

Chapter Four

Research Methodology

4-1 Methodological Framework

Education, as an area of applied research, draws on a range of disciplines and research methods, each underpinned by an epistemological standpoint regarding the nature of knowledge about education and an ontological positioning of education research as a part of the social sciences. This taxonomy of approaches to research is dealt with in detail by Cohen et al. (2001). They draw extensively on the work of Burrell and Morgan (1979) to derive relationships between a philosophical standpoint in regard to ontology, epistemology, determinism and a methodological approach. Whilst recognising the limitations of this taxonomy (Deetz, 1996; McCourt, 1997), this research study can be usefully located within this framework.

Subjective Approach		Objective Approach
Nominalism	← Ontology →	Realism
Anti-Positivism	← Epistemology →	Positivism
Voluntarism	← Human Nature → (Free Will)	Determinism
Ideographic	← Methodology →	Nomothetic
The Nature of Social Science (Derived from Burrell and Morgan (1979, p3) and Cohen et al (2001, p7))		

The approach here will be distinctly subjective. The ontology of this project will draw on the account of nominalism provided by Burrell and Morgan (ibid., p4):

“The nominalist position revolves around the assumption that the social world external to individual cognition is made up of nothing more than names, concepts and labels which are used to structure reality. The nominalist does not admit to there being any ‘real’ structure to the world which these concepts are used to describe.”

This is distinctive from a realist approach that regards the social world as objective, independent and empirical with an existence prior to and separate from individual cognition. When designing a research study that looks at the ways a particular subject area, such as media studies, exists within diverse individual institutions of higher education and across the English higher education

sector it is difficult to conceive of a clear objective identity for something that only seems to exist at all by virtue of the social interactions between individuals (students, academic staff, parents, advisors), groups of individuals (departments, faculties, institutions, research communities) and the wider public sphere of policy makers, the general public and the media. The study of the media is itself the study of the mass communication of ideas; an essentially social phenomenon, albeit one that has a tangible technological presence in media artefacts; films, newspapers, radio and television programmes etc. This meta-study of the media fits well with a nominalist view of the social world.

Whilst a nominalist approach positions the study in relation to the nature of reality this requires a complementary position regarding the nature of what we can know about media studies phenomena and how it is possible to communicate that knowledge – an epistemological stance. Burrell and Morgan (1979, p5) characterise the epistemology of social science as a positivism axis, defining a positivist approach as seeking *“to explain and predict what happens in the social world by searching for regularities and causal relationships between its constituent elements”*. This is contrasted with an anti-positivist approach where *“the social world is essentially relativistic and can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved in the activities which are to be studied”*.

A key consideration for this study is the role of an observer in defining what constitutes knowledge within a research paradigm. This research study must deal with the inescapable relationship between the researcher and the research material. With a background as a media studies academic and a current

professional practitioner in the area, in this case the researcher cannot be regarded as an objective observer as envisaged at the positivist end of Burrell and Morgan's epistemological axis. This study is much more suited to an anti-positivist approach with its emphasis on relative knowledge that is specific to individuals. Adopting this stance takes what might be considered a problem – the absence of an independent observer of media studies – and turns it into an advantage; “*One has to understand from the inside rather than the outside*” (ibid., p5). This study is based on what it is possible for an embedded professional practitioner to know about media studies.

Although necessarily taking a subjective view of both the documentary evidence of public discourses and the research interview data, the embedded researcher's initial perceptions of these can provide a valuable starting point for the exploration of the area. Although academic practitioners are normally based within a single, specific institution, academic practice implies a broader set of professional interactions through conferences, subject networks and external examiner processes. This enables the researcher to design a study that is relevant and addresses topical, potentially contentious, issues without adopting a *tabula rasa* and so can identify areas of interest such as ‘*employability*’ and ‘*theory/practice*’ from a preliminary pilot study. An embedded researcher can draw on their own professional practice to identify issues and then test them against the current literature before commencing the main study. From that point it is then necessary to maintain a degree of reflexivity and meta-reflexivity through the study. Ultimately, it is possible to compare the study findings and their derivation from the evidence in the light of the initial assumptions that

underpinned the study design and reflect on the influence of researcher subjectivity.

The third Burrell and Morgan axis is an articulation of what it means to be human in a sociological context. This is the philosophy of free will and is set between the poles of determinism and voluntarism. At these extremes, people who constitute an organisation such as a university and their associated activities are considered to either be entirely a product of external causes and effects; the individual is an outcome of their environment (determinism) or else the individual is seen as completely autonomous, exercising unrestrained choices (voluntarism). Within the context of a university, both these extremes fail to capture the complex nature of the social interactions that constitute the practices of higher education. The theoretical grounding of this work views the social interactions of the participants as the defining basis of the organisation and higher education as communication within social structures. This leads to a rejection of total voluntarism. Members of a university engage in both formal and informal interactions that are underpinned by power relationships, evidenced within discourse. But in seeking a position on the determinism/voluntarism spectrum, the idea that the action of individuals is entirely determined by the social and cultural practices of the institution also fails to capture the complexity of higher education's practices and the actions of individuals associated with those practices. Indeed, the language of academic practice implies a significant degree of autonomy. '*Academic freedom*' is a frequently used term and can be expressed as a set of codified rights within higher education (University and College Union, 2009). In their statement on academic freedom the University

and College Union set out their expression of principles of this autonomy; “*freedom in teaching and discussion*” and “*freedom from institutional censorship, including the right to express one's opinion publicly about the institution or the education system in which one works*”.

Whilst the University and College Union expresses academic freedom as a set of unqualified rights, higher education institutions may take a more nuanced stance by expressing academic freedom as a set of rights together with associated responsibilities. The University of Bath (1988) in their institutional statement of academic freedom explicitly associates a responsibility to each right. For example, the rights/responsibilities include;

“Freedom: Within the law to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions.

Corresponding responsibility: To support the same freedoms for those of differing view.

Freedom: To select methods of teaching course elements which have been properly agreed.

Corresponding responsibility: To take full cognizance of (i) the intellectual and professional needs of students and (ii) requirement for the integrity and coherence of an academic course.

Freedom: To take an active part in the governance of the University.

Corresponding responsibility: To accept decisions properly arrived at.”

This gives insight into the way an institution perceives the autonomy of its members and how that autonomy integrates with the practices of that institution. There is an emphasis on the individual exercising rights within the constraints of collective practices; “*take an active part*” but “*accept decisions*”

properly arrived at". Here, "*properly arrived at*" implies the primacy of some collective decision making processes through committees and other governance mechanisms.

This leads then to an intermediate position between determinism and voluntarism. Members of a university exercise a degree of individual control over their personal professional practice but this has limits and is constrained by institutional culture and social practices.

Having established a philosophical position with respect to ontology, epistemology and free will, the methodological position of the study follows as a consequence. Burrell and Morgan characterise this as a positioning between ideographic methods and nomothetic methods. For Burrell and Morgan, the ideographic approach "*emphasises the analysis of the subjective accounts which one generates by 'getting inside' situations and involving oneself in the everyday flow of life*" (ibid. p6). This is contrasted with nomothetic methods that "*lay emphasis on the importance of basing research upon systematic protocol and technique*" (ibid. p6).

Nomothetic methods are generally associated with research in the experimental and natural sciences and can be appropriated for use in the social sciences, where they tend towards the systematic collection of defined data and a more quantitative approach to analysis. In contrast, ideographic methods concentrate on directly capturing the complexity of social practices through a sampling of direct accounts and experiences.

In designing a particular research study there are often a number of legitimate alternative approaches that could be deployed, either singularly or in a mixed-methods combination. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the range of options available for this study and to justify the decisions made. This then leads to a consideration of the legitimacy of the findings and recognition of the limitations of the data. These limitations are important if there is to be an extrapolation from the specific to the general. When formulating a research programme and choosing the most appropriate tools, the basis for these choices needs to be derived from the research questions. Whilst there may be an element of iteration around the research aims and the design of the study, ultimately any research method has to be capable of delivering answers to the questions posed.

On the basis of the above analysis, this study draws on semi-structured interviews to generate primary discourse data and then makes use of publically available secondary data for comparative purposes. This method dovetails with the *naturalistic inquiry* approach, providing greater depth of discourse sampling than a survey/questionnaire could offer.

Although Burrell and Morgan's taxonomy has achieved significant recognition and longevity, it has been subject to a number of critiques over the thirty-five years since the publication of *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In particular, Deetz (1996) attributes some of the success of their model to the power it has to legitimise both mainstream approaches to organisational research and emerging alternatives. However Deetz also points out the paradox that arises when Burrell and Morgan's four-axis model is applied

to itself, particular in relation to the subjective/objective axis. For Deetz, contemporary language-based epistemology problematises the subject/object dichotomy and characterises it as a discursive practice with political implications. So by positioning research along this axis Burrell and Morgan are establishing an implicit hierarchy:

“The subjective-objective distinction performs political functions by constraining the conception of science and creating hierarchies of research programs based on the same faulty logic as the distinction itself.” (Deetz, 1996, p.193)

So although a subjective stance has been adopted for this study, it is recognised that this not unproblematic. However, a recognition of the discursive practices that construct research methods alongside the discursive practices that construct the ‘*media studies*’ domain provides a degree of consistency on which to proceed with the investigation.

4-2 Approach to Discourse Analysis

Widely used across the social sciences, discourse analysis is used to label a very broad range of methodological approaches to the analysis of a variety data. As an all encompassing definition Taylor (2003, p.5) summarises discourse analysis as “the close study of language in use”. Taylor then expands on this to categorise approaches to discourse analysis into four main areas;

- A linguistic approach focussing on formal language structure and the communication of meaning.

- Work that emphasises the situated use of language and the impact this has on communication.
- Discourse analysis that is preoccupied with discourse within a specific and specialised domain and examines the use of specialised vocabulary and discursive practices to define and characterise the domain.
- A focus on much larger societal or cultural contexts for language with a preoccupation with “power and resistance, contest and struggle” with an “assumption... ..that the language available to people enables and constrains not only their expression of certain ideas but also what they do.” (ibid., p.9)

Taylor notes that these categorisations often overlap and it is the final two that characterise the approach adopted here. Although the study is based specifically on media studies, the analysis does consider the relationships between the specialised discourses of media studies and the much broader public discourses around higher education and its role in society.

This position underpins the methodological approach throughout the study. It derives from the initial scoping of media studies, the formulation of the research questions (see Chapter One) and reinforced by the review of existing research literature in Chapter Two. This confirmed that much of the relevant sociological research into the issues around UK higher education adopted a similar approach and continuing this would provide a degree of methodological consistency between this study and the secondary literature, allowing comparisons to be drawn reasonably. For example, Trowler in defining a conceptual and

methodological framework for his analysis of the extent to which academics are 'captured' by the discursive practices of managerialism, quotes Potter and Wetherell (1987) and confirms his position:

"...discursive practices 'do not just describe things, they do things', and the things they do have important implications individually (in terms of identity), socially (in terms of social construction) and politically (in terms of the distribution of power)." (Trowler, 2001, p.186)

Adopting this starting point provided a framework on which to build the research design, data collection and analysis:

Research Design

The priority in the research design is to generate a legitimate and substantial amount of relevant primary data that captures the discursive practices that are relevant to the research questions. The design must be feasible within the resource limits of a single doctoral researcher. Building on the experiences of other researchers undertaking projects of similar style and scope (for example, Jump, 2011), a design consisting of primary semi-structured interviews together with some associated collection and analysis of publically available primary documents was considered a sufficiently reliable and proven approach to research questions of this nature.

Developing the design beyond this initial framework brought together the review of the existing literature, particularly around the history of the development of media studies as an academic subject, and the researcher's own professional experiences. Drawing on the advantages available to the embedded researcher, it was possible to establish a relatively small set of interview prompts for each participant that were likely to provoke the participant into deploying discursive practices that would provide legitimate data worthy of further comparative analysis. For example, a purpose and rationale for media studies is a recurrent debate through the literature and coincides with the researcher's professional practices experiences. When tested in the initial four pilot interviews, this was found to be a fruitful theme for exploration as the participant responses were complex and diverse and provided a useful opportunity for a comparison with public discourses evidenced through other primary sources such as university promotional materials.

Data Collection

Underpinning the interview element of the data collection is the premise that the participants' responses consist of discursive practices that construct the reality of media studies for them. These practices consist of language elements such as vocabulary, phrases and arguments that provide the material for a comparative analysis. Comparisons can be made between the various participant responses and also between participant responses and examples of public discourse assembled through a subsequent data collection exercise. The process of data collection focused on capturing these discursive practices by providing an

opportunity for participants to talk openly, freely and at length and without preparation, in response to minimal prompting. The prompts were based around elements of potentially oppositional discourses identified from the literature, public discourse and professional practice. They were then structured to encourage firstly engagement (“tell me about yourself”) and then building in elements of public discourse with the aim of surfacing complexities and ambiguities (for example, “what does vocational mean to you?” and then “now tell me about employability”).

Data Analysis

The data analysis phase of the project inevitably consisted of an extensive practical and technical process of parsing the data, extracting elements for use in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. This was a complex multi-stage process with the potential to generate a number of valid but distinct interpretations of the participant responses. To produce a rationale for the analysis presented here that goes beyond a superficial ‘themes emerged’ requires a tracking of the process and reference to the underlying concepts and research questions.

Following the interviews, primacy within the project shifted from the issues and themes identified in the literature to the primary interview data to ensure that the analyses remains focused on the participants’ construction of media studies. The analyses were led by the participant responses with subsequent analysis consisting of a comparison with relevant primary public discourse data and associated secondary research. This ensured that the analyses and subsequent

conclusions were driven by the concerns of the participants, arguably a more valid treatment than the reverse process of trawling the data for responses that fit a pre-conceived idea of what the key themes and issues should be.

Practically, this approach was realised through the data coding process which involved multiple passes through the interview transcriptions. A first pass through the responses focused on coding them in relation to the interviewer prompts. This provided an overview of the responses but revealed the discrepancies between the *a priori* themes and the balance of participant transcripts in terms of both the extent of their response and the discursive practices they deployed in building their contribution. For example, the prompting designed to expose a preconceived notion of an oppositional discourse around the mass media coverage of media studies did not provoke a volume of response nor any evidence of discursive practices that might form the basis of a valid analysis and the theme was discarded. Conversely, whilst participant views on the role of assessment was not initially considered likely to form a particularly significant element of the analysis, the first coding pass demonstrated that a number of participants had referred to assessment practices as part of their response and that there were sufficient depth to this to justify an analytical theme. These 'emergent' themes were codified through a second complete pass through the transcription and used to form the basis of the analysis presented here.

In this way, the themes, as presented in the analysis chapters, were assembled. Asserting the primacy of the interview data as the starting point for the analyses,

these themes then formed the basis for additional secondary research of the associated academic literature and the assembly of related public discourse data to form the basis of the discourse analysis.

Following identification and analysis, the seventeen individual themes presented here were reviewed to establish a preferred structure for the analysis chapters. Whilst it would be possible to cluster the analyses in a variety of ways, the establishment of three meta-themes allowed them to be presented in a logical progression and in clusters of appropriate size for the thesis. On this basis, the analyses are presented in three chapters; discourses of identity, discourses of academic practice and discourses of public policy.

4-3 Relationship Between Discourse Analysis and Critical University Studies

The relationship between the emerging body of work identified as *Critical University Studies (CUS)* and the work presented here is multi-faceted. CUS (Williams, 2012a) has emerged over the period of this study as an umbrella term for a body of academic research literature that seeks to critique recent developments in higher education. It can therefore be considered as a relevant albeit more generalised source of secondary research material with which to contextualise this specific work on media studies. Alternatively, CUS can also be considered as a source of primary public discourse data arising as it does from academic practice. This is of particular interest as, when considered as a set of discursive practices, a strand through CUS can be characterised as a discourse of

'*apocalypse*' with a portrayal of higher education on the brink of catastrophe. In contrast to this study, much of CUS consists of analyses and reviews of higher education policy and the associated public discourses with less emphasis, so far, on primary fieldwork within higher education institutions. Whilst methodologically more complex with a blurring of the distinction between primary and secondary research, a comparison between the discursive practices of CUS and the discursive practices of media studies, as evidenced here, is of value as it demonstrates the ways academics deploy and manage oppositional discourses. A publicly deployed discourse of '*apocalypse*' contrasts with the more nuanced approach to the changing higher education environment evidenced through the discursive practices of the participants in this study.

4-4 Selection of Public Discourse Data

The format of the analyses in Chapters Five, Six and Seven consists of a presentation of the discursive elements extracted from the participant responses and then a comparison of these elements with each other and also with examples of the relevant public discourses. These comparisons are also contextualised through reference to appropriate research literature.

With copious amounts of higher education public discourse data readily available, it was necessary to sample this carefully to provide a manageable but valid body of data to associate with the participant responses. The principle behind this analysis was to maintain the primacy of the participant responses and to search for additional related public discourse data and research literature to affect the

analysis. For example, in Section 6-3 the analysis of the discourses around quality assurance consisted of an initial identification through the coding process of significant participant discursive practices as they managed their interactions with the quality assurance processes within their institution – the use of terms such as ‘aliens’, ‘ghosts’ and ‘roundheads’ by participants signalled that this was likely to be a area for fruitful analysis. Following the establishment of these elements as the focus, further research led to the identification of the policy documentation of the Quality Assurance Agency as an important source of relevant public discourse data, with a vocabulary quite different from that used by participants, that could contextualise the participant responses and demonstrate how these discourses are contested, managed and ultimately accommodated. An associated literature search followed and this led to a consideration Morley’s (2003) work in the same area and this was integrated into the analysis to ground it within the existing body of academic work.

This focus on the participant responses as the primary driver of the analysis allowed a coherent picture of the participants’ construction of media studies to emerge from the data with sufficient public discourse and research literature to contextualise it and evidence the relationships between public discourses of higher education and the discourses of media studies deployed by the participants.

4-5 Selection of Participants

Taylor (2003) notes the difficulties in producing discourse data, as the process is very labour-intensive and not particularly efficient. This is likely to lead to smaller sample sizes than are achievable with other approaches but there remains an obligation on the researcher to ensure that the data are a valid sample of the overall domain under consideration, in this case, undergraduate media studies in England.

The interviewees were approached individually, either face-to-face or by email, and invited to participate in the project. The overall aim was to ensure that the totality of the interviews would effectively sample the discourses around media studies. A diverse participant group would provide more opportunities to identify a wider range of discourses. The selection process was based on a number of criteria:

1. Would the interview be compliant with the project's ethical approval?
This precluded the selection of staff with a line-management connection and students with an assessment connection to the researcher.
2. Will the potential participant be likely to offer a pertinent sample of the media studies discourse? Invitations were targeted at people working across the range of media studies approaches; for example, theory and practice, journalism to creative film making practice.
3. Will the participant's background contribute a breadth of experience to the project? Participants were identified as having significant influence on, and/or a major stake in, the outcomes of media studies courses and are

indicative of the groups of people involved; academic and professional service staff, graduates and student advisors.

Although gender and ethnic diversity issues are likely to be as prevalent in media studies as they are in other areas of the academy they are not the focus of this study. Detailed demographic data was not collected and the participants were not asked to formally self-identify with particular characteristics such as gender and ethnic/cultural background although some did refer to their gender/ethnic backgrounds when asked to describe how they came to be in the professional positions they are now. However, it was important to check that selecting on the basis of professional background/role was not inadvertently also delivering a group of participants that was markedly different to the gender and ethnic characteristics of the wider media studies academy. Following selection according to the above professional criteria, the participant group was made up of nine female and ten male participants. Five of the participants are from non-white backgrounds. This is likely to be similar to the wider media studies academy and so the contributions of this participant group can be reasonably taken as indicative of the wider group (In 2012-13, the gender of UK full-time academic staff was reported as 39.3 per cent female, 60.7 per cent male with eighteen per cent of the total identified as from an ethnic-minority background, HESA, 2014)

Potential participants were initially sourced from networking opportunities such as the 2012 Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA) Annual Conference and the 2012 Political Studies Association, Media and Politics

Group Annual Conference or were approached through intermediate contacts. Using a direct personal approach to the invitation resulted in a very high participation rate. Everybody approached directly agreed to participate. Nobody actively declined to participate. This delivered an appropriate set of participants as described in Chapter Five, Section 5-2 but it would have been useful, given that it is an area of expansion (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011), to also include a participant from a private provider of higher education. With no direct or indirect links, an attempt was made to contact possible participants derived from institutional online staff profiles. A number of emails were sent but no replies were received and so it was not possible to pursue this. This could be a useful component of a follow-up study. The final participant group (details in Chapter 5, Section 5-2 and Appendix 1) consisted of twelve departmental media academic staff, three media studies graduates, three central university professional staff and one student advisor. These categorisations cover their primary role at the time of the interview but this is an over-simplification as many of participants have experience as media industry professionals and other roles in education and sometimes chose to refer to these experiences when responding to the interview prompts.

Before the interview, each participant was supplied with a project information sheet (Appendix 2) detailing the nature of the project and the processes for handling their contribution. They were then asked to complete and sign a consent form (Appendix 3). The University of Bedfordshire Research Ethics Committee approved the data collection and both the information sheet and the consent form prior to their use on this project (Appendix 5).

4-6 The Interview Process

The decision to choose semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection mechanism for this study was based on the direct relationship between the nature of the data generated by these interviews and the conceptual framework established in Chapter Three. Whilst not without its limitations, the data generated are direct samples of the discourses under consideration. The modalities are significant with the things people say likely to be different to what they might write, for example, on a questionnaire. The assumption here is that, by not supplying the specific details of each prompted topic beyond the general overview of the interview supplied via the project information sheet (Appendix 2) and with the interview taking place within an environment that they feel comfortable in (see below), their spontaneous responses are valid samples of what they regard as 'say-able' – discourse. This allows a reasonable comparison to be made with other discourse samples and other modalities; institutional promotional images and written text, government policy documents, university web sites and secondary research literature.

Nineteen one-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out face-to-face across calendar years 2012 and 2013. This time period is significant for some of the subsequent analysis as it contextualises the responses of participants in relation to the changing national tuition fee and student finance policies. With the implications of the changes still emerging, the interview date within this overall fieldwork period was potentially significant and so this is explored in more detail in the relevant section (Chapter Seven, Section 7-4)

Lasting from 45-60 minutes with audio recording turned on following the confirmation of consent, all the interviews took place face-to-face in a setting of the participants' choosing. This was often their place of work although where participants shared office accommodation, those interviews were conducted in nearby social spaces. The only limitations were the requirements for a relatively quiet environment to facilitate audio recording and the need to minimise the chances of the interview being interrupted by phones or passers-by. This approach was designed to encourage the participants to feel comfortable about the process so that they could concentrate on the discussion and to encourage them to offer their own views and opinions rather than adopting any particular perceived required responses.

The use of semi-structured interviews within qualitative research in education is well established (Cohen et. al., 2007, p.270; Dilley, 2004). The interviews used here were designed as semi-structured as they were intended to be exploratory rather than test any specific hypothesis. However, some structure was required to ensure that the interviews generated comparative data. This was achieved by developing specific prompts from the general theme of the interview as characterised in the project information sheet. The prompts that were selected had emerged from the literature review as potentially provocative or contentious (for example, '*vocational*') or were at least a feature of the current public discourses (for example, '*tuition fees*').

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.100) have characterised the way data is generated in this type of interview:

“In a very real sense, then, investigator and respondent together *create* the data of the research. Each influences the other, and the direction that the data gathering will take in the next moment is acutely dependent upon what data have already been collected, and in what manner. There is in the investigator-respondent dyad, a transitivity, a continuous unfolding, a series of iterations. Each shapes the other and is shaped by the other.”

Recognising this phenomenon, the prompting was used to build examples of discourse as the participant was introduced to each theme (customised according to the participant role; graduate; lecturer, advisor etc.) and asked to talk about what it meant in relation to their experiences and practices (see Appendix 4 for an example of interviewer prompts). Once they began talking then the interviewer responses were confined to affirmation of their contribution and prompts to elaborate and clarify. The structuring of the prompts was designed to allow participants to revisit their previous responses and give a more nuanced response. For example, after listening to their response to the term ‘*vocational*’ they were then asked about ‘*employability*’, a tactic that sometimes resulted in the participant returning to their views on the term ‘*vocational*’, adding greater depth.

The bulk of the interview was semi-structured along these lines but at the end of each interview the participant was reminded of the general area under consideration and the purpose of the study and then asked if there was any question the interviewer should have asked but had not. This open-ended prompt allowed the participant to expand on any of their previous responses or raise areas of interest not covered in the interview.

Following the interview the audio recording was submitted to a professional transcription service. The transcription service was asked to provide a verbatim

transcript of the audio recording, including pauses, intonations and non-lexical vocables. This was not to facilitate a fine-grained linguistic analysis but to retain some sense of the response as an oral text, capturing its vitality and immediacy and giving some indication of the way in which it was said.

After transcription, the data were coded thematically to draw together participants' responses to both the initial prompts (for example the introduction of the £9000 p.a. fees regime) and to also collate elements of their responses that covered concepts that emerged from the data when the transcriptions were analysed post-interview (for example the role of collegiality in academic practices). The data were coded using HyperResearch (ResearchWare, 2014), qualitative data analysis software. This allowed the markup and collation of transcript elements according to themes. The data were parsed and coded in two stages with an initial scoping of possibly significant themes following by a more detailed pass through the data, coding responses against the emerging themes.

There then followed a further rationalisation of the themes as interrelated themes were combined (for example, *'practical work'* was amalgamated with *'theory and practice'* and some themes were left in abeyance for possible subsequent analysis outside this project. The HyperResearch software was then used to produce reports for each theme with all the participant responses collated into separate files. These reports were then subsequently parsed for the most succinct and indicative participant responses for inclusion in the analytical chapters (See Section 4-7 below).

4-7 Consideration of Alternative Research Methods

Whilst the methodological approach outlined above builds on the conceptual framework established in Chapter 2 and draws on established research practice in this field it is inevitable that choices have been made and the selection of a particular set of tools and frameworks implies that other approaches have been discarded. These choices are not neutral and the selection of research methods will impact on the kind of knowledge that can be generated and its validity in addressing the research questions. There are many possible, plausible approaches to designing the study and so this section of the chapter explores a range of alternative strategies and evaluates their advantages and disadvantages over the chosen approach. Ultimately, the adoption of a particular approach can only be justified through reference to the research questions and the nature of the answers.

The most significant initial selection in the design of the research study was the choice of a largely qualitative approach over either a wholly quantitative approach or a hybrid method combining both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Whilst a quantitative/qualitative dichotomy often characterises a consideration of research methods in the social sciences, this is not necessarily helpful as Silverman (2010, p13) points out:

“The fact that simple quantitative measures are a feature of some good qualitative research shows that the whole ‘qualitative/quantitative’ dichotomy is open to question. ... At best, they are pedagogic devices for students to obtain a first grip on a difficult field. ... At worst, they are excuses for not thinking...”

So whilst the approach taken here is to pursue the nature of media studies through an in-depth qualitative engagement with a relatively small number of individuals this is supported by the quantitative approach to characterising the provision of undergraduate media studies in England taken in Chapter 1. Describing the size and diversity of the provision across the higher education sector in terms of the numbers of courses and students allows a subsequent evaluation of the applicability of the qualitative data in terms of the extent to which it is indicative of the discursive practices of interest. Mapping the backgrounds and experiences of the interview participants onto a taxonomy of media studies is an important aspect of validating the data.

A variety of alternative techniques could have been deployed. It may have been logistically easier to conduct the interview remotely via a telephone or video conferencing link. This may have enabled a greater number of participants although if the participant was available for the interview remotely then they would generally also be available face-to-face. To conduct some interviews remotely and some face-to-face would introduce an additional variable and therefore greater complexity into the data. Whilst communication technologies are powerful, effective and now quite familiar to most professionals there is still an element of mediation in the process and the result would still not fully capture the interactions of two people talking to each other (Sellen, 1995).

4-8 Ethical Considerations

This section considers the ethical implications of the methodological framework deployed in this study. This research includes the involvement of both individual participants and the use of public discourse data. The use of data from both these sources requires care and consideration to avoid any negative consequences for the individuals or institution involved. The overall approach to the ethics of this project has been developed in accordance with the British Educational Research Associations ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011) and the University of Bedfordshire Ethical Procedures (University of Bedfordshire, 2011).

The specific ethical considerations within anti-positivist research have been considered by Taylor (2003, p.20):

“Any researcher has ethical obligations, but these are highlighted when the researcher acknowledges her or his own presence within the research process and also abandons the claim to be discovering truth.”

Recognising the significance of these obligations on this project, the data collection process was designed in accordance with the BERA Guidelines with a focus on informed consent. All participants were adults (over 18) and not identified as vulnerable and so were regarded as capable of providing informed consent when supplied with the appropriate project information.

The study involved interviews with academic staff, other higher education professionals, secondary school staff and media graduates who were still also postgraduate students at the time of data collection. Participants were selected

in a way that avoided any personal relationships or professional connections between the researcher and the participants. Specifically, potential University of Bedfordshire participants were not considered where there was a line management connection (staff) or responsibility for assessment (students).

Prior to their interview, participants were supplied with the information sheet (Appendix 2) and consent form (Appendix 3), normally attached to the initial contact email requesting participation. Immediately prior to commencing the audio recording, the participants were asked if they understood the process and offered the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before they signed the consent form. They were again reminded that the interview was being audio recorded and that they could withdraw consent at any point during the interview. The interview did not commence until formal consent had been obtained. After the interview was concluded, the participants were asked whether they were happy for everything they said to be used in the study. No objections were raised by any of the participants.

Post-Interview Confidentiality and Anonymity

This study is based around the insights of participants in a number of specific roles within media studies. The relationship between their role and their perceptions is integral to the study. Whilst all contributions were and will be treated professionally and with respect, the inter-connected nature of the area and the possible implicit identification of participants through a combination of their role and their contribution, it was not possible to guarantee that

participants' identity cannot be deduced. As there is an initial presumption of confidentiality and anonymity in research ethics this aspect of the study was foregrounded in the ethical scrutiny process and the specific measures outlined below were put in place.

Possible limits to anonymity and confidentiality are recognised by both the Economic and Social Research Council (2014) and the British Educational Research Association. Section 25 of BERA's (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research notes that:

"The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must recognize the participants' entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they or their guardians or responsible others, specifically and willingly waive that right. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to have such a waiver in writing. Conversely, researchers must also recognize participants' rights to be identified with any publication of their original works or other inputs, if they so wish. In some contexts it will be the expectation of participants to be so identified." (British Educational Research Association, 2011)

It is this principle that informed the consent documentation for this study.

Participants were explicitly informed that confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed, prior to them giving their consent. This specific consent was obtained in writing and participants were also notified in writing of their right to withdraw their consent, without giving a reason, at any point in the interview.

Data Handling

All the collected research data was handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Specifically (based on Milligan, 2014):

- Personal data was processed fairly and lawfully.

- Personal data was obtained only for the specified purposes, and was not further processed in any manner incompatible with those purposes.
- Personal data are adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.
- Personal data are accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date.
- Personal data will not be kept for longer than is necessary for completion of the study.
- Personal data shall be processed in accordance with the rights of data subjects under the Act.
- Appropriate technical and organisational measures will be taken against unauthorised or unlawful processing of personal data and against accidental loss or destruction of, or damage to, personal data. In this study all data (and backups) that are not being actively processed are encrypted using Apple FileVault (128bit AES).

Minimising Risk

Participants were not stressed beyond what is normal for them. Participants were informed of their option to terminate the interview at any point. The interviewer would have terminated the interview if the interviewee showed any signs of stress.

4-9 Interviews: Reflexivity

Any study that aims to capture and analyse the nature of media studies within the academy and to draw justifiable conclusions needs a conceptual framework such as the one outlined here. Whilst this is true for all research, some features of this particular study require very careful consideration of what the collected data represents and the ways in which valid conclusions can be extracted. The nature of the study needs to be foregrounded at the outset, as it is likely to appear somewhat self-referential and potentially circular in its arguments, a phenomenon noted by Baert and da Silva (2010):

“Self-referential research confronts people with, and challenges, the presuppositions which they hold in virtue of their membership to a larger community, but the precise nature of this collective selfhood remains open. Amongst these different communities is also the academic community to which the social researcher belongs. Indeed, self-referential knowledge will affect the presuppositions of the academic discipline in which the researcher functions.” (p.299)

The author of this study is a white-british, male academic practitioner in the media studies field, researching media studies practice, using tools and techniques that feature heavily in media research as well as in wider social science research; all social practices that closely relate to the social practices under consideration. And this research has been conducted within the context and constraints of the

University of Bedfordshire, a specific Post-92, Million+ university institution, a particular instance of an organisational structure that is considered by the study. So whilst demonstrating the objectivity of any research study can be problematic and unobtainable, at first sight, this study might appear to be particularly subjective and self-referential. There can arise significant questions around the role of the author in the collection of the data, particularly through the use of semi-structured interviews with the approach open to suggestions that the data are untrustworthy. The interactions between the interviewer and interviewee are also dependent on the equity of their relationship (Seidman, 2012). With ‘insider’ research, the interviewee is likely to know the status of the interviewer and may have a preconceived view of the interviewer’s stance in relation to the interview content and so may shape their responses accordingly (Trowler, 2012). In this case, the conceivable power relationships between the interviewer and the participants was varied and complex when considered against factors such as their formal positions within institutional hierarchies, their genders and their ethnic backgrounds.

In this study, the participants occupied various formal positions in their organisations with some being perceivable as ‘higher’ status (research professor, Director of Teaching and Learning), some being equivalent (head of department, associate dean) and some being perceivable as ‘lower’ status (lecturer, course leader). However, it cannot be assumed that these hierarchies directly translate across the sector. It is not clear that a head of department in a Million+ university would be perceived by interviewer or interviewee as ‘higher status’ than a research-active lecturer in a Russell Group university. When this

professional status is overlaid with gender (a male interviewer interviewing both male and female participants) and ethnic background (a white-British interviewer interviewing participants from a variety of backgrounds) then the relationship between the interviewer and a particular participant becomes an individual one with power implicitly negotiated for each interview. This begins with the initial invitation and is followed through in the supplied pre-interview information, the informal preliminaries before the interview starts and the formal interview itself.

All these factors can lead to untrustworthy interview outcomes and so the design of the study needs to recognise these issues and to minimise their impact. (Cohen *et al*, 2001; Newby, 2010). However, taking some care to conceptualise the approach and recognise its limitations, there are also strengths to draw on. With a researcher embedded in the practices under consideration there is the potential for rapid insights into the main issues and also the possibility of greater acceptance of the researcher by the study participants with perhaps more openness that derives from being on the 'inside'. This gives the researcher a particular perspective on the domain. This approach is recognised in the methodological research that relates theoretical and conceptual positions with the use of interviews. R C Bennett in personal correspondence with Martyn Denscome (cited in Denscome, 1995) notes that, "*I would like the interviews to be assessed much more from the perspective of texts with lives attached—the interaction of potentially volatile subjectivities*". So rather than a pure data collection exercise, this study becomes a dialogue with greater richness and depth as the participant and researcher may share a body of knowledge, experiences and values but, given the diversity within the sector, may also have quite radically different values

and approaches. This leads to fascinating researcher/participant conversations that do appear to capture something of the essence of media studies practices but without the conceptual framework developed here they might be dismissible as probably anecdotal reinforcement of the author's preconceived ideas and opinions. Rather than express the interview process as a series of interviewer 'questions' followed by specific respondent 'answers', the interviews are characterised as a set of interviewer 'prompts' and the associated 'participant responses', recognising that this gives rise to data that can legitimately be regarded as samples of discourses that can be compared with the available sources of public discourses.

Although this conceptual framework is widely used in higher education studies, some potential problems within this domain have been identified by Trowler (2001, p.196). Trowler's paper directly addresses the extent to which academic staff can be and are "captured" by external, institutional discourses and any oppositional discourses that arise in parallel. Trowler concludes that this is a valid approach but that:

"There is a danger of over-extending this argument to a position which asserts the existence of a semiotic democracy in which all texts are 'read' in creative ways and filtered through localized cultures, ideologies and communities of practice." (ibid.)

Three reasons are given for this; appropriate alternative social structures are required to facilitate alternative discourses; oppositional discourses may be unstable with individuals using different, context-sensitive and potentially contradictory "discursive repertoires" and, finally; institutional structures and the

processes that build them (for example, staff requirement policies) can be designed in a way that filters oppositional discourses.

The second of these reasons is a potential problem in this study. It is assumed that interviewing the participants individually on a face-to-face basis in a location they choose and find comfortable together with an interviewer who presents as both a researcher and professional practitioner in media studies, leads to a valid sample of discourse that characterises the social practices under consideration. It is possible that the participants are deploying their research interview “discursive repertoire”.

The interview process and the interviewee/interviewer relationship deployed here does mitigate this potential problem and the evidence from the transcripts shows that, over the course of the extended conversations, the participants appear to be accessing a range of discourses and are certainly not displaying an uncritical capture by dominant external or institutional discourses. The interview transcripts offer rich and varied samples of oppositional discourses and therefore the subtle and complex power relationships identified by Foucault.

4-10 Transcripts: Reflexivity

The nineteen interviews generated 910 minutes (over 15 hours) of audio recordings resulting in over 165,000 words of transcription. The processing of these data and their reduction down to the fragments reproduced here can never be a neutral process and is likely to have had as much impact on the resultant findings as the participant selection and interviewing processes.

Following the interviews, the audio data files were sent to a professional transcription company specialising in research interviews. This provided a rapid turnaround and high-quality transcription but as it was carried out by a number of different transcribers, the results were varied. None of them could be expected to be experts in the topics being discussed and therefore the transcriptions were checked and corrected for the misreading of technical and jargon terms, alongside the original audio.

Once all the transcripts were in place, they were thematically coded. A further selection process was then applied to the collections of coded fragments to exclude duplication and/or '*uninteresting*' observations. It is recognised that research of this nature is co-constituted by the researcher, participants and their relationship (Finlay, 2002) and it is within this process of selection and refinement that the researcher has significant impact. Although the researcher cannot legitimately fabricate participant responses, the omission of some responses is a necessary part of the analysis if a coherent picture is to emerge from the data. Finlay's response to this issue is to point to reflexivity as a safeguard, defined as:

"Thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of "what I know and how I know it" to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge." (ibid. p.532)

It is this reflexivity that will be foregrounded through the analysis of the rich, insightful, humorous and varied participant contributions that follow.