brief explanation to the purpose of the research and nature of the interview
- Use of audio recording for the production of transcripts and how the data will be analysed and participant validation
- Assurance of complete anonymity, confidentiality and data protection including ethical implications, trust and indemnity
- Consent form

Interview Questions	
Date:	Name of Participant: Job Title:
Location:	Time:
Contact Details: (Email and telephone number)	
<i>Biographies</i>	
Tell me about your level of learning/experience/skills prior to starting the Foundation Degree (1)	
What was your role prior to starting the Foundation Degree? Has it now changed? Culture/Learning environment	
What prompted you to undertake the FD? How is individual progression encouraged within ELH?	
How would you describe your colleagues and store manager's reaction to you undertaking the Foundation Degree?	
Provide examples of how you have been able to take advantage of other learning opportunities at work (2)	
Has enrolling on the Foundation Degree changed employer expectations?	
Do you think the organisation could do more to support students whilst on the programme? What is your opinion of the mentor role?	

What happens to students who have completed the programme? (Promotion, top-up degree?)
THE FUTURE:
Do you feel that you have changed through undertaking the Foundation Degree? Do your fellow workers view you differently? (4)
Have you been able to share your learning experiences with your fellow workers? (4)
How do you feel that the FD has helped shape your attitude towards your work/career/learning? (2)
<i>Expansive/Restrictive - Culture/Learning environment</i>
How would you describe your role and what you do?
Which skills are most valued by ELH and why? Widely distributed skills/Technical
Do you feel that you have had sufficient support whilst studying for the Foundation Degree - store/ H/O/ MMU? E.g. Are you given study days, does someone else cover your job whilst at University, support for employees as learners?
Do you have the opportunity to use your own initiative in your current role? Are you able to apply what you are learning?
Are you encouraged to make suggestions for improvement? Can you supply any examples?
<i>Expansive/Restrictive – Approaches to workforce development</i>
Once you have completed the Foundation Degree what next? How does the Foundation Degree feature in your career aspirations?
Will you have the opportunity to apply your newly acquired skills/knowledge in other areas of the company if you so wish?
<i>The Foundation Degree</i>
Which aspects of the programme have you most/least enjoyed and why?
What has been your most valuable learning experience?
If you could change anything about the programme what would it be?
Is there anything that you would like to ask me about my research?
CLOSE THE INTERVIEW AND THANK THE PARTICIPANT – STATE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Appendix D

Final Template on the Theme of Support

1. FOUR SUPPORT DOMAINS

1. Introduction to each domain

2. HEAD OFFICE SUPPORT

1. Education and Skills Department
 1. Span of authority
 1. Influence
 2. Link responsibilities – ELH and University North
 3. Geographic location
 4. Restructure
 5. Resource issues

2. Operational Role

1. Accommodation and travel arrangements
2. Tracking the student
3. Reviewing progress
4. Periodic review
5. Ragging
6. Responding to queries and concerns
7. Student withdrawals
 1. Work life balance
 2. Study days

3. Communication

1. Communication channels
 1. Telephone
 2. Email
2. Communication systems
3. Store format
4. Group and store personnel managers
5. Zone cluster meetings

3. SUPPORT PROVIDED IN-STORE

1. Senior Management
 1. Programme sponsor
2. Suitability
 1. Store manager suitability
 2. Training credentials for staff development
 3. Store Performance
 4. Relocation
 5. In-store mentor

3. Ownership of the qualification
 1. Assessment centres
 2. Operational requirements
 3. Key performance indicators
 4. Development targets
 5. Periodic review
 6. Competing priorities from other programmes

4. Store issues
 1. Culture
 2. Lack of awareness and understanding of the qualification
 3. Resistance
 1. Discouragement
 2. Resentment and jealousy
 3. Performance targets (key performance indicators)
 4. Conflict of interest
 5. Rotation of managers and staff
 6. Obtaining buy-in

5. Encouragement
 1. Weekly meetings
 1. Mentoring
 2. Informal conversations
 3. Reviews
 4. Networking
 5. Help with assignments and projects
 6. Colleagues and staff
 7. Store Directors

6. Driving own learning
 1. Student role
 2. Ability to ask for help

4. PEER SUPPORT

1. Networks
 1. Collegiality
 2. Connections
 3. Friendships
 4. Communities of practice

2. Communication channels
 1. Facebook

3. Geographic location of students
 1. Overnight stays

4. Alleviating stress and anxiety
 1. Assignment guidance
 2. Providing reassurance
 3. Retention

5. UNIVERSITY SUPPORT

1. Pilot programme
 1. Evaluation
2. Academic personal tutor role
 1. Friendly academic
 1. Trust
 2. Insider/outsider role
 3. High student dropout rates
 4. Retention
 5. Facebook
3. Listening to student problems
 1. Platform to voice concerns
 2. Impartial view
 3. Reticence to ask for help
4. Obtaining the correct balance of support
 1. Too much hand holding

Appendix E

Project Outline for Research Participants

Research Project Outline for Participants

Project Title:	Exploring the Experience and Effectiveness of Management Learning: A Case Study of a UK Foundation Degree in Retailing
Project Manager and Contact Details:	Jill Murray: Senior Lecturer in HRD University North 0161 2473588 j.l.murray@mmu.ac.uk

Background:

This research builds on the researcher's background in retail management and upon experiences of teaching on the FdA in Retailing, specifically the first year unit Personal and Professional Development, Year 1.

When first introduced in 2001, the intention for Foundation Degrees was that they would meet the Labour Government's objectives of expanding higher education as well as addressing skills shortages in the workforce. They differed from other qualifications at this level as the intention was for them to be employer-led with employers involved in every part of the programme from inception through to delivery and evaluation. Therefore, research into Foundation Degrees has been steadily gaining momentum, making them a rich area to study.

The Project:

This project consists of a qualitative, longitudinal case study examining the experiences and effectiveness of management learning through a FdA in Retailing. The research will be conducted at three levels of analysis that include; the macro (government), the meso (organisation) and the micro (individual).

The study will therefore include those with responsibility for funding and overseeing the development of Foundation Degrees, those managing the programme within both the organisation and delivering institution. At the heart of the study will be the Foundation Degree students studying for the award.

Data collection will commence in April 2009 and will involve semi-structured interviews, participant observation and the collection of documentary evidence. The interviews will comprise mainly of open questions around a set number of themes (maximum 10). Each interview will last one hour at which point, if the interview is not finished, participants will have the opportunity to decline further questions. Before interviews commence permission will be sought of interviewees to tape-record the conversations however, if permission is not granted notes will be taken. All interviewees will have opportunity to review the interview transcript once complete, prior to analysis.

The research is due to commence in April 2009 and will continue until the summer of 2012.

Aim of the Research

The aim of the research is to explore the experience and effectiveness of management learning through studying for a FdA in Retailing. The objectives will therefore focus on the skills needs of the retail sector, expansive and restrictive learning, individual learning and students dispositions towards learning.

The outputs will form part of Jill Murray's personal research work, supervised by University North.

Appendix F

Research Project Consent Form

Research Project Consent Form		
Project Title:	<i>Exploring the Experience and Effectiveness of Management Learning: A Case Study of a UK Foundation Degree in Retailing</i>	
Project Manager and Contact Details:	Jill Murray: Senior Lecturer in HRD MMUBS 0161 2473588 j.l.murray@mmu.ac.uk	
I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):		
If you wish to discuss any aspect of the project in further detail, please do not hesitate to contact Jill Murray at the above		
I have read and understood the information about the project, as provided in the Information Sheet dated _____.		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.		
I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing. I will not be questioned on why I have withdrawn		
The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.		
The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me		
I voluntarily agree to take part in this project		
Signature of participant:	Date:	
Name in block letters:		
Position:		
Workplace name and address and Email:		
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix G

An Illustration of Potential Future Research

A Short Vignette - Retailer B

A small vignette has been included in this thesis to illustrate two different approaches to employer engagement and participation in the delivery of the FdA in Retailing. First presented is a brief history of Retailer B this provides background information which highlights the differences between the two cases. Followed by a review of the partnership arrangement and the support offered to students by Retailer B when studying for the award. The findings revealed that there were three key areas of difference between the two organisations, the first, was the size of the organisation, the second was the seniority of managers accepted onto the programmes, third was the support given by senior management.

Retailer B, were a small grocery retailer with 29 stores in the North West of England. The privately owned family firm commenced trading in 1847 with a mission to provide “*the best quality goods*” it is now managed by the fifth generation of the family. Retailer B was the second retailer to form a partnership with University North to deliver the FdA in Retailing. Previously University North had been accrediting the organisation’s in-house training programmes. FdF as part of the Employer Based Training Accreditation (EBTA) initiative conducted the assessment, after which the award was available to employees who had completed the three-year in-house Management Training Programme. This enabled accreditation of prior and

experiential learning (APEL)²⁰ to take place at level 4, and meant successful students were exempt from certain first year units like Personal and Professional Development (PPD1). The small numbers of students selected (approximately 10 per year) were in the main mature managers with 4-15 years' service with the company, so considered a different type of cohort from that of ELH. In all other respects, the delivery and assessment of the FdA in Retailing remained consistent across all retail groups.

However, there were some notable differences in terms of the partnership that developed between the delivering institution and the client organisation. It was apparent that a “closer relationship”, had formed between Retailer B and University North (Simon, Project Manager). This was partly due to the proximity of the organisation's head office to the university. Support days took place at the company's head office, rather than the university. On these occasions, a group of academics attended the organisation together and the offices were open plan so the team had the opportunity to meet and converse with senior management. The Project Manager commented:

I have a closer relationship with [Retailer B] head of learning and development...there is far more talking to each other, it is hard to put my finger on it...We spend a day with them so it is much more intimate, we all know the students by name, I don't know the [ELH] students at all (Simon).

²⁰ APEL is a process of identifying, assessing and accrediting relevant learning that has been gained through experience (such as employment, work experience, volunteering, or experience as a service user or carer) that can be shown to be equivalent to learning within a formal qualification, module or unit.

The Project Manager described the organisation as a “*family type firm...caring, not corporate at all, but very professional*” (Simon). This family/caring approach extended to the FdA in Retailing. Ten students originally enrolled on the programme in 2008 and this increased to 11 when the head of learning and development joined alongside. She was already a graduate so her reasons were not altogether apparent, although she was able to witness first-hand programme delivery, assessment and engagement. This rather unique arrangement had both positive and negative connotations for the institution and the students and described it as rather like having “*a spy in the camp*”, someone overseeing what was taking place (Ivan, Programme Co-ordinator). However, as the cohort knew each other well, she was able to offer additional study skills support. For example, when assessment deadlines were nearing she would organise additional study days so that the group could all look at the assignments together. Students from ELH had to organise their own study support networks as previously discussed.

Senior management in Retailer B were also instrumental in supporting managers on the programme. Board members including the Chief Executive Officer delivered guest lectures on the programme and helped assess final year project presentations (Ivan, Project Co-ordinator 1). They also attended student graduation ceremonies (Carol, Project Co-ordinator 2).

You get the impression when you see people like that, that they really want their students to do well...because they want to develop really good managers and can see the benefits of that. [ELH] on the other hand I do not see that coming through (Ivan).

In contrast, graduation ceremonies for students from ELH were not attended by senior managers, instead members from Education and Skills were present. The attendance of head office personnel at workshops was also minimal and blamed on “work-demands” (Carol, Programme Co-ordinator). ELH held a celebration for FdA in Retailing students, described by the FdF Director as a “*HR led event that only a couple of low-key operations people attended*”. He suggested that the involvement and support given by senior management at Retailer B was the key difference between the two organisations and a major contributing factor towards the success of the FdA in Retailing in this organisation. In the first year the company achieved 100% retention figures and higher than average grades across the cohort. Those managing the programme at University North, were keen convey the differences between the two organisations, with the Programme Coordinator commenting the FD, in his opinion, was better suited to smaller companies because of the level of support they could offer (Ivan).

Retailer B was a far smaller organisation to that of ELH, having only 29, located geographically in the North of England compared to the 3378 ELH owned in the UK. Retailer B selected experienced store managers for the programme rather than junior line managers. The aim was to provide them with wider retail knowledge thereby extending the three-year in-house training programme they had previously attended. The support of senior management was integral to the success of the programme in Retailer B, illustrated through their involvement delivering guest lectures and helping with assessments. In addition, students had additional study time and a dedicated HR manager to support the award. The 100 % retention figures achieved was in contrast

to those of ELH for the pilot stage of their programme. Further, it served to illustrate that retailers are not one homogenous group in terms of their skills demands and expectations for the qualification as Retailer B had successfully integrated the qualification into their development for store management.