PERSPECTIVES ON THE LEARNING JOURNEYS OF STUDENTS IN ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores students' experiences in higher education in England in the early 21st century. It uses a longitudinal perspective, drawing upon data from semi-structured interviews with undergraduates as they progressed from transition to graduation.

The thesis argues that students enrol at university with learner identities shaped by different educational and social backgrounds. Once at university, students move through a process of acclimatisation during which they build upon particular capacities that enable them to succeed in higher education. These capacities help students to build robust undergraduate identities which allow them to exercise agency in their learning. However, as they do so, they carry with them varying degrees of risk and have to negotiate the disjuncture between expectation and reality in their undergraduate experiences. An understanding of the impact of risk and disjuncture has important implications in the rapidly changing world of higher education and these, alongside concepts of field, habitus, capital, and academic and social integration, help to explain undergraduate experiences in the rapidly changing political economy of higher education.

Focussing on the particulars of individual experiences highlighted the significant investments individuals make in their studies and for whom the world of higher education can be an uncomfortable place.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

APEL	Accreditation of prior experiential learning
APL	Accreditation of prior learning
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BIS	(Department of) Business, Innovation and Skills
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CVCP	Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now UUK)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
NAO	National Audit Office
Nvivo	Qualitative Data Software package from QSR
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UK	United Kingdom
UUK	Universities UK
USA	United States of America

1. Chapter One: Understanding higher education

1.1   Introduction

This thesis explores students' experiences of higher education in England in the early 21st century, arguing that a deeper understanding of those experiences will contribute to the development of a better and more socially just system. As it is a study undertaken at a time of great change in the policy environment of higher education, this chapter begins with an overview of that context and how it contributes to the overall aims of the study. It is followed by a section describing the structure of the thesis.

1.2   The higher education policy context

Key themes in higher education policy include the purposes of higher education, stratification of universities, who should participate in what kind of higher education, who should fund it and what outcomes students can expect. As these themes form a background to students' experiences, they inevitably inform the enquiry.

Higher education takes place in a range of settings, at different levels, through various modes of delivery. In this discussion, the term 'higher education' is taken to refer to all qualifications above Level 4 in the UK Framework of Qualifications in higher education (QAA) and includes all certificates, diplomas, foundation and undergraduate degree courses taught in universities or colleges. In the thesis the focus is upon undergraduate students studying full time, three year degrees.

1.2.1   The purposes of higher education

At the heart of debates about the purposes of higher education lies the contradiction in the perceived relationship between disinterested and applied intellectual endeavour. Writing in the late 19th Century, in 'The Idea of a University', Newman described a university that was to be:

> a place of teaching universal knowledge. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral, and on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement of it. (Newman 1976:ix)

Newman went on to argue that universities are different from technical 'academies' because they are concerned with preparing (limited numbers of) citizens for leadership, not imparting technical know-how. It is the vision of universities as sites of intellectual endeavour that contrasts with some modern day discourse on higher education, but nevertheless the historical legacy of Newman's 19th Century vision contributes to contemporary policy contradictions. Layer (2005b:5) argues that there are fundamental contradictions between the preservation of university as a site of education for an elite minority, accessed by those who attain the highest, most academically focused qualifications in school, and the economic needs of society in which vocationally specific skills and knowledge are at a premium. The former aims to develop social capital for leadership while the latter prioritises human capital to populate a globally competitive labour market.

Whilst suggesting that university study may be either primarily vocational or academic over-simplifies the debate about the purposes of higher education, it serves to highlight the multiple purposes of higher education, and the disagreement over the emphasis between those multiple purposes, for the individual, society and the economy. In this thesis, these tensions are seen as significant as they influence the relationship between students' reasons to study

and their envisaged futures, which then impact upon their motivation through times of difficulty.

1.2.2   Institutional unification in higher education

By comparison with several other European countries, the UK has traditionally applied a more limited definition of what constitutes 'higher education', the former often incorporating technical and social education (Scott 1998). Nevertheless, higher education in the UK has undergone significant change in the last 40 years leading some writers to describe the shift from an elite to a mass system characterised by increased student numbers and greater diversity (Slowey 2000), a hierarchy of institutions (Reay et al 2005) and an increasingly vocationally orientated curriculum (Edwards and Miller 1998).

In particular, the re-designation of polytechnics as universities in 1992 had profound consequences for the ways institutions positioned themselves in a quasi market, with the purpose and mission of institutions becoming a more salient issue. It has been argued that some universities were more able to retain their elite reputations and entry requirements (Watson and Taylor 1998) while the polytechnics, on the other hand, were seen as more vocational and flexible in their provision and more willing to offer education locally to more diverse populations, including mature students (Layer 2005a).

The 1992 Higher Education Act introduced a unified funding structure and resulted in a rapid increase in the numbers of students enrolling into higher education, some of which occurred in an expanded further education setting. The 15 years between 1980 and 1995 saw student numbers increase from 800,000 to 1.7million (Slowey 2000), which by 2010 had risen again to nearly 2.5million (HESA). This three-fold increase was part of a global trend where

numbers increased up to 1999 by 40% across OECD countries (OECD 1999) and a further 20% on average up to 2008 (OECD 2010). How mass higher education can accommodate a more diverse body of individual learners is a key theme in this thesis alongside the impact institutional status has on students' experiences.

1.2.3 Diversification and stratification

The increase in student numbers in the UK was largely due to government funded expansion and resulted in an increase in possible routes into higher education. For example, the development of Access courses in the 1970s encouraged mature students from previously under-represented groups to participate in higher education (Layer 2005b); the development of GNVQs, BTECs and the accreditation of prior learning (APL) and prior experiential learning (APEL) further broadened the range of accepted qualifications on entry (Watson and Taylor 1998). However, it also led to concerns that although routes into universities were becoming more varied, some teaching, learning and social environments were failing to respond to the diversity of students now entering university (McCormick 2005). The perception that students from non-A Level backgrounds struggled academically in higher education led to calls for restrictions in entry (Williams 1997), leading some writers to argue that widening participation practice had become 'tied up in snobbish elitism' (Stuart 2005) and was fostering a deficit model of those students who entered higher education other than through the traditional 'A Levels in school' route (Taylor and Bedford 2004).

Full time students and those with three A Levels at Grade A are more likely to continue beyond their first year at university than are part time students or those with two A Levels at low grades (NAO 2007). However, as some argue, simplistic conclusions are to be avoided as a complex matrix of influences makes firm conclusions problematic (Yorke and Longden

2004, 2008; Quinn et al 2005). The reasons given for leaving a course are often a mixture of personal, institutional, course related or financial factors (NAO 2007). In the UK, moreover, retention is better than for many OECD counterparts and staying on rates have increased (albeit marginally) despite the increasing number of students (NAO 2007).

Expansion in the 1980s, followed by consolidation of the number of available places in higher education in the 1990s, has been described (Barnett and Di Napoli 2008:4) as being 'a thrust towards making universities sites for the production of practical, professional knowledge with immediate applicability in the real world'. This emphasis was seen by some as a move against intellectual elitism (Miller 2008) (or Newman's disinterested intellectual inquiry) while others have seen this as a positive 'democratisation of academic discourses' (Scott 1998). For example, the development of additional subjects to meet the interests of new participants (such as courses in women's studies), to address social transformations (such as courses in Information, Communication and Technology) or in response to more varied career paths (for example, the growth in vocationally orientated qualifications) illustrate how higher education has responded to changing social and cultural conditions. These changes are relevant to this study because they influenced the subject choices of its participants and their perceptions of the purpose of university study.

1.2.4   Changing the funding of higher education

The latter part of the 1990s and the first years of this century saw policy priorities expand beyond concern for the numbers participating to the social and demographic mix of students enrolling (Parry 2010:36). The fact that students from lower socio-economic groups are under-represented in higher education despite significant investment in policies to increase

their participation remains a dominant theme linked in part to debates about how higher education should be funded (David 2011).

As the number participating in higher education increases, so does the cost of providing it. Originally funded through a combination of public funds, endowments, legacies and other partnership arrangements, the burden of cost has shifted over time towards participants. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) offer a useful typology of current funding regimes, illustrating a continuum from a market to a social model and placing the UK slightly to the market end (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Typology of Funding Regimes for Higher Education

Market model. Students are expected to meet the full economic costs of tuition and any associated costs such as living expenses. Bursaries or discounts may be offered at the discretion of the institution.	←——————→	Social model. The state is expected to meet the full costs of tuition and any associated costs such as living expenses.
USA Australia UK		Sweden, Netherlands
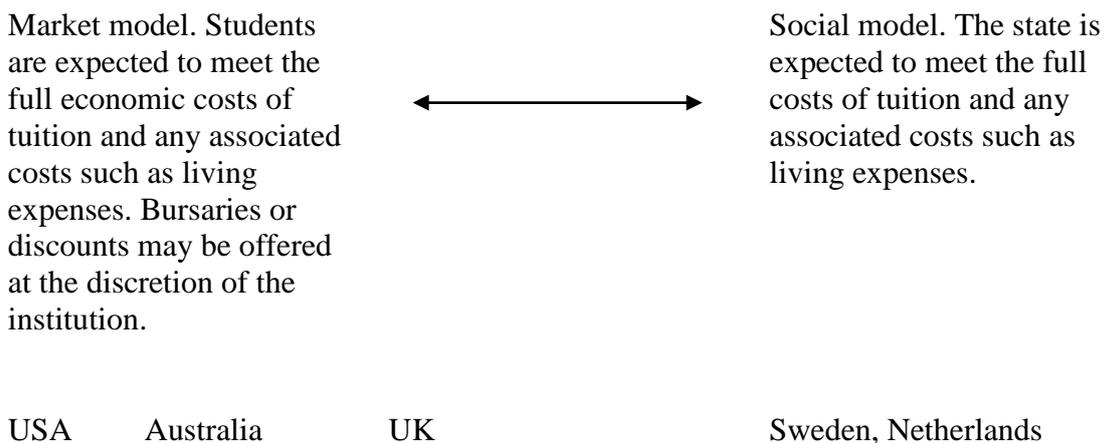
Source: Furlong and Cartmel (2009:36)

The move away from state funding of higher education had begun with the Conservative governments in the late 1980s and 1990s through to the eventual replacement of grants with student loans (Watson and Taylor 1998). This trend continued with the New Labour administration of the late 1990s and early 2000s and has been taken further by the Coalition Government of 2010.

As well as making recommendations for changes to the funding for undergraduates, the 1997 Dearing Report (leading to the 1997 Higher Education Act) also placed an emphasis on continued professional development, employer partnerships, flexibility of provision and an expansion of pathways into higher education (Slowey 2000). However, it was for the introduction of fees which students were required to borrow money and, against Dearing's recommendations, the scrapping of maintenance grants, that the Act is most notable.

The shifting emphasis in funding continued in the Higher Education Act 2003 with the introduction of 'top-up' fees, allowing universities to charge up to £3000 subject to approval with the newly established Office of Fair Access (OFFA). This trend continued with the recent Browne Review into higher education (BIS 2010) which argued that the 2003 changes failed to meet the financial needs of universities who were forced to draw upon their reserves to maintain standards, and which has since been adopted through the introduction of higher tuition fees for 2012.

Students are now expected to make a substantial contribution to the costs of studying for a degree and to accrue debts in the process which are likely to take years to repay. As a consequence it has been argued that students have different expectations from, and relationships with, their teachers and institutions (Batchelor 2008). The policy of introducing student fees has also raised concerns that the very groups government policy seeks to attract are more debt averse and therefore less likely to participate with a student loans system (Callender 2008). How student debt is perceived and experienced by students themselves is a concern in this study.

1.2.5   Outcomes from Higher Education

Students leaving higher education are likely to measure their success against a range of criteria (Archer 2003), including their subsequent positioning within the labour market. This can be viewed in both the short and long term; against earnings, job obtained or the deployment of graduate skills and knowledge. Research conducted on the employment outcomes from higher education has tended to focus on the short term outcomes, in part because of the difficulty of ensuring consistency in longitudinal data. It has also focused on financial returns (the 'graduate premium'), rather than the level of work obtained because of problems in defining graduate level employment (Adnett and Slack, 2007). Whilst some of the evidence suggests that higher education participants earn more over a lifetime than those who do not participate (Blundell et al 2005), more recent evidence suggests that the financial returns differ according to social and demographic status, institution of study, subject studied, degree classification obtained and age at graduation (Purcell et al. 2007; Power and Whitty 2008; Hussain et al 2008).

Of course graduate employment prospects are closely linked to the state of the economy and the research reported here took place at a time of mixed economic fortunes: economic growth followed by rapid recession, (2006-2009) the consequences of which was just becoming clear as the students in this study graduated.

Albeit problematic, employment progression post-graduation can be tracked; other outcomes for individuals from higher education, such as engagement with subject, gains in social status and prestige and the extent of personal change are harder to measure and, possibly as a consequence, have not been highlighted in the literature. It should be noted, however, that the benefits of higher education to society are not simply economic. It has been said to have a

'civilising' effect (Dearing 1997) and may be expected to play its part in reducing wider inequalities by affording social mobility and enhanced opportunities to people from lower socio-economic groups (Archer et al 2003).

Walker (2006) has developed the notion of capabilities in relation to higher education in an attempt to reflect broader objectives for higher education. Drawing from the work of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2002) to offer a model based upon a capability approach, she seeks to place democratic, ethical and critical values at the heart of higher education learning and teaching and provides a list of capabilities that might form the basis of 'graduateness'.

The relationship between qualifications for future employment, social mobility and education for civic or political engagement are themes behind students' experiences in higher education and thus contribute to the policy framework behind this study.

1.3   Aims of the study

Recognising that students' experiences of higher education are set within a policy framework raises questions about the nature of those experiences which are the focus of this study. Its overall aims are to explore:

- how students experience university, teaching, learning, assessment and study;
- how students experience university socially and culturally;
- how students conceptualise success in higher education and value the outcomes from that education.

The study seeks to understand how individuals experience university across the duration of their undergraduate careers. It is therefore based on an analysis of longitudinal data gathered

in four semi-structured interviews with eight students across the three years of their studies (32 interviews in all), enrolled on courses in two institutions from different mission groups.

Drawing upon theories about higher education it seeks to offer a multi-dimensional approach to exploring the experiences of these students, focussing on a wide range of aspects and stages of participation. Situating the study within the debate on widening participation is intended to explain the context in which students were studying. The themes of structure and agency (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Warren and Webb 2007) and the relationship between them inform the analysis and the concept of the 'learning career' (Bloomer 1997) helps to make sense of the longitudinal nature of the study.

1.4   The structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured to explain the academic context of the study, research methodology and methods adopted and then to guide the reader through the stories the students told about their experiences.

Chapter Two discusses existing understandings of students' experiences in higher education, focussing on the literature which discusses the theoretical concepts used in the study: social justice, forms of capital, habitus, learning careers, identity and educational transformations. Chapter Three explains the purposes of and approach to the research, the design of the study and methods used to collect data, paying attention to issues of validity, reliability, ethics and data analysis.

Chapters Four to Eight present the data from interviews. Each of these chapters is structured around a stage in the 'student lifecycle' (HEFCE 2001); in other words, students' experiences of higher education are viewed not just as discrete stages (first year, second year, third year),

but as periods of transition. This approach is utilised not to imply a mechanistic, linear journey, but to reflect the fact that data were gathered at different phases of transition for the students.

Chapter Nine summarises the findings from the analysis of the data and Chapter Ten presents a theoretical interpretation of those findings, concluding the thesis by outlining the practical lessons that can be drawn from the data and highlighting its contribution to knowledge.

1.5   Summary

This chapter has outlined the policy context within which the project is situated, in particular drawing attention to issues of rapid change, conflicting purposes and differential outcomes from higher education. It has introduced the aims of the study and the structure of the thesis.

The next chapter explores research which has thrown light on students' experiences in higher education, discusses how theory has helped to illuminate our understandings of the undergraduate experience and introduces the themes that shape the later analysis of the data gathered for the study.

2.   Chapter Two: Understanding students' experiences of higher education

2.1   Introduction

This chapter examines literature on students' experiences of higher education, locating this within a brief discussion of concepts of social justice, influences upon participation and the choice process. It then considers how students experience making the transition into higher education, following which factors influencing success for students in higher education are discussed. Academic and social experiences of university life are then examined, focusing on teaching, learning and social integration before considering how social factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and family and educational background impact upon participation in higher education. Relevant theoretical concepts used in the study, including habitus, capital and field (Bourdieu 1997), learning cultures (Hodkinson et al 2007a), and learner identity (Bathmaker 2010), will then be explained. The chapter concludes by highlighting gaps in knowledge which this study seeks to address, including how social influences change or endure as students navigate university learning.

2.2   Social justice in higher education

Central to debates on participation in higher education is the principle of social justice because experience in higher education can bring material, social and cultural benefits to individuals and this raises issues of equity. Whether the benefits from higher education are seen in economic or social terms or both, they raise issues of fairness, transparency and democratic accountability. While these could and should be viewed in relation to the distribution of chances to participate (i.e., access *to* higher education) if participation itself is founded on unequal principles (i.e., practices within higher education are themselves

exclusive) then social justice is not served by focusing only on access. Therefore, a more nuanced definition of social justice is required.

Furlong and Carmel (2009) describe aspects of social justice, including fair access to rewards, respect for individual and collective rights, a sense of equity (at least in opportunity) while recognising the problems in reconciling competing demands; for example, noting that social justice involves the restriction of some groups in accessing opportunities where their participation is hindering other less powerful players from participating. In the field of higher education, entry policies based on qualifications, themselves a product of unequal opportunities, presents an example that challenges some notions of social justice. Indeed, throughout this debate, the tensions between merit and privilege that are inherent in the UK education system cannot be ignored. They contribute to the challenge of understanding attitudes to higher education participation, the socially and culturally situated nature of learning, and the impact student motivations and expectations of outcomes have on participation.

Cribb and Gewirtz (2003) present a pluralist view that takes into account differing facets of social justice, such as how to reconcile competing demands between different groups. They see social justice as multi-dimensional (distributive, cultural and associational) and situated within practice, as well as informing its development. In other words, advocating policies which advance social justice must take into account the situated nature of practice and needs, therefore, to be supported by appropriate resources. It is this view that informs the thinking in this study.

Seeing social justice as both redistributive and cultural (Bhatti 2003) means we have to pay attention to issues of identity. In relation to higher education, some may feel a greater sense of

entitlement and value in university according to how they see themselves as a learner. Congruence may be harder for some groups than others to achieve, where they do not see themselves as legitimate participants in a world to which they may not think they belong. Achieving success in this world may be harder if they need to first work to be accepted, in their eyes, into 'the club' of higher education. This is why the concept of social justice is important to this work.

2.3   Participation in higher education: 'embedded' decision-making

In recent years writers have sought to understand the choice process as a complex interaction of factors (Ball and Vincent 1998; Fuller and Heath 2010). In this context, participation can be seen to be both the initial decision to take part but also the longer term experience once students are in higher education.

Fevre et al (1999) argue that the emphasis on the human capital approach to understanding choice in higher education, where higher education is seen as the means to developing economic value, ignores ways in which structural factors influence decision making, with tacit rather than explicit reasoning dominating. They identify three approaches to participation: functional avoidance (where career progress was better achieved through the workplace), instrumental credentialism (participation for the sake of qualification) and vocationally transformative (you learn what is needed to do the job). However, these categories ignore other reasons for participation, such as social or personal growth, or intrinsic subject interest.

Ball and Vincent (1998) identified the importance of *informal* networks in influencing decisions when they noted the classed nature of decision making, contrasting 'hot' knowledge

(socially embedded within communities) and 'cold' knowledge found, for example, in prospectuses and league tables. Members of different communities draw upon more than one 'grapevine' to gather information. They likened this to a 'landscape of choice', where the landscape differs depending on the location of the viewer-participant.

Pugsley (1998) found similar class-matching in a study of decision making. Taking class as a multi-dimensional concept (parental occupation, education, postcode, etc.) she found that working class families relied on formal systems to advise young people on options and displayed a reluctance to 'interfere' with professional advice. Middle-class parents on the other hand appeared to know how to 'read' the market: they could 'decode' and interpret available information, understanding its implications for the graduate labour market. There were also differences in attitudes to location of study: working class families preferring children to study locally and middle class families putting a greater premium on independence and moving away from home. Reay and Ball (1998) identified what they described as a working-class discourse of 'child as expert' where parents were reluctant to challenge their children because of the formal setting in which children had been advised.

Brooks (2002) also addressed the theme of social embeddedness in decision making in work examining how young people discussed career options with their peers. She found they used the rhetoric of individual choice to justify decisions but that this masked the underlying tensions surrounding how decisions were interpreted within the hierarchical structure of higher education. Respondents in her study were reluctant to discuss their choices before they had made up their minds for fear of being judged negatively by peers who perceived some institutions as having higher status and value.

Another focus in the literature has been on how family background shapes attitudes towards, knowledge about and propensity to participate in higher education. Factors in the family shape later attitudes towards and success in education (Gorard et al, 1999b) and there is a growing understanding of the need for early targeting of support in strategies to widen participation (Gorard et al 2007). Building on this understanding of the influence of families on early educational experiences and how these shape later attitudes to education, some of the literature has concentrated on how families are involved in the processes of application to university. Gewirtz et al (1993) discuss how middle-class families are able to negotiate the landscape of higher education and appreciate its implications for outcomes later in life. Brooks (2004:495) describes finding mothers and fathers involved in discussing higher education options with their children and notes that young people consult their parents more than any other source of advice and information. As Hutchings (2003) suggests, information is not neutral.

Osborne et al (2004a) identified the fragility of decision making, shaped by four considerations: national policies, national and regional economic and labour market conditions, policy and practice of higher education institutions, and personal backgrounds and circumstances. This is helpful in highlighting the impact of external factors on individual decisions.

Two themes stand out from this literature: the tension between social structure and individual agency and the extent to which decisions are both conscious and apparently rational. When decision making is seen as a class-based, socially constructed process, the decision whether or not to participate in higher education becomes more situated. At the same time, the decision itself becomes less consciously made (Keane 2008) and more determined by horizons of

possibility. So for a pupil from a family with higher education experience, attending a school with a high progression rate into higher education, who is surrounded by advice and guidance on post-18 options, there may be as little conscious decision making about participation as a young person growing up in a neighbourhood with low participation, where employment patterns and educational attainment levels suggest that university is not for the 'likes of them' (Archer et al 2007a).

Brannen and Nilsen (2005) argue that we are not wholly free agents able to choose our biographies: class, ethnicity and gender shape our 'choices'. They highlight what is not said, as much as what is said, and suggest that placing emphasis on individual agency may encourage the labelling of individuals with failings for not progressing in ways that some might expect.

2.3.1 Understanding decision-making in the lifecourse

Thinking about how individuals navigate decision making in education is helpful in understanding their choices. There is evidence to suggest that examining what has gone before, how future possibilities are perceived and taking stock of these all influence decisions. The embedded nature of decision making was discussed by Ball et al (2002) who saw choices as stages within the decision maker's biography.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) proposed a 'sociological theory of career decision making' which attempted to reconcile competing tensions between higher education policy based on notions of rational (economic) choice and sociological understandings highlighting the constraints of socially constructed pathways. They found decision making by young people to be at least partially rational, pragmatic, opportunistic and context-related, as well as highlighting the constraints limiting options which tended to be overlooked in the emphasis

on 'choice'. They described decisions being made within what they called 'horizons for action' but recognised these horizons may be 'segmented'; in other words the options available may be defined by other factors, such as gender, ethnicity and class. They developed the idea of 'turning points', whereby particular events or circumstances caused a reassessment of priorities and options, within a 'learning career'. These turning points were interspersed with periods of routine which, they suggested, either reinforce or challenge the decisions taken at turning points. In summary:

> Within a field, people make pragmatically rational decisions within their culturally derived horizons for action, at turning points. (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997:41)

Developed in the context of learning career choices, this work explored dispositions to learning and how decisions influence them. Dispositions in this context encompass attitudes and approaches to learning, shaped by a number of factors including previous experiences, perceived costs and benefits, as well as personal applicability. The significance for this study is the importance of taking a longitudinal approach to researching dispositions to learning, and seeking to understand ways these can change. It is an approach that is central to my research and raises the question how students in higher education experience horizons for action and turning points in their learning careers.

The insights from the literature on choice which inform this research are the concept of 'choice' as problematic and decisions (or non-decisions) being shaped by structural and individual experiences. These contexts and circumstances have to be negotiated when entering the complex, stratified field of higher education with the potentially life-changing implications that different choices carry.

2.4   Transition into higher education: making sense of university

The concepts of academic and social integration (Rhodes and Nevill 2004) have been important in understanding how students experience transition into university. In this context, academic integration refers to the extent to which a student participates in, and succeeds with, their learning. A student who is academically integrated will enjoy learning, will extend their understanding and knowledge and see themselves as part of a learning community. Academic integration is closely linked to, but distinct from, academic engagement.

Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997) developed the concept of social integration as a way of understanding how students experience transition into higher education. Social integration refers to the degree to which a student feels appropriately embedded within an institution and the extent of 'fit' between their situation and their institution. Tinto's work, based in the USA, examined factors in student attrition from College and led him to argue that institutional policy to reduce attrition needed to focus on the first year experience. Tinto's early work drew upon sociological theories of cultural transition (Yorke and Longden 2004) and concluded that students left college both because they failed to integrate (academically, socially or both) and because institutions failed to adapt their practices to address this. He saw academic and social integration as separate but recognised they influenced each other. Yorke and Longden (2004) revised Tinto's model, adding concepts of institutional commitment to student welfare, institutional integrity (the extent to which institutions did what they said they would) and communal potential (the extent to which students saw a community of like-minded colleagues to support their work). Much of the focus of subsequent work on student retention has been on an individual's ability to integrate into college or university life (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005) but this approach risks ignoring the wider social and political contexts that influence processes of integration (Brunden et al 2000) and this study seeks to address that limitation.

Although Yorke and Longden (2004) argue that a better understanding of why students drop out helps institutions facilitate students' success, there is a danger this emphasis promotes a 'good enough' approach to student success. In other words, the job of an HEI is simply to retain students, not necessarily provide the highest quality teaching and learning environment possible. Furthermore, the emphasis in Tinto's work on young participants in Ivy League Colleges in the USA offers limited insight into the experiences of an increasingly diverse undergraduate population in the UK (Laing and Robinson 2003).

The focus on early transition also fails to recognise ways in which students' experiences at university may change over time, but it has nevertheless been influential in improving institutional practices on induction (Yorke and Longden, 2004). However, there are limitations to the effectiveness of transition programmes (UUK 2005) and students need more than appropriate information about their courses. What is also needed is greater recognition of the diversity of students and their ways of life including their family, living and working arrangements whilst studying (UUK 2005; HEFCE 2001). An important aspect of this study, therefore, is to explore these dynamics and argue for greater recognition and understanding of the significance of individual experiences.

Living arrangements (in halls, shared houses or the family home), working commitments in addition to study, care and other responsibilities and interests all shape how students spend their time. As an increasing number of students, particularly those from Social Classes 4-7, study at a local university (HEFCE 2009), so the stereotypical image of a student away from home for the first time, living in halls, is unrealistic for many. As Christie et al (2008:577) describe, many mature students live what they call demarcated lives and, as a result, have only 'partial and incomplete membership of the student community'. Writing in the US,

Bozick (2007) argues living off-campus impedes a student's successful transition to college, but this view is criticised for seeing off-campus students as 'deviant' and failing to comply with a dominant model of student life. Bowl et al (2008) found that being in university based accommodation did not necessarily improve social integration for students and some students found living in halls an isolating and impeding experience. They emphasise the complexities involved in understanding how students' lives impact on their ability to study, integrate with and have a sense of belonging to the university as a community of learners.

Participating in higher education can provide a distinct social experience, a rite of passage, as well as academic and, for some, professional learning (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). In my study, this idea of social integration 'include(s) self-esteem and the quality of relationships established with teaching staff and peers' (Rhodes and Nevill 2004:181). However, I would argue that social integration depends on issues of academic identity, confidence, and participation. For students to have a sense of being socially integrated they must share some common identity with their peers, have confidence in their abilities as students and share academic endeavour with others. Achieving this level of integration may be harder for some students than others and this may be influenced by a range of factors including class, ethnicity, gender, prior educational experiences, living arrangements and motivation to study. Moreover, institutional culture will affect the degree of social integration possible (Thomas 2002).

Christie (2009) highlights the emotional anxiety and shock of transition and its impact on learning. She argues that learners have to develop new ways of coping before they can begin to learn what they are required to learn. Bhatti (2003:65) argues that having clear goals can help transition, and 'those with instrumental tendencies are more likely to achieve desired

outcomes' compared with those who study for the sake of it, or 'who drift into a disconnected, ambivalent world outside the university'. Within her sample of 16 graduates, she found that some, particularly 'non-traditional' students, reported self-directed learning only actually took place in the workplace once they left university.

However, transition into university is one phase of students' undergraduate experiences. There has been extensive research into that transition, particularly the first year experience, alongside a focus on retaining students within higher education (Quinn et al 2005). Less attention has been paid to the processes of adaption and integration as students progress throughout their undergraduate studies.

One purpose of this research is to examine the ways students are able to draw upon different resources in order to have a sense of social integration at university and how that influences their progress as undergraduates. Hence, the first research question:

What are the processes whereby students adapt to and thrive in the university environment?

2.5   Factors in success: developing undergraduate learner identities

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) identified four approaches in academic literature to understanding learning: a focus on learner well-being and individual attributes; 'learning styles' where learners showed (fixed) preferences and capacities; the social context of learning focusing on the interrelationships between learner, activity and context; and, finally, ways in which learning is influenced by social, political and economic contexts. They argued, however, that the temporal dimension i.e., the ways in which dispositions to learning changed throughout a learning career was missing from this literature. Bloomer and Hodkinson's work centres on the idea that dispositions to learning endure but also change across a lifetime. The

notion of a 'disposition to learning' encompasses attitudes which have been formed by previous experiences of learning, are socially constructed and reflect broader underlying features of learner identity. According to Bloomer and Hodkinson, learning lives are erratic, non linear, affected by partially rational decisions linked to other life experiences and include formal and informal learning. Central to their work is a discussion of the capacity of individual learners to adapt and transform their learner identity; they argue these transformations are the result of complex and individual circumstances, influenced by structural factors such as gender, class and ethnicity. Their work on how individual learners negotiate these circumstances through their learning careers, although situated in further education, offers an important dimension to explaining undergraduate experiences in university.

Understanding the influence of class, gender, ethnicity, education, family and community on dispositions to learning suggests they shape the ways people see learning and how individuals view themselves as learners. In this study, therefore, the degree of 'fit' between students' identities as undergraduate learners and their university environment will be explored alongside whether and how that 'fit' influences their ability 'to stay the course' and ultimately graduate.

The concept of learner identity has been used to illustrate the constraints faced by some students in both choosing to attend and then experiencing different institutions of higher education (Archer and Leathwood 2003; Archer et al 2007b). Reay (2003) found that working class students in her study carried a fear of 'fitting in' to a university environment, partly because they had fewer 'safety nets' of support and capital (Bourdieu 1990a) than their middle class counterparts. Much of the literature (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, Archer

and Hutchings 2000) focuses on experiences of disjuncture and struggle in higher education by students with working class backgrounds; yet Crozier et al (2008) suggest that working-class students show much greater resilience and perseverance than their middle-class counterparts in overcoming disadvantages.

Using the lens of learner identity to study students' experiences offers particular relevance to my questions. As Hall has argued (1993), the theme of 'becoming' is as important as 'being' to social identities. Epstein et al argue 'in school contexts, identifications and dis-identifications are frequently made along lines of social difference' (2003:121). I was interested in exploring the role of difference in the way students perceived themselves. The fluid nature of identity, changing as it does over time and according to situation becomes more significant in a rapidly evolving world (Bathmaker, 2010). It seemed to me student experiences were inextricably linked to issues of identity and using this lens allowed me to focus on the individual, the personal and the narrative.

Identity shapes dispositions to learning and illustrates the nature of changes arising from participation. It is not a one-way process, however, as learning, along with habitus (Bourdieu 1990a), shapes identity, and it is the interaction between these that is the focus here. Higher education is a collaborative project: learning is a shared endeavour, shaped by students and teachers taking part, recognising the contribution learners make to their experiences. The question arises: how do identities change through participation and what can this tell us about teaching and learning in higher education today?

How students reconcile any 'gap' between notions of themselves as learners and what is expected of them as students is an important question in understanding the undergraduate experience. Some studies suggest three explanations for how students reconcile such gaps:

rejection of 'old' identities in favour of 'new' (Skeggs 1997); or the development of 'dual' or multiple identities to suit the particular circumstances (Grossberg 1996, cited in Crozier et al 2010) or gradual (and often disrupted) change over time as students negotiate the world in which they study (Crozier et al 2010). Behind these explanations is the tension between the concept of 'transformation' (changing to something else) and 'becoming' (building upon existing foundations).

Identity is also seen as playing a crucial part in constraining the choices of some individuals about where they study (Crozier et al 2010). Here, identity is seen as being constructed through discourse, material factors and structural inequalities; the student is 'always becoming' but within boundaries and hierarchies of inclusion, exclusion and power. These arguments are summarized by Grant (1997:105):

> For student-subjects, then, while some positions are made more likely, others are made more 'difficult'. For example, it is often easiest for the young, white, middle-class male to be constituted as the 'good' student because the characteristics of this position sit most snugly with his other subject positions.

The crucial point here is that identity is not singular or fixed. As Lawy (2003) argues, identity is neither a product nor an outcome of change but affects the processes that produce change. Identity is fragile in the way it responds to (new) risks, such as finding oneself at university for the first time. For some students, then, participation in the (socially constructed) world of higher education is more problematic than for others. Drawing heavily on the theoretical work of Bourdieu (1997) the link is made between ways in which a student's holding of social, economic and cultural capital impact on their engagement with their education (Weil 1986; Reay 1998a; Reay 1998b; Bowl 2003).

2.5.1 Bourdieu and 'habitus'

The concept of habitus and the way it shapes students' experiences within the field of higher education has been widely discussed in the literature (Reay 1998a and b; Crozier et al 2010, Fuller and Heath 2010). Bourdieu saw habitus as:

> the way in which culture is embodied in the individual, … how one's view of the world is influenced by the traditional distribution of power and status in society (Stuart Wells, 1997:423).

We may not be aware of habitus but it shapes how we see and make sense of the world, and this will depend upon the nature of the field in which we are operating.

Reay et al (2005) argue that the notion of habitus represents Bourdieu's attempt to manage the tensions between structure and agency, to recognise the constraints of structure without condemning individuals to helpless victimhood. One of the four aspects of habitus they describe is the possibility of change. In other words, although habitus may lead us to reproduce the social conditions of our upbringing, it does so with unpredictability. It might predispose us to action, or exclude the possibilities of other actions, but it does not remove the possibility for us to exercise agency over our own destiny.

One focus in the literature is institutional habitus and its impact on students. As the size and diversity of the higher education student population has increased, the focus in the literature on how universities respond to these changes has intensified. Kleeman (1994) suggests the stages institutions go through in adapting to increasing diversity: an initial focus on admissions and processes of recruitment reflects the sceptical view of the impact of that increasing diversity. Over time Kleeman argues, a more nuanced stance is adopted whereby institutions begin to devise ways to support their students in adapting to the established norms

of the institution and the final stage, requiring the co-operation of academic staff, is changing practices to accommodate student needs. Although suggesting a rather linear development, Kleeman nevertheless highlights some of the responses institutions may utilise in addressing student diversity. The extent to which institutions have adapted their practices is open to much debate, evidence suggesting further work is needed to understand practices (Archer 2006, UUK 2005).

Braxton and Hirschy (2004:92) identify three generalisations from their study of successful social integration for an institution with a diverse student population: a commitment of the institution to student welfare, institutional integrity (which they define as being where missions and goals translate into policy, where rules are fair and expectations are broadly met), and communal potential, where there is a sense of cohesion and a shared identity within the institution. In other words, the institution becomes committed to providing an environment conducive to learning for all students; is transparent, consistent and honest in what it can deliver and where there is a shared sense of purpose in the institution.

However, Bowl (2003) argues that institutional habitus excludes and alienates students who do not neatly fit with a particular institution's tacit or explicit expectations of the 'traditional' student. She argues that institutional practices, norms and expectations make active participation harder for students coming from certain under-represented groups and constraints, often hidden, lead to some students being labelled as more problematic than others. In particular, childcare responsibilities place particular burdens on some (mainly female) students that higher education institutions fail to recognize. In addition, she argues that too little attention is paid to the impact of personal and family crises on mature students and some institutions fail to respond flexibly to these circumstances.

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Although understanding of how institutions might provide environments conducive to diverse student needs has developed, it appears to conflict with empirical evidence of students' experiences. Clearly some progress has been made (UUK 2005) but much work remains (David 2010).

2.5.2 The outcomes of higher education: what success might mean

The discourse surrounding the role of higher education in society is mirrored (Filmer 1997) in the literature about what outcomes the individual enjoys from it. For Nussbaum (2002) the role of higher education is to develop student's understanding of the plurality of the world, how policies affect different groups and their inter-connectedness. She points to the United States where a general higher education precedes specialisation as a potential model. She identifies three capacities for the 'cultivation of humanity' (2002:302): living the examined life (after Socrates); belonging to (all of) the human race (not just sectional, partisan groupings); and narrative imagination (to be able to stand in another's shoes and understand the world from different places). Walker (2006:128) then develops these three capacities and identifies eight capabilities that serve as a potential model for higher education: practical reason; educational resilience; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition; social relations and networks for learning; respect, dignity and recognition; emotional integrity; and bodily integrity. Both these writers remind us to see a broader picture of outcomes for the individual and point to the personal capacities, or capabilities, that may be shaped within higher education.

However, there is a danger in focussing on these dispositions as Avis (2006) describes: the emphasis on individual transformation and self-improvement has allowed us to downplay structural factors in student progress and may encourage a tendency to pathologise those who,

either through choice or, more commonly through limited opportunities, do not participate or persist in higher education. While both Nussbaum and Walker would resist such tendencies, the emphasis on checklists of attributes tends to be rhetorical and aspirational. The use of the term 'capabilities' suffers perhaps from being closely associated with the skills-based approach and capacities offers a broader interpretation that encompasses the ability to exercise agency as well as ability. Nevertheless, what both writers have done is to recognise broader outcomes from higher education that move away from simplistic notions of employment and career progression, prevalent in much of the policy discourse.

2.5.3   Employability

According to Yorke (2006:2), employability:

> Refers to a graduate's achievements and their potential to obtain a 'graduate job', and should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a 'graduate job', which is subject to influences in the environment, a major influence being the state of the economy'.

However, Gore (2005:341) argues:

> Many observers have noted that 'employability' is a term with multiple meanings, with each definition deployed according to organisational objectives, political necessity or ideological leaning.

As English undergraduates are increasingly expected to fund their studies themselves, there is a growing emphasis in policy discourse on how higher education prepares graduates for work. The concept of employability has been used to describe this process, but as Yorke hints, the concept is problematic. For Morley (2001), employability is too often used in a way that removes structural factors from debate, focussing instead on individual capacities and attributes. She goes on to question the degree to which higher education might, can, or should, develop skills and dispositions which constitute possible attributes for employability. Given

the rapid changes in the employment market, too much emphasis on specific or even generic skills is in any case risky, because demand for skills is fluid and subject to frequent change. She argues that the world of work is too often portrayed 'in a highly sanitised and rational way' (2001:135) and students are not encouraged to question workplace structures or practices.

Atkins (1999) also writes about the pitfalls of too great an emphasis on the acquisition of generic skills for two reasons. First, similar to Morley, she argues that the notion of skills is too simplistic, subject to change or disagreement over priorities and possibly better taught in the workplace than at university. Second she argues that some universities, predominantly in the post-92 sector, have used employability as a way to compensate for those students lacking in social or cultural capital in higher education. In other words, where they cannot compete on academic grounds, these institutions seek to market themselves as being more likely to offer an advantage in the workplace. Hesketh (2000) found there was a hierarchy of institutions in employers' eyes, and employers' skills requirements were fluid, the content of the degree course being of greater significance than the skills apparently developed through it. Burgaz (2007) found that students believed that their skills and competencies were only moderately improved by their university experience. Cranmer (2006) concludes that universities would get a better return in terms of graduate employment if they put more resources into work placements and employer engagement than in employability skills development.

Clarke and Patrickson (2008) also question whether employability in higher education is over-rated and used to put the blame on the individual graduate as a diversion from expecting employers to contribute more to training new graduates at work. In other words, the emphasis

on employability as an outcome from higher education, even if there were consensus over the meaning of the concept, may be misleading and inappropriate.

It should be possible to have a debate about the impact of events in the lifecourse, of structural factors outside of individual control and broader policy frameworks, which avoids judgements on individuals' worth. In that spirit, the second research question considers aspects of undergraduate identity that encourage success:

What are the capacities that help students adapt to and succeed at university?

2.6 What happens at university: teaching and learning as a social activity

Students enter university as undergraduates for a range of reasons but one goal is to learn about their chosen subject, profession or vocation and this occurs through the teaching, assessment and study they undertake. There is a body of literature which explores these activities: one focused on technical aspects of teaching and one which explores the social and cultural importance of the learning situation.

Marton and Saljo (1976a; 1976b), Prosser and Trigwell (1999), and Biggs (1999) focus on 'surface and deep' learning and on the value of specific teaching approaches in promoting learning. Here, surface learning suggests superficiality against deep learning which seeks to question, analyse and challenge. They seek to address improvement in teaching and learning through the technical process of teaching itself. It is an approach that has been criticised for setting up a binary divide which promotes deep over surface learning (Haggis 2003, Malcolm and Zukas 2001).

Haggis (2003) and Read et al (2003) have suggested that the focus on surface/deep learning in the literature took insufficient account of the social and cultural context within which learning takes place and that recognition of these factors and their influence on students is crucial. Haggis argued that insufficient attention has been paid to the complexities of teaching students from different backgrounds and simplistic distinctions between surface and deep learning, together with the emphasis on a skills-based approach to university teacher education, were problematic. She advised a conceptualization of learning that recognizes the different approaches, knowledge and circumstances of students in a mass higher education system. For Read et al (2003:261) the isolation that some students experience may exclude them from accessing what they describe as the academic 'culture'. They argue that this culture reflects the 'dominant discourse of the student learners as white, middle-class and male'. All these authors agree that insufficient emphasis has been placed on the situated nature of learning in favour of a skills-based approach. This encourages programmes of student support that seek to compensate the learner for the perceived inadequacies in their knowledge or skills. Mass higher education, they argue, requires a fundamental revision of approaches to learning and teaching if the learning needs of more undergraduates are to be met.

By focusing on socio-cultural experiences, other literature on curricula, pedagogies and academic engagement has attempted to explain what happens within higher education classrooms from a different perspective. The concept of academic engagement was developed by Ashwin and McLean (2004) and by Mann (2001) who argue that students' motivation to study, their social and cultural arrangements and prior educational experiences all influence the ways they engage with learning.

Linked to this is a body of literature on curriculum and how it might exclude people from particular social groups (Bernstein 1996), as well as work on pedagogies and how these might also exclude some groups. Malcolm and Zukas (2001) argue that the emphasis on process and psychological models of teaching and learning rather than on the social and political context of the learner has hindered attempts to develop more inclusive curricula, pedagogies and practices.

Bernstein's argument (1975, 1996) that pedagogy is often invisible in higher education is helpful to this debate. In particular, the hierarchical rule in the pedagogic relationship, or as he describes the roles of 'transmitter' and 'acquirer', highlights the need for the new student to learn how to be a student, within a given set of rules that may be implicit and more known to the teacher (or transmitter) than to the student (or acquirer). Bernstein argues that there may be (different) spaces for negotiating the dominant and regulatory rules. Furthermore, Bernstein describes 'criterial' rules which will determine what counts as legitimate communication within a given relationship. The hidden power therefore lies in differential understandings of these rules, the purpose of the rules in determining competence of the student (i.e., the role of assessment) and the space available, controlled by the teacher, to negotiate those rules. Bernstein's work offers a helpful insight into the power relations of what happens in formal teaching and therefore contributes to understanding this aspect of students' experiences in higher education.

Assessment processes require particular attention. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), education is a social institution, whose purpose is to inculcate the dominant culture. Higher education also performs the role of sorting machine, determining who meets the criteria for cultural dominance and thus reproducing social hierarchies. Mann (2008) echoes this analysis

by arguing that universities produce knowledge which carries a particular status, within a hierarchy of expertise marked by social recognition through qualification and authority. Assessment and subsequent qualification are processes through which social status is formalised. This means that assessment is neither value nor power-free.

How assessment contributes to learning at university is also subject to critique. Mann (2008) argues that for assessment to contribute to learning meaningfully students need to feel some control over what they do. However, if the assessment tasks are not personally meaningful to them they become objects rather than subjects of their own action, with something outside determining what they learn. As Evans (2011) describes students become performers rather than learners, the goal being to demonstrate performance rather than to develop understanding. Therefore, there needs to be a more nuanced understanding of formative and summative assessments. Ideally, formative assessment is useful as an aid to learning, particularly through the use of feedback. The extent to which this happens in today's higher education is contested as it is suggested that the target culture predominant in education encourages teachers to view formative assessment as a means of demonstrating teaching rather than emphasising diagnosis and subsequent development (Davies and Ecclestone, 2008). So assessment is bound up in social power relations, cultural norms and performative purposes, which may undermine its place in teaching and learning at university.

However, the ways academic teaching staff experience their work should not be overlooked either. Taylor and Bedford (2004) examined how academic staff explained student success and found they focused on student-based factors rather than examining their teaching practices or curriculum design. Taylor (2008) reminds us that teacher identity matters as well as student identity and suggests that some academics in contemporary higher education suffer

from yearning for a lost 'golden age', arising from a sense of loss of personal job satisfaction and status and from the perceived prioritising of knowledge transfer over knowledge creation. In other words, teachers have their own social and political contexts and it is important to recognise their impact on practice. In this study, how teachers respond to students is important and these contextual factors need to be recognised.

2.6.1   Learning cultures

The themes of social and academic integration come together in the work by Hodkinson et al (2007a) on 'learning cultures' originally developed in post-16 further education institutions. For them, culture is socially constructed and a learning culture is 'constituted … by human activity', as 'human practice', and exists through 'interaction and communication' (2007b:419). In my study these ideas are transposed into the higher education setting to help illuminate understanding of students' experiences and to contribute to a theory of learning cultures that offers:

> a particular way to understand a learning location as a practice, constituted by the actions, disposition and interpretations of the participants. (Hodkinson et al 2008:34)

Here, learning is located as a social and cultural activity, influenced by and influencing individual dispositions to learning. These dispositions are developed throughout a learning career and shape and are shaped by experiences in both formal and informal education. Building upon the notion of horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), in this context dispositions to learning are bounded by horizons for learning, or possibilities for learning. These horizons are shaped by the web of an individual's situation, position, habitus and learning culture where boundaries are not fixed and can be stretched or constrained by previous learning experiences. As Bloomer described 'studentship':

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> To be understood in terms of the dialectical interplay between systems of dispositions within existing habitus and perception of the opportunity structures available. The development of new habitus, new dispositions to learning and knowledge, new perceptions of opportunities and new actions (studentship) was symbiotic (Bloomer, 1997:145).

In describing the key influences over learning cultures, Hodkinson et al (2008) identified a range of factors, including: students, teachers, location and resources, syllabus, institutions and relationships and time spent with students and teachers. They also highlighted vocational and academic cultures more broadly, and wider social and cultural values and practices. This lengthy but not exhaustive list, illustrates the complexity in understanding learning cultures because it is important to understand the interplay between different influences. The more that is understood about the ways these influences interact, the more institutions may be able to develop informed strategies to meet the needs of the diversity of students in their institutions.

Students are also 'active constructors of the meanings of the education they encounter' and not simply passive recipients of education (Apple 2000:58), emphasising the argument that technical aspects of teaching and learning have downplayed the complexities of the interactions that take place in the process of learning. Wingate (2007:395) argues that to learn effectively, students may have to change their perceptions, habits and epistemological beliefs but this process is often left to chance, raising the question of how explicit the teacher needs to be in directing student learning and to what extent students need to find their own way of learning.

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe learning as situated within 'communities of practice' where all learning takes place within the social and cultural context of the group and its history. Based originally upon the apprenticeship model, a person joins the community as a novice and as a 'peripheral participant'. As they learn from the experts within the group, acquiring

appropriate language and knowledge so they move towards a more central role within the group. Wenger (1998) developed these ideas, applying them to professional development and used the concept of institutional acclimatisation. He highlighted the importance of informal, social learning in constructing knowledge amongst participants within working communities. However, this work has subsequently been criticised for failing to pay due heed to issues of structure (Fuller et al 2005). As Fuller et al discuss, the way people learn and what they learn is shaped in part by the power dynamics at play. In university, students are generally placed in cohorts of peers, and the 'expert', or teacher, is placed outside of the group. Students are taught in formal situations, and the composition of the group changes according to amongst other things module choice and stage of study. The notion of a community of learners supporting and helping each other is useful but a more nuanced consideration of social structure and embodied habitus is required for this study.

The theme of change is also explored by Bamber and Tett (2000) who identify four stages to transformations in the process of learning: entitlement to participate, disposition to the course, approach to theory/practice, and professionalization. They argue that 'supporting students, therefore, means taking into account the context in which their learning occurs', arguing that too often circumstances and experiences are used to illustrate the difficulties posed by diverse participation in higher education, rather than how practice should be adapted to meet diverse needs (2000:59). Bamber and Tett note that for some students with limited or no family tradition of higher education, learning experiences are more likely to be disjunctive than integrated.

Wheelahan (2007:148) suggests that a critical realist approach to learning allows the teaching of 'truths' but recognises that knowledge, seen as a social product embedded in the practices

of the world, is provisional and should be tested. Learning processes therefore are active and reflected in the notion of emergence (the process of becoming) as knowledge and understanding grow through practice.

Within literature which takes a socio-cultural approach there is recognition that education is a social practice, influenced by the world beyond the classroom, which changes over time and in response to new situations. The way a first year undergraduate responds to teaching will be different, therefore, from a final year student, as will the response of a student with experience in the workplace compared with one without that experience; all learning is shaped by social and cultural worlds. It is within the context of this analysis that this study poses its third research question which examines how undergraduates' understanding of learning changes over time and what helps or hinders them in dealing with those changes:

In relation to students, teachers, curriculum, pedagogy and organisation, what are the important facilitators or inhibitors to the process of adaptation and succeeding at university?

2.7   How background factors influence undergraduate learner identities

In discussing the influence of class, gender and ethnicity on participation in higher education there is the risk of over-simplification, emphasising one or two causal variables rather than examining the interaction of economic socio-cultural and individual circumstances (Lynch and O'Riordan 1998, Archer et al 2003). Structure and agency should be seen as forces which together shape experience rather than as binary opposites (Lynch and O'Riordan 1998:450). Furthermore, in stressing structural factors alone, there is a risk of pathologising people on the basis of their membership of disadvantaged 'groups'. Archer and Leathwood, for example, found there were many ways in which working class individuals 'actively resist, or embrace,

higher education as a possibility' (2003:175). It is important, therefore, to recognise that not all people experience structural influences in the same way.

An understanding of how class, ethnicity and gender influence students' experiences of higher education has been enhanced through the use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and its relationship with the 'field' of higher education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). They saw the field of higher education as consisting of:

> Cognitive and structural mechanisms that mediate socio-political and economic forces while simultaneously reproducing fundamental principles of social stratification. (Naidoo 2004:457)

Bourdieu analysed higher education's role in replicating existing practices and social hierarchies through its structure and organisation. Higher education does not operate in a closed environment but is shaped by political, economic and social expectations while retaining its own field of hierarchy, rules and practices. Its outcomes are, in effect, social replication of 'people like us' with differential outcomes according to the capital students are able to draw upon and develop while at (differently valued) university.

2.7.1   Class, gender and ethnicity

Education policy in the UK has focussed on the meritocratic principle that those who are able to meet the entry criteria should have the right to access higher education to fulfil their potential (Ball 2008; Young 1998). However, this apparent commitment to access through merit ignores how class impacts on participation, given the strong correlation between social class and educational achievement in schools (Chowdry et al 2010; Vignoles and Crawford, 2010), access to post-16 education, employment and promotion prospects and to lifetime earnings (Purcell et al 2007; Adnett and Slack, 2007). Critics have rightly argued that

explanations for these correlations have tended towards a deficit model of working class abilities or willingness to access opportunities (CVCP 1998; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003) and assumptions that the goal of working class participants should be to 'become' middle-class (Archer and Hutchings 2000). In higher education, the 'failure' of working-class students to adapt to middle-class norms has been used to explain their poor retention rates (Taylor and Bedford 2004). The work of Bourdieu, particularly the concepts of capital and habitus (Bourdieu 1997; Reay 1998a; 1998b; Mann 2001; Bowl 2003,) has been particularly influential in developing an alternative explanation of the impact of class on participation.

Bourdieu used the notion of forms of capital to explain why people respond differently to their situation. He argued that forms of capital make the 'games of society – not least the economic game – something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle' (Bourdieu 1997:47). He identified three forms of capital: economic (enabling the purchase of goods or property); cultural (including dispositions, goods or understandings, or institutionalised in the form of qualifications) and social capital (in terms of connections and ability to engage in social interaction at different levels). Moreover, the forms of capital must be relevant to the 'field' in which they are to be employed and, in higher education, the latter two forms of capital have been particularly important in understanding participation.

Other aspects to be considered in the debate on participation include gender and ethnicity. Culturally situated concepts of femininity and masculinity (Webb 1997; Cealey Harrison 2001) have been used to understand how gender shapes learner identity. For example, how girls' identities shape behaviour have been explored (Walkerdine et al 2001) as well as how different constructions of masculinities influence attitudes to schooling and higher education

(Burke 2009). The important message for my study is the way gendered identities have developed prior to university and then impact on how undergraduates experience university.

There is a growing body of research in the USA and UK into the influence of ethnicity on students' choices in higher education, (Beck et al 2006; Leslie et al 2002; Shiner and Modood 2002). The use of the term ethnicity in this context, as opposed to race, recognises the social construction of groupings (Connolly 2003) whereby an individual's identification with a particular group constitutes ethnicity. The foci for research into ethnicity and higher education have been the distribution of students from different ethnic backgrounds (who goes, where and why?) and the impact of ethnicity on students' experiences at university.

There are variations between different ethnic groupings and generalisations can be misleading; Connor et al (2004) found that ethnic minority participation in higher education varies across subjects, universities and locations and is clustered in post-1992 universities, particularly in London. They highlight the problems in isolating ethnicity as a causal factor in participation, pointing to the interaction with other factors (such as class and gender) and to the variety of experiences of different ethnic communities. Similarly, Reay et al (2005) found evidence to suggest that ethnicity alone cannot explain patterns of choice: factors such as class and geographical location interact with ethnicity.

2.7.2   Educational background as an influencing factor

When considering the influence of educational background on student outcomes, there are two questions to consider. The first is how school, college or workplace learning shape the student's view of participation and, second, how educational background influences experiences at university. As discussed above, a considerable body of knowledge now exists

that seeks to explain the impact of class, ethnicity and gender on decisions and experiences and there is some understanding of how school influences entry to higher education. For example, the Sutton Trust (2000) analysis of access to the top 13 universities listed in newspaper league tables found that children from independent schools, representing 7% of the English school population as a whole, made up 39% of entrants to those institutions. Conversely, children from poorer social class backgrounds, who make up 50% of the school population, represented just 13% of entrants to top universities. The chance of getting into these 'top' institutions was twenty-five times greater for children from independent schools, approximately double the proportion found in the population as a whole.

There are two issues here, one is the differential levels of school attainment and the other is the information, advice and guidance schools offer to pupils. Students in the state sector face greater disadvantage because not only are they less likely to achieve high grades (one third of high A level performers come from the independent sector (Sutton Trust 2000)), but independent schools offer a particular curriculum better matched to entry requirements (including matching academic subjects), have stronger links to elite universities and expectations of progression that help normalise the application process for students (Reay et al, 2005). This contrasts with those students from state schools faced with 'a morass of choices they often felt ill-equipped to deal with' (Reay et al 2005:59).

Much of what is known about prior educational background is situated within an analysis of class and how this has affected the setting within which students studied. For example, Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) identify the tensions in education policy which shape the likelihood of participation: private or state school, academic or vocational pathways, tripartite or comprehensive system, school or further education. By contrast, there is much less research

into the impact of educational background on students' experiences in higher education, particularly how teaching and learning in schools and colleges prepare students for higher education.

Pustjens et al (2004:283) report on a range of studies of the effect of schooling on participation in further education and subsequent success in higher education in Finland but observe that there has been less research into the longer term experience of students. In their statistical analysis, they found that once other variables were taken into account (cognitive ability, gender, age, socio-economic status) school background still influenced success in higher education.

Some of what is known about educational background and its impact on university experience is inferred from data on outcomes from higher education. For example, Bristol University documented evidence that a student from a below average school (in terms of exam attainment) can be admitted with two or three points fewer than standard offers and still get as good, or better degree (Sutton Trust 2000). It suggests that it is harder to get 'good' grades at A Level in the state sector and, therefore, students from that sector are capable of greater achievement than their A-level grades suggest. HEFCE (2006) compared degree classification outcomes and found that Access students' progression in higher education was broadly equal to students with lower A Level grades but a full 12% behind the best qualified A level students.

The literature suggests educational background matters in three respects: the culture of expectations the school or college has on whether or not to participate and where to choose (Reay et al 2005); the levels of achievement students are able and expected to reach; and the ways in which teaching and learning practices reflect those of higher education and prepare

students for university. This latter aspect has been neglected in the literature. In this study, I was interested in examining how these influences endure or change as students became more familiar with the university environment, seeking to move beyond the literature of choice and examine whether and how educational background, including social and academic experiences in formal settings, influences students throughout their university careers.

By comparison with work on choice, there is little research into the longer term support offered by parents to students in higher education. As more students choose to live at home whilst studying, (HEFCE 2009) the ways in which families support students throughout their studies merits investigation. Families bring obligations as well as support, and there is room for enquiry into how family circumstances shape students' experiences once in higher education. The fourth research question therefore is:

What impact, if any, do students' educational, economic, social and cultural backgrounds have on their ability to adapt to university?

2.8 Risk and individualisation

A number of theoretical insights inform this study. Whilst the work of Bourdieu is foremost, how people balance the risks and uncertainties created by participation in higher education can be understood with reference to the work of Beck and Giddens.

Bourdieu's (1990a, 1992, 1997) concepts of habitus, field and forms of capital have been hugely influential in developing understandings of students' experiences in higher education. Bourdieu argues that one has a position within (and towards) a culture and this shapes one's disposition to that culture. People are always socially positioned and that positioning shapes how they behave. But habitus for Bourdieu is shaped by prior and current experiences, as well

as from within ourselves. Crucially, it is also the meaning we give to our experiences which help shape what and how we learn.

Bourdieu's concept of field has been likened to the idea of a market and a game (James and Biesta 2007). Here, the field is the market and the game is to learn how to manipulate the market to greatest advantage. However, the conventions and structures of the market may change and therefore understanding of the market needs to be adaptable. That understanding depends in part on the forms of capital possessed. Bourdieu (1997:46) argues that if it were not for the forms of capital, life would offer a world of perfect chance such as that offered by a roulette wheel: where the ball lands is open to pure chance. However, capital disrupts the perfect chances of the roulette wheel and influences where the ball lands – essentially it skews the chances of success. Since everyone possesses different degrees of forms of capital, the world does not offer perfect chance. Bourdieu recognises that academic achievement relates to possession of (appropriate) capital, or an understanding of the rules of the game, and thus rejects the idea that success at university relates purely to 'academic ability'. So the students in this study do not start with equal chances of success and the interest of this enquiry is to explore the ways universities influence the rebalancing of those chances.

Crucial to Bourdieu's work is understanding the ways in which economic, social or cultural knowledge or connections, might be converted into appropriate capital, of use within a given field (Bourdieu 1997). Cultural capital, as knowledge or understanding, is embodied, it is held within, acquired over a length of time and not therefore instantaneously exchangeable. It is also described as 'symbolic' precisely because it is not always immediately recognisable or exchangeable. However, one of the ways cultural capital can become exchangeable is in what Bourdieu calls institutionalised cultural capital. This is where there is a process of formal

recognition, such as educational qualifications. This institutionalised recognition allows the possibility for conversion to economic capital. However, for conversion to be possible, there needs to be a value attached to the recognised capital and in a market economy this value relates in part to scarcity value. An important aspect to this debate is the tendency which Bourdieu describes for the conversion rules to be disguised within the rules of the game, so how an individual is able to profit from their capital will depend directly on their familiarity with those rules.

Social capital in the context of students' experiences of higher education relates to the networks they are able to draw upon to help them navigate the field. Bourdieu recognises that building these networks requires an investment of time and energy by the individual: they do not just happen, but are the result of work and commitment. However, some may find building social capital easier if they are able to identify socially with those around them and speak, in effect, the same language.

Understanding the notion of mediation, or the 'reaction' between fields and habitus (James and Biesta 2007) is what concerns this study. For Bourdieu, dispositions are deeply lodged within habitus and they are both durable and transposable. How students' dispositions to learning in higher education change over time is a key question. Habitus has links to learner identity and in part that relates to one's social identity, or how one sees oneself in relation to others. As Vincent argues, 'social identity is vital for whom you know and has consequences for structures of opportunities for both what you can do and what you can be' (2003:213). So how students see themselves in relation to those around them will shape how they see themselves as learners (their learner identity) and how they envisage their future as a learner

and professional. Thus, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital are the foundations to understanding learner identity in the context of this thesis.

The appropriate capital possessed will influence how the student can operate within their chosen field, or in this case their learner identity as an undergraduate student. The greater the degree of fit between their habitus (which in itself relates to the capital upon which they are able to draw), the more secure they are likely to feel in their undergraduate learner identity.

Alongside Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital, the idea of risk and uncertainty is relevant to research into students' experiences of higher education. According to Giddens (1984, 1991), the apparent reduction in the importance of social structuring allows the individual to develop reflexivity, or a unique sense of self. The collective consciousness of class is reduced and thus individuals no longer position themselves as members of a class with the attendant expectations that brings. Here, social structures are the 'rules and resources' and are deemed to be potentially positive, enabling not necessarily constraining and allowing for social action. The implication here is that as people are no longer bound by class or gender they can turn their understandings of rules and resources to their own use and thus facilitate social integration into a broader society (1990). However, the fact that some groups still dominate, largely in relation to the forms of capital they possess somewhat undermines this argument. Those who have a better understanding of the rules in higher education, for example through family experience, may fare better than those without that knowledge, however reflexive they may be.

Of more use in the debate is Beck's work on risk (1992). He suggests that technological development has changed the nature of risk which has disturbed society's faith in scientific advancement. Beck argues that as risk becomes more universal, traditional social structures

become less dominant, so individuals have to make their own judgements, no longer determined by the rules of class or gender. These judgements will include the interpretation of possible risks faced and possible solutions to those risks. His concept of individualisation, where it is necessary to renegotiate a position to suit the new circumstances suggests liberation from social norms which in itself may undermine an individual's sense of security, forcing them to re-integrate on different terms. However, Beck goes on to argue that there are consequences for identity in this new found uncertainty. He highlights individual identity, standardised (or expected) identity in relation to the labour market and institution-dependent identity (shaped by policy such as welfare, education, planning and so forth). So in Beck's world people are free to choose but actually they are not free to choose because identity is still formed in relation to economic and social hierarchies. Beck acknowledges there may be tensions between institutional biographies, life stages and standard biographies but ultimately individuals are responsible for constructing their own biographies. They have to look to themselves for identity formation within individualised biographies. In doing so, decisions are taken in relation to assessment of the risks faced.

In this study, Beck's work adds to the analysis of students' experiences in two respects: it helps to explain the confusions and contradictions students may face in having to adapt their sense of themselves as learner within higher education where they may find themselves in a world of unfamiliar norms and expectations which challenge their biography to date. Second, it helps to explain the interpretation of risk students make as they balance the personal investments (including financial, time and professional) they commit to their studentship against the uncertain outcomes they envisage from their endeavours.

2.9   Summary

This review of what is known about students' attitudes to and experiences of higher education has highlighted a number of questions that this research is designed to explore. There is a continuing debate about widening participation in higher education both in terms of who participates and what participation means. Much of the literature focuses either on one particular social characteristic that a group of students share or on a particular stage in the student lifecycle. This study considers the interaction of social structures, (class, gender and ethnicity) and the impact of family and educational backgrounds on students' participation. It will explore how students draw upon different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1997) to support their learning. Unlike previous studies it will examine how different influences endure or change in the course of undergraduate study without focusing on one 'type' of student. It will also examine how students negotiate academic practices and how they integrate socially at university, addressing the research questions identified earlier:

- What are the processes whereby students adapt to and thrive in the university environment?

- What are the capacities that help students adapt to and succeed at university?

- In relation to students, teachers, curriculum, pedagogy and organisation, what are the important facilitators or inhibitors to this process?

- What impact, if any, do students' educational, economic, social and cultural backgrounds have on their ability to adapt to university?

The concepts of habitus (Bourdieu 1997), learning cultures (Hodkinson et al 2007a) and identity (Bathmaker 2010) will be drawn upon in order to understand how students' experiences change over time and, what helps them to succeed in higher education. The study

also addresses how students construct undergraduate learner identities and what capacities they require to do so successfully.

3.   Chapter Three: Approach to the research and research design

3.1   Introduction

This chapter is in two parts. The first section explains the epistemological and ontological position I took in this study and the second describes the research design and methods used and addresses issues of validity, reliability, and ethics. The chapter explains why I adopted an interpretivist approach, how I sought to collect, interrogate and interpret the data and how this helped me to answer the research questions outlined above. It also explains how I sought to build theory from the data rather than to test a specific theory or hypothesis. I describe how the study was conducted with due regard to ethical considerations that respect the integrity of the participants and the data provided by them.

3.2   Approach to the research

In this section I seek to explain the approach I took to this research. I aim to demonstrate the ways in which I thought about the questions I was asking, how I interpreted the answers I found and what I thought this meant for the wider world of higher education.

3.2.1   An interpretative epistemology

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of how students from different backgrounds saw success in higher education, how they worked towards success and what helped or hindered them. I did not expect to find an absolute truth (Usher 1996a) in this research, nor do I think there is a truth to be found. I recognise what was being researched is a social and cultural process subject to infinite interpretations. As Scott and Usher (1999:25)

argue, interpretivism 'asks how meaning is constructed and social interaction negotiated in social practices' but does not seek a universal truth.

Within the interpretivist paradigm, human beings are viewed as acting not as autonomous, neutral beings whose behaviour can be recorded, monitored and understood from an external viewpoint, but rather as situated beings, within a given social context, at a particular point in time. In order to understand and interpret their actions as accurately as possible, we must first attempt to understand their situations, and the influences, beliefs and contexts which shape their behaviour. It follows from this that any enquiry must pay heed to the social context, or to develop what Dilthey described as 'verstehen' (Baert 1998); in other words, to seek to situate actions within social and cultural contexts.

However, one cannot ignore what Habermas (1984) refers to as the 'double hermeneutic' where all knowledge is seen as being partial and perspective bound (May 1996). In order to understand an action, humans use their own 'interpretive frames' (Scott and Usher 1999), in other words they interpret the world through previous understandings. It is important to recognise those frames and seek to ensure that research is conducted in such a way as to avoid those frames becoming a determinant of the findings.

For example, my own experiences as both a mature student and professional advisor to students have shaped my perceptions of the higher education experience. I can vividly recall my own feelings, earlier in life, of isolation from friends who had been to university, knowing I could have followed them and how my life would have been different had I gone to university straight from school. I saw myself as the outsider looking in, not having found where I belong in the world. I can recall too the excitement and expectations I experienced as I entered this previously hidden world of higher education and my disappointment when the

reality fell short of those expectations. Nevertheless, I worked hard and remained committed to fulfilling my potential, providing a better future for my children, exploring something I was interested in. There were also pragmatic reasons for my participation in higher education too: at that time (1986) it was as economically viable to go to university as it was to live as a single parent on benefits and the future employment prospects were better than surviving on state benefits.

Similarly, my commitment to social justice, in particular equality of opportunity, especially in education, shape the way I would like the world to be. As a student advisor in a post-1992 university my daily work brought me into contact with students who found the experience of higher education alienating, isolating and confusing. They often had nobody to turn to for advice but a stranger working in a student advice centre. The level playing field (Bowl 2003) appeared very unreal for some students. Furthermore, the knowledge and experience I have gained in the process of conducting this research have helped shape my understanding of the context in which I am researching. As the political debate about future funding, size and purposes of higher education has developed, so I have wondered how this state of policy flux has affected the students I have been working with in this study.

Research questions focussing on peoples' experiences of the world inevitably involve interpretation and are subjectively framed. However, all research involves a degree of subjectivity but the attention paid to rigour in the data collection and analysis, outlined below, helps to maintain the validity of research. Whilst I would not claim that the research does not bear the mark of my world view, I do believe it is respectful to the participants and analysis has been exhaustive. Furthermore, I do not claim to have uncovered universal truths.

However, this study presents fresh perspectives on students' experiences in higher education that may contribute to understanding and inform future research.

3.2.2   Research design: a narrative case study approach

The origins of this study lie in another project I had worked on as part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded 'Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference' project (Hockings et al 2008). This used the concept of academic engagement and examined the ways in which students from a range of social, educational and cultural backgrounds experienced learning and teaching in two different sites of higher education. I set out to build upon that research and followed some of the participants from that study as they moved through university. The research conducted for this thesis focuses on the specifics of the student experience and extended the analysis of their experience through to course completion.

This research was centred in two different universities, one pre-1992 and one post-1992 (Appendix I). These were chosen because they are widely understood to represent the different types of institutions, not to reinforce existing stereotypes. The study included students studying a range of subjects, including professionally orientated courses and more generic, though still vocationally orientated, qualifications.

The analysis of transcripts and questionnaire data from the earlier study were used to inform the development of interview questions, particularly in the first year interviews and provided a starting point for the data gathered here.

As I learned more about the different approaches to research and thought about the study I began to describe my approach as case study research (Yin 2003). However, as I started the

data collection process and reflected on the analysis of data I realised what I was doing was a hybrid between case study and narrative research (Carr 1986). The individual unit of analysis was to be the students' experiences and the way in which the research questions would be answered was through their stories and rich and 'thick' (Wolcott 2001) descriptions of experiences, before and during their time at university.

The nature of the inquiry undertaken for this study, namely an examination over a sustained period of time of the complex web of relationships and influences on students in higher education meant that adopting the case study approach was effective initially. For Yin (2003: 13), a case study is:

> an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

He goes on to point to the multiplicity of the variables and sources of evidence that characterise a case study inquiry. As Denscombe reminds us, 'case studies tend to be 'holistic' rather than deal with isolated factors' (Denscombe 2007:36) and it is the holistic nature of the undergraduate experience that this study aimed to capture. It had all the characteristics Denscombe describes of case study research: depth, the particular, relationships/processes, holistic view, natural settings and (potentially) multiple sources (2007:37).

Bassey (1999) summarises some of the criticisms of case study research. These relate to the need for consistency and accuracy in reporting findings, and theory and methods are sometimes given inadequate regard. Bassey goes on to argue that the problem of generalisation from case study research is often dismissed too easily. Generalisability in this

sense is used to refer to the extension of knowledge gained in this study from a very small number of students to across the higher education field.

For Yin (2003) there are two possibilities for generalisations from research, the first being statistical generalisation, which cannot be claimed from case studies as the number of cases and nature of the data render this inappropriate. Yin does, however, offer the possibility of a different kind of generalisation, analytical generalisation, where the findings from case study research can inform the development or confirm the strength of pre-existing theories. Bassey (1999), in contrast, argues there can be 'fuzzy' generalisations made from case study research (but again, no statistical inferences), by which he means theoretically based predictions which suggest some possibilities or interpretations, as stories or pictures drawn from the research. In this study, the aim was to construct detailed interpretations of students' stories and from these draw some tentative, 'fuzzy' generalisations that may inform future research. For example, building a picture of the ways in which students change identities as learners may potentially offer an additional dimension to existing understandings. So in this study I have asked the question 'what is theoretically important about my case?' (Hood 2007:154) and looked to build upon existing understandings.

3.2.3   Narrative research

According to Czarniawska (2004:3), narrative analysis dates back to the Bible and the Koran. By the 1990s narrative research had become accepted as a legitimate approach to social science research. Narrative research pays attention to the detail of social actions through the telling of stories. Those stories allow the personal experiences, understandings and histories of individuals to be told from the individual's own perspective at particular moments in time. However, they also describe histories, set experiences within social contexts and allow

individuals to choose what matters to them and what they want to be told to others. Czarniawska goes on to argue:

> To understand a society or some part of a society, it is important to discover its repertoire of legitimate stories and find out how it evolved (2004:5)

How the stories are told here and the interpretation put upon them relies on ethical reporting and honest interpretation to ensure legitimacy.

In this study, student stories are used because they give an insight into how students experience university, how they see themselves as undergraduate learners and choose to present themselves to others. They allow me to describe individual experiences set within large organisations, national policy frameworks and broader social, cultural and economic structures. In this sense, they seek to 'speak truth to power' (Coffield 1999) by revealing the micro level impact of macro policy. As Bathmaker argues, 'they reveal ambiguity rather than hide it away' (2010:2) and may allow me to 'call into question dominant narratives that do not match the experience of life as lived' (2010:3) by the students themselves.

Critics of the use of narratives in research argue the approach is too subjective, relying on one perspective at a moment in time, in a given setting, presented in a selective way, open to interpretation that can change or distort the intention of the original account. However, this can also be strength in narrative research, allowing stories to be told that would not otherwise be heard. Describing the research approach as a hybrid between case study and narrative acknowledges the broader context of student experiences whilst allowing me to use an approach which recognises the deep and personal data within students' stories. All research has its limitations: this particular approach suits the research questions and serves the needs of the study well.

3.2.4 The use of a grounded approach to theory

Telling stories, however powerful and important they may be, is not enough to constitute academic inquiry. Those stories require some kind of interpretation if they are to contribute to theory building. As I read about theory I struggled to find one theoretical framework which would provide an explanation of the phenomena under discussion. I concur with Thomas (2006) that theory is a useful tool but should not be a straight jacket into which data and interpretation are squeezed. I wanted to build theory around my data. This led me initially to consider grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1996) but later to apply a Generic Inductive Qualitative Model (Hood, 2007). Hood argues that to be termed 'Grounded Theory' the research process must be cyclical, each stage informing the next and repeating itself until such a point that new insights cease to appear. Constant comparison between cases and against theoretical categories is essential (2007:156). The Generic Inductive Model is less rigid and has a goal of interpretation of rich data, not developing a theory from data analysis. This is a better description of how I approached my study because it does not assume the cyclical process. Later interview schedules were amended in the light of preliminary analysis of early data, informed by emerging issues which seemed dominant in the narratives. There was an emphasis on themes and interpretation and inevitably an element of comparison both between cases and against existing knowledge. Themes emerged from the data because they were emphasised by students themselves, but they were prompted by interview questions (Appendix IV, V, VI, VII) and therefore I recognise an element of my own determinism within the data.

In summary, my approach to the research was interpretivist, using individual stories to illuminate the complex processes of becoming a successful learner within higher education. I

sought to build theory from the data acknowledging the part I played in directing interviews and I used the lens of learner identity to make sense of the stories I was gathering.

3.3   Research Methods

This study was designed to be a longitudinal exploration of the higher education experiences of a small group of students from a range of social, demographic and educational backgrounds. It used semi-structured interviews as its main research method, although documentary evidence from each institution and from policy literature was also analysed and used in thinking about the students' accounts. In addition, students taking part were later asked to complete a short mind-mapping exercise to illustrate the main influences on their decision to participate in higher education.

3.3.1   Using semi-structured interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the eight students who were willing to take part, and interviews were held towards the end of their first, second and third years of study. The timing of examinations and holidays meant that, in practice, some students were interviewed at the start of the next academic year. Denscombe (2007) stresses the need to pay attention to the details of the interview location and seating arrangements. Interviews were organised to take place in person wherever possible, in places convenient to the students, although three of the first year interviews were conducted by telephone at the request of the participant.

Interviews were digitally recorded, with the prior consent of all participants. No one refused permission to record the interview and the presence of the recorder did not seem to concern the participants. Nevertheless, I was conscious of Scott and Usher's (1999) observation that

using a recorder signals that the interview is a public conversation, subject to the rules of public engagement and subsequently becomes framed in this way. On balance, the benefit gained from being able to listen and share the conversation, as opposed to spending the interview trying to write everything the interviewee said, outweighed the disadvantages of the recorder. Furthermore, the accuracy of the text from a digitally recorded conversation could not be matched with written note-taking.

Interviews were one method adopted for the study. Other methods were considered, including learning diaries, email questionnaires, video diaries or photographic records of student life. All these methods offered extended possibilities to reach the thoughts that formal semi-structured interviews could not. Learning diaries were discounted because they required significant time commitment from students who were reluctant to participate. Similarly, when asked, students were unwilling to undertake a photographic exercise on the grounds of time and concern from the students that it would not reveal anything more than in interviews. An email questionnaire, even if completed, would offer less rich data than face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, I was aware of the limitations of the interview situation and was keen to allow students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences away from the potentially false and formal atmosphere of the interview itself. Finally, the use of the spider diagram, or mind-map, offered such an opportunity.

3.3.2 Using spider diagrams

At the end of their second year, all students were asked to complete a spider diagram of the important people, events and texts that had influenced their decisions to participate in higher education and had shaped their experiences so far. The exercise offered the students the chance to reflect without the presence of the researcher directly to influence their thinking. It

also allowed them more time because they were asked to complete the exercise at home. Some examples of these are included as Appendix IX.

3.3.3 Recruiting participants

A number of considerations influenced the drawing up of the optimum criteria for students to participate in this study, but the primary concern was to achieve a sufficient, appropriately balanced profile so that 'sufficient data are collected for researchers to be able to explore significant features of the case and to put forward interpretations of what is observed' (Bassey, 1999:47). A balance needed to be struck to ensure feasibility in terms of time and resources available for a doctoral study while retaining sufficient numbers of students throughout the course of the study to enable meaningful analysis. At the outset, the intention was not to examine exceptional cases but I was interested in pursuing in-depth a 'significant few' (Cohen et al 2000). One problem with conducting a longitudinal study is that peoples' plans and actions are not always predictable. By studying just a few cases, one has to rely on them staying in the study and sharing with you their histories and experiences. The sample by the end of the study may not be how one envisaged, but its initial construction allowed for some decline in the number of participants over the course of the project.

Decisions about the initial criteria for selection of participants were made with explicit reference to the research questions asked in the study, which were themselves derived from the theoretical concepts already discussed. This included a question about the institutional context within which students were studying. Given the fragmented nature of the current higher education sector (Reay et al 2005) the study was strengthened by being located in two institutions, chosen both for reasons of practicality and proximity and because they provided a contrast in mission, student population and status in the league tables. Access to both sites had

been negotiated as part of the earlier ESRC study and was renegotiated with tutors for the purposes of this study.

Another aspect of the analysis concerned the influences of the students' backgrounds on their learning experiences, including educational, social and economic factors. It was important therefore to include students from a range of backgrounds and this was achieved within the group of participants in terms of educational background, age, gender, ethnicity and social class.

All the 26 students interviewed in the earlier project were contacted again by email and asked if they would be willing to participate in further research interviews. It was made clear to them this was for my own research purposes rather than an extension of the ESRC project. It was important for the students to understand the difference as the earlier work had been co-ordinated through tutor groups and some students may have felt a degree of obligation to participate because of this.

The intention was not to construct a representative sample of students and the design of the study did not allow for this. As Shipman reminds us, 'case studies keep the evidence in context, cannot be used for generalisation, but are consequently of value to practitioners' (Shipman 1997). The focus of this study was the context of both the institution, the teaching and learning environment and the social world of the student and the interactions between them. Therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of the students as cases, rather than as samples (Shipman 1997). A summary of the salient characteristics of the students taking part in the study is included in Appendix II, together with a short biography of each student.

3.3.4   Building upon earlier research

In any research design, there are decisions and compromises to be made between the ideal and the possible. As Robson (2002) argues, it is in the detail of those decisions and compromises that the integrity of the research lies. The decision to build this research project upon work that had been undertaken as part of an earlier project raised particular questions while, at the same time, carrying a range of advantages. These included having already established contacts with potential participants. Recognition of the work from established peer review processes and, in particular, exposure to questioning from conference paper presentation sessions all helped to refine and define the parameters of this study.

The challenges this position posed were the need for independence in design from the original study, a realistic design for a study on a smaller scale, and accepting some of the design decisions from the earlier project, with particular regard to the sampling decisions taken to recruit the students in that study.

3.3.5   Longitudinal research

The longitudinal nature of the study posed particular challenges in retaining a meaningful number of students within the study. After initial contact was made with the 26 students interviewed in previous research, responses were received from 14 students, seven in the pre-1992 and seven in the post-1992 university. Of these, two from the pre-1992 university had left the institution by the end of their first year and one from the post-1992. One of the students who had left the pre-1992 university had moved to another university and agreed to take part in the study and be interviewed by telephone. Similarly, the student who had left the post-1992 university agreed to be interviewed, again by telephone. At this point a decision had to be taken whether to seek to pursue those participants who withdrew. The focus of the

study was on the changing nature of students' experiences over three years while at university and therefore it was decided not to pursue those who left their courses in the first year.

By the end of the second year, another student had left the post-1992 university and because there were concerns about the student's well-being, a message of support was sent to them but further contact ceased. As a result, eight students remained in the final two years of the study and therefore the data reported upon here are from those eight students.

The students remaining in the study comprised four from each university, two men and six women, three mature and five younger students, seven from white European heritage and one student from a black ethnic background, one from private school, three from Access courses, four from local comprehensive sixth forms and in a range of family circumstances with different histories of family experiences of higher education. The group therefore contained within it the characteristics highlighted in the literature as both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' although none were viewed as either representative or typical of these categories.

The four students at the pre-1992 university were all studying Nursing and so provided a small sub-set within the data where limited cross-referencing of data, on the basis of subject of study, was possible. Two students at the post-1992 university were studying BioMedical Sciences, one was studying Social Work and one Business.

It was recognised at the outset that the research would rely on students giving their time freely to participate in interviews and to check data. Maintaining contact with students over the period of study was challenging, and use of email to keep in touch, but not gather data, helped to do this. However, students changed addresses and contact numbers frequently and regular contact was necessary, although I was conscious of the need to remain unobtrusive and not

make unnecessary demands on their time. Home and lodging addresses, mobile and home phone numbers and both university and private email addresses were kept for ease of contact where these were made available to me by the students. Messages were sent at Christmas and before examination periods wishing the students well as a further means of keeping in touch.

3.3.6   What interviews can tell

The reasons for choosing semi-structured interviews as the main source of data for this study have already been described. However, as Holstein and Gubrium (2004) have argued, it is important to consider both the 'hows' and the 'whats' of interviews. They suggest the need to pay as much attention to how the knowledge is constructed as to what the output of the interview is. This means thinking about the processes of knowledge production as they occur in the interview situation and in subsequent analysis of interview data.

The semi-structured interview is a useful tool for the exploration of complex factors and offers more depth than a questionnaire could do (Fontana and Frey 2000). It is clear from the literature that interviews take many forms and pose practical and analytical challenges for the researcher (Arksey 2004). Yin (2003) describes interviews as 'guided conversations' and this captures the essence of the process, although as Warren (2002:86) asks, are we 'travelling along with' our participants or 'guiding them along a route to a particular place'? For the purposes of this study, interviews are seen to be a means of travelling alongside but with appropriate signposting along the way. I did not know where the conversation would end up, but I did point out the direction of travel through the interview questions I asked. The interview provided an opportunity to converse with and listen to students, using 'open' questions to allow as much flexibility in the response as possible. To use Scott and Usher's model, the interviews had a weak focus (the content of the questions was broad and open to

interpretation) and frame (how the questions were phrased aimed to allow for personal interpretation by the student) (Scott and Usher 1999). This allowed the students to determine the important issues they wanted to share with me and helped to address the power relationship between us.

Silverman (2000) questions whether interviews give us direct access to experience or whether they offer us narratives. He asks whether it is better to observe what people do than ask what they think. In this study, the research aimed to understand experiences from the student's perspective and the interview, when seen as a narrative, allows access to that perspective. Greasley and Ashworth (2007:834) suggest that, in their research, the use of a series of interviews allowed them to 'become immersed in each lifeworld'. This seems a somewhat exaggerated claim for the use of data since no two people can experience a 'lifeworld' in quite the same way. The approach to the data that was adopted in this study was more aligned with Miller and Glassner (2004) when they argue that we can 'achieve knowledge of social worlds' through semi-structured interviews.

A cautious approach to the interpretation of interview data also acknowledges the role of the interviewer in the data generation process. Baker (2004) encourages researchers to think about data 'making' or data 'generating' rather than simply data gathering. She goes on to argue that attention should be paid to how interviewees physically position themselves within the interview, how they respond to questions and how they interpret their expected role in the interview. She gives as an example the position of a teacher responding to questions from a parent to illustrate that we respond to other people's questions in ways appropriate to the role in which we are being asked the question. By recognising this positioning the researcher can begin to see interpretation of data as 'from thought through language to themes' (2004:162).

Like Baker, Holstein and Gubrium (2004) acknowledge that one cannot ignore the individual behind the interview participant. They go on to describe interviews as a 'limited improvisational performance' where the playing out of roles that Baker describes allows for the exploration of more complex and wider ranging factors than a simple conversation might imply. In the interviews in this study, I was conscious students were responding to questions in a somewhat false setting, they would have their own understanding of the roles expected of them and what we talked about might not be the same as the conversations they might have with friends and families. Nevertheless, what they shared was what they wanted to present as the public face of their experiences and this was important in itself.

I was further aware that participants might be reluctant to explore negative experiences, particularly where these related to assessment processes. Assessment, or rather fear of assessment, was a constant theme in the interviews and I was conscious that they might find discussing their own performance difficult. Nevertheless, it was important to the study that these difficulties could be addressed in an open, non-judgemental way. At the back of my mind was a concern that the student could be presenting a false impression for fear of being seen to be unsuccessful. Even at the end of their studies, reporting their final classifications, I was aware they could be exaggerating the truth. Protecting their anonymity was important from an ethical stance and therefore reports from students were taken on trust.

A further reason for using semi-structured interviews in this study was to allow me to build a relationship with the participants. As the study examined their experiences over an extended period, students' participation needed to be maintained across the three years of their undergraduate study. Conducting several interviews with them allowed me to build a relationship with them, while remaining alert to the differences in the power balance that

Walford (2001) describes. As he suggests, the relationship is not equal and, at the end of the interview, the researcher retains the 'evidence' and controls how the data are interpreted. Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews allow more scope for respondents to set the agenda than more structured data collection tools (Scott and Usher 1999) and, therefore, offered a useful tool for this study.

3.3.7 The interview process

A further challenge I faced was the extent to which I stuck to the interview schedule and asked follow up questions. If participants had information or views they considered important but were denied the opportunity to share, they may have been more reluctant to participate in future interviews. However, as an interviewer, I was determining what experiences were most important. Therefore, a balance needed to be struck which allowed the student to determine their own priorities in the interview as much as the scope of the project allowed. This meant that interviews were often lengthy. In one case, an interview lasted one hour before a single question was asked, although all the questions on the schedule were subsequently covered. Extensive use was made of follow up questions in the interviews to invite participants to expand upon, clarify and discuss issues further. In addition, interviewees were offered the opportunity to ask any further questions or to comment on issues of relevance to themselves which had not been covered.

In the interviews, students appeared to be relaxed and open, becoming more relaxed as the study progressed and the meetings built upon earlier discussions. Having met me in interviews before, they knew what to expect, had built a relationship with me and seemed comfortable in knowing the purposes of the interviews. These factors facilitated the dialogue, but familiarity brought its own challenges, such as remaining focussed on the research

questions. The power relationships that Oakley (1981) and other feminist researchers alert us to were minimised as far as possible by meeting the participants on their familiar territory, at times and places of their choosing and by adopting an informal and friendly approach. Giving them time to think and 'permission' to stray off the point were useful techniques. However, as explained below, care was exercised in assessing the impact of these dynamics when analysing the data.

In conducting the interviews, two further issues were considered. The first concerned the appropriate use of silence. As Rapley (2001) described in his analysis of research with teenagers evaluating drug-education exercises, sometimes the judicial use of silence by interviewers allows space for reflection and may encourage a more expansive response to questions than a supplementary question would. Silence can, of course, be intimidating, and care needs to be exercised in recognising the balance required. I was conscious of giving interviewees time to think through what they wanted to say.

Secondly, participants may have seen me as a role model for the conduct of their own academic research. One participant, in particular, was very interested in doing a PhD after his studies and took a keen interest in the research process. It was important therefore to present a competent, well organised and informed approach to the research to serve as a good example.

3.3.8 Construction of the interview schedule

In preparing the schedule for each set of interviews, consideration was given both to the areas to be covered and the specific wording of the questions. The areas to be covered broadly followed my research questions. I used the first part of the end of first year interview to gather demographic data. With subsequent questions I sought to follow a logical sequence to allow

the interviewee to develop a coherent pattern of thought. A section on choices and decisions about going into higher education was followed by questions about what had influenced those choices and the impact of their earlier educational experiences. The next section explored the learning and teaching experiences of students once at university with the subsequent section addressing social integration. The final section explored definitions of success and issues of aspirations beyond university. Thus, the link between the research questions and the actual interview questions was quite explicit. In subsequent interviews with the students in their second and third years, the format remained broadly similar with relevant questions being adapted to suit the year of study. Some questions were kept constant, for example, the question about the preparation for higher education was included at each stage because the student's perspective on what had helped them to prepare for university might have changed over time. This would relate directly to one of the research questions and was an example of how conducting a longitudinal study of this nature required an appropriate mix of consistency and development in the questions.

The schedule was structured to provide an introduction to build rapport (Denscombe 2007), followed by open-ended questions (Yin 2003). By asking questions in this way, a balance was struck between seeking specific information and allowing the interviewee to determine the priorities of their responses. An example of such a question was:

> Thinking back to your school or college, what did they do, if anything, that helped you to prepare for university?

Yin (2003) provides a useful summary of how best to conduct an interview, by arguing that the task is to follow particular questions, but in an unbiased, friendly and non-threatening way. His use of the term 'informant' rather than 'respondent' reminds the researcher that interviewees can play a useful role in broadening the line of enquiry, while at the same time

ensuring that they do not come to dictate the direction of the research. Silverman (2000) similarly encourages us to 'go beyond a list' and to think about links and developments we can make in response to our interviewees' answers.

It is not just the impact of the researcher's personal identity that influences the responses, but also what that identity means to the interviewee (Robson 2002). In this case, I was a member of academic staff. The impact of this might have been reduced because I was also a student and I stressed this role to the participants. Sharing sympathies about completion of coursework was one example of this. Wary of the potential pitfalls of self-disclosure (Abell and Locke 2006) this was used sparingly.

3.3.9   Spider diagrams: a further dimension

Spider diagrams have particular meanings in Mathematics and Computing (Stapleton et al 2004) but in this context the intention was to encourage students to think creatively about what had influenced them coming to university. In this study, the exercise offered the students the chance to think about their influences without me being present to directly influence them. The exercise was either emailed to the student in advance of the scheduled interview, or given to them at the interview for subsequent return. A particular consideration when designing the exercise was the degree of guidance I should offer. Producing an example based on a fictitious character might have directed the student and may have constrained their scope for free thought. Nevertheless, the instructions contained a brief, indicative diagram with titles but no examples (see Appendix VIII).

Little has been written about the use of visualising techniques in research, except in relation to research with children (Denscombe 2007). The advantages of the spider diagrams were they

allowed a further rebalancing of control between myself as the researcher and the interviewee. In one instance, a student produced her diagram and pointing to one comment began an explanation with 'it sounds daft, but….'. It felt debatable whether she would have shared that point if asked a direct question in a formal interview, but having committed it to paper, she seemed happy to offer an explanation. Another revealed in her diagram an example of something she deemed to be trivial but upon reflection felt it had been of some significance. She explained that her mother kept an empty photograph frame specifically for her graduation photograph, to match the one framing her brother's photograph from an earlier year. When she thought about this, she realised this symbolised a family expectation that she would participate, and be successful, in higher education.

Two students completed the exercise after the second year interview had taken place and returned it by post. In these cases, the lack of opportunity to ask questions meant the data had to be taken at face value. This suggests the diagram was a useful preparatory tool rather than a stand-alone instrument. It may have the added benefit that it prompted the participants to reflect prior to taking part in interviews.

3.4   Approaching data analysis

In this section I describe the practicalities of and my approach to data analysis. I explain how using computer software to store and organise the data was useful but less effective for the analysis and the ways in which I sought to present and interpret the data.

3.4.1   Practical steps

The interviews generated a large amount of data which created practical problems of data management. There were forty-five hours of interviews, some two hours long, five spider

diagrams and a body of policy documentation to analyse. I decided to transcribe the interviews myself as a way of becoming familiar with the data. Although a lengthy process, this proved to be valuable in familiarising myself with the data. Data were stored securely electronically and, where in paper form, in a secure filing cabinet.

Once the interviews were transcribed they were sent back to individuals to check and amend and once confirmed they were filed in the case study database (Yin 2003). After a further read through, they were loaded electronically into Nvivo for coding. I chose Nvivo because of my previous experience with the programme and because it was readily available within the university. Having used Nvivo before, I was conscious of its limitations. I was aware that relying solely on an electronic means of coding may encourage the researcher to see the data in a piecemeal fashion, extracting 'snippets' of data rather than reading the extracts in the context of the interview. The final coding structure used for data analysis is shown in Appendix X.

Using Nvivo was just one stage in the data analysis. It allowed me to identify the broad themes that arose within the data. However, in a longitudinal study, there are a number of different ways of examining the data: by year, theme, subject, university, educational background for example, and in practice several approaches were explored. It was not until I came to write up the data analysis that I realised the strengths of particular approaches. In the end, the longitudinal nature of the data gathered was best reflected in adoption of a lifecycle approach to analysis. I used a large, A3 notepad to pick out key moments in each interview and to see the patterns in the data more clearly than the snippets seen in Nvivo.

Once I had analysed the data in this way, I went back to the complete transcripts to confirm my analysis was appropriate to the context in which the extract was located. Walford's (2001)

reminder that quotes might be taken out of context, their meanings changed or presented as snapshot 'truths' rather than contextualised meaning serves to illustrate the care needed. Revisiting the transcripts to locate quotes helped me to check their meaning. Denscombe (2007) advises the use of quotes in two ways: when speaking in the interviewee's voice, and to support (but not prove) a point. By checking against other data sources and with the interviewees, these dangers can be minimised.

Using Nvivo requires the establishment of nodes against which sections of the data can be coded. There are two categories of node: free nodes that are not associated with a particular structure, and tree nodes that sit within a framework of analysis. The coding structure used was devised to reflect the research questions. For example, one aspect of the analysis concerned what students thought about the teaching and learning they had experienced. A category (tree node) was created called 'teaching and learning' and sub-categories were created within this tree node of 'positive experiences' and one of 'negative experiences'. Previous experience had taught me that a broad coding structure was necessary in the first instance. If the categories were too specific there was a greater likelihood of inappropriate coding, since subjective decisions had to be made about what the data really 'meant'. It was more accurate to code generally at first, only breaking the data down further once the broad categories were securely established. Over time, the number of nodes grew as data analysis refined the interpretation, and further categories were identified.

In constructing the Nvivo project database, I was mindful of Yin's (2003) analogy of the auditor approach to project management. This meant that at all times the process of the research, including decisions made, should be recorded so that anyone could, if needed, trace back every step in the conduct of the research. An example of this was that within Nvivo, all

nodes had against them a description of how I had interpreted that node so that I could check against the coding decisions. That is not to say that another person would necessarily code them in the same way; experience of team coding had taught me that this is a subjective process. However, taking this approach made my coding decisions explicit and open to challenge.

3.4.2 Validity and reliability in the data analysis

The meaning of validity and reliability require explanation. Validity is taken to be the extent to which the findings are true to the data, or the extent to which they represent the 'truth' (Silverman 2000). Reliability refers to the extent to which the same conclusions would be drawn if the research were to be repeated and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify how this can be achieved in qualitative research. As Robson identifies, trustworthiness of the findings may be a more useful way of thinking about this, since the extent to which the findings from this study are 'true' will depend on whether there is a 'truth' to be found (Robson 2002). Careful use of data and their rigorous checking are the main mechanisms used here to ensure validity.

What is important is to ensure transparency, rigour and attention to detail in the methods adopted. Where possible, the data were used to let the students describe the issue in question. However, there was a fine line to be drawn between simply presenting the data and yet providing sufficient analysis and explanation to justify the argument. Several first drafts of data analysis were discarded before arriving at an approach which allowed for explanation and interpretation. Quotations are used in the presentation and analysis of data to illustrate, highlight or explain particular points in the analysis. In some places these quotes are lengthy.

This was to allow the reader to understand the context in which the student was reporting a particular issue without having to rely on my reporting.

Alongside attention to detail within the gathering of the data, it was important to me that I took a rigorous and methodical approach to analysis. Miles and Huberman (1984) argue that in analysis, theory must be 'internally credible'; in other words, there are no unexplained contradictions in the analysis, and that what is being argued is 'faithful' to the data. Yin (2003) reminds the researcher to abide by three principles of data collection: using multiple sources of evidence, constructing a reliable case study database, and demonstrating a clear 'chain of evidence'. This latter point was particularly useful, in reminding me to ensure there was a logical flow from questions asked to data collected and conclusions drawn, and this flow should be evident to the reader as well as to myself.

Drawing further upon Yin's work, his model of validity and reliability in case study research was useful. He describes four tests against which any case study research should be judged: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Yin 2003:34). He then goes on to describe how these might be achieved and at what point in the research study they are most relevant. My interpretation of these tests in relation to this work is outlined below.

The test of construct validity relates to the process of gathering data. In this case, it meant using more than one source and ensuring the data were accurate through member checking (Denscombe 2007). It was further achieved by relying on Yin's chain of evidence approach to ensure that conclusions drawn were to be found in the data, which themselves related to the research questions asked.

The test of internal validity is in the rigour of the data analysis. In my analysis, I was constantly aware of the need to question whether there were other plausible explanations for observations, by looking for other examples of similar observations and linking these to logical explanations.

External validity is assured through the application of theory to the design of the case study and the extent of the claims made in relation to the theoretical framework. Where previous theory has been used as a template against which to compare the empirical results of the case study, the findings will have external validity (Yin, 2003:33). However, it is within the cautious approach to generalisation that this study claims its external validity. The choice of cases within the study allowed for some literal replications (for example, two mature students on the same course in the same institution) and for some theoretical replications (for example, comparing students from different educational backgrounds). This meant that themes drawn from the research questions could be used in the data analysis. Although the numbers of participants are such that these generalisations cannot translate into 'truths' about the student population as a whole, they can be used to inform, support or question theory. This was the approach to external validity adopted in this study.

The aim throughout the research was to be transparent in the procedures undertaken, explicit about the interpretation of the data and meticulous in recording decisions taken, thus allowing for scrutiny and challenge.

3.5   Ethical principles and practicalities

My interpretations of ethical principles concern the need to protect the participants in the research from harm and to avoid the exploitation of their data. Sikes (2010) argues that

relying solely on bureaucratic processes of ethics approval may encourage researchers to think in a superficial way about ethics. Therefore, I describe the priorities in my approach to ethics before elaborating the ethical framework I adopted. I wanted to adopt an ethical framework to the research, not merely to pay regard to what could be described as normal respect (Cousins 2009). Consistent with the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2004) guidelines, my interpretation of research ethics underpins the approach to the research described here. These principles are summarised in the formal ethics approval form submitted at the start of the study (Appendix XI).

3.5.1   Formal ethical considerations

The need to respect and exercise a duty of care in relation to the participants was paramount. My aim was 'to leave them somewhat better off for having talked to you' (Rubin and Rubin 1995:40); or at least, to ensure they were not disadvantaged by their participation. In this study, all participants were over eighteen and did not have declared vulnerabilities, although they were studying and therefore I took care to ensure the research did not interfere with their studies. Where appropriate, I consulted participants' tutors to ensure that interviews were not scheduled at times of pressure, although participants' individual identities were not revealed to the tutors concerned. As the research progressed, I relied upon students to judge for themselves when interviews were best scheduled and I ceased having direct contact with tutors. I avoided examination periods, making timing more problematic as it would have been preferable to interview all the students as they approached the end of each academic year. However, respect for study priorities coupled with students' expectations of long summer holidays meant that some were interviewed at the start of the next academic year.

Other steps which I took to ensure that ethical principles were followed included obtaining written consent from the participants at the start of the research process, along with offering a written explanation of the research and their part within it (Appendix III). I also gave a verbal explanation at the start of the first interview. Students were reminded of this consent at the start of each subsequent interview and of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. Mindful of the need to ensure that consent was truly informed (Cohen et al 2000) I discussed with participants the purpose of the research, how the information would be used, and what it would not be used for. For example, when students spoke about contributing because they wanted the teaching to be improved at their university, I made it clear that this study would not have a direct impact on that, other than contributing to a wider body of knowledge about teaching and learning.

The issue of anonymity to protect students' identities was discussed with each participant. They were asked to choose a pseudonym for use in the reporting process, but all declined to do so. I therefore chose pseudonyms at random. The universities in which the students were situated were also anonymised, but the subjects participants studied are reported as fact because this was directly relevant to the descriptions of their experiences. Students were assured of confidentiality and reminded that the information shared would not be given to tutors or influence their progression.

Participants were asked to review the transcripts of interviews and offered the opportunity to amend, delete or add comments as they wished. This served as both an initial check on the data, to ensure that 'facts' were correct (for example, what school the participant attended), and to ensure that 'what was said was not simply said in the heat of the moment' (Denscombe

2007:201). In practice, nobody changed the transcripts and in some cases, students did not confirm the contents either. In these instances, agreement was assumed.

3.5.2 An ethical framework

These steps, I would argue, are easy to describe but great care was needed in analysing, interpreting and presenting the data. I asked myself the question, as Sikes (2010:11) suggests: if this was a story about someone close to me, would I be happy with the way in which I have presented them? I was mindful that participants would read what I had to say and might feel let down by my interpretation and the responsibility of appropriate use of data weighed heavy on my mind.

I was mindful of Rubin and Rubin's (1995:99) advice to listen to the interviewee and not write their story for them. Treating interview data (indeed, all data) with the utmost respect and care is an essential part of ethical research. I was conscious not to 'cherry pick' the data but have tried to present data in context and as far as possible at appropriate lengths. Quotes are therefore used where they are pertinent to the topic being discussed and are presented in their original form. However, I was uncertain about whether to present quotes as they were spoken where they included 'ers', 'ums', or the very common 'like'. Students themselves commented on how often they used these terms when they read their transcripts back. I decided to remove as many of these as possible on the grounds that participants themselves were uncomfortable with them and they were not the central to the data.

Finally, my relationship with the participants in the study deserves mention. In many respects, I was seeking the middle way that Rubin and Rubin (1995) define; these were not necessarily going to be deep friendships but they were nevertheless personal relationships, deepened by

the longitudinal nature of the study. In the first instance, I was concerned that participants might view me as a member of the teaching establishment of the university and this would influence the dynamics of our relationships. I sought to reassure students that this was not the case by emphasising my role as a doctoral student, and my lack of influence over their studies. Over time, the relationship with the students became more familiar, although I was careful to maintain a professional, respectful connection. I was constantly conscious of the power relationships we held. I felt dependent on the students since I needed them in the study, but at the same time I retained the control of the data, despite informed consent mechanisms and member checks.

The research processes I went through should not be seen as the limit to ethical research. Paying attention to, and being mindful of power relationships was equally important in designing ethical research. At the end of the study, I asked participants how they felt taking part had influenced them.

3.5.3   Reflections on the study: Students' participation in the study

Taking part in a study of this nature has the potential to influence participants' experiences as they are asked to reflect on their motivations and actions. All students who took part in the study reported participation as a positive experience. For some, the process of reflection was particularly powerful.

For Carol, participation had made her think about her original reason for choosing to study nursing and how that changed over the time she was at university, although she acknowledged that her answers were snapshots in time:

I've probably reflected more than I would have done, a lot of the questions you've asked I wouldn't have thought to ask myself ... People asked in your first few placements 'oh why did you want to be a nurse', and the answers I gave there are probably changed to the answer I'd give now.

Her participation in the study also caused her to consider her family's influence in a way that she had not done before:

And all the stuff about you know, my dad wanting me to do well. I probably wouldn't have thought about it, I probably would have just gone through life that's just how it is! Whereas now I think 'shut up!' (laughs) I'll do what I want and I'll be happy!

For some participants reading the transcripts of the interviews provided them with a written account which illustrated the distance they had come since they started university. Louise described the value of looking back on her first year experiences:

I think looking through the transcript was strange, did I really say that??!! It was quite weird looking back at it, it was like looking back in time. That was what I was thinking at that particular point and it was really weird. But good, because I did kind of look at it and think OK, if that's how I felt what can I do about that then?

Rebecca explained that it had been helpful to think about her learning in preparation for her interviews with me:

There have been a few moments where I just catch myself doing something, and I think 'oh, I'll tell Sandra about that, she'll understand!' Yes, just thinking about things, like why are you reading this, why are you doing that? Oh, that's different, you haven't done that before… thinking how would you apply that to getting a better grade, or learning in a different way?

The process of meeting somebody external to her studies throughout her course had been valued by Veronica too. She described how this had motivated her to achieve what she wanted to each year:

Yes, it's had huge impact actually. Especially when you first started interviewing us when we started our course. It was lovely to know that somebody is actually watching you progressing, so it motivates you as well, to think that OK, somebody is watching me and they want to see you get through your course, so it pushes you a lot harder to

actually make it into a reality, rather than just dreaming the dream that you want to live your dream. Like when you see Sandra it's like, I've done this I've done that you know, because you really want to show that person that you've matured and you've been the things in life that you really wanted, so that they can be able to look back and say OK, you didn't waste your time!

Taking part in the study seemed to have prompted participants to reflect on their experiences in ways they might not otherwise have done. Secondly, the value of having someone external to their studies taking an interest in their experiences throughout their course had, they reported, been a positive experience for them. The fact that they continued to participate and meet on an annual basis suggests they did value the participation.

3.6   Reflections on the study: Research approach and methods

The study sought to combine a case study approach with narrative research to reveal the complexity of students' experiences. I chose not to focus on one particular 'type' of student, nor one phase of university life because I was interested in exploring how students from different backgrounds experienced higher education throughout their studies. One potential criticism of the research is that a small number of students contributed to the research and this had implications for the generalisability of the findings. However, the depth within the data has illuminated an understanding of undergraduate experiences and helped me to develop a new model of undergraduate identity which can be used in further research.

An alternative approach to answering the same questions might have been to undertake a study with a larger number of participants utilising focus groups or questionnaires, in more universities, across more subjects. However, doing this would not have elicited the deep and personal insights offered by the students in this study, made possible in the one to one relationship I was able to build up over the three years. The deep, qualitative approach taken in this research provided appropriate data from which to develop the thesis.

3.7   Summary

This chapter has discussed my approach to research and theory building, the design of the research project, how it was undertaken and why decisions were taken in the way they were. The initial research questions lent themselves to a longitudinal, qualitative study of a small number of students progressing through higher education at two different universities. The intention was to illuminate different aspects of the student experience through the in-depth analysis of lengthy student stories gathered through semi-structured interviews. I set out to explore some key issues with a strong emphasis on letting the students' interpretations dominate the analysis. Mindful of the dangers of letting my own prejudices and political commitments shape the research, I sought to minimise this risk through the approach to data analysis and interpretation described. The next five chapters will discuss the data taking the lifecycle approach, from choice and preparation, through university and outcomes from higher education.

4.   Chapter Four: Decision making in a limited field

4.1   Introduction

Chapter Two examined what is known about some of the influences upon decisions people make about participation in higher education. This chapter presents data from students on their thinking about higher education and the choices they subsequently made. Previous research shows that decisions are influenced long before they are actually made and the word 'choice' in this context can be mis-leading (Furlong and Cartmel 2009; Gorard et al 2007; Reay et al 2005). For some students decisions are made within tightly defined boundaries and the term 'choice' may suggest freedom from constraints that does not exist for individuals. Constraints may be both economic and social, where needs (such as the requirement to support a family or to pay back debts) and expectations (for example family histories or working towards a specific career goal) may limit the boundaries of possibility. Furthermore, the extent to which it is believed that decisions about participation in higher education are made consciously is contested. For some, the lack of decision is a more accurate description (Keane 2008).

The data focus on different aspects of choices, including the perceived benefits of higher education, selection of institution and subject to be studied and show how choices are shaped by a range of influences. These include experiences of schooling (Brooks 2002; Foskett et al 2004), family background in higher education (Pugsley 1998), what seems to be appropriate or even possible, 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) and economic as well as family responsibilities.

It is argued that these influences then shape potential participants' habitus (Bourdieu 1990a) which in turn shape their disposition to learning in higher education. Alongside this, they will draw upon different capital in their choice-making process. Applicants with appropriate capital (cultural and social) are likely to have greater insights into the field of higher education to help them to negotiate their position within it. Two things may follow: first, those participants are able to draw upon knowledge and understanding of the hierarchies within higher education, and second to feel confident about their legitimate place in the field. This has implications for identity, or sense of self as undergraduates entering university for the first time.

4.2 Thinking about Higher Education

How students discussed their decisions to participate, and their perceptions of the costs and benefits of participation varied and three themes emerged. For some, the 'decision' to participate was less a deliberate one and more a foregone conclusion, while for others, decisions were described in terms of making up for lost time, or fulfilling earlier unrecognised potential. Others saw higher education as a necessary route, or stepping stone, to a specific job. A dilemma emerging from the data was balancing the economic expense of participation against the likelihood of enhanced earning power to justify the (particularly financial) sacrifices necessary to study at university.

4.2.1 Conscious and unconscious decision making

Previous studies (Ball et al 2002; Pugsley 1998) argued that for some students, participation in higher education is more the result of non-decision making than a conscious, calculated choice. In this study, Carol gives an example of this. All the male members of her family studied successfully in higher education, her father and both brothers had attended the same,

elite university she now attended. In her first interview, Carol described what the consequences would have been if she had decided not to participate:

> If I would have not wanted to go to Uni and I wanted to just work in a shop I think there would have been a few things said. They wouldn't have just said 'Oh that's fine'. They say they would accept me but I can't really think they would.

However, Carol was quick to explain that she had not felt under pressure to make her decision:

> I didn't feel particularly pressurised because I wanted to go to Uni for me, because I wanted to be a nurse and that's how you go about it.

The themes of acceptance and expectation run throughout Carol's account of her thinking about participating in higher education. In her second year, describing her spider diagram highlighting the key people, events and texts that influenced her choices, Carol commented:

> It's kind of hard thinking what it was that made me want to go into higher education. The only main thing I could think of is that I've always expected I would go. There's never really been a doubt in my mind…. And my dad went to university, he wouldn't have been pleased if I didn't want to go to university.

Other indications Carol gave of these expectations were her mother buying a frame for her graduation photograph before she had even commenced her course and the ways in which her school created a culture of expectation in relation to university participation through the attitudes of teachers in class:

> A couple of people that didn't go, it was kind of, they were stigmatised in a way. 'Right, if you don't want to go, you sit on that table, we won't talk to you anymore. I'm going to talk to the university people.' It wasn't said outright, but it was kind of implied.

Carol was describing a combination of school and family expectations that left her in little doubt about her educational future. However, she described absorbing those expectations without consciously considering alternatives. She described choosing a 'top' university, liking

the Open Day there and being able to picture herself feeling comfortable and at ease amongst the 'old buildings'. It was not until her third and final year that Carol described being conscious of her family's influences on her career choices:

> I don't think I necessarily noticed it as I was growing up, because that's just what you're used to, but for my Dad it really is like that. If I hadn't gone to uni., he would have had something to say about it.

These implicit expectations had shaped Carol's progression into higher education, apparently creating a destination that was pre-determined and upon which her acceptance by school and family seemed to rest. She would have had to challenge her father and to have resisted messages heard throughout her childhood to decide against participating. In her case, the conscious decision would have been *not* to participate, requiring her to break with family tradition and expectation. For some students, however, the decision to study in higher education required them to break with their family expectations in other ways and make much more conscious and potentially risky decisions.

4.2.2 Breaking the mould

The three students who came to university from Access courses had stories to tell of having decided to change career path after several years in work. They talked about agonising over the decision and for these students participation came about as a result of a lengthy, conscious process compared with the apparently unconscious process that Carol seemed to describe.

Samuel had grown up in a working class community where there was little knowledge about or expectation of participation in higher education. Talking about his family's experiences of education he recalled:

> We all three of us came from a, from the indices of deprivation, we are around 84th lowest in the country, so all three of us never got a reasonably good education at all. Because to be at university, it's like 'What me? Nah! They've made a mistake!'

Samuel's decision later in life to challenge these expectations came about as a result of a complex range of factors that seemed, in his words, to all 'fit together'. After more than twenty years working in industry he knew he had 'just had enough of factories and manufacturing', experience compounded by redundancy and unstable employment prospects. His resolve to change his career path was influenced and supported by his siblings' own moves into professions:

> Having worked twenty five years in manufacturing, putting the emphasis away from my mechanical, electrical and supervisory skills, I needed and realised I was good with people and this actually runs in my family. My sister is a supernurse, my brother was a social worker and he said 'you would be good at this'.

The disruptions to his working life had coincided with his children growing up and leaving home and his paying off the outstanding mortgage on his house. He felt this allowed him the freedom to apply for entry to higher education, although he was acutely aware of the risks involved. Throughout his interviews, Samuel made frequent references to his 'gamble', recognising it was not just his own future he was risking:

> I'm gambling with the student fees, the loans, maintenance grants and all that. It's twenty thousand pounds. Well, my wife and I are gambling on me doing it. I'm gambling that I can actually write well enough and I can actually pass the course.

In addition, Samuel had been diagnosed with dyslexia early in his Access course and this explained his difficulties with writing. Samuel's dyslexia caused him to view the risk as more precarious than it might otherwise have been, hence his concern about his ability to write well enough. He also described how difficult he found reading for study:

> Reading? The words move ways, or sometimes, depending on the print, they crawl, and I can spell the same word three different ways on the page.

His experience as a recovering alcoholic had taught him self-reflection which he later relied on in his Social Work studies and shaped his desire to work with people. In contrast to Carol's 'obvious' choice to enter higher education, Samuel had to change his 'normal biography' (Ball et al 2002; Du Bois Reymond 1998) and had moved into an unfamiliar world. His choice centred on his own life experiences. It was the particular combination of life factors that provoked his decision:

> The life experience I've got, I feel that I need to do something with it. I feel that I need to put it to use. It's the right time in my life to do it. Family wise and career wise.

The weight of the 'gamble' was to feature heavily in Samuel's story and clearly illustrated the conscious, considered decision he had taken in entering higher education.

4.2.3   Stepping stones

The third theme in the study was a focus that was not so much the 'unconscious' movement into higher education of Carol, nor the life disrupting decisions of Samuel, Simon and Rebecca. For Jane, Helen, Louise and Veronica, participation was seen as a 'stepping stone', or something that you go through in order to get to the other side, closely related to a career where higher education was the route to a particular job. There were, however, allusions to participation as a stage in life, or part of a process of growing up and building independence from parents.

Helen, Louise and Jane, as nursing students, demonstrated the career route disposition to higher education. All three said at some point in their interviews that they were in university because that was how you became a nurse and as the job was moving to become a graduate-only profession, it made sense to undertake the degree rather than the Diploma. Unprompted

they all said had there been another route to qualification they would happily have taken it. University to them was simply somewhere you trained.

Similarly, Veronica, studying Business at the post-1992 University saw higher education as a step along her career path:

> I have spoken to some girls, asking them what it is they are doing and why they chose it and they just said 'oh, you know, I just thought I'll choose it, try it out at university. But for me, it is where I see myself beyond my degree, so the degree is only a stepping stone to where I need to go.

For Veronica, the goal of her career was an important motivating factor and helped her focus later on in her course. In the second year, she described what she felt university offered her that she would otherwise have missed:

> I had a career goal beyond university and I wanted to achieve that career goal. I know I could still achieve it without university but the choice of coming to university is to help me learn vital skills.

Throughout her interviews, Veronica returned to the theme of seeing university as a stage to move through in order to get somewhere else. For her, as with Helen, Louise and Jane, the main purpose of higher education was linked to career progression and as Bhatti (2003) discusses this was to have implications for the ways in which they engaged with university life. Their choice to participate was deliberate but they did not consider they had viable alternatives and chose higher education as the best route to something else beyond.

From these descriptions, it is possible to identify three themes in how these students thought about participating in higher education: as a 'normal' progression from school, a conscious life-changing decision and an instrumental route to a chosen career. The ways they talked about their choices were bound by earlier experiences and influences and linked to their perceptions of the purposes of higher education.

4.3   Choosing subjects

The process of choice students described was neither linear nor sequential, but it required multiple decisions. Alongside the decision to participate in higher education at all came the decision about what field of study to engage in. For some students, the decision about subject came after that about institution, set against a number of variables. Only one student in this study described choosing the institution first and the course second, although even he had a clear picture of his field of interest before choosing the institution.

In reality, decisions are seen by students as balancing sometimes competing demands and constraints, resulting in greater or lesser compromises. Those compromises are then absorbed into the student biography and may be hidden amongst the descriptions they give of their decision making process. Nevertheless, a key theme to emerge in later data analysis was that of the importance of subject interest and how this sustained students when times got tough.

Here the data on subject choice are presented, focussing on the themes emerging. These included subject interest, work and career prospects, influences and constraints, and the idea of 'giving something back'. The data suggest that for some participants, the route to choosing their subject was circuitous and entailed 'false starts'.

4.3.1   Subject interest

All eight students described an intrinsic interest in their subject of study. The more enthusiastic students talked about 'love' of the subject, or of having a 'passion' for it (Elton, 2000). There were however, distinctions between students in the ways they described the development of that interest. The common theme amongst the nursing students was a longstanding interest in the profession since childhood. For example, Jane recalled being

stimulated by television programmes:

> When I was really little you have the ideal you want to become a doctor, because you think "Ah, they're so much better, more important, than anything". Growing up, I liked watching all those hospital programmes, you know Great Ormond Street, things like that.

Television programmes as a source of inspiration recurred in other nursing students' interviews. Like Jane, Helen recalled knowing what she wanted to do from an early age, partly as a result of growing up in a medical family:

> I've always wanted to do it. I come from a quite medical background. My dad is a GP, my mum was a nurse and we've generally been brought up knowing medical things. It has always really interested me.

The subject choices for the students at the post-1992 university, studying BioMedical Science, Business or Social Work, were more disrupted and contingent on life experiences. The three mature students described recent experiences that influenced their decisions to change career direction as well as personal connections with their chosen subject. Samuel's life experiences and his brother's encouragement led him to choose Social Work. Simon's interest in herbalism, coming from his own experience of ill health and failed attempts to remedy it with conventional medicine, led him into BioMedical Sciences. Rebecca's choice was influenced by an interest in diving and Marine Biology, balanced with other considerations of location of institution, available support networks and future career prospects. A further example of personal life experience influencing subject choice was found in Veronica's story. Her initial choice had been Law, driven by a commitment to improving human rights in her home country of Sierra Leone. Her move into Business was prompted by what she described as a 'revelation' as she recounted a dream she had about how best she might help provide employment opportunities for her communities back home.

The mature students' descriptions appear to be more immediate: responding to life events and personal experiences rather than the lifelong commitment the nursing students described. In later interviews, the certainties arising from this kind of lifelong ambition were apparent when the nursing students spoke of their confidence in obtaining employment. By contrast, all four students at the post-1992 university expressed doubts at some point over their choice of subject.

4.4   Choosing a career: compromise and prospects

Three of the four nursing students described career prospects in nursing as being important factors in their subject choice. In particular, Carol spoke about the diversity of opportunities available in nursing, Louise about the employment and promotion prospects available to graduate nurses and Jane described thinking of nursing as 'a good profession' to get into. By contrast, two of the students in the post-1992 university had modified their choices to balance subject interest against the financial and career implications of their decisions. They spoke about compromise rather than opportunity. For example, Simon described how his subject choice was constrained by his need to earn a living to support his family. His primary interest was in herbalism but upon further investigation, he worked out that the financial returns on a career in alternative therapies would be less than a BioMedical Sciences qualification:

> I researched it, I realised that Herbalists by and large don't earn a lot of money (laughs) and have to bolster their earnings up with some other job and I thought 'that's not really for me'. I want to be picking something that I can do, where I can actually earn a living, but it has got to be medically based because that's what I'm in to.

Although not supporting a family, Rebecca also considered the need to compromise subject interest in order to study a course that would link more directly to a career path, as she described her choice:

> Then as the Biology went along, I just really loved it and decided I wanted to do a Biology-based degree and I applied for Biological Sciences but kind of decided that wasn't really much good to anything. It was a good degree to have but it wasn't really going to get me a career so then I re-read the prospectus and picked this one.

These students' subject choice was shaped by practical compromises and financial implications that were explicit in their interviews.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) describe 'turning points' where people reach a particular point in their lives (such as leaving compulsory education) or an event occurs (such as redundancy) and this provokes them to change direction, in this context to choose to re-enter education. What the mature students at the post-1992 university described were different circumstances in their career decision-making that had prompted them to change direction and to disrupt their working careers. However, the term 'turning point' may be mis-leading as all three of the students in this study described a growing sense of dissatisfaction with their lives, over some years, that culminated in their decision to re-enter education.

In contrast, three of the four nursing students seemed to be responding to turning points brought about by what Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) describe as structural changes caused by the end of schooling, building upon long-standing commitments to particular career goals. In other words, they had reached the end of one formal stage of life (schooling) and had to make a decision about where to go next. As Hodkinson and Sparkes describe, turning points can disrupt a person's understanding of, or disposition to, their place in the world, challenging their 'habitus' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and causing the individual to reassess their response to the position they find themselves in. Turning points may be traumatic (dislocating) or they may be evolutionary; how they are experienced may determine how quickly the individual adapts to their new situation and indeed the ways in which the students in the study made their choices may have impacted on how they settled into their new

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environment.

4.5   Changing courses, changing subjects

Not everyone entering higher education will complete a course of study. The choice they make at the start of their higher education career may prove to be unsuitable for them, or differ from their expectations; alternatively they may not pass their assessments. The possibility of changing course and starting again allows students to remain in higher education and contributes to retention strategies within universities. For three students in the study, the course they were enrolled on was not their first. Two had undertaken one year of another course and the third had successfully completed a degree in an unrelated subject. Their explanations for their subject changes included disrupted choice processes at the point of A Level results and poor guidance in school. In Veronica's case, the exam board had lost the results and she was not able to take up her preferred place and course:

> Before I came here, my grades were lost by EdExcel and they found it about a week and a half before university started. But in that time I wanted to do Law, so I was offered by H university to do criminology, but I wanted to go to a redbrick university. My mum said, you know, they're offering you criminology in H, it's actually better if you come here and do Law: it's the course that you wanted to do and that's fine... But as the year went, I changed my mind that I wanted to do Law and I wanted to transfer so I started doing Business instead.

Helen had not obtained the grades required for her original choice and had to make up her mind about changing her choice of course within the space of two hours through the process of UCAS Clearing. This allows some students to make changes to their choices over the summer months once examination results are known and acts as a sorting house to allocate unfilled places:

> I actually applied to do psychology because I did a psychology A-level and I thought, I don't feel ready to do nursing. I thought I would do psychology and then maybe

move on, but actually I didn't do as well in my A-levels as I hoped for, so I got offered education on the actual day. So I had about two hours to think about it and I just plumped to do that degree and it happened that this wasn't for me.

Louise, gained a First class degree in a computing related subject but subsequently returned to her original ambition to study for a career in a medical field, citing poor guidance at school as the reason for her enrolling on the computing course:

> I applied for a course at (pre-1992 university) which I did get intobut then I decided that I didn't want to do that course, and ended up going through clearing and doing another course for three years. …I've always had an interest in things medical anyway and I always wanted to be a doctor. But they gave me no encouragement to follow that. My GP would give me leaflets for courses while at school, the lady in charge of it, said, 'oh you'd never get on it because you're stupid and no good at maths...you'd be lucky to get into university'. And that was what I had to put up with at school. They were really bad.

These examples help to illustrate the factors which influence decisions often taken in the heat of a crisis moment. The implication here is that choices arrived at through limited possibilities and within a constrained timescale may be less successful than decision making that is made with less constraint and more time for consideration. Quinn et al (2005:18) suggested that recruitment through the clearing process is more likely to lead to a change in course later on, or early withdrawal from higher education.

4.6   Institutions and status: choosing where to go

Alongside decisions about what subject to study students also need to decide what institution to study at, considering the type, location and course provision of the institution. How the applicant views the institution may be informed by a range of sources, sometimes based in statistical facts, more often grounded in word of mouth and using what Ball and Vincent (1998) describe as 'hot knowledge'. Information, Advice and Guidance available in schools and colleges has been described as problematic (Maguire et al 1993; Thomas et al 2002) and

students may be left to negotiate a mix of marketing material, guides based on different survey data as well as advice from friends and family who may have their own opinions and experiences of different institutions. For example, Louise described the advice she had received in school:

> They were absolutely useless! It was a case of you had your UCAS form, 'you have your personal statement, make sure you fill everything in'. You have six options, 'right, we want them filled out. Even if you don't want to go there, fill it in!'

Similarly, Carol felt let down by her teachers when she explained how they had advised her:

> When we started doing the choices for university, they kind of just chucked it at you. One morning we had a morning registration period, and they just suddenly said that in the next few weeks we're going to start talking about it, and doing a personal statement, and then you've got to make your options before Christmas. And it was all so quick.

The participants in this study had well-rehearsed explanations for their choice of institution which remained consistent throughout their studies. They described deliberate positioning and an awareness of the status of their chosen institution:

> She said, go to your local university. (post-1992 University) is a fine place. Scientifically speaking they are well respected… There's nothing wrong with going there, it's on your doorstep. And think about something run of the mill, you know, like Biology-related. (Simon, BioMedical Sciences)

For some, choice was limited by financial considerations. Participants were also aware of the social implications of their choice in terms of proximity to support networks, gaining independence from parents and living amongst a more varied population than they were accustomed to:

> That's one of the reasons, I think I even said it in interview, that I came to (pre-1992 university), because I knew it would be so diverse. And I'm used to white middle class, coming from Oxford, so I wanted a change from treating that typical cohort of people to being thrown in to the deep end. (Helen, Nursing)

It was like I knew that I wanted to move away from home and I thought at least if I've got someone there it won't be as bad. I don't know, it's sort of weird because I was going to go to P and when I decided that I wasn't going to do Marine Biology I thought well, I don't really need to move that far away, I just wanted to move far enough away to move out of home but still be able to see my parents (Rebecca, BioMedical Sciences)

However, Rebecca also illustrates the unplanned nature of some decision making when she described how she finally made her choice of institution based on friendship:

I went to do Marine Biology and then I changed my mind. I had really loved Human Biology so I thought I'll do that… but to be honest, and this is really bad, I chose this because Simon was doing it. He picked it because it was the one that needed the most credits in the prospectus, and he figured then that it was the hardest one to do, so he should do that, and he was 'you do it as well! Come on! Blah, blah.' So I thought why not? So I just phoned up, changed my course, and they said alright then. And that was that.

There was no evidence of a broader knowledge of the content of courses, the ways in which they would be taught or from visits to the university in students' descriptions of their decisions. That is not to say these were not considered, but the students did not describe these.

4.6.1 Views from above: choosing a 'top' university

Three of the nursing students made reference to the status of the institution in making their choice and for two of them it was one of the deciding factors. Not only did they use the term 'top university' when describing their institution, but they positioned themselves as superior in relation to what they described as lower status institutions. For example, Jane described her decision:

I applied for all the universities that do nursing in this area, just because I couldn't have afforded to move to other parts of the country. It's (pre-1992 university), I think either the Guardian's university chart or something, when I was applying for unis, this was one of the top in this area.

Jane used her local knowledge of the area, drawn from school and friends, to distinguish between high and lower status institutions:

> …because it's seen as a high class university, it's the whole cutting out the lower society sort of thing, whereas in [new university], from living in [local city] a whole lot, I know it's seen as lesser, it's not seen as a good university.

Comparison with what was seen to be a lower status institution was evident in Carol's description of how she thought she would have felt in relation to her brothers (who attended the same, pre-1992 university) if she had chosen differently:

> Deliberately didn't apply to [new university], or other universities that weren't Redbrick Universities, and the fact that both brothers came here. If I'd have gone to a kind of, not lesser university, but one that isn't highly credited, I probably would have felt a bit lower in comparison to them.

The status of the institution was also important in determining the value of the qualification at the end of the course, with the elite status apparently conveying an advantage in the labour market as Louise described:

> And then I found from what people have said to me that just coming from this uni. opens up jobs as well. You get looked upon better than the other university. People on the ward and people who have done recruitment sessions with us. They've said that usually they look at your application form, see (elite university), you get an interview.

Carol and Jane made reference to newspaper university league tables to confirm the superiority of their chosen institution, although they were vague about which papers they had consulted and how they had used the league table information.

The students stressed the use of informal networks and local knowledge in distinguishing between institutions. They had deliberately opted for what they understood to be a higher status institution, hoping that would give them an employment advantage.

4.6.2   Attending a 'new' university

The remaining four students were enrolled on different courses at a large, Post-1992 university. Like their counterparts in the elite university, they were aware university hierarchies and their own institution's position. Three of the four students made reference to the perceived status and the implications this held for them in future employment situations.

The link to employment prospects led Rebecca and Simon, studying Biomedical Sciences, to believe they would need to gain a first class degree to compensate them in the jobs market for the lower status of their university, as Rebecca discussed after one of their placements:

> We've spoken to people who work in labs and they've said that if people apply from [post-1992 university], they won't even look at them. Whether that's an exaggeration or not… There is that kind of stigma attached to it, if you haven't got a first from [post-1992 university], then what have you been up to for three years?

Rebecca also attributed her failure to get an interview for a course in Medicine in her final year at least in part to her coming from the university she was attending. Once again, the students were reporting hearsay, acquired as a result of local conversations, rather than based on research evidence. Yet despite these perceived disadvantages, both students had positive things to say about their choice of institution. Rebecca had been offered a place at (elite university), the professional accreditation linked to her course at (post-1992 university) clinched her choice:

> I started talking to this guy and he says I'm a mature student as well, I'm at (elite university), and I told him that I was at (post-1992 university), and he goes ' was that your first choice?' I said, 'yes!', and he was 'oh, OK!', and I said, 'yeah, it's a really good university.' That's the kind of attitude people have. Because I got into (elite university), but still chose to come here because this course is accredited and (elite university's) isn't. If it's not accredited, then you can't register as a BioMedical Scientist, you have to do a top-up degree after, so just because you've got the status of going to (elite university), you're going to have to do another two years to get registered.

Simon, too, described making a positive choice to come to (post-1992 university), citing high entry requirements as one indicator of quality and emphasising the challenge involved in his course:

> Oh yes, I wanted to be really tested, really tested hard. I wanted a tough degree. Something that was going to push me to the limit. I didn't want to do any namby-pamby rubbish. I wanted the real McCoy. I've started to believe in myself.

Some students described the institution's effect in relation to their peers. Here, there was a perception that not all students were as motivated as the interviewees and this seemed to be linked in their minds with the students the institution attracted. Veronica had originally wanted to go to what she described as 'a redbrick university', but enrolled at (post-1992 university) as second choice; in her final year, reflecting back, Veronica recognised how the university environment may have impacted on her studies:

> I think generally, apart from the university, I'm not going to put it down because the university has a lot of good departments, but I think it's the area that the university is in, I need to be in a place where I am stimulated and motivated. The only way I can be motivated is when I see people who have a lot of aspiration around me.

Veronica was describing how she had not found the kind of motivation in her fellow students that she felt she had. Similarly, Simon described feeling people around him lacked motivation, related in part to the status of the institution:

> I think it's the personal motivation thing again runs from top to bottom. Because we're there, that's who we are. We're not, as a university, all together, everybody trying to climb our way up, right? This university could be one of the top ones, I have no doubt about it. It's got all the elements.

For these students, there were issues of aspiration and motivation in their institution that were linked in part to Veronica's description of the geographical area the university was in which was depressed economically, and Simon and Rebecca's descriptions of peers.

Although these students were aware of the position of their university in the reported rankings of institutions, they nevertheless had positive stories to tell that explained why they were there, stressing the different benefits they gained compared with other, higher status universities. The messages they heard from league tables, peers and friends did not necessarily concur with their perceptions and choices.

4.7 Implications for undergraduate learner identity

These findings have significance for the development of undergraduate learner identity. In Bourdieuian terms some students were able to draw upon both social and cultural capital to help them navigate the field of higher education. For Carol, this related to her family history and their first-hand experience of the same elite university she saw as her preferred option. The capital was directly relevant. Simon drew upon the advice of his college teacher to find a place where he would get the support he needed. Jane drew upon local knowledge and perceptions of status, less direct and secure than Carol's family experience, to position herself.

However, as Hodkinson and Sparkes describe (1997) these students had different horizons for action, bounded by differing social and economic constraints. The need to compromise subject interest for employment prospects was evident here. The administrative constraints of the application process, together with reportedly poor advice at school left some students compromising their original choice, prompting them to change direction. These factors shaped how students positioned themselves which then had implications for their identity as an undergraduate learner.

Those who had grown up in families with a strong history of higher education participation saw university as a natural progression in their learner biography, grounded in a sense of entitlement and security. Others had changed their standard biography, having grown up in a world where they did not expect to study at university. Students in the latter category were studying in the post-1992 university. One student had rejected the pre-1992 institution, apparently in favour of professional accreditation, but later admitted she preferred to study alongside her friend. For Rebecca, the social capital offered by doing so outweighed the status attached to studying elsewhere. In all their descriptions, students at the post-1992 university described a place where they felt they could 'fit in' despite being positioned further down the higher education hierarchy.

4.8   Summary

Describing how the students in this study thought about participation in higher education illustrates three themes in the decision making process. First, an apparently seamless educational trajectory from school to university informed by family and school expectations from an early age; second, and most evident in the mature students, higher education representing a break with past career expectations and requiring a conscious decision involving calculations of risks and benefits; and third, instrumentality where higher education is almost incidental, as a route to a particular career goal.

In his study of the role of values in working class students' career decision-making, Greenbank (2009) found that students did not understand how their (post-1992) university was positioned within the hierarchy of higher education institutions or that such a hierarchy existed at all. In contrast, the students in this study were able to articulate how their universities were positioned with reference to league tables and in the perceptions of those

advising them. In the older, more prestigious university, students described the advantages they expected to gain in the labour market as a result of a perceived status differential. Students in the newer university felt they were likely to be disadvantaged but described other benefits they felt accrued from their choices. It seems as though advisors and students were relying on league tables to identify the relative worth of institutions in ways that limited choice, such as when students were unwilling to consider other 'lesser' universities.

For participants in this study, choice of institution rested on a number of practical and political factors, as students understood the hierarchy of status but balanced this with factors such as professional accreditation, proximity to home and recommendation from tutors. Subject choice mattered too and for some represented a compromise between the 'love' of the subject and realistic career and work prospects. The data revealed the complexities and fragilities of decision making. Students' higher education choices were influenced by their own experiences, those of their families and friends and perceptions of value attributed to different aspects of university reputation. Another aspect of decision making revealed in the data is how decisions were taken often in the heat of a moment.

This chapter has considered the ways in which students described their decision making about participating in higher education and what subject to study, where. It has revealed how students draw upon different capital (Bourdieu 1997) to make decisions about higher education and in doing so how they position themselves as potential learners in this field (Naidoo 2004) according to different horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). It also reveals how students experienced risk (Beck 1992) differently and how they incorporated that sense of risk into their decision-making process. How those decisions impacted on their experiences at university is discussed later, with reference to students' motivations and

dispositions to study. The next chapter examines the ways students described preparing for university.

5.   Chapter Five: Preparing for university

5.1   Introduction

This section presents data on how students felt they were prepared for changes to the teaching, learning and social environment experienced on entry to university. First, it examines the advice and guidance students were given when they applied for university. The data focus on support during the process of application, how students learnt about social aspects of university life and what would have helped them feel more prepared for the changes they faced. Second it discusses how students felt their school or college teachers prepared them for the teaching, learning, assessment and studying they encountered in their first semester. Attention is paid to data from later in their studies to capture whether there were preparations in school or college that were not immediately recognisable as useful but nevertheless helped the student in the longer term.

The emphasis put upon the first year experience in Tinto's work (1993) arose from concerns about attrition rates of first year students in American universities. Tinto highlighted the importance of early 'integration' as one important factor in retention. However, this led to a focus on developing induction programmes for first year students rather than examining how students are prepared for higher education by their previous educational and family backgrounds. Even less is known about how these preparations then influence progression and adaptation later in the student lifecycle.

Entry to higher education inevitably represents a change of situation, which challenges established understandings of self as learner. This disruption to learner identity then requires a process of acclimatisation to the new environment. Where students can draw upon relevant previous learning experiences to negotiate their new situation that acclimatisation is likely to be faster and less disruptive than those without such relevant experiences.

5.2   Preparation for university life

The previous chapter introduced the theme of inadequate guidance from teachers in the process of choosing courses and institutions. This theme was also evident as students described how their schools and colleges helped them prepare for university. Five of the students described leaving school feeling inadequately advised about their university prospects, while two described how their schools had created a culture where university was seen as the expected route after A Levels. A reliance on significant other adults was helpful to some students, as was recognition that it was for the student themselves to learn about being a student, it was not necessarily something somebody else could help them with. However there were some examples of positive interventions that schools and colleges made and these are discussed.

5.2.1   A lack of encouragement

The three mature students in the study and two other students from families with little higher education experience left school feeling dissatisfied with the encouragement they had received from their teachers about their future careers. This was linked to an impression that they were in some way not 'good' enough to study at university. In Louise's case this related to her performance in Maths and to one particular member of staff:

She was like 'Oh you'll never get into medicine 'cause you've only got a B in Maths. So I thought OK fair enough and I was going to do Biological Science and she was like 'you can't do that you've only got a C in Maths'. She just constantly put me down. Anyway I got an offer of a place here to do Biological Science but I'd had my confidence knocked so much by her that I didn't take up the place.

Veronica described feeling that other students, seen by teachers as in some way more clever, were given more encouragement:

I noticed that they tended to pay more attention to trying to help people who they felt they got along with more, who they felt was smarter or who came from a more privileged background, or something. …

The three mature students described feeling let down by their schools: Samuel linked this with the school not having identified his dyslexia, Simon had been subjected to bullying and Rebecca felt shy and excluded:

Samuel: No, no. It was just… throughout my school life it was 'he's not too good'. And that's all it was. 'Oh he's not too bright. He's alright on the other stuff, sport, great sport. Socialising? Wonderful, no problem at all.

Simon: My school, I'd rather forget. It was catastrophic. I was, along with my brothers, considered to be a bright, potentially bright student. But I had a real tough time at school so I didn't do any good, basically. I had the potential to do massively well. So I got half-way through my A Levels and quit.

Rebecca: But for me as well, I was so quiet and shy at school that I didn't participate in any class discussions, I would just sit there.

It was not just school teachers who left students feeling education was not for them. Rebecca explained how the lack of encouragement from her parents, particularly her mother, had impacted on her thinking about university:

They probably thought they were doing the right thing, by just leaving me to it, but it would have been nice to just have a little bit of encouragement. Ooh, do you not fancy going to university? They were always oh, going to university is a waste of time, you get yourself into so much debt, blah, di blah…

In the end, it was the encouragement of other significant adults in her life which convinced

her that she was capable of entering university. A colleague at her work repeatedly questioned why Rebecca had not been to university and why she worked in the job she did:

> She was 'right, Rebecca, why are you here? Obviously you can do so much more.' Constantly, everyday, nagging at me, and she was like 'if you're here in a year I'm really not going to be happy with you!'

Similarly, an ex-teacher from her school who had become a family friend convinced her of her potential to benefit from university:

> He was like 'come here, promise me that you'll do something, go, just go to S College and enrol in anything, it doesn't matter what you do, just enrol on a course and start learning and do something, so promise me that you will do this,' and I'm 'alright then!' (laughs) 'I'm phoning you in two weeks and if you haven't done it I'm going to phone you everyday until you do it,' 'Alright! I'll do it!' So I did.

A common theme in these descriptions was leaving school with a sense of unfulfilled potential. For these students, the intervention of a significant other person, a colleague, friend or family member had helped to convince them they could succeed in higher education, where experiences at school had suggested otherwise. By contrast, Helen came from a private school where expectations were that all pupils would progress into higher education and she reported how this made other options less attractive:

> They are very academically driven, because of league tables and things, there is a pressure and say "We had so many students get degrees when they left this school, and they are now doing this job" you don't want so many people, of your students, go away saying they left at 16 to be a hair dresser.

The ways schools shaped expectations and judgements of suitability for higher education led to delayed participation for some. Significant adults helped to convince individuals that messages from school may have been mis-leading.

5.2.2 Guidance in choosing careers

Three students described how they had not been helped by their school or college to properly research their chosen career. For example, Louise explained that her school could have prepared her better:

> Encourage you more really to look into courses, go and visit unis. They didn't do anything like that. They didn't try to find out what your interests were, or how to explore your own interests. They were very much, stick with the basics, do science or maths or English, and everything else they sort of put you off doing.

Similarly, both Rebecca and Simon felt that they had not fully understood the role of a BioMedical Scientist. They realised they were not alone when they ran a session for the following year's intake at their university, as Rebecca described:

> Because Simon asked them a question, 'what does a Bio-scientist do?', and the answers were so far off from what they actually do. But that was the same for me, last year. I hadn't got a clue, so somewhere they're being misleading.

As Rebecca's comment implies, it is not obvious how students can acquire these understandings until they get to university. One suggestion in the data was the importance of information from peers and a reliance on finding out for oneself. Here, students reported they felt decisions were made best when they were made through independent research, based in personal interests and ambitions and upon trusted sources of advice. As Louise admitted there were drawbacks to finding out for yourself:

> I think in the long run it's worked out, but it's meant that I've taken the long way round to get here than what I suppose most people would have taken.

Here are echoes of the fragility and contingent nature of decision making seen in Chapter Four. Students absorb understandings about themselves and their place in higher education

through messages from teachers and have to work out their value for themselves. It was only through personal experience that they were able to do this.

5.3   Learning about university life

Another theme in the data was a failure of guidance in schools and colleges to inform applicants what university was 'really like' and how information came best from existing students who spoke from experience (Foskett et al 2004; Moogan et al 1999). There was the sense that applicants were given a partial story from institutional guidance that did not always include information they felt would have been useful, such as what social activities were on offer or what teaching was actually like at the university. Helen described how this aspect was missing:

> Just maybe having outside speakers in, from university, to give you a broader picture of university life, rather than just working at university, because not so much for vocational courses but for regular degrees, I think there's a lot of extra curricular stuff that they don't teach you at school.

Given the differences between institutions, it is difficult to see how future participants can be given more specific advice and it is unsurprising that students learn most through experiences. Students had to find out information for themselves, usually through trial and error over a period of time. However, there were examples of students being more proactive in researching the broader picture. The use of student-led, web based fora had helped Veronica to research her choice of course. In particular, she emphasised the insider knowledge that these offered her:

> I was able to find out from students that belong in certain schools how the lecturing is, what the quality of the lecturing is really like, how hard they found some of the modules, and about budgeting and all these different things. Things like that really give you a perspective, and tell you about the environment that you are going to be studying in.

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What the student data revealed was participants' limited understanding of what university life would be like but recognition that this was not something that could easily be provided by schools and colleges. What students wanted was evidence from existing students that addressed their concerns and did not present an institutional view, designed to show the institution in a positive light, as Veronica had found:

> Personally, a lot of the things that universities did, where they have people from university come to talk to you, those things, they're just formalities, but it doesn't really give you an idea of what the university will really be like. Because many of them come, but they are just sales people, they are just there to sell all the good parts of it.

In other words, students wanted a realistic vision of what university life would be like, from credible sources that had actually experienced it. What they received were limited examples of formal information focussing on particular aspects. However, that raises the question of what 'university life' means.

5.3.1   Realistic visions of student life

The varied ways students engage in social activities at university have been described elsewhere (Christie et al 2008; Keane 2008). All the participants in this study apart from Samuel discussed what they saw as stereotypical images of student life, which in their view centred around drinking, clubbing and partying, discussed by Helen below:

> I think the stereotypical view of students is that they're going out, clubby, drinking, you know, don't get out of bed until 11, 12, that sort of thing? Just very sort of relaxed, make up your day as you go along and spend a lot of time doing leisure activities because when you only do 12 hours a week, you have got that time to fill.

She went on to describe how these images left her having to find her own balance:

> To be honest, I'm not one for the typical student – the clubbing and the drinking and everything ... I do go out occasionally, but my social life is quite internal. I tend to

socialise with a few nursing pals and things like that. …Some people have found it very difficult to get the balance this year. They're either concentrating too much on work or too much on play. It's a skill that you learn. I think the first year is learning all about how to balance life at university. Because it is a bit surreal. It's not normal.

None of the students saw themselves fitting the stereotype, either because of their maturity or because the demands of their course were such that time was too pressured. This left students falling back on their own ways of socialising. Rebecca and Simon discussed this in their first year:

Rebecca: Yes, there is the whole stereotype of being a student. It is something that I really don't like, I avoid going to the student union bar, or hanging out in the student-y environment. Because it's so false, to me, you can see people acting the way they think they should be acting as students, fitting into that category, instead of just doing whatever it is that they want to do. So I try to avoid that as much as I can.

I: It feels as though that stereotype is actually quite strong. I mean quite a few people have said that they don't want…

Rebecca: I couldn't believe how strong it was, the freshers' fair was so stereotypical of what they think students want, but we just walked through and thought, well this is rubbish.

Simon: The thing is, I don't belong, I'm a peer, because I'm a student, but I don't belong to that peer group so I can't be pressurised by any of it.

The lack of identification with these stereotypes was evident in Louise's description of how she gave up being a student representative:

I was student rep last year, I'm not now, I've taken a back step from that, but we don't tend to go to the Guild and do the nights out very much. We've done a few, and it's been a bit of a flop really, so, whether it's, we've discussed, whether it's our age, or stuff, we don't do all like the drinking and getting slaughtered that maybe they do…

In this study, students both young and more mature rejected the stereotypical images of student life and described them as unhelpful and misleading. The emphasis placed on these images meant that students described being unprepared for student life and not knowing how to take the opportunities on offer. For example, Helen had found her first experience of higher

education to be unsettling, because she felt she did not belong in the environment where everyone was 'expected' to adhere to particular norms:

> I think my last university experience was really unnerving because you are thrown into a situation where you know what is the 'cool' thing to do, you know that the university life generally, the view is that as a student you party hard and you drink a lot and you have a big social circle, and I think if you don't fit into that, I think university can be really unnerving.

The nursing students rejected it in part because their timetables were such that the hedonistic lifestyle of Helen's description would not be possible because of placements demanding shift work, course work requirements whilst working on placement and disrupted patterns of working. Regular commitments to university clubs and societies were difficult as Jane described:

> Just because I think being a student nurse is very different from being your typical uni student. A lot of the time they're in uni for two, maybe three days a week and then they've got the rest of the time to do whatever, get drunk, whatever crazy students do! Whereas with nursing when you're at uni you're there five times a week, most days it's all day, and then obviously when you're on placement you're working full time.

Students' living arrangements reflected their concerns about work taking precedence over study as they described how halls of residence had interfered with their ability to concentrate on work:

> Initially to make friends, they were really good, and I would still recommend them if you're starting somewhere, because otherwise, it's quite difficult to make friends on the course, because you just go to lectures and that's it, until you start doing little group activities it's quite difficult. But halls, it was a problem, them coming in at 4 o clock in the morning, playing, I mean, fine if you want to go out, that's great, or if you want to sit in the kitchen doing whatever, but you know, just turn it down a notch, because I've got to be up at 9 o clock, and don't play on your Playstation screaming at 6 o clock in the morning.. (Rebecca)

In contrast, living at home provided Jane with an atmosphere conducive to study, away from distractions:

Yes, just because I probably wouldn't have got qualifications if I wasn't at home! I suppose it just takes the pressures off you. Obviously if you've moved out and you're renting you've got all the pressures of bills and shopping, and a million other things like that and if you're in student houses with other people they might be having a party, you've got an early shift the next day, and you're trying to sleep and obviously that doesn't happen at home!

Veronica, on the other hand, had found living in student accommodation off-campus problematic and had moved back into halls where she felt she was more able to focus:

I lived in the campus as well, so it really helped me if I'd got tired I could always escape and go back to my room. But I always tried to push myself and, OK, I'm not going to my room, I'm going to stay here all night, I'm actually going to study, and then in the morning I'd go, sleep, for a bit, and then go to my lectures.

Simon and Rebecca had both experienced their induction programme at university as patronising as it seemed to rely on expectations of 'student behaviour' that did not relate to their expectations, as Simon described:

When they set up Freshers' Fairs I don't think it's that appealing or interesting. It's a bit tacky to be honest. And I think if things are a bit more cultured and thought-provoking, then that would be of more benefit. Instead of saying, here's the stuff that you're already doing and you can have some more of that, why not say, well here's something that will open your eyes?

He went on to describe how he experienced a dominant portrayal within the university of unhelpful stereotypes of students:

I know that the university powers that be have ideas about what they think students like, and what they want, but I think they are quite often wrong. … I don't think that they think they are grown up enough.

The combination of publicity and guidance seemed to have left the students with confused understandings of what student life might be like. Relying on stereotypical images which these students did not relate to, meant they felt unprepared for the social world they were entering and that shaped their experience of the institution throughout their course. Students

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reported they would have preferred a broader introduction to student life, based on peer experiences and guidance on exploring social engagement away from the stereotype of clubbing, drinking and partying that they had absorbed from school, college, the media and from their new institutions.

5.4   Preparation for university teaching and learning

So far, data presented have shown how prior education and informal stereotypes developed students' understandings of what life at university would be like. A key research question concerned the impact of educational background on students as they moved through higher education. One aspect of this was how students felt their education and work backgrounds had prepared them for the teaching methods, study requirements and assessment processes at university. Students entered university through diverse routes, experiencing teaching and study patterns that helped prepare them in different ways for university learning. They experienced various patterns of support and this left them with expectations of university teaching which were not always accurate. The data are discussed below in relation to the qualifications students studied for prior to university to highlight the differences in preparation.

5.4.1   A Levels: spoon-feeding and shock

The four students who came to university from A Level backgrounds described their experiences as more disrupted than those entering from Access courses or the International Baccalaureate. Although they said their schools had made reference to different expectations, and in some cases teachers were reported to have altered their teaching to reflect those expectations, students described their shock during their first year at university (Christie et al 2008). Particular issues faced related to what they described as the speed of learning required,

the independent nature of learning and the academic conventions of essay writing and referencing. As students progressed through their courses they were able to reflect on how little they felt their A Levels had prepared them for learning at university.

Carol provides an example of this shock and confusion. She had come from a state school sixth form having gained A levels in Psychology (Grade A), Biology (C) and an AVCE in Health and Social Care (A). Although drawing on her Biology knowledge to cope with the Physiology component of her course, she found the teaching methods in her first year to be very different from school. She found the pace of teaching difficult:

> You'd get one lecture on the brain and then that was it, and I was thinking, well aren't we going to do this for a bit longer? Normally in college, you'd have a whole month to do just one subject or something, and you got one lecture. It was quite shocking.

At the end of her first year, Carol described her perception of the difference between the ways she learnt at school and at university. In particular she felt she was being given less guidance on what her teachers expected than she had been used to at school. It has been argued that the dominance of assessments in education has encouraged an expectation of teacher-led 'spoon-feeding' (Dunford 2010), and this seemed to be evident in the way Carol described being taught:

> It's quite different. It is more, kind of, handed out on a plate, in a way. Especially with psychology, everything they taught you was designed for the exam, and they would say 'right, this is going to be on the exam, so you have to learn it', and at university it's much more your own learning, and in your own time and everything, so that was a step up from school, definitely.

At university, Carol drew heavily on her family's experience in higher education to help her understand what was needed, particularly as she came to write essays. She had expected to be given support from her teachers as she had been used to at school. There was just one instance she could recall when her school teacher set an assignment that would encourage

additional, independent research, which at the time seemed incomprehensible to her but which she now understood after her first year at university:

> I had one tutor who always said he wasn't going to tell us everything, he said the people who deserved As would go away and learn it for themselves, and I didn't understand at the time, because I thought if it's going to be on the exam, you should teach it us, it's not fair! And he said, when he set us tests in the past, I've thrown in a couple of questions that if you haven't done further reading, you won't be able to answer, and he said I think that's fair, you probably don't! And at the time I kind of hated him for it and I couldn't understand it. But now, I get it. He was in that kind of higher learning mindset and I wasn't quite there.

Carol reflected on how prepared she had been for learning at university when she was nearing completion of her course. She repeated that she had not been well prepared, a sentiment expressed by other A Level students in the study. The differences between school and university learning are summed up by Carol:

> It was quite, a fairly good school, but it's just a completely different way of learning and it's a different environment and your classes are only 50 minutes or an hour, and they go over everything, you know, the curriculum is done to death, whereas at university if you didn't get it the first time, you didn't go to your lecture, it's your own fault.

Louise experienced a sense of shock in her first experience of higher education and overcoming this shock helped her to know what to expect this time around:

> The shock is that you are not being spoon fed anything. They don't tell you 'well you definitely need to do this,' 'you definitely need to do that'. You're given your assignment and that's it, just go off and do it, and you're kind of left that and it's 'oh, what do I do?'. I think that was the biggest shock of all. That was really, really terrible. Once you get used to the fact that you have got to go out, you have got to find out your own stuff, do your own research and things, then you're fine.

Where the A Level students could recall teaching strategies that had helped to prepare them for university, they tended to come at the end of A Levels and focussed on encouraging independent research work or developing specific skills, such as note-taking. For example,

Helen who attended a private secondary school, described these two aspects but questioned the extent to which schools could prepare students for university teaching:

> I think my school is very good in the last four months of my last year, they did a lot more independent learning, so they encouraged me to go away after lessons and research things and read a lot more. It got a lot busier because you had your regular lessons, but then they made you go and do the kind of skills you would need and also taking notes, they made me take notes verbatim to try to get me used to that. Generally though, I don't think schools, I don't know whether it is because schools can't do it, but I think they don't do enough of it, actually, preparing you. I don't know how they would, to be honest, I can't think actually, how easy that would be. But those two things were definitely really useful.

However, these were felt to have been taught as an afterthought, not embedded in the curriculum or required in day to day learning. There was more evidence of preparation for some aspects of higher education teaching and learning where students had come through non-A Level routes to university.

5.4.2   International Baccalaureate: Knowing what to expect.

Where students reported being well-prepared for university teaching and learning, it was clear that this related to how they had been taught previously and the expectations their teachers had had of them. In particular, fostering an expectation of independence in learning was seen as critical, (Wingate 2007; Gamache 2002) as was a more collegial relationship with teachers than the A Level students had described. Jane had studied the International Baccalaureate at a local state sixth form college. She described her school as being 'very good' at promoting independent learning and her lessons as having been more like seminars. She had been expected to write extended essays and had project weeks at school when she was expected to research around her topic and produce lengthy essays, more akin to those expected at university. Jane felt that the other aspects of her course, the community service and the breadth of the curriculum for example, had given her a 'broader view' which helped her to

understand the broader social and political context at university too. The informal relationship she described with her teachers seemed to be part of the institutional culture of her Sixth Form College. Jane was convinced her course offered her something different and by the end of her first year at university she was able to reflect:

> My transition from post-16 into university, I haven't had any massive changes I had to deal with, with how I learn and how I've done my work. It's been very much the same, just obviously to a higher degree.

And as she compared herself to the other, A level students in her class she felt that she had been better prepared:

> It's just that some of the people at the beginning of the year were really unsure of how to do their essays and everything. And these were not just obviously mature students who hadn't been in education for a while, because it's quite understandable them worrying about stuff, but some of the A Level students were like, 'oh, I never had to do this'. And I would have thought that they had to do essays in A Level.

By the end of her course Jane reflected that asking questions in class was not a problem because that was what she had been encouraged to do at Sixth Form College:

> If I disagreed with something, I would normally comment and say and put my point across just because that was similar to how it was in school. In some of our lessons at school it was quite similar.

The expectation for independent research, writing extended essays up to 4,000 words and contributing to academic discussion in the classroom seemed to be features that Jane recorded as helping her to adjust to university.

5.4.3   Access courses: shared endeavours

The other route to university experienced by students in this study was preparation for Higher Education Access courses. Rebecca, Simon and Samuel came to university from local Access courses and described being expected to read around their topics, contribute to classroom

discussions and use a range of sources to analyse critically.

They considered themselves to have been well prepared in comparison with their A Level counterparts, as Rebecca described:

> They'll come out of a lecture and go, 'I don't know what he was talking about! I don't know why I'm doing this. They expect us to know!' but they tell you that you are reading for a degree, you've got to do so much research on your own, and there does seem some who are quite negative, whereas I expect that I'm not going to know everything, that I need to go and read.

As well as expectations for learning independently from the teacher, the Access course students had found the focus on understanding different ways of learning (such as visual, kinetic, etc) to be useful, as well as specific skills development such as note-taking, reading, essay writing and critical analysis:

> Simon: The English, because it was English, Maths, Biology and Chemistry. The English tutor was a real top bloke. He knew what was required to prepare us to go to university, so that when we got here it would be a seamless switch.
>
> Rebecca: Yes, it wasn't so much an actual English class, it was essay writing skills. Preparation, note taking, preparation, that kind of thing, to prepare you for the university style of learning. More of us reading a book, and that.
>
> Simon: When I went into the Access course I'd been out of education for a long, long time. I wasn't aware of the way that teaching methods have changed. And they have changed a lot. But the thing is, teaching methods nowadays are so much better than when I was at school, and it was kind of, wow, if this had been how it is now, if it had been like that when I was at school, I would have benefitted from this a lot.

By the end of her second year, Rebecca recalled the value of her Access course as she moved on to university:

> The Access course, it teaches you to do independent learning, that if you want to know something, you have to go and get a book and read. Whereas, I was thinking this the other day, why I didn't do that well in my GCSEs, was because I thought, if I don't know it, then I don't know it. I would never have gone to the library and got a book and read it. At school, they tell you the stuff and that's all you know. You don't think ooh, if I read a book I could learn a bit more about that..

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For Samuel, the content of the Access course was useful at university:

> From what I gather from other Access courses the other Access courses are spoon fed, research is spoon fed. We weren't. We were, 'Right, this is the area that you need to study', we were given some reading lists, and told, 'and there's the internet and you can use it from the library, and you need between ten and twelve per thousand words.' It was hard. But the first two or three modules from the Social Work course, 50% of the research was used from the Access course. It was directly relevant.

Samuel also explained how the Access course he attended had raised his expectations of himself as a potential undergraduate but his experience once at university did not meet those expectations:

> You stride through the Access course, you get to uni thinking oh, I've really got to step up loads, and to be honest, the Access course that I did prepared me to be a C/B student. And the transition in the first year was not that great.

The ethos of shared inquiry described by students on the Access course meant they supported each other through their studies, creating a culture that Rebecca described in her second year:

> We wanted everyone to get through and pass it. So if someone didn't know something and someone else did, we'd go off and help each other.

However, the small group learning, based on mutual help and encouragement created tensions for the students once they studied at university. Rebecca and Simon came from the same Access course onto the same BioMedical Sciences course at university. They had brought their experiences of shared studying, where students met informally and discussed their work, sharing resources and ideas, and tried to replicate that model at university where group work was often required. They had met with resistance from the younger students who worried about plagiarism and preferred to work individually. Rebecca and Simon found this lack of mutual endeavour frustrating.

At university, work was described as 'group working' but in Simon and Rebecca's experience

this meant students worked individually and then brought their work to be presented together. In contrast, on the Access course, students had studied together, discussed their interpretations and worked in close proximity. Group working therefore had a different meaning in the two settings.

However, as she moved through her university course, Rebecca began to experience greater frustration with working in groups, preferring by the end of her third year to work by herself:

> I think I just took it all more seriously. I think that I might have grown up a little bit in the last year, as well. Just thought, this is actually about me, doing it for myself. Not relying on anyone else to get me through it.

Rebecca, Simon and Samuel described how their Access courses focussed on developing reflective practice in understanding different ways of learning and skills development which were appropriate to university learning and provided a supportive framework within which students felt able to share their understandings. This meant that when they came to university, they were not shocked at the expectations placed upon them, they had skills upon which to build and they understood how they needed to study. It did, however, foster expectations of a degree of shared learning which was not replicated at university.

5.5 Prior experiences and knowledge

Preparation for university does not happen solely in schools and colleges. Students discussed what other knowledge and experiences they brought to university, either in relation to understanding subject matter (predominantly the younger students) or in life skills such as communication and confidence (reported more frequently amongst mature students).

Two of the nursing students described having had family members suffering prolonged periods of ill health, or of experiencing it themselves. Drawing upon their experiences, they

said they were able to contextualise what they were taught at university, in particular thinking

about what they were learning from the patient's perspective. A third nursing student, Helen,

had worked as a care assistant and this she said had given her a good grounding for her

university course:

> Because I worked as a health care assistant, a lot of the skills we've learned I'd
> already learned them. I actually think the way I learned them was better than in a
> classroom setting.

These experiences seemed to have given the students another source of knowledge they were

able to draw upon to understand what they were being taught in university. Other students

described how experience in the workplace had given them interpersonal skills upon which

they drew to help them interact socially in the classroom and beyond. For Rebecca, these

included communication skills developed in years as a retail assistant:

> I've worked with the public for so long, I've got good communication skills with a
> variety of people. If we were in little groups, I suppose it's easier to explain things
> and work together.

In Simon's case, experience of running a business and relating to the public on a daily basis

and Samuel's experiences of over twenty years in industry had given them some knowledge

about workplace expectations. Samuel described how he translated his life experiences into

knowledge he could draw upon and relate to his social work training:

> They say that there is no substitute for experience, but it's a new experience that
> you're going into. But all you do is you use the same coping type mechanisms that
> you've built up, and then you transfer them to the course. Certainly some of the A
> Level students who came from school have continued to struggle, in the social work
> environment.

However, Samuel found some of his experiences and expectations of working practices were

not helpful and he had to learn new, unfamiliar ways of relating to people. In particular, ways

of negotiating differences were new and this meant Samuel learning new codes of conduct to

suit the social work context. Describing the way in which conflict in industry was dealt with he explained:

> However, they're much more up front, they are much more confrontational, they are settled within days, or hours, or a couple of minutes face to face where you go somewhere, you shut the door and you shout at each other, or whatever, or you voice your opinion, free and open. Somebody disagrees with you, and then you come to some sort of compromise. You don't do that in this environment, because you would be accused of being aggressive, abusive, a bully.

What the mature students described suggested that life experiences, particularly gained in the workplace, seemed to offer them some strategies and knowledge from which they could draw in understanding and negotiating their learning. They were able to locate the expectations they faced within a broader context of workplaces cultures and experiences but sometimes had to learn new ways of negotiation.

5.6   Knowing your subject

The value of prior subject knowledge was also discussed. Students' descriptions ranged from seeing it as an essential for coping with the demands of their degree course, to those who saw it as more important to develop the generic skills needed for learning at this higher level. The nursing students felt that recent, prior learning in Biology was important to build upon in their first year lectures in Physiology where there was a large amount of information to be understood in a short space of time. Jane's description contrasts with that of Louise:

> I had some knowledge, but a lot of people, they hadn't done any type of Biology so they were like, what?! Because (teacher) brought us in quite slowly at first, and then built up, the knowledge on it, so he brought in sort of GCSE level and built it up. Whereas the other lady, she was just sort of, higher, more degree level stuff. ... You can't just get Biology like that. It's very complex! (Jane)

> A lot of lecturers say "No matter what your question is, it can't be stupid, it can't be wrong" which is really reassuring when you first start, because especially for me in

Bioscience I didn't do an A-level, so I don't know a lot of those things. So for me to feel that I can ask and not feel like it is a silly question is really reassuring. (Louise)

Some students also reported drawing upon their learning at school or college, referring back to notes taken, in helping them to understand university lectures. However, as time went on, students described the importance of prior subject knowledge as diminishing, as they developed their understanding. Prior subject knowledge offered students a grounding in and familiarity with technical terminology which helped them to develop further knowledge.

5.7   A model for pre-entry undergraduate identity

Upon entry to university, students had varying capacities upon which they drew, dependent on access to different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1997), including embodied and institutionalised cultural capital, both deeply rooted in self and formed by adherence to particular norms and rules of previous establishments. Their identities at this point in time were shaped by different life experiences. In this study, three models emerged of undergraduate identity on entry to university: un-mediated, partially mediated and extensively mediated. In this context, 'mediation' is used to describe the influence of different educational experiences upon identity and draws upon the work of Dewey (1963[1938]).

Participants in the study who came to university straight from school at the age of 18 or 19 had experienced formal education primarily in the context of school and post-16 college. They were well practised in school learning, and were used to a considerable degree of teacher support and direction in their studies. Their education had been recently validated through successful completion of Level 3 qualifications; this led them to have expectations of success. Although they were likely have experienced informal learning at home or in part-time employment, their pre-undergraduate identities had, in the main, developed in a formal

educational setting. They were young adults. Their decision to enter university was made alongside peers following similar educational routes and therefore represented little break with their 'normal' biographies (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). Their identity is described as un-mediated to reflect the strength of influence of their formal educational experience, and the single context within which their formal education had taken place. This is not to deny the other influences such as family or friendships.

A number of participants had previously studied in higher education, but changed educational direction, either switching courses or embarking on a second undergraduate course. These students therefore had some experience of learning in higher education. They understood the learning expectations at university but had either found they did not fit into the environment or else their aspirations had changed. They varied in their familiarity with the norms of university life and had some understanding of academic conventions, teaching approaches and assessment processes. Some had disrupted undergraduate experiences, often in another subject area, and under particular social conditions. In the main they had successful educational experiences, and had been exposed to some form of university life. Their pre-undergraduate identity is described as 'partially mediated', because it reflects that exposure while recognising the limited exposure they had had to other experiences of education (in higher education) and possibly the workplace. They too were young adults. They had, however, taken decisions which set them apart from their previous university peers who either continued on original courses or moved into the workplace following completion of their course.

Finally, some participants were mature students returning to study after prolonged periods in the workplace. They had distant memories of school education and often their experiences

there were described as difficult and unsuccessful. They had extensive experiences in the workplace and family commitments and had experience of acting independently and carrying different responsibilities. As well as formal educational experience on Access courses they had experience of learning within the workplace and other contexts. They had often had to make significant decisions to enter higher education (Fuller and Heath 2010), which impacted on other aspects of their lives and broke with their anticipated biographies and those of their peers. Their pre-undergraduate identities are described as 'extensively mediated' to reflect the multiple learning contexts and influences they had been subjected to, over extended periods of time.

These terms are not intended to imply exclusive or definitive categories into which students should be squeezed, but are utilised to delineate some of the differences in pre-undergraduate identities evident in this study. The diagram below summarises those differences and illustrates the model.

So in this study, students arrived at university with a range of pre-undergraduate identities, developed in different settings, drawing on different forms of capital. Some faced greater academic and social challenges and some carried greater family and work responsibilities. They found themselves in a new field and the relationship between habitus and field was disrupted. This raises the question: how do universities (and students within them) then reconcile their identity as learner with their new environment?

Table 1: A model for pre-undergraduate identities

Un-mediated pre-undergraduate identities	Partially mediated pre-undergraduate identities	Extensively mediated pre-undergraduate identities
Formal learning has taken place primarily in one setting: school or sixth form college.	Formal learning has taken place primarily in school but also in higher education for a (limited) period.	Formal learning has taken place in multiple settings: school, the workplace and in college on Access course.
Successful learning at school characterised by qualification at Level 3.	Successful learning at school and subsequent University study.	Distant memories of school as difficult and uncomfortable, partially restored by success on Access course.
Participation seen as part of normal biography.	Participation seen as part of normal biography but disrupted and different from that of peers.	Participation requires a change in biography, different from peers, often at some cost to immediate family as well as self.
Familiar with teacher-led education, used to authority from others.	Some understanding of university academic norms and expectations of independent learning.	Experiences in a range of education and training contexts, used to support on Access course, with some experience of managing others in the workplace.

5.8   Summary

Students prepare for university study both in schools and colleges and through their experiences of life in a broader context. The students in this study who came straight from school had been disappointed by the support their schools had given them in preparing for university. There was a contrast between the descriptions from mature students of unhelpful memories of school and those from others who came from schools with expectations of participation.

Students from all backgrounds expressed concerns at stereotypical images of what being a student would be like and would have preferred realistic information, drawn from trusted sources based on first-hand experiences.

Students from A Level courses described being taught in ways they felt had not prepared them for independent study and reported a shock in the transition to university teaching methods. Prior life and work experiences offered a useful form of knowledge upon which students were able to draw to help them to understand the context of their subject matter. Prior subject knowledge seemed to offer familiarity with technical language and building blocks upon which students were able to build their university learning.

The findings described in this chapter address the research question concerning the impact of educational background in student success and some of the students' early experiences of transition into university, contributing to an understanding of the research question concerning adaptation to university. They reveal the impact of previous educational biographies on students and how this impacts on their feeling of legitimate belonging in higher education. Education left students with differing understandings of the rules of the game of higher education (Crozier et al 2010) and students relied on different forms of capital (Bourdieu 1997) to help them adapt. This had implications for how they saw themselves as undergraduate learners.

The next two chapters consider how students progressed through university. They present what students had to say about their academic and social experiences during their three year courses, drawing on descriptions of initial transition experiences and reflective data towards the end of their studies.

6.   Chapter Six: Academic experiences at university

6.1   Introduction

The next two chapters describe the students' experiences as they moved through undergraduate study, from their first to third years. The first chapter describes their formal educational experiences and the second describes the social networks students drew upon to sustain them through their studies. These themes emerged from the data and seemed to fit with the concepts of academic and social integration (Rhodes and Nevill 2004). Academic integration refers to how a student relates to the academic demands made upon them and to teaching, assessment and related practices. Social integration refers to the relationships and support networks that help the student to feel a part of an academic community. Both are important in understanding what constitutes a successful university experience.

6.2   Academic Integration

In this thesis, an understanding of academic integration incorporates the idea that learning is a social activity which happens not only within a 'learning culture' (James and Biesta 2007) but in a space bounded by hierarchies and rules (Bernstein 1996) that require negotiation and assimilation. Students need to learn how to be students in higher education, to learn the rules of the field (Bourdieu 1990a) and they do so individually and in groups. Although they are new to the field, their teachers are well versed in the rules, indeed they are the 'regulators' of the field and therein lies the imbalance in power. Relationships need to be negotiated, but the space for negotiation will vary for every teacher the student encounters. Key factors within the learning space are likely to include the subject discipline, the teacher and their practice,

norms, regulations and expectations of the institution, and the coherence and experiences of the group as well as the student's willingness and ability to negotiate.

Students, particularly in the first year, are thus engaged in a constant re-negotiation of the teacher: student relationship and this has implications for their sense of self as learner.

The focus of this chapter is on how students described academic integration, presenting data on four elements of academic practice at university: teaching, assessment, studying and learning. These elements reflect the different aspects of university education that the students described and what they felt were the outcomes of their experiences. The complexity of the educational experience is often overlooked within literature that tends to use the language of 'teaching and learning', so they are broken down further here, recognising that the four elements overlap and should ideally form a cohesive, integrated whole. In this context, the term 'teaching' is used to refer to students' contact time with their teachers, both in university and on placements. It may be in lectures, seminars or one to one. Some use was made of virtual learning environments, but all units in all courses involved some direct contact time with teachers. 'Assessment' refers to those formal tasks students undertake to meet the requirements of the university course, as formative or summative tasks and sometimes to meet professional bodies' specifications for academic and professional competence. These include examinations, structured writing tasks, competence based tests, class presentations and placement assessments. 'Study' describes the work students do, which is course related, but not directly supervised by the teacher. This includes reading, making notes, independent research, undertaken alone or with other students, on campus, at home or elsewhere. 'Learning' refers to the outcomes of formal teaching, assessment and studying undertaken, but may also include the outcomes of informal activities outside the classroom. Learning may

involve the acquisition of factual knowledge, or it may be subjective and tentative, part of a web of understanding and knowledge. It may be obvious how and where we have learnt something or it may be something that has come from a range of activities or sources, built up over time. It may refer to information gained or to developing understandings of the world. For the purposes of this discussion, learning means what the students describe as their understandings both of subject, themselves and working practices within their field of study.

6.3 Teaching

This section focuses on how the students discussed formal, teacher-led experiences, beginning with the classroom setting. Here they talked about the importance of enthusiastic teaching, of passion for subject and those teachers who go beyond the standard presentation of facts. They discussed the value of being taught in small groups and how they sometimes found learning in large group lectures problematic. The preference for teachers linking their subject to practice was a recurring theme and there were issues about formal supervision arrangements on placements. In early interviews, students described being unwilling to contribute to classroom discussions, but as they progressed and began to understand the 'rules of engagement' they described feeling more comfortable in class and enjoying greater interaction between students and teachers. There was also a growing realisation that the teaching that went on in the classroom was part of a much broader picture of practice based learning and independent study, guiding and supplementing other work rather than being the sole source of knowledge.

6.3.1 Enthusiastic teaching

The most frequent, theme throughout the students' descriptions of teaching was that of the desirability for teachers to be 'enthusiastic' in their classroom behaviour and 'passionate' about their subject. This was seen as one way of compensating for large group, didactic

teaching in lectures. I sought to understand what they meant by this enthusiasm and to elicit examples of how this was evidenced in practice. Three characteristics were commonly referred to: the inclusion of more than just what was contained in a PowerPoint presentation; including personal anecdotes and additional stories; and the notion of a 'performance', or an animated presentational style. Participants suggested that when the teacher added in further detail it implied that they were engaged in the subject and were keen enough to have done some additional work in preparing the lecture. While all teachers are likely to have prepared more than simply a PowerPoint presentation, the inclusion of anecdotes and additional material convinced the students that this preparation had been done. It was the additional material students remembered in particular, suggesting that they preferred a teaching style that included both PowerPoint and personal intervention. This perhaps served as a good model for the studying that teachers expected of their students. It demonstrated to the students that the teacher had a broad understanding of the subject, as Veronica described at the end of her first year:

> When you have a teacher with a lot of passion for what he does, he goes into it a little bit deeper, he starts exploring other ideas that the slide doesn't have, so talking about personal experience, using theoretical side of things, looking at the practical side, looking at things that are happening right now in the markets you know, he talks like he reads about it everyday.

The inclusion of personal anecdotes recurred in other interviews and seemed to show the students a personal engagement with the subject matter and a willingness by the teacher to break down some of the barriers felt in the classroom. For example, Simon, used to a more informal, small group teaching environment on the Access course, described how the inclusion of personal anecdotes and examples from professional practice helped him to feel more comfortable in their first year:

> Why is that good? Because you relate to him. If he shares a personal thing with you, all of a sudden, you're on his level.

Students focussed on the personality of their teachers, and the need for teachers to be lively, energetic and animated in class. For some, this was reflected in body language as well as voice, helping to keep students' attention. Simon described how for him, teachers needed to have 'presence' in the classroom:

> It's the presence of that person. I've had lectures I've been in, and the guy is very animated, very expressive and demands your attention and it kind of wakes people up. I think that nodding off and being bored, losing focus and attention is something that rubs off and if one person starts to drift away, it spreads. You've got to imagine it as if you are performer, giving a performance.

For Rebecca, this animated physical style of teaching signified a passion about the subject that helped to keep her interest:

> Passion, and such a knowledge of their subject that they… there' s one guy and he runs up and down the room, he's jumping up and down on chairs to point at a picture for you. And his hands will go ,.. it's their body language, you can tell, he loves it.

The use of PowerPoint differed amongst the teachers described. What students felt to be an over reliance on PowerPoint slides or use of slides as a script was deeply unpopular. Students in both universities and across subjects wanted to know that when they came to a lecture they were going to learn more than something on the written page, so when teachers simply read what was on the slide they felt their time had been wasted and their interest in the subject waned. For example, Jane reported on one lesson that she had sat in:

> We've had one lecturer, she gave a slideshow of 50 to 70 slides and she just read through them. You can't do slideshows like that and expect to keep the attention of the students, because it's just so boring, you might as well have just printed it off and I could have read through it myself.

Equally, there were examples of students remembering particular slides to help them understand topics, such as the BioMedical Sciences teacher who used graphic slides of injuries to show the students examples of what he was lecturing about.

6.3.2   Class sizes, or small is beautiful

The number of students in the classroom seemed to be an issue of concern and related to how participants felt able to ask or answer questions and to share their own experiences. Whether students came from schools or colleges, none had experienced the kind of large lecture hall teaching they faced at university. They described feeling unable to contribute to the lecture, intimidated to ask questions and worried about falling behind or not understanding what was being taught, as Jane described in her final year interview:

> When you're in a large group, say there's 100 people in the lecture theatre, you're just one person and sometimes people don't want to raise their hand and give their opinion. … some people are very much lecturers and they just talk and talk and talk. They don't leave space for questions, but in our smaller groups it's a lot easier to just raise our concerns or our opinions or just comment on things.

Participants described how some teachers seemed to control how students could ask questions, both overtly by requesting that students wait until the end of the lecture before asking questions, and implicitly by their behaviour in response to questions where students reported teachers showing signs of irritation at being interrupted. Rebecca described how some teachers manage their classroom:

> But a lot of the time the lecturers don't appreciate being stopped in the middle of their thing. They want questions at the end, or when they say 'have you got any questions?' Some of them aren't that keen on you shouting out, or putting your hand up.

Teachers may have good reason to manage interaction in this way, when they have a great deal of information to get through for example, but the students described experiencing this as irritation with the interruption, as Jane recounted:

> The one we've got at the moment, she seems a bit taken aback sometimes when people ask questions. I wanted to ask a question so I raised my hand and her asking me what I wanted was 'what's the matter?' That's not a very good way to answer an enquiry! And I thought is she not used to teaching?! I asked my question and she looked a bit put off track by the fact that someone had asked a question.

There were examples of students enjoying lectures where there was interaction and for them, a comfortable environment, as Louise described at the end of her first year of nursing training:

> I think all the lectures we have, they're supposed to be formal lectures but they're not. We can ask questions whenever we like and they will kind of veer off the main topic to help us understand things. So they are very kind of laid back and it's very much like the lecturer will have what they want to cover, but they will also take into account what everyone else needs to know and things like that. Which is really, really good. …. I think if you're discussing something, you're just more likely to remember it more. Whereas if you've just got someone in front of you, going through the slides, just 'this, this and this', you kind of switch off, I think.

The advantages students described of being taught in smaller groups centred on feeling comfortable in the class, either through the active participation of students in discussions, or through the more personal relationship that the students felt they had with their teacher.

6.3.3   Comfortable classroom atmospheres

One of the key attributes students described in good teaching was the ability of the teacher to put them at their ease in class. The lecture situation seemed to offer less opportunity for this to happen, although there were examples of what was seen as good practice in lecturing. As well as 'enthusiastic' teaching and the use of humour, students described teachers asking questions of them in class, giving students the opportunity to discuss examples with their peers, being open to students asking questions and encouraging them to make contact with the teacher at

the end of the class to discuss outstanding concerns. Another example that was used by several students was of teachers who were able to create a classroom culture where it was acceptable to be wrong. This was mentioned by five of the eight students in their early interviews as a way of breaking down classroom barriers and encouraging discussion. That reassurance helped to reinforce the notion that students' contributions were valued and that higher education learning concerned the uncertainty of some knowledge where there was not always a simple right or wrong answer. Samuel described the contrasting approaches of his first year social work teachers when he was asked to describe a 'good teacher':

> It's got to be S. She seems to give you the room to make mistakes. And then when you do mistakes, she doesn't jump down your throat. She's 'Well, yeah, but….' And then she'll go on and she'll explain where you might have gone wrong. Whereas other lecturers will go 'oh yes, explain that to me. Explain how that's going to work then!' And you're thinking, 'Well, it's only an idea. I was just saying'.

Students talked about being wary of speaking out in case they were wrong, of not knowing and feeling unable to challenge teachers because of their higher qualifications. As time progressed, descriptions changed and they began to talk more about feeling comfortable in class and knowing their teachers better. Helen, talking in her final year about the benefits of teachers knowing her and the more relaxed atmosphere this created in the classroom, reflected:

> H: When it's more relaxed I feel like I can ask those questions as well, so that's a big thing. If you don't feel you can ask questions that you think they might think are silly, then when it's a more relaxed atmosphere, you can ask those questions.
>
> S: So do you think that has changed? Do you think that you are more likely to ask questions?
>
> H: Yes. Definitely. I wouldn't have challenged people as much as I do now. If I don't understand something, or I'm not happy doing it, I'm much more comfortable saying 'no, I'm not going to do that until you give me the rationale behind it, why I'm doing it.

Creating an informal atmosphere in class helped students to relax and participate in classroom discussions. Early on in their courses this was achieved by some teachers relating to students in specific ways, using first names and an informal style. Later on it centred on what students felt was a more personal relationship as numbers in class diminished and they felt they knew their teachers better, and were themselves better known.

6.3.4   Learning to be a professional

Although students emphasised teaching approaches in their interviews, they also talked about the importance of subject relevance in teaching. Students needed to be able to see the link between what they were being taught and their expectations of the course content. So for the student nurses, it was important they knew how the teaching was going to help them to be better nurses. This was in part evidenced by their preference for lessons taught by outside speakers who worked in a clinical setting. As Helen explained at the end of her second year, these teachers were seen to have credibility, with more up to date knowledge and greater reference to professional practice:

> It feels more relevant because they're not a lecturer who used to nurse. It's almost like you've got a slightly greater respect for them because they're still out in the field doing it. And it's often more relevant information. They are just more focussed on what you actually need to learn and on what you're actually going to need to know when you go and do these things, not all the theory and bumpf behind it. They include that, but it's not so much, it's not so heavy on that side, it's more relevant on what you're actually going to need to do when you're hands on.

All the students reported enjoying practical lessons, either where role play exercises were involved (in Business and Social Work) or in clinical sessions for the nurses and laboratory sessions for the BioMedical Science students. However, students recognised that these lessons were not the same as performing the tasks in the workplace, either in placement settings as part of their course or in external work arrangements. Students reported feeling unprepared

for work at first and regretted not having more realistic practical lessons at university. For example, Simon opted to work on a placement over the summers to gain professional accreditation. He expressed his shock at arriving on his summer elective at the end of his first year:

> When I went to the lab at the end of my first year, it was a revelation! I literally walked into pathology and went 'what the hell's going on here?!' I don't know any of this! I've just done a year's degree course to be one of these people and I have no clue what they're doing.

However, despite this shock, Simon went on to explain that he understood the need to concentrate on theory and ethics in the workplace before being sent into work situations. Other students were less enthusiastic about the work-related elements of their courses. In particular, the nursing students were critical of their Professional Development module, complaining both about its organisation and its ability to deliver what it was designed to do. The nursing students reported feeling patronised and confused about how they were meant to demonstrate the learning outcomes of their module, or whether they needed to spend time learning what they thought they should know in the first place. Typical of these complaints was this from Helen at the end of her first year:

> I can't really see a link, I mean the way that you treat a person, there is a professional way of executing treatment for someone, which comes from an understanding from bioscience, but apart from that. I think it definitely should be covered right from the beginning of a nursing programme but I think there is a lot of weighting put on it and they complicate it.

The students argued that they recognised the need to cover issues of professional behaviour in their university courses but they would only really learn how to behave once they were in the workplace. They seemed to make distinctions between the two settings, seeing the university as the site of theoretical learning which they would then put into practice in the workplace. This raises questions about the place of higher education in teaching 'employability'.

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In the Nursing and Social Work courses, the placement element was designed in part to give

the students the practice they needed as part of their professional body requirements.

Interviewed in her final year Carol explained how she used placement experiences to 'cement'

the knowledge she gained at university:

> I suppose with placements. They've really helped to cement the knowledge in my head. We've learned quite a lot about diabetes from my A Levels, and then in my first year, and you keep picking it up because it's quite a common problem. … You saw all the problems that are in the text books in real life…. I do think of the patients and link it back to the problems. I probably wasn't doing that in my first and second years.

The theme of developing a better understanding of the link between professional practice and

learning was evident in Helen's reflection in her final year on how she had built upon her

knowledge and experiences:

> It's like in your first year you're pretty much just getting a feel for nursing, and then second year you're beginning to acquire things a lot quicker, your skills and your practical elements, and then you get into your third year and people are actually expecting knowledge and skills from you so you begin to really want to go out there and get them, because you know that you're going to be tested on them

Helen made the link with her assignments in her final year, as she was now able to apply her

practical knowledge to her academic work:

> So I think having to draw on my placement experience a bit more is what I'm really passionate about and has helped my grades, so I think my learning has steered its way towards more practical elements rather than academic.

A further example was Rebecca, describing how she made links between her BioMedical

Science practical placement experience and academic work:

> To me, it's associating it with the job at the end of it and not just sitting in a lecture and thinking well this is really great but why am I learning this? When you're actually doing something practical, then that lecture makes sense. They've linked it so the lectures fell into place with the practicals so it all fell into place and it was yeah, a micro-biologist would do this…

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There was a common thread in the data about how students acquired the skills and understandings required by their profession. University teaching that was clearly linked to professional practice was welcomed by all the students in the study where this was current, credible and useful. The example of Professional Development, which the Nursing students seemed to regard as being unhelpful, provided something of a contradiction to this principle. Here, the content of the module did not reflect the students' understandings of how they could best learn to be a professional. Clearly, learning to be a professional was far from simple.

6.3.5   Moving from teacher-led, to teacher-guided

The themes of independence and inter-dependence were apparent in the data, with evidence that as students progressed they learnt to rely more on their own knowledge than that of the teacher. At first, students relied heavily on their teachers for determining both what they needed to know and how they might come to know it. Part of the confusion in their early experiences was when teachers did not perform that role to the extent they expected. However, as they came to know their teachers better, the accounts the students gave of their experiences changed. A typical example was Helen's description of the change she felt in how she interpreted the teaching she experienced:

> It felt more formal, it felt like they were the information givers, they had the 'know', so I just took whatever they said because I was just sucking up whatever I could get. And now I see them for who they are, really. More realistically. So I don't feel as uncomfortable asking them why …

The theme of accepting teachers' expertise in the first year and learning to question later in the course was common, and seemed to relate to students' developing knowledge. Students began to talk more about how they understood where the gaps in their knowledge were, what

they felt they needed to know and how they could best learn this. As Simon reflected in his final year:

> I am looking at first and second year stuff that I'd done. What was I thinking?! What was I thinking?! And I know it's, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't understand the concept of what I was doing. I was being told to follow orders and then trying to interpret it with my limited knowledge.

Students described relying less on lectures, seeing them as an interesting addition to learning rather than the basis for all work. In early interviews, they reported concerns about note-taking skills and whether or not they were able to understand all that had been taught in lectures. This was less of a concern in later years as they understood the need to supplement lectures with self-directed study, as these two extracts from Carol's interviews, in her first and final years illustrate:

> 1st Year: At first I didn't really like the lecture style, because I didn't feel that I took much away from it, in one ear, and then as soon as I walked out of the lecture it had gone, but I think that I got a bit used to it, as time went on.

> Final year: Maybe in the first year I looked to them more to teach and then if I didn't understand something at the end of the lecture, I'd get that sort of panicky feeling thinking 'oh, I don't understand. And they're never going to teach me again', whereas I don't get that now. If I don't understand something in a lecture I think, it doesn't matter. Or if it is important, say it's going to come up in the essay, I know that I've got to research it anyway, you use your lecture notes, and a lot of the time the lecture's helpful at the time, but I never really look back on lecture notes. So, I'd go away and read a book or an article or something anyway. Completely ignore the lecture notes.

They were moving from expecting to be teacher-led in their work to expecting to both supplement the teaching and to move beyond the knowledge contained within it.

6.3.6   Lessons on teaching

This section has described what the students reported about teaching in university and on placement. They reported preferring enthusiastic, passionate teaching, with teachers

'performing' in order to retain the students' interest. What this did in practice was to model an enthusiasm for the subject which then helped to engage the student. Teachers' use of technology in the classroom, particularly PowerPoint, was highlighted, where students were critical of what they saw as an over-reliance on slides to convey the content of lectures. They valued the teacher going beyond this minimum, contributing personal and professional experiences, together with topical additions such as news stories to illustrate the subject. Where teachers were able to establish a rapport with students this seemed to help build a more comfortable atmosphere in class which then encouraged discussion, asking questions and contributing personal knowledge. It was helping the students see their teachers as professional people with knowledge to share, which in turn helped the students move towards a position of greater responsibility and freedom to pursue their own interests within the broader subjects they studied. They also raised issues about where professional behaviour was best learnt and what the links between university and placement-based teaching should be.

6.4   Assessment

Assessment can be seen to have two main purposes: formative assessment is designed to assess the current state of the student's knowledge or ability in order to assist the teacher in planning teaching and the student in understanding how their learning is progressing; summative assessment is designed to reveal what has been learnt or understood as a result of the teaching and studying that has been undertaken. Assessment is not a neutral process and is inextricably linked to power relations between teacher and student (Mann 2008:113). The teacher holds the power to confer accreditation, pass judgement on and determine future progression for the student. The outcome of that judgement influences how students see their academic value, social and economic positioning and their learning. This section presents the data from the study which focused on the impact of assessment. Themes that emerged from

the data included the importance of feedback and the problems associated with it; the importance students placed on the grades they achieved; issues of workload pressures and how students learnt to cope with these; the value of linking assessments to practice and how students managed the dynamics of group assessments. Equity in assessment processes for students with dyslexia is discussed briefly at the end of the section.

6.4.1   The importance of feedback

Where feedback was timely, clear and appropriate students reported learning from the feedback and using the guidance of the marker to improve their study skills and develop their understanding of the subject matter. The most frequent examples of learning from feedback concerned referencing, which most students reported struggling with. This was an example of academic conventions that were unfamiliar and students needed to learn. In their first year interviews this common concern was illustrated by Carol, discussing her confusion about what was expected:

> I did the referencing exactly the same, for four essays, and I got very good for three of them and then unacceptable for one, and I've got to go and speak to my tutor because I'm a bit confused about what I'm doing wrong…… They gave us a web-site for how to do referencing, which is the one I've been using, but it's not the best web-site, it's a bit confusing.

Once they had learnt to reference their sources appropriately, students often reported feeling more able to cope with the demands of the course. However, they were using 'referencing' in two contexts. One was the straight forward academic convention of referencing, which they slowly began to understand using appropriate guides. The other was the need to draw upon multiple sources and to show how they had used them in their work, as Jane described at the end of her second year when she discussed the impact of assessment on her learning:

> ….feedback on assignments, and the fact that most lecturers stress really, really much, you must get your referencing right! And it's because last year I used a lot of web-sites and stuff, which is really quite bad, but I'm reading a lot more now, using journal articles and stuff, which is a lot better than just going to the website.

Receiving positive feedback on work helped to encourage students and sustained them through times of low motivation. Some recalled positive feedback from placement experiences, including from patients, clients and professional staff which served to convince the students that they were doing well. What frustrated them was when feedback from assessments was delayed or deemed insufficient, as Rebecca explained at the end of her second year:

> I think the feedback has been quite poor in the last semester. Especially with the practical reports. We did one, and we didn't get the results for about two months and in the meantime, we'd done about 6 others. So if you've messed the first one up, you sort of need to know before you hand the others in because you've pretty much done them in the same format.

A second issue with feedback reported by two students was apparent inconsistency, particularly where it was felt the advice they had been given before the assignment was contradicted in the feedback received after it. This perception of inconsistency seemed to prevent those students from using the feedback as a learning experience, focussing instead on the *process* of assessment rather than lessons from it. Apparent inconsistency between markers was reported by Carol, in her first year, again in relation to referencing policies:

> The only thing that I'm a bit worried about at the moment is my essay style. I've written a few essays, and I've got OK marks, and they give you feedback, and they've said, you know, it's alright. And then I've got another one and I've pretty much written it exactly the same, and they've said it's not very good, and your referencing style's not very good, you've done it wrong. And so it seems a bit dubious, whoever marks it, it depends what grades you get.

The need for consistency in relation to how students understood the guidance they were given about their assessment requirements was apparent in other interviews too. Samuel, who had

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described being used to specific guidance in his Access course, found he was criticised for not meeting appropriate criteria in his work:

> And some of the marking! When you write the essay to the aims and requirements and they've given you what they want in the lectures, and you write to that criteria, and then when they come to the mark sheet they say you haven't applied this, that, or the other, or you should have included this, that, or the other. And you've got an essay plan off them and they've OK'd your essay plan, and then they mark you with a D. I'm really annoyed at that, and it still goes on!

This was a good example of a student feeling aggrieved at the feedback he received but it was unclear whether this was an inconsistency in his work or in the guidance. Nevertheless, for Samuel it represented an injustice which he chose to highlight rather than the advice he was given about improving his work.

6.4.2 The dominance of assessment

At the start of their courses, students seemed to spend time working out what their teachers 'wanted' from them in their assignments. Passing the assignments was a constant worry for them and success was described in terms of 'passing', 'still being here', or 'just getting through'. Once they had received marks they were happy with, students reported increased confidence, in some cases describing having more control over their learning. Students apparently judged their performance by their marks alone rather than how they felt they were understanding their subject, and often cited receiving poor marks or feedback (in their terms) as a reason for periods of poor motivation. The dominance of assessment processes in the student interviews was apparent particularly in the early days at university when students worried they would not meet the required standards. In these early stages, success at university was often described in terms of what classification of degree students hoped to achieve, or simply passing the course. As they moved through their courses, students became

broader in their interpretations, often expressing regret at the level of anxiety they had felt about early assessments. Helen had been concerned about her grades in her first two interviews but by the end of her second year she was more circumspect, placing greater importance on her practice as a trainee nurse:

> Last year I'd say I was aiming for a first or a 2.1. Now, 2.1 would be nice but if I'm better at what my job will eventually be, and I can't tell you the ins and outs of the academic stuff, I'm not too bothered. So my focus has changed, which it bothers me slightly if I don't get the mark that I think reflects my ability, but not as much as it used to.

Students seemed to have moved from feeling anxious and insecure about assessments to taking a more relaxed 'so long as I get through' approach as they moved through their course.

6.4.3   Assessment and workload issues

In their first year, students varied in their perception of the workloads they experienced in comparison with expectations. Some students reported feeling surprised that the pressure was not more than it was and saw it as less than they had experienced at school, while for others the workload was a source of anxiety. Where students were worried about workload, it was often attributed to having to produce multiple assessments at the same time as coping with placements and relatively full teaching timetables at university, captured in this excerpt from the interview with Samuel at the end of his first semester:

> Coming over the Christmas period we've got three assignments and having noted that we'd just finished two, and we've got another three to finish before the end of Christmas, to be handed in as soon as we come back and another project, so its going to be full on over the Christmas.

By their second year, most students were reporting having learnt from their first year experiences and having changed the way they organised themselves to meet the demands of

their courses. For example, Louise reflected in her final year how she now recognised the need to pace herself:

> I think I've become more mature in the way I approach things now, although I've not written assignments until the last minute, I have done a bit of the work over the weeks leading up to it, so I've got the basics to work on, whereas before it was like, I've got two weeks left and I've not even started it!

In particular, most students had recognised the need to plan their time more carefully, and to spread their workload to minimise anxiety. They described being more proactive in planning assessments and using their lessons as preparation for those assessments, as Veronica described:

> If I have my first lecture and I receive my first assignment and I know what my assignment is, from that point on I start looking within that lecture what I can use towards my assignment or towards my exam.

The demands of multiple assessments taught students the value of forward planning and helped them to understand the link between what they were learning in class and what they were being assessed on. That link was at its most obvious when assessments were clearly linked to the professional aspects of their subjects.

6.4.4   Linking to practice

Students had described preferring teaching that was clearly linked to their future professional practice, and this preference was felt in assessments too. They reported paying more attention to the marks they received when the link to practice was clear and the nurses in particular enjoyed practical assessments that helped them to demonstrate clinical skills. Veronica, studying Business, had also enjoyed a role play assessment exercise which aimed to recreate a real-life selection procedure. Students had found the professional links harder to identify in

their first years as they were taught theory, ethics or scientific knowledge that they needed as foundations for their practice.

There were examples of assessments where the students were allowed some flexibility to tailor their work according to their interests and this was popular. Allowing some degree of flexibility encouraged the students to pursue areas of personal interest and this seemed to afford them a greater degree of control over their learning. Jane gave an example of a teacher trying out new forms of assessment and responding to student feedback in adjusting the assignment:

> We had a really good module on the first term of this year with our acute care... there are five videos we had to watch and then we had to write about them and answer questions on them, which I thought was a really, really good assignment. It's not just case studies to read and then you'd have to write from that. I think visuals are helpful. .. And we were the first year that did it. There were some problems with it, at first we had to write about all five videos in I think, 2000 words, you couldn't put a lot of information about each one, so we raised it with [the teacher] and he changed it so that you just had to pick two and write a lot about it, and I thought it was really good and I think he's going to carry on using it now!

What was apparent was that assessments linked to practice, with some flexibility in content and in mode of delivery, were both popular with students and helped them to engage with the assessment process. Group assessment activities met with a more mixed response.

6.4.5   Working with peers for assessment purposes

Students recognised that group working was an important aspect of studying and described the benefits of sharing knowledge and ideas. However, these benefits were sometimes overshadowed by two factors. One was the fear of accusations of plagiarism and the other related to perceptions of unequal contributions to group activities. Rebecca and Simon described how the fear of plagiarism had apparently stopped some students taking them up on

their offers of shared working and study groups in their first and second years. As discussed

in the previous chapter, they had been used to working as a group in their Access course.

However, once at university they encountered suspicion from peers, as they describe:

> Rebecca: I don't think that all the students want to be integrated in to that kind of study group, they want it to be their own work and they're not sharing any of their ideas with anyone. And because they're so strict on plagiarism and collusion, and your work must be your own.
>
> Simon: Yeah, some people are a bit scared by that.
>
> Rebecca: Because sometimes we've said, you know, to come and.. and they've said, 'oh no, collusion…'. And it's like, well, we're not handing the same piece of work in, it's just …

Louise also reported the fear of plagiarism as a reason for limiting the sharing of preparation

work in her final year, describing plagiarism as a 'dangerous aspect':

> We never kind of shared essays or anything like that. If you start getting into kind of the dangerous aspect. Because my boyfriend, who's on a different course, he emailed one of his friends his essay and someone else got hold of it and plagiarised it. And he had to go through a whole process.

This uncertainty about the boundaries between shared work and plagiarism is another

example, alongside referencing, of students being unsure about academic practices and having

to work things through. Students often reported wanting to work alone, preferring not to

compare themselves against other students until after they had received their marks. Where

students were required to work with others for assessment purposes, there were issues when

one student was motivated and committed but felt that other students did not take the work as

seriously. Veronica experienced this in her second and her third year, as she described:

> I'm really trying to get a very good grade. At the same time it's a bit frustrating when you get students working with you that are not so focussed. I was in a group and only one member of the group was actually helpful. Other members of the group wanted to focus on their own individual projects because they feel like if they focus on that then they guarantee that they are going to come out with a good grade. It's a bit frustrating

because I'm giving my time and energy to actually coming to the meetings, without them really contributing anything substantial, so it wastes your time, so you then have to put in more time to actually try and get the group work done to a reasonable standard so that you know that you can come out with at least a decent grade.

This became less of a problem as student numbers declined on her course and the students who remained became more motivated and committed.

6.4.6 Managing dyslexia and assessment processes

Two students in the study identified themselves as having dyslexia, Jane and Samuel. Samuel made frequent reference to his dyslexia and the ways it impacted on his Social Work studies and, in his eyes, the chances of him receiving equitable treatment. In relation to assessment processes, two issues dominated. The first was the amount of time he felt he had to spend on a written assignment in comparison with other students. As he described it:

> If they say that a module is 150 hours, for a dyslexic person it's a minimum of 450, and the 450 hours would get you perhaps a C. If you put another 150 hours on top of that you might get a B.

He felt that his issues with writing and reading made studying to produce academic writing much slower, often spending a whole day to write just a few words. The second issue he reported was how his teachers were alerted to the fact that he was dyslexic. The system of anonymous marking meant that dyslexic students stuck a white sticker on the essay and teachers were instructed to take the dyslexia into account when marking the work. However, at the end of his first year, Samuel felt that this identification in itself raised issues in the marking of his work:

> I've got the impression now, at the end of the year that I actually need to work harder than the 'average' person to get more than an average grade. I need to produce, say your average C grade, if I gave in an average C grade paper, it be a low C grade. If someone else gave in an average C grade paper, it's an average C grade paper.

This was just one student reporting his experiences and they were not shared by Jane, the other student with dyslexia in the study. She reported less disruption, in part because she reported less severe indications in her dyslexia. However, they are reported here as being of significance to Samuel and indicative of the challenges faced by students coping with dyslexia in higher education and by teachers striving for equitable and fair assessment processes.

6.4.7 Lessons on assessment

The students in this study pointed to the ways in which assessment processes can facilitate learning in higher education, through both the practices of researching and writing and the reflection and knowledge gained through appropriate, timely and clear feedback. Where that feedback was felt to be unclear, inconsistent, or unduly delayed, it confused students. Students who felt their marks were good in assessments were motivated by their success, conversely disappointing marks served to de-motivate. Linking assessments to professional practice and allowing some flexibility to incorporate personal interests helped to engage students. Group assignments, while showing students the benefits of shared learning, also caused some frustrations as they grappled with understanding the boundaries of plagiarism and how to cope with less motivated peers.

6.5 Studying

Direct teaching is one part of the wider learning experience for students in higher education. The major part of their work takes place outside the classroom, away from the direct supervision of academic staff, here referred to as 'studying'. This section describes what the students said about how they studied, what helped or hindered their study and how that changed as they moved through their courses. Students described how they coped with full timetables and multiple assessment tasks, combining professional, placement learning with

private study and managing other commitments at the same time. They described how they improved their time management, becoming more efficient and more focussed as they moved through their courses. Learning to use different source materials and adhere to academic conventions which were new to most of them as they started university was noteworthy. They made limited use of institutional facilities for learning, mostly working alone at home. Finally, they described how they found, often by accident rather than design, different techniques that helped them to learn, such as visual depictions of complex factual knowledge.

6.5.1   Time management

Participants in this study were taking vocational courses, some of which involved combining professional accreditation procedures with academic study. The combination of the two meant that students had full timetables while in university and had to learn to cope with periods out on placement. This left little time for other activities and students made frequent reference to the fact that they were not able to participate in the 'normal' student activities because of their workloads. For the Nursing and the Social Work students, their first semester had involved them not only learning to cope with university but also the challenge of going out on placement for the first time. This impacted on the way they made friends but also placed a strain on their ability to manage their time. For two students this was compounded by having families at home who made other demands on their time, as Simon described at the end of his second year as he learnt to balance study with family:

> Because of my situation, having to run a home and having a family, I have had to do the best I can under the circumstances with the time available. What I'm trying to do now is to say to people, the wife, the daughter, and so on, I really need this time to study so unless it's a dire emergency, then I'm going to be studying. Being more assertive, because with kids who have got no responsibilities, they'll do it whenever they feel like it because there's no burden upon them.

Another student was sharing the care of her disabled mother with her sister and this had restricted her ability to study as she might have wanted to. Two students in the project made reference to having to do paid work in their spare time and described how this was complicated by the interruptions caused by periods on placement. One of these students, Samuel, was unable to continue with his part time work beyond his first year as the demands of his Social Work course and periods of placement placed too great a demand on his time.

As the students moved through their studies they described how they learnt to manage their time more effectively, understanding the need to plan ahead, to begin researching for assignments as soon as they received them and to limit their social lives. Students described becoming more focussed on their studies as their final year approached and becoming more efficient in their use of source material. Students varied in the ways they organised their time and described their own preferences, including students who studied throughout the night and those who preferred a nine to five pattern.

6.5.2 Learning to use multiple sources

Alongside the individual coping strategies the students developed to manage their time, a common theme throughout interviews was how they began to understand how to use a wider range of sources in their private studying. It was clear from the students' descriptions that the use of journal articles changed over time. Several students reported not using journals at all in the first year and only beginning to use them in their second. When asked why they had not accessed them earlier, they replied either they did not know they could, or they did not know how to access them. Once they mastered the use of journals, they noticed an improvement in their understanding, as Carol describes at the end of her second year:

I just couldn't seem to access it and then the first time that I did it was just sort of 'hallelujah' type moment! And we had to do articles for the research so I've kind of got really familiar with it now. I feel quite confident with it now. It's still quite frustrating when you find the perfect article and you can't access it, it's very annoying, so you end up picking whatever you can access.

In most cases, it was not until students undertook a research related module that they began to use journal articles, usually towards the end of their second year. They reported not knowing how to access the sources, despite being taught how to do so in induction and other sessions. For example, Rebecca described how her practice had changed:

We started doing the research for that and then our lecturer said 'no text books for your introduction', and we were all horrified. I mean, how were we supposed to write our introductions without using text books and he was like well you can read one or two, but that's all, the rest is journals. And 40 or 50 journals. And we were all like 'aaah!'

As students learnt how to access different sources they began to see the benefits of using journals to keep up to date with literature and access a range of perspectives. As a result, all eight students reported feeling more confident in writing and having learnt to read more effectively, reviewing articles for relevance before committing time to in-depth reading, illustrated in this extract from Samuel in his final year:

Yes, it changed, definitely changed. You learn to be more specific, you're closer to the subject material. You can be switched off more quickly and you got to read first, on an abstract say, forget that one, move to the next one.

Developing this skill offered students access to multiple sources of evidence and seemed to signify an important shift in study patterns, as Louise explained in her final interview:

I never used them (journals), because I never knew really how to access them and I didn't really appreciate their value in terms of your work. It wasn't until, it was probably the second year really when I had to do a research module where we had to go and find researched papers, that you realise that actually they have got a lot of information in them. I've used them all throughout the third year. For essays and things, for the latest evidence, whereas textbooks are old!

This apparent lack of knowledge of how to use academic texts was linked to uncertainty about the use of academic conventions, such as basing writing on evidence from respected sources, critical analysis, using subject specific terminology, or structuring essays. Learning to understand these conventions took place over time through a number of routes. For some, the feedback they received from assignments helped them as did individual advice from personal or subject tutors who seemed willing to offer time and advice to students. However, some students could not describe how they learnt these conventions, other than finding out over a period of time, seeing other students researching materials and gradually coming to understand the need to access and then use multiple sources.

6.5.3 Using university learning facilities

Only one student made use of university workshops to learn about academic conventions and only one student mentioned using a text book on how to structure essays. The students described a gradual process of acclimatisation to academic work, drawing on advice from teaching staff to help them navigate the requirements of their courses. Students reported this was a process that needed time and could not necessarily be taught in the first few months of study, as Jane argued in her final interview:

> I mean we did have little library lessons in the first year, about how to use the library and stuff, how to use the online searching and journals, just because you're not used to using it you don't use it as much and it's just something that went on during time and you learn it as you go.

Apart from making use of the university library facilities, students reported little use of other university-based facilities, such as computer or study rooms. All the students had computing equipment at home and access to Broadband and this reduced their reliance on institutional facilities. Students described preferring to work at home unless they had a specific need to

study in the library. The exception was Veronica who made use of her university library to study. For her, the availability of twenty-four hour access to library sites was particularly important, as she preferred to work through the night. She reported this enabled her to study alongside people who she felt were similarly motivated because they too preferred to study through the night. For the nursing students the limited time spent in the university in between placement times meant that remote access to library facilities was essential. This was also the case for those students with families at home. All the students reported making greater use of the library facilities in their second and third years, with very limited use in their first year. Students described their use of university web networks where teachers posted lecture notes, course outlines, assessment processes and other materials. Students seemed to use these instrumentally, to access information or materials, rather than as an interactive forum for shared learning.

6.5.4   Working with others

As well as having personal preferences around patterns of private study, students reported differing attitudes to working with others. All students could see the value of sharing ideas with others and most agreed that they learnt from other people on their course. However, as they moved through their courses they increasingly worked alone, even when they had sought to work together with others earlier on. In some cases this was a matter of practicality as placements interrupted day to day contact with others. There was some evidence of students using social networking sites, such as Facebook, as a means of facilitating group working, but mainly these were described as sources of mutual support. The more common way of sharing work was for individuals to prepare part of an agreed task and then hold a final meeting to pull together individual contributions. As well as being a response to practical considerations

this was also described as a way of overcoming the difficulties of unequal contributions from group members.

6.5.5   Working out how to study

As the students moved through their courses, they developed individual techniques that helped them to study. One theme that emerged was the use of visual media in preference to written notes. One student described covering the walls of his study at home in flip charts with post-it notes highlighting key points. Another described drawing up one side of A4 for every topic in her Biology module to act as an aide memoire. A third student, coping with dyslexia, described preferring textbooks with frequent diagrams to break up the text. The use of colour coding in note taking was also mentioned. The changes in study over time are highlighted in the examples below:

> Normally when I'm revising I have a big A3 art pad and I try and put a subject, or a topic, on one page, and pretty much re-write it just on this piece of paper so that I know where it is. (Carol End One)
>
> I've changed, before I used to hand-write everything out of the book, I copied bullet points, and I've reverted to typing it now because it's a bit quicker. I still do have to make notes, (Carol End Three)
>
> I've always been fine with organising my work and things anyway, but I've just become so untidy with stuff. I have notes all over the place, and books all over the place, I'm absolutely rubbish! (Louise End One)
>
> I think I know now how to search out more relevant information straight away rather than having to get loads of things and that's useless, so you know, I can cut down the amount of time I'm spending reading. And I'm able to skim through stuff. (Louise End Three)

Students had developed coping strategies, in response to the demands of the courses. These helped them to make sense of large amounts of new information and to feel in control of their studying. What was clear in the data was the growing understanding of the volume of work

and the techniques students found were their way of managing their time. These were not learnt as a result of anyone teaching them how to study, but each student appeared to be working out their own strategies.

6.5.6   Lessons on studying

In summary, the data on studying indicated individual responses, developed over time, to competing demands of heavy timetables, professional placement sessions and family and social circumstances. Use of university facilities, other than the library, was limited, in part because students had ready access to computing and internet services at home. Students took time to work out what suited their needs best and to adapt their study patterns accordingly. As they became more familiar with the academic conventions they worked within, their use of different media and texts developed, largely self-directed and self-taught.

6.6   Learning

The three components of the academic experiences described above included the teaching in the classroom and on placement, the assessment processes students were required to undertake and the private study that complemented formal teaching. The fourth element in what is often described as teaching and learning is the output of those processes, or what is actually learnt. Here, learning is more than simply subject knowledge and incorporates how students' conceptions of knowledge changed over the time they were at university. Students did report increased subject knowledge and understanding, but put much greater emphasis on other aspects of their learning. The themes most commonly referred to in interviews, alongside increased subject knowledge, included an increase in confidence, both personal and academic, and an increasing sense of responsibility and understanding of knowledge.

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6.6.1 Students and knowledge

Three aspects of knowledge were apparent in the data. The first concerned the degree to which students saw knowledge as fixed and specific or as fluid, changeable and open to interpretation. The second related to what could be described as the ownership of knowledge, in other words, whose knowledge was valued and the extent to which students felt able to contribute their own understandings to knowledge that would be valued in the context of their courses. Finally, the degree to which students connected their knowledge to practice varied both between students and over time.

6.6.2 There might not be a right or wrong answer

The students in the study who came straight from school tended to describe knowledge in their early interviews in technical terms, bounded by what they needed to know and as something to which they had little to contribute. There was evidence of anxiety that they did not know 'enough' and there was little room for ambiguity in their descriptions. The impression they gave was that there was a set of facts they had to learn and then they would 'know'. However, as they progressed through their courses, and particularly once they had undertaken a Research Module, the students began to use multiple explanations even for seemingly fixed scientific concepts. Carol gave perhaps the clearest example of this. In her first interview she described her understanding of nursing in terms of technical knowledge, apparently disconnected from other aspects of her life, something was either right or wrong. She described her anxieties about her limited knowledge in Biosciences:

> I'm used to knowing how things are supposed to work and then he'll start going off on a tangent about if someone was on a drip and you start getting a bit, 'Ooh, am I supposed to know all these words, am I supposed to know how to: you know, if someone has that condition am I supposed to know how to treat it in hospital because you can't get that from biology books.

At this early stage in her course, Carol compared her knowledge to that of her peers, assuming they knew more than her:

> I think I was one of the only one to put my hand up and then I thought 'Oh, I'm the only one that's put my hand up – I'm probably wrong' but then it turned out I'd been right, that I'd been confident enough to do it. It doesn't happen often.

As she progressed through her second year, Carol began to describe how she understood the responsibility she faced in learning outside the classroom:

> I think I've realised that you have to do a bit more at home and that it really is kind of down to you, how far you want to go with it and how passionate you are about that particular subject. And you have to do it for yourself a bit.

By the end of her course, many of Carol's earlier doubts and uncertainties had been replaced by her own experiences and understanding. By then she was linking her knowledge to practice, she drew upon her own experiences to help her understand and she found that she no longer worried if she felt she knew less than her peers:

> I think on the first two years, I was always asking what they'd done on placement because I was worried that they'd be more ahead of me and that they had done more. And if they had, I'd sort of feel a bit awkward, jealous probably, that they had done it. Whereas now, I'm not really bothered because I know that we've all got roughly the same knowledge, and some people will have done a little more in a specific area, but then I'll know something that they don't.

In contrast to the students from A Level courses, the older students from Access to Higher Education courses and Jane from the International Baccalaureate course described feeling comfortable with admitting that they did not know the 'answer'. Their experiences of learning in a supportive, collegiate atmosphere at college, with strong personal relationships with their teachers, seemed to have encouraged them to see 'getting it wrong' as part of their learning experience, from which they could move on. They expected to be able to ask questions in the classroom and saw answering their questions, and debating points of view, as an integral part

of their teachers' role. In early interviews with these students there was a greater acceptance that answers could be open to different interpretations and may be part of wider debates. The link to practice was more explicit from a much earlier stage in their course. In addition to being willing to admit that they did not know something or that they might be wrong, the non-A Level students described being more willing to question their teachers in class. Although they recognised that their teachers may know more than they did, they did not see this as a barrier to interaction in class. Even in his first interview, Simon described how he liked to learn by taking control for himself, by asking for help and by admitting that he did not know:

> I strive to understand. I will do as much as I can on my own because that is the type of person I am, but increasingly I am becoming a person who is more prepared to ask questions and say 'I don't understand, I'm sorry, I might be appearing a bit thick, but I really don't understand this'.

By the end of his second year, Simon was thinking beyond his university learning, wanting to link his new knowledge to a broader understanding of life:

> I don't want my thinking and my thought processes to be covered by something and have to be written down. I want it to be fluid, to evolve, like an ongoing process. I'm adding my spiritual and mental thought processes and kind of refining it.

He recognised the changes in his knowledge over time and how this set him apart from those without that knowledge:

> And I read it again recently and understood it perfectly, so I know I've gone from there to there. I'm not a layman anymore. It means that I completely understand the basics of the subject which the man in the street wouldn't. Everybody knows what DNA is, or thinks they know, but they don't and I do.

By the end of his course, Simon argued he had been encouraged to 'think outside the box', describing his dissertation that involved new medical research that challenged old ways of detecting diseases in the liver. He described taking control of his own placement assessment processes through the layout of his portfolio:

And different ways of producing evidence that might be a bit left field as well. And that never really went down very well with verifiers. Because they needed it to be 'this is what we expect' it's all to be firm, but I'm thinking, no, you've got to accept change. You've got to accept a different interpretation. And even though they didn't like it, they had to doff their cap and say 'that's a good one, that is!"

Simon was demonstrating a willingness to challenge and to take control of his learning which had been apparent from the start of his course. Other students had to change further from a position of received knowledge and this in part had arisen from their understandings of the fluidity of knowledge.

6.6.3   Practical knowledge, grounded in theory

There was a distinction in the students' first interviews between what they described as practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge, again most evident with the A Level students. In early interviews they stressed how much more comfortable they felt learning practical things such as how to give a bed bath, or where their learning had a practical application, such as preparing a presentation. Theoretical understanding in these early days for them was seen as disconnected from practice, more difficult to learn than practical 'useful' knowledge, summed up by Simon in his first year:

> You know, theory is all well and good, but it will only ever remain in your mind or in a book, unless it is put into practice. I know a lot about cricket, in theory, but unless I was actually able to walk out to the middle with the bat and replicate this theory as a series of runs then I wouldn't be able to prove that I could do it.

Similarly, at the beginning of her course, Helen was struggling to reconcile the theoretical learning she was doing with her practice requirements:

> I like it when they relate the theory to practice. We had a module on Social Theory, and I think a lot of the people, including myself, found it really difficult to get to grips with the subject, because they didn't relate it too much to practice and it was just very theory-based.

By the end of her second year, she was beginning to link her theoretical knowledge to her practice, acknowledging the role her placements played in this:

> Theory's great but not if you can't relate it to practice, because then it's just theory. I think sometimes my personal research when I'm on placement is more relevant. Whereas this way, they give you all the theory and then you're left to link it with the practice. But when you're out having the experience, you learn, you absorb it a lot quicker. You can see how it fits together.

What made theoretical knowledge easier to acquire was where it built directly on school or college learning, for example in Biology for some Nursing students or Bioscience for the BioMedical students. However, students from non-A Level backgrounds were immediately able to recognise the importance of theoretical knowledge in the workplace. As Rebecca described in her first interview, on her Access course she had developed ways of making theoretical learning work for her:

> I'll read it out of the text book normally and just repetition, if I'm learning on my own and I can't do anything particularly practical with it. And then I'd normally read it then try to write it down so I can explain it myself and then check back with it and keep doing it back and forth.

In later interviews, particularly by the end of their studies, all the students reported being able to understand the links between theory and practice. They were more comfortable with theoretical learning, perhaps as Jane put it: 'you know the reason behind what you are doing.'

6.6.4   Lessons on learning

The students' descriptions of how they viewed knowledge could be seen as a continuum, with disconnected, impersonal, factual information at one end and a more connected, questioning, personal and interpretative knowledge at the other. Some students viewed knowledge as fixed in time, and as right or wrong. They deferred readily to their teachers' authority and did not feel it was their place to question that authority. Later on, they began seeing knowledge as

flexible, changing over time and subject to different interpretations. They began to contribute their own ideas and experiences. Movement along that continuum, whilst not necessarily uninterrupted or linear, seemed to be influenced by a range of factors, suggesting that not only are understandings of knowledge subject to change, but also dependent upon the circumstances in which it is being used. In other words it is situational. These factors included the extent to which they were able to feel in control of their learning, the ways in which students viewed their teachers (seen in part in relation to earlier experiences at school or college), and the links they were able to make between theory and practice. The students who came to university from non A Level backgrounds seemed to arrive already equipped with a more nuanced understanding of knowledge and with at least some familiarity of the learning environment they faced. For them the period of transition to university learning seemed to be less disrupted. At first this seems to contradict established literature pointing to the challenges non-traditional students face in their transition to university (Christie et al 2008; Reay 2003). However, data presented here refers to one small part of the student experience, namely students' conceptions of knowledge and how these change over time. These are a small part of what Tinto described as academic integration, itself just a part of his explanations for the student experience (Rhodes and Nevill, 2004). For this one aspect of integration, the students from non-A Level courses appeared to arrive with a better understanding of some of the rules of the university classroom than did their A Level counterparts who appeared to be reliant on teachers for their learning of factual, disconnected information.

6.7   Academic capacities: having command over conventions

Academic capacities are needed to succeed in undergraduate study and in part, this involves understanding the rules of 'the game'. Academia has its own conventions and practices (Osborne 2007) and these serve to validate knowledge and enhance credibility in the

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presentation of that knowledge. For example, using appropriate and peer-reviewed sources, formulating arguments based on evidence and presenting information in well-constructed prose all serve to convince the reader that the writer knows what she is talking about. Being able to present work in appropriate forms using technical language attracts good marks, thus reinforcing confidence and encouraging success. Yet students took time to build academic capacities as they learnt to understand what was required of them by their teachers and became more familiar with accessing, interpreting and applying information. This was more problematic for some than others and in part related back to their pre-entry learner identities and familiarity with university teaching conventions.

6.8   Disciplinary capacities: commanding specific knowledge

Disciplinary capacity was the possession of specific knowledge relating to one subject discipline, including having command over the language, understanding its application and having the ability and resources to use that knowledge in appropriate settings. Disciplinary knowledge needs to be gained before an undergraduate feels confident in their work yet the ways that knowledge is framed (Bernstein 1996) within specific language, or jargon can exclude novices in the subject. Students have to learn the language before they can feel confident in using it to describe knowledge. There are theoretical underpinnings to disciplines which have to be understood before knowledge can be built upon (Grant 1997), yet those theoretical concepts are often hard to master. Students needed to be secure in the foundations of language and theory before they understood how knowledge shaped actions in practice. In professional subjects there were specific cultures, practices and norms which all had to be learnt (Wenger 1998). The more secure students felt in their understandings of their subjects, the more secure they described feeling in questioning their teachers and placement supervisors. There has been limited attention paid to the importance of disciplinary

knowledge (Ecclestone 2004) but in the model I am proposing here it frames the teaching, learning and understanding within a discipline. The command of the discipline marks the student out, serves as evidence of progress made from generalist to specialist and sets them apart from the 'layman'.

6.9   Summary

This chapter has described the academic experiences of the students as they talked about teaching, assessment, studying and learning. They began their courses with a limited understanding of what university learning required. They relied on teachers to guide them, but found only limited help as they grappled with the complexities of independent learning. As students moved through their courses, their confidence as learners grew through an increasing understanding of academic conventions and as their subject knowledge developed. They were learning the rules of academia and describing a greater level of academic integration.

As the students engaged in their studies, they began to acquire specific, relevant cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) which enabled them to participate in the learning culture (James and Biesta 2007). One student described this process as 'learning class'. This participation contributed to strengthening their learner identity and allowed them to exercise greater agency (Brannen and Nilsen 2005) in their learning. However, the extent to which they felt comfortable with their situation was in part dependent on their social integration and this is the focus of the next chapter.

7. Chapter Seven: Support networks

7.1 Introduction

Progression through undergraduate studies is unlikely to be smooth and without challenges. Those challenges will vary in nature and intensity but all students are likely to face them at some point. Critical moments may pose a risk to continued study; these may relate to academic achievement, personal relationships, professional participation or personal health and well-being. These moments may threaten undergraduate learner identity by undermining students' confidence in themselves as learners.

Once learning is seen as a social activity, logic suggests that successful learning requires a sense of social integration. In this context, social integration implies a feeling of belonging which includes a sense of entitlement to learn, a fit between self and environment, and a belief that one can contribute to, and benefit from, the activity in question. One's ability to navigate the field relies upon a degree of congruence between habitus and field, aided by the possession of appropriate social capital.

However, that identity may be nurtured as well as challenged by social relationships and strength in those relationships may reinforce notions of belonging. Thus, the support networks undergraduates build for themselves will provide some protection for difficult times. They will require investment to build. Important relationships in this field are likely to include teacher: student, student: student and student: significant others.

This chapter reports on students' descriptions of the factors that sustained them through their university courses. Three factors emerged from the data: the people with whom they maintained some kind of relationship, the personal motivation that kept them engaged with their course and finally the institution within which they studied. All three themes appeared to endure throughout their undergraduate studies, they influenced the ways students thought about their courses and were important in their continued progress on the course. The chapter concludes with a summary of what seemed to be the most important factors in the network of support students built for themselves and why these were significant.

7.2   Important relationships

Students described the relationships they had built up with people around them as a source of encouragement and support throughout their studies. All the students discussed the importance of their fellow students and how they sought to maintain relationships with them. The variability in the relationships with teaching staff was a noticeable theme in the data, as students found some teachers more approachable, available and willing than others to foster more personal relationships. Students described how this impacted on their studies and reinforces the theme in Chapter Five that informal teaching environments are conducive to classroom engagement for some students. Finally, a range of other people of significance to the students was identified, including partners, families, friends from outside university and those in shared accommodation. How these people helped to provide support is reported, noting particularly how family support from those with knowledge of higher education practices endures, while for some with different experiences there was a degree of alienation from those closest to them.

7.2.1 Peer relationships

How students in the study described their relationships with fellow students differed, but all pointed to the benefits of having people around with whom they shared their learning experiences and from whom they could seek advice and reassurance. The four student nurses in the study described particularly strong bonds between themselves and their peers, built largely on shared professional values and experiences. The two BioMedical students had come from the same Access course and relied heavily on each other for support. Just one student, Veronica described feeling isolated in her first year, as she struggled to make friends and fit in to her new surroundings:

> I think since I've been in uni, I find it harder to get to know new people, just because I'm used to being in a comfort zone so I find it harder to go out….. so I tend to stay in my room a lot or go into my flat mates room and just watch movies …

Later in her course, Veronica described how she had managed to find a friendship group as her fellow students became more 'serious' and she was able to engage in shared work with them. What the other students described in their peer networks was the importance of friendships for both practical and emotional support. Practical support included sharing lecture notes, exploring ideas, clarifying expectations and sharing knowledge. Emotional support included reassurance from friends that theirs was a shared experience, having someone to relax with and to help to motivate them when they felt overwhelmed with work. For some students this kind of support was essential to their survival on the course, as Samuel described:

> And you've got to have a network. You can't do it all on your own. However good the teaching is, however good the representation is, you come up against things that you're not sure about, or you need help with. Your fellow student will give you more important and better directed input than a tutor or a lecturer, particularly on your bit that you're struggling on. And they've possibly got more understanding.

For the nursing students, the shared professional experience seemed to encourage them to build close and supportive relationships within their group from the start, and the benefit of that was clear in how they described themselves in relation to other students, as this example from Louise's interview at the end of her first year shows:

> I'm quite lucky in that all of us on the course, we're all quite close. And we all tend to find the same things difficult, which is quite good, so we'll just get together and have a good moan and a chat about it and if someone's finding it particularly hard, we help pull each other through.

The nursing students described how periods of placement had disrupted their friendship building, and how the professional placements were an additional pressure. Being able to share their experiences of sometimes traumatic incidents helped them to cope, as Helen described at the end of her first year:

> I think it's been quite remarkable, this year, how we can go away and be working on placement and then come back for about six weeks and work alongside each other in university and we are incredibly close. It's because there's a lot of emotional things that come along with the course and everyone relies quite heavily on each other to relax, to help through the year.

What students seemed to be describing was how the friendships they built with their fellow students were crucial to their well-being and helped them feel a sense of belonging, as well as being a source of friendship and fun, summarised in this extract from Carol's interview at the end of her second year:

> I feel kind of proud of our nursing group. There's a sense that everyone really wants to do well. Normally in a group there's the people that 'ooh it's not cool to do your work', but it seems as though everyone is like 'how much have you done? I've done more', and everyone wants to do really well which is nice because it encourages you to do really well. And when we talk about placement, and everyone says things like how much they want to be a really good nurse, it encourages you to think, oh, well maybe if we all want it then we will get there. I do feel we are nurses. There is definitely that thing that holds us all together. Pushes us forward. Definitely a strong sense of belonging.

However, there were limits in the ways students worked together. Practical considerations related to time available for socialising, balancing competing demands and the limited opportunities for engagement in lectures. The reliance on lectures, particularly in the first years and based in large, formal classrooms or lecture theatres meant students were constrained in building relationships with peers. This was compounded by extended periods away from university on placements, not living on campus and having family responsibilities that required time at home.

As the students reflected on the importance of peers in their support networks, it became clear the students had largely built their network for themselves, with little facilitation from teachers or the institution more broadly. Three students commented that they would have welcomed more opportunities to mix with students from other years while for others attempts that were made were not successful. For example, the nursing students were mixed with the Physiotherapy students in Professional Development but described how the two groups sat apart from each other and did not mix. Samuel described at the end of his first year how peers from other years on his course might offer useful insights from their experiences of the course:

> Perhaps a little bit more contact with second or third year. Or even if someone writes a diary or something, or even a blog… You could openly discuss problems and strategies and which way to go from there. What do they really want? What do they really want?

This poses a dilemma for institutions: on the one hand peer relationships are important to students, but they seem to be something that students themselves need to control. How institutions can facilitate peer support networks in a way that allows students to retain control over them remains a challenge. Yet in this study, peer support was left to students to build.

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For example, Helen described how she felt it was important to spend time in the first year building up friendships which would then sustain her throughout the harder parts of the course:

> You need to start your relationships in Year 1 that will carry you through for the next two years after that. So you need to go out and have a bit of fun. Because the thing about this course is that you need a lot of support, because if you do have a bad placement, or your academic work is struggling, or whatever, you need someone there, or friends. And also, when you're doing a full time job and university, sometimes you really need to just stop doing all of that and go out and have a bit of fun and de-brief on experiences that you've had.

Students described using technology to facilitate communication between themselves, including emails and social networking sites, in particular Facebook. For those students who were living off campus or who had extended periods away from university on placements, Facebook became a means of keeping in touch, sharing stories from placements and for asking specific questions about work, references or lecture notes. Other ways in which students described building networks included taking on the role of student representative, building up small study groups, using the university's internet cafe and in some cases acting as an informal mentor to younger students. All three of the mature students had described assuming the role of mentor to other students and saw it as part of their responsibilities to support, and even represent other students in negotiations with their course leaders. For example, Samuel, by the end of his second year had tried to offer support to those peers he knew to be struggling:

> I know I tried to help three people that are no longer there. I'm struggling with the fourth. She's struggling, at the moment. She's got to get stuff in before the 9th. She's going through a particularly bad time with her family. Whether she's going to do it or not, I don't know. And I spoke to her, I've spoken to her virtually every day since we broke up.

What students seemed to be describing was the need for support, that it was their responsibility to build a network and that involved helping and supporting others as well as getting support in return.

7.2.2   Living arrangements

The data showed a greater degree of ambivalence about the influence of living arrangements on the ability to foster peer relationships. Five of the eight students lived at home, two because they had their own family homes and three younger students who lived at home for a mixture of financial, practical and emotional reasons. The remaining three students spent some time living in halls of residence with the rest of the time spent in private, shared accommodation. They remained ambivalent about the atmosphere in Halls. As discussed elsewhere (Bowl et al 2008) student halls of residence can be a source of alienation and disruption and may not always provide a safe, secure environment for study. All three students had rejected the stereotypical model of the partying student and found halls disruptive and noisy. They had quickly moved into more private living arrangements. The younger students who remained in the family home wondered whether they were 'missing out' on something in halls, illustrated by this extract from Jane's interview at the end of her second year:

> I've missed out on halls because of not living in there, so I haven't had the, whatever happens in halls (the crazy parties!) but I don't think that that's been too big an issue because a lot of the stories that people tell you is 'oh we've been out drinking, blah, blah blah', and I'm like, well I've already done that so it's not really that big a draw.

The data showed that those students who had stayed at home found ways of socialising with their peers and there was a shared common experience of *not* being in halls, as Carol described:

> With living at home, I haven't been out as much as other people, but quite a lot of people off my course live at home, and some of the closer friends I've made live at home as well, so it makes it a bit easier, I don't feel as though I have to keep up as much. Because they're all still living at home and they see their friends from school, or boyfriends, or whatever. So it's quite nice that I don't constantly feel that I have to be going out.

From the data, it was clear that peer support was an important factor in sustaining students through the tough times on their courses, that relationships were built on a shared experience and understanding and students themselves recognised the importance of building that network in a range of different ways. This shared experience was, not unsurprisingly, in contrast to the relationship students described with their teachers.

7.2.3   Relationships with teachers

The most striking feature of the descriptions students gave of their relationships with teachers was the ways in which they varied. The more positive descriptions included how teachers were able to reassure students, guide them, inspire them and made themselves available to students who saw them as approachable and willing to help. Other examples however were of teachers who students reported as remote, appearing to them more interested in their own research than in students, unwilling or unable to respond to students' requests for advice or who were disorganised or unsympathetic to students' concerns. Students seemed to place a high value on having one teacher throughout their studies who held a particular interest in them as individuals, either as a Personal Tutor or as Course Leader, but this was not always possible because of the way the course or teaching was organised. It also raises the question of how to accommodate students' expectations of support which may be unrealistic even if resources allowed for additional contact time.

The nursing students were all allocated a Personal Tutor as part of their support network. For

some students, like Jane, this role became less important as she built stronger relationships with all her teachers, who knew her by name. She was studying on the Mental Health nursing route and was taught in small groups by a small number of teachers. Jane described being used to coping by herself at school, including coping with her dyslexia, and therefore she had little expectation of support from her teachers. For other nursing students, the Personal Tutor became an important figure in their support network. Two students made regular contact with their Tutors and described how they had been a source of personal and academic support. For example, Louise described the support her Personal Tutor had offered her:

> We're supposed to go once a term, which I try to do, but I've been a couple more times if I felt I needed to go and just discuss work …And you can go when you've got issues outside uni as well. I was having a lot of stress at home and I needed someone outside of the family, just to go and talk to, just let off steam. You can go and do that and they don't mind.

In contrast, Samuel consistently described the support from some of his teachers as inadequate, interpreting their calls for independent study as a lack of interest on their part:

> University tutors say 'go away and read' and the best phrase that they use is: 'university, you learn in university how to think for yourself. So I am encouraging you to think for yourself.' It's just a get out.

One of the messages in the data was that students differed in their expectations of support from their teachers and in how they perceived those teachers responding to support needs. This left some students feeling unsupported by their teachers and others secure that support would be available as necessary. For example, students reported that the range of support included one teacher who encouraged students to email him and responded to their messages 'within minutes, even at midnight', to other teachers who did not respond to messages and were reported as being unavailable for consultation for weeks on end. Where students used the system of Personal Tutors offered to them, this seemed to provide some clarity about what

was available and to provide some legitimacy to the students' requests for help. There were, nevertheless variations in how students felt their Personal Tutor responded to their requests. What seemed to help was teachers being explicit about their availability, so that students knew when and how to contact their teachers, and where that availability was realised in practice.

Three students expressed dissatisfaction with the level of support they had received with their final year projects or dissertations. Typical of these was Veronica's frustration:

> I found that I didn't get so much support from my academic lecturer. There was a lot of confusion at the start of it all. The tutor that I was allocated, I tried to send her emails and everything, and then I didn't find out until a month later, because every time I sent an email she was always away on a trip, oh she would meet me after she gets back… so when she finally did get back, I sent her another email saying that I've waited a month now and I wanted to see you, and then she informed me that oh, somebody was supposed to come and tell me that she wasn't my dissertation tutor anymore, I'd been allocated another tutor and I was like, well why didn't they let me know??!!

The problems centred on the students' perception of the teachers' lack of availability or response to requests for help and this suggests they would have benefitted from clearer guidance on what to expect, coupled with a second port of call, to alleviate some of these problems.

There was variability too in the support students felt they received while on placement from people who were designated their placement mentor. In two instances students reported a serious breakdown in the relationship but in other students' interviews it was clear that placement mentors could provide valuable professional support, as Carol described:

> I found that I understood it more when he explained it, than if I had gone away and read it in a book, so that sort of changed my perception.

What the data seemed to reveal was a lack of clarity in what the relationship between student and teacher was, or should be. In the early interviews, students were asked about the differences in their relationships with teachers at school or college and now they were at university. Two pictures emerged. One was of impersonal relationships with university teachers, in part relating to the number of students in the class as Carol explained:

> Probably a lot more impersonal because there are that many more of us. I think some of them will recognise some of the people in our course, because if they contribute more or they ask more questions, and they know some of their names, but they would, probably recognise me if I walked past them, but they wouldn't know my name or anything.

In contrast, three students described their early relationships with teachers at university in terms of being equal, adult, two-way and even as friends. The description of friendship between teachers and students repeated throughout the student interviews, as students reflected in their final interviews how their relationships with teachers had changed. Two mature students who had spent time with one of their teachers out of class had been warned not to socialise with their teachers after classes, for fear of accusations of bias in their assessments. Rebecca described how having this more sociable relationship with her teacher helped her:

> We used to ask them about their time at uni and how they got here and whether they're happy here. I think it's good to get their perspective on things. As a student it gives you a wider knowledge of how the university works, because if they've been in a bad mood or if something's happened they are accountable to how ever many people, they've got deadlines and we've got this and that. It gives you another perspective ...

What Rebecca seemed to be grappling with was understanding the appropriate boundaries in her relationships with teachers and how 'friendships' may not have been considered fair in relation to her peers.

Others described a growing respect from teachers, which seemed to be grounded in their

professional development as Helen described:

> I feel closer to them because you spend more time with them and you're talking about qualifying and there's that sort of respect. It's always been an adult to adult relationship, because you are adults when you start, but you're more mature now and I think there's a natural increase in respect for you because they know that you're going into a profession that they've experienced themselves, and they understand the pressures and they see you go through those ups and downs over the three years so there's more of a respect there.

The idea that teachers were friends seemed to give students reassurance that they had fitted in and that somebody was looking out for them, illustrated in Louise's final interview:

> We're all like friends! It's great! You get some of them who know all your names and because you've had them in the first year and again in the second year, by the time you get to the third year, they know you, they'll come up to you and ask how you're doing and they know us on our own personal level.

Common amongst these descriptions was agreement that seeing teachers on a personal level allowed students to feel able to ask questions and to engage in academic debate on a more equal footing than they had felt at the start. The following extracts illustrate the shift in Carol's perception of her teachers between her first and final years:

> 1st Year: But they all seem pretty knowledgeable really, and a lot of our lecturers have got PhDs, or Masters degrees and things, so you kind of, I take what they say as being correct.

> 3rd Year: I think because I was quite surprised at how many letters they had after their name and I thought wow! They're really intelligent. But I don't think about that now and a couple of lecturers we have had I sort of think 'they're rubbish!' I could have taught myself that from a book, but most of them are really good.

The varying levels of support from teachers described by students suggested that teachers could perform a vital role in supporting students as both professional and personal mentor, but there were limits to that support, depending on the working patterns of the teacher and students' willingness to seek help. The third category of people providing support is here

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loosely termed 'significant others' and includes family, partners and friends from outside of university.

7.2.4   Relationships with significant others

As students talked about the support their families gave them, two themes emerged: for some students, with parents who had been in higher education, support was evident throughout their studies and was practical, academic and emotional. For students whose parents had not attended university, and for the two mature students who lived with partners who had not been in higher education, support was not specifically academic but more practical or emotional. For one student, the enduring nature of the support given by her family was striking. Carol reported that both her father and brothers had experienced university positively, saying they had enjoyed their experiences and in her early student days she came to rely on them for specific academic guidance:

> My Dad's very good at reading through them and giving his input saying what he thinks they're looking for and things like that. If I was on my own I probably would be handing in some really rubbish essays. But with their input…whenever I have a bit of a problem and I don't know the answer I always ring up my brother. Normally he knows because he only graduated this year so it's really helpful.

By the end of her second year, Carol recognised that she had probably learnt more about essay writing from her family than she had from her teachers:

> And then I'd get another essay on something that I'd never learnt about, and I remember saying to my parents, 'how do they expect me to write about this when they haven't taught us?' and my dad said, 'well, they're not going to teach you. Go and find out!' .. So he's like 'this is higher education now' But slowly, I think, it happened. It took a while, probably, and I remember another time, I went to my older brother, crying, saying 'I don't know how to write an essay! I don't know what they expect me to do!' And he gave me a few tips and said read a book and write down any point that you think is relevant, bullet point it, reference it so you know the book if you need to go back. Do that, for as many books as you need and then by the end you'll actually know that subject really well, whereas before you knew nothing. And I

did that and it worked so...

The support from Carol's family, informed by their own experiences in higher education, was emotional as well as academic:

> So that was a really horrible term. I can't really think of what kept me going. Probably my family. Not so much my friends because I didn't see them. Yes, probably just my family. And I did ring up my brothers a couple of times and say 'oh, how did you cope?' and they'd say 'oh, it's horrible, isn't it?' and sympathise, which helped.

What was striking in Carol's story was not only the additional support she was getting compared to other students, but the way that support was informed by direct higher education experience. However, towards the end of her course, as Carol's nursing knowledge and experience grew, she began to distance herself from this support, even expressing irritation with her father's interventions:

> Yes, that's getting annoying now, (laughs), it was good at first, because it was really helpful with essays and I didn't have a clue. ….. But then it got to a point where he wasn't helping me anymore, and he wasn't understanding what I was writing so he'd suggest things and I'd completely ignore them and I'd be right no, I'm right, you're wrong.

Nevertheless, the enduring nature of the support helped Carol to understand the academic conventions with which she was expected to work in a way that other students did not have access to.

7.2.5   Family understanding of higher education

For those students who had partners or families with little experience of higher education, their descriptions of the support they received were different from those who had that experience. There was evidence throughout their descriptions that they did not discuss their work at home, because of a perceived lack of understanding of the pressures they were under. Simon described the distance he had felt from his partner as he celebrated with his fellow

students at the end of his course, arguing that he wanted to be with people who had been through the same experience as he had at that time:

> But when I came out of the exam I knew that I'd passed my degree, at that moment in time, that was when I knew I'd passed because I knew I'd done enough. And I was numb! I was utterly numb because we went over the pub, and everybody was in the same boat and I just wanted to be with them really, to be honest, because they understood how I felt and they all felt the same way. They all knew how they'd done in the exam, and that it was over! But you try to convey that to somebody else who hasn't done it. … She (his partner) didn't understand it at all.

Rebecca described how she did not discuss her work with her mother and father because they had not been to university and so 'did not understand', exemplified in this extract from her final interview describing her father's reaction to her degree classification:

> I had to text my dad to tell him that I got a 2:1 when I found out and he said he had to go and ask his friend what it meant, whether it was good or bad before he texted me back!

It was not just the varying family experience and knowledge of higher education that influenced the nature of the support families were able to offer. As a mature student with a young child, Simon reported trying to find ways of accommodating both his family relationships and study into his timetable. Simon's account of his family's circumstances contrasted sharply with Carol's and other students who lived at home or in Halls with few responsibilities beyond their course. There was a gender dimension too, to the expectations the two mature male students had of themselves in maintaining the family home on limited budgets, while they studied, as Samuel described as he looked forward to his summer break following his second year at university:

> For the last two weeks I've been doing essential maintenance around the house. For the next two weeks I've got to get three cars serviced and MOT'd. That's my car, my wife's car and my mother-in-law's car, she's seventy-odd. So I do those, I've given it two weeks because I know there's some stuff wrong with my mother-in-law's car and

hopefully I can get the parts second-hand. Then after that I need to go to work. I need some employment. I'm skint.

His account, and that of Louise, who grappled with the responsibility of caring for her disabled mother while she studied, illustrates the difference between their experiences of family life and those without such responsibilities. For some, the practical support their families were able to offer included maintaining the household to allow them to concentrate on their studies. Two students highlighted this kind of practical support as part of their reason for choosing to live at home while they studied, fearing they would not be able to cope with the demands of university at the same time as they coped with new domestic responsibilities such as washing, cleaning and cooking for themselves. Although these mature students had different demands on their time and emotions as they studied, the support their universities offered them did not change to meet those different support needs. For example, timetabling constraints offered no flexibility and placements were fixed at specific locations. However, remote access to library facilities and the ownership of personal computers in some part helped students study more flexibly around other responsibilities. Yet within a small number of students the variety of family needs was clearly evident and helps to illustrate the different demands and access to support students have, confirming the complexities for institutions in meeting those support needs.

From the early days of worrying about settling in and grappling with unfamiliar academic practices, through the pressures of assessments, placements and classroom learning, to the finality of third year assessments and dissertations, students described periods of extreme stress and anxiety. These included times when students had literally cried down the phone to their teachers or family and when they had contemplated giving up their studies:

I mean, this year it has been really tough. We had our first placement just before

Christmas, and I ended up missing two weeks of it because I had a cancer scare, and I had to be off, I was undergoing all sorts of tests, and then I got the all clear but then I had to make up my placement time. I ended up working right up until the day before Christmas Eve when everyone else was on holiday! (Louise, End Year Two)

At that point I was actually, at the point, I was crying down the phone to them, I was that upset. So I did feel that I was a bit let down that no-one came out to see me. It was just reassurance I needed really. (Helen, End Year Two)

Could be the possibility of the debt, possibility of self-doubt, possibility of anything. This year it's been absolutely horrendous. I've just about managed to get over it. …. Fourteen hours at a computer and doing 50 words, going back the following day and crossing the 50 words out, and just working at it like that until the 50 words turns into 10, and you can actually save 10 words the following day. No seriously, it's been that bad. (Samuel, End of Year Two)

At these times, the people who had been able to offer support included family, partners and fellow students. Having a source of personal support was important to students and yet it is not something that institutions can necessarily provide. However, it was not just people who sustained the students through times of difficulty. Another aspect of the students' experiences was their reason for studying at university, and the ways in which that kept students engaged and motivated on their course.

7.3   Motivation in times of stress

From the descriptions of their motivation, it was possible to identify three themes: subject interest and potential professional success; the achievement of high grades (according to students' expectations of themselves) and for some students, the debt they were accruing in order to study.

7.3.1   Identification with the profession

For the students on courses leading to a professional qualification, the end goal of achieving that qualification was cited as the reason they kept going when things got difficult. This was illustrated by Helen and Louise's responses at the end of their first year to the question 'when

times have been hard this year, what has kept you going?':

> I really, really want to be a nurse so I always remind myself that the goal is not too far away and it's achievable. (Helen)

> Well, in two years time I'll be graduating and be able to go off and work. That's what's keeping me going. (Louise)

Similarly, at the end of his second year, Samuel described how his goal of being a social worker had served to motivate him:

> Licensed to practice, the ability and the tools to be the best social worker I can be. Because the knowledge that I've got, so far, has enhanced my practice. I want it to continue to enhance my practice, and I want it to progress to the competence that you can know that you can virtually walk into any situation with a given service user and, you will know, well, you won't know the answers but you know where to go to give the service user the best service.

These students often cited the positive feedback they had received while on placement as a key motivating factor and this featured across the years as an important element, which helped them to see their future within their profession, as Louise describes:

> Especially on my placements. I've had lots of really nice comments back, from my mentors, how they've been really pleased with my work and how I'm going to make a fantastic nurse, things like that, coming from professionals, really helps you out. If you are having a tough time with your work, having those comments makes it all worth it. (End of year one)

> It's when you speak to the patients and they say thank you to you and your assessors tell you that you're doing a good job, that's what keeps me going. (End of year two)

Another student with a particularly clear end goal that helped sustain her through her course was Veronica, studying Business at the post-1992 university. Veronica's background in escaping the war in Sierra Leone and her subsequent adoption by a family in England led her to have specific ideas about why she was at university. Her determination to build an enterprise that would offer employment in her home country was evident in her interviews and served to motivate her even when she felt isolated and struggled with her workload.

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When asked at the end of her first year what had kept her going, she replied:

> My dream! Once you go into higher education, the main drive for it is always motivation and passion, because if you have motivation and passion, then nothing is impossible.

In her second year she contrasted her own determination with some of those around her, whom she felt were only just beginning to understand the challenges they would face entering the employment market:

> Because once you have a definite identification of what it is you want, you've got your eye on the goal and you've got your strategy and university is part of that strategy to get there. Especially because of the credit crunch people are realising that a lot of people are losing their job so they are realising oh wait, I've wasted two years when I had that opportunity to gain experience. So now everyone's struggling to try and get as much out of it as possible. And you can kind of see the train crashing!

It was clear that for these students, having an end goal, knowing what they wanted to get out of university, helped to motivate them and support them through pressured times. For some students, the desire to gain what they described as high grades also served to motivate.

7.3.2 Aiming for high grades

In the first year of their studies, six of the eight students expressed determination to achieve high grades throughout their courses. They had set their sights high from the moment they came into higher education. All but two students made frequent references to the standards they were expecting of themselves. The two students who did not prioritise high grades were focussed on getting through, completing their courses and obtaining professional qualifications. In their interviews, neither Samuel nor Jane made reference to high achievement, although both had high expectations of themselves as professional practitioners.

The remaining students talked about wanting to get either First Class or Upper Second Class Honours and their motivations varied in why they felt this was their goal. Simon had realised on his Access course that he was capable of high achievement and he wanted to prove to himself that he could succeed. He aimed for First Class Honours and spoke of his disappointment in his second year at being given C grades for some work. During his final year, he began to realise the personal cost of aiming for a First Class degree, following a discussion with his tutor:

> One lecturer who I really respect said to me 'Si, I know you want a first and I know you've said that you want a first, but take a 2:1. Take it from me, you'll get a 2:1 easily, 2:1 and then you won't end up killing yourself.' And he knew exactly what he was talking about and I refused to believe that he was right until the point when I thought, you know, 'God, this is killing me! It is killing me!'

His friend and fellow BioMedical Sciences student Rebecca had also set her sights high. She had gained high marks in her Access course and was determined to do well at university. In her first year, Rebecca described her 'proudest moment' as being when she was awarded a high mark for an assignment. In her second year, she recognised an element of peer competition in encouraging her to aim for high marks:

> I don't want to be the one that gets the worst results. So it's not peer pressure, but a little bit of competition. And we all want to get, obviously everyone wants to get an A, but we all try to get an A or a B, which generally we all do, so it's good to have that.

Like her peers in the study, Rebecca valued the opinions of her teachers and she was keen to impress them with her abilities, fearing their reaction if she under performed:

> Knowing that the lecturers know who I am when they're marking my work. …they all kind of know who I am now, and I don't want them to be marking that and thinking what an idiot, why has she done that?

In Rebecca's case, the fear of their reaction combined with respect for her teachers and competition with her peers helped to motivate her to work harder to impress. This comparison with others was felt by Carol too when she made constant reference, throughout her interviews, to her marks in relation to those of her peers. So in her first year she was most proud of having gained the top mark in her year for a piece of work and again in her second year when she measured her marks in comparison to others. By her final year, Carol talked about having felt 'quite bitter' when one piece of work was marked lower then she had expected. Carol's determination to pass with a First Class or Upper Second Class degree stemmed from the previous success her brothers had enjoyed at university:

> I'd like to get a 2.1, it's what I'm aiming for. I know I wouldn't get a first. Again, comparing to my brothers, they both got 2.1s, although one was very close to a first. He should have got a first. So if I got a 2.2 I'd be really annoyed that I hadn't done as well.

What was apparent to other students in the study was how much it mattered to them how well they did. However, by the end of their second year Helen and Louise were placing greater emphasis on professional achievement. For Helen, 'succeeding in nursing is more important than high academic grades', and Louise argued that 'good grades do not necessarily make you a good nurse'.

The students in this study cared about their grades for a number of reasons, as part of a range of factors driving their commitment. For all the students who reported their grades as having personal significance the desire to do well and achieve high marks served as a reason to keep going and to work hard. Only Simon reported the personal cost of that endeavour, coping as he was with a young child at home. Where students spoke about their fears of failing to achieve standards they had set for themselves in relation to others, they did not present those

fears as having had a negative effect on their studies, rather seeing them as an added impetus to work harder and to prove their abilities to others.

7.3.3 Accruing debt

Alongside career interest, professional qualification and ambitious grade targets, three students mentioned the debt they were accruing as a reason to carry on when things got tough. In Samuel's interviews, the issue of debt was raised in all three years, whereas for Rebecca and Jane the issue of debt was revealed in later interviews. For Samuel, the debt led him to think of his decision to participate in higher education, after twenty years in manufacturing industry, as a 'gamble'. He saw the gamble in relation to his ability to pass the course and there was evidence later in his studies that concern about debt was causing him some problems in clearing his head to write his assignments. However, for him the fact that he, and his family, was accruing debt to study gave him a reason to persevere.

As Rebecca recalled at the end of her second year, the debt she was accruing served in part to motivate her to focus on her studies. Following a period where, by her own admission, she did not work as hard as she felt she could have done, the final year of her course concentrated her attention:

> It used to be 'Oh, I'm going out tonight' and all that stuff, but now it's actually 'you've got one more year – sort it out!' Because I've gone and got myself twenty grand in debt for this, I may as well do it properly and come out with the best degree that I can..

As these students progressed through their courses, and their investment (or debt) became larger, the motivation not to 'waste' the investment seemed to become greater. It served both as a motivator to encourage a more serious attitude to study (in Rebecca and Jane's cases) and as a risk factor for Samuel as he felt he gambled with his family's future.

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The three elements, professional qualification or end goal, ambitious grade targets and the fear of debt all featured as motivating factors. These, alongside the people and networks of support built up by the students, sustained them through their courses. What was less clear was how their institutions supported them, particularly how their institutions offered individual support and guidance.

7.4   Relationships with institutions

In examining the data on institutional support mechanisms, it was helpful to think of two aspects: the ways in which support was organised at course level and the ways in which students engaged at institutional level. This included their engagement with central university services, with the Students' Union or Guild and with wider university-wide activities. At course level, key factors seemed to be the varying availability and facilitation of individual and group support and the ways in which poorly organised teaching impacted on students' commitment to the subject. At institutional level, the limited use the students made of central services or facilities, together with their limited knowledge or identification with the institution was noticeable.

7.4.1   Support at course level

Prominent in the data was how students identified support, or gaps in support, from their course teachers. The differences reported in teaching staff availability, discussed above, reinforce the strengths and limitations of support linked to course teams, as these two contrasting descriptions from Rebecca and Simon, talking about teachers on their Biomedical course illustrate:

> S: So you go and knock on their door and they will not entertain you walking through the door unless you've got an appointment for that particular time. Whereas,

sometimes, you might book an appointment and it'll be like, say, next Tuesday at half past three….

R: Because we've got tutors who've, she's never replied to our emails, our Personal Tutor, but A will always reply within a couple of hours. Sometimes we've been in the internet Café and we've got a problem, even on a module that's not his, he'll come over from his office to help us.

Rebecca and Simon regarded A as an excellent teacher because he was able to respond to their requests quickly. Similarly, the nursing students reported varying degrees of accessibility of their teaching staff, again with named individuals being remarked upon for their ready availability. The contact students had with their teachers seemed from the students' descriptions to be determined by the willingness of the member of staff to make themselves available rather than being explicitly spelled out as some kind of entitlement upon which they could rely. Even where the support was centred on a specific piece of work, students reported having difficulty gaining access to teaching staff and again it felt as though students were either lucky in who they were allocated, or not, as the case might be. This extended extract from Carol's interview at the end of her second year describes the discrepancies that students felt:

We all had teachers for the groups and we all got told different things in relation to the essay, and some teachers were really good and they said 'I'm going to give you loads of guidance', and others would say 'well you know you should be thinking about this yourself and I don't want to be putting too many ideas onto your head because I don't want you to produce the same essay…' And I asked the module leader for help and he said 'I can't give you help, you've got to go to your individual facilitator, and he wasn't being much help. I really wanted help because I didn't know what to do. And I appreciate that they can't give us the answers, but I really wanted more guidance and I wasn't getting it. And my friend in a different group was getting it without even asking for it, which didn't feel fair.

Students spoke about their frustrations at what they saw as poor organisation of teaching sessions. They were critical of modules where the order of teaching was not clear to them, or where teachers changed or were substituted halfway through the module, or where teachers

did not know what the students had already been taught on the module. For example, Rebecca recounted the organisation of an exam:

> We had one exam, and from the minute when we were queuing up, we were continually shouted at and told how stupid we were, until we sat down and the exam begun. And I was nervous enough because it was the whole end of module exam, and it was 'you know you shouldn't have your phones on, get back there, if I hear anymore talking I'm cancelling this exam, you can all come back in resit week.' There were about six of them, continually shouting, 'you, get that bottle of water off the table!', 'are you all stupid, have you never done an exam before?'. And it was because security hadn't come and opened the door!

Where there were problems with organisation, students turned to student representatives to mediate between themselves and teachers. For those students in the study who took on the representative role themselves, it gave them the opportunity to gain a better understanding of how the course, teaching and the university were organised. All those who assumed the role spoke positively about their experiences, as Rebecca discussed:

> We've got a good little circle of friends that we're always with, and it's good to have that environment. I've never felt that I was on my own here, and that if I didn't understand something there was nowhere that I could go. And I think that being a student rep and being involved in other facets of the university as well, I feel that I belong here.

Here were further examples of students forming their own support networks, relying on each other for representation and not finding the institution performing that role.

7.4.2   Relationship with the wider institution

Alongside the variability of the course related support was the limited connection and engagement students described with the institutions in which they studied. When asked about the university facilities they used, students invariably talked about the use they made of the libraries, both on campus, in neighbouring universities and remotely. When asked what other facilities students had used, the only examples were Samuel and Jane who had used the

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central university's dyslexia support services and one other student who had referred herself once to the university's counselling services. Descriptions were centred on practical engagement, centred in studying, constrained by time and commitments to other activities, primarily placements. In their final years, students reflected on their engagement with their institution:

> I did join the gymnastics in my first year, but because of placement, I could barely go, and I stopped going in the end. It was really hard because they were all talking about their halls of residence, and they really wouldn't include me in it because as soon as I said I lived at home, that was it, they were like OK. I'm not talking to you now. …Then because I was maybe a bit shy, I wasn't confident enough to strike up conversations about other things, you just get a bit hurt and think 'oh, I can't be bothered to go there'. (Carol)

> You're only in university half the time in 3 years, and because of the shift work, you don't get the chance to do what other students do within the university and to use those facilities. For example, in my first year I was a member of the university sports centre and most of the classes are on at times when I'd be at work so I couldn't continue with it because I couldn't juggle the two together. I'm sure there are students doing this course that do manage it. Those crazy people with lots of energy but I just don't have the energy. (Helen)

> My first part of my second year I went to a group, but then I was missing too many because I had a shift on, and sometimes…it's like if you miss a few or you're too tired, because obviously it's to come in, because sometimes you'd be in uni in the day and then you'd go home because it didn't start till 7 at night, and then having to come back again, it was just a bit too much.. (Jane)

> In the first year, because you're in the lecture theatre, most of the time, there's just so many of you, you're there all the time, you go, you have your lecture and then you either go to lunch or you go home, or you go to your next lecture and there isn't a time for chatting, or to get to know each other on a social level … so there's not any like social activity… (Rebecca)

> I did go to a few of the events that the university organised but generally not really, because we don't have an active university community. It's mostly you have to take yourself to go to them, otherwise they don't really try and because the university focussed more on the international students than it does the home students.. (Veronica)

These descriptions illustrate the limited engagement students had with their university.

However, they also discussed the use they made of facilities. Students described varying degrees of satisfaction with the library facilities on campus. Carol described the medical library at her campus as her 'second home' and Veronica described a shared camaraderie around studying in the university library overnight. Criticisms of the libraries included the variability in the levels of useful help staff offered in locating sources, shortages of workspaces at busy times of the year, shortages of books and too many books being on short loan and a regular source of complaint the lack of refreshment possibilities in the libraries. Students wanted to be able to access food and drink as they studied and this led them to prefer to work at home.

Students used the university to provide what they needed specifically in order to access resources for their learning. Institutional constraints, such as the appropriate use of facilities, keeping food out of libraries for example, limited the students' willingness to use the facilities. In this way their affinities seemed to lie with their courses and peers rather than the institution itself.

Students' engagement with other student activities, such as sports societies or special interest groups was limited. For some students, the explanation given for this was a lack of time as placements disrupted regular time commitments. However, for other students there was an issue of what was on offer to them. An exception was Veronica who appreciated the range of opportunities her university had made available to her as a student of Business. These included awarding credit for volunteering, grants and a programme of support to encourage enterprise and an innovation centre. Despite these opportunities, her description of the university community she gave was typical of the other students:

This university doesn't have a university community! I don't feel so! …..

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But the use of new technology helped to alleviate the lack of community she had described:

> Yes, that's made a big difference, everything has been on Facebook, so once you've joined the university networks, they contact you and if they have workshops for people that are struggling with their assignment and anything like that, they send you bulletins on Twitter as well, so you can follow them.

What students were describing was a detachment from the university as a large organisation, accessing only what they needed as and when they needed it. In part this was a consequence of the type of courses some of the students were taking. The demands of placements took students away from the institution for significant periods of time. Other students were limited by family and caring commitments and therefore took a practical approach to studying where it suited them best. Of much greater importance were the immediate support networks available from their course environment, teachers and peers.

7.5   Social integration: having an effective network of support

Social integration (Tinto 1975) was important too. In this context, it was the capacity to build and access a network of support, usually with peers, which provided the student with reassurance, advice or merely distraction. It enabled them to feel comfortable at university (Read et al 2003) and part of a community built upon strong and positive relationships with peers, teachers and family. Those relationships reinforced social integration in Tinto's sense: the congruence between the individual and the social community within the university (Braxton and Hirschy 2004:97). Understanding the boundaries of those relationships was important and a balance needed to be struck between seeing teachers as 'friends' and not being intimidated by their professional and academic credentials. Having a network of peers from whom they could seek reassurance or advice, or even just as a source of distraction, was important in making the student feel that they fitted into the university environment. Being

able to discuss issues with people who were in similar situations was important and this shared experience gave meaning to the relationship. Social integration at university was founded in relationships, rather than in institutional practices.

7.6   Surviving critical moments

As they moved through their courses, attitudes to learning and learner identity changed gradually and without the students consciously realising it. Some commented they would not have noticed the changes had they not been taking part in this study. The process of reflection required by our annual interviews caused them to review their progress in a different way. However, there were critical moments in their studies which could cause a crisis of confidence and lead participants to question their future participation. In the data, three 'moments' placed particular strains or challenges to learners' identities: poor or failing marks, personal crises and problems arising within placements.

Participants generally had high expectations of themselves, with only one student reporting lack of concern over her marks, provided she passed. Not surprisingly, where those expectations were not met, either through a lower mark than anticipated, negative feedback on work or failing a module, students faced setbacks in how they saw themselves as learners. Where an assignment was failed, extra work was required in the re-sit. Lower than expected marks created disappointment and sometimes confusion about what they needed to do to improve and this required them to draw upon their capacities as learners.

There were particular crises too for those who undertook placements. In particular, conflict with members of supervisory staff caused problems, with resulting confusions over relationships with university teachers and responsibilities for resolving disputes. Having

professional competence questioned strikes at the heart of students' experiences given the centrality of professional learning for vocational courses and caused a crisis of confidence and motivation. What helped to overcome these moments of challenge was positive feedback from others, particularly patients in the case of nurses and guidance from teachers about workplace protocol.

Finally, the link between personal lives and learning was apparent when moments of crisis occurred in students' personal relationships. In this study those moments occurred where the priority given to studying seemed to challenge that given to close friends and relatives. How much time and energy students devoted to their studies affected what was left for others and what these moments of challenge did was to expose the priority being given to their studies. This caused students to reflect on their motivations for study and their degree of commitment to it.

The model of pre-entry learner identities tentatively offers a way of distinguishing between students on entry but needs further testing with larger numbers of students. However, within the confines of a small study such as this, it is possible to make some suggestions of the impact these differences had at university. They seemed to play a part in how these students responded to the critical moments they experienced. Those who held un-mediated learner identities described the greatest 'shock' (Christie et al 2008) on entry to university but seemed most confident in their abilities to overcome setbacks. Those who had partially mediated pre-entry learner identities had overcome their shock in a different higher education setting and so seemed to understand better what was expected of them. The mature students were more likely to be critical of their teachers and to want to challenge the boundaries of their teaching

and learning, thus struggling with adapting their work to the constraints of academic convention.

As they moved through their studies, having a strong network of peers to offer support reinforced students' sense of belonging and thus helped them to see themselves as part of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Thus their learner identity was strengthened which helped them survive difficulties.

7.7   Summary

This chapter has focused on students' descriptions of the support they used and how they engaged with their peer group, teachers, institution and families and friends while at university. The students focussed on engagement at course level, with immediate peers and some teachers, with use of wider university facilities being broadly instrumental and related to their studies. There were some examples of the institution facilitating social networks but in the main students forged their own relationships, often to help negotiate the stresses and strains of their academic demands. There was a valuable shared experience between peers and a degree of understanding that was often not present in other relationships. Where families had experience of higher education however, they were able to offer relevant and timely advice which endured throughout the course. Having a clear end goal, a determination to succeed as a professional, seemed to help students keep focussed and committed when studying was difficult.

Students' descriptions of their processes of social integration (Tinto 1975) showed how they acquired social capital (Bourdieu 1997) through the networks of support they built for themselves. This helped them to negotiate the critical moments they faced. It helped to

reinforce their sense of belonging to the learning community (Lave and Wenger 1991) and contributed to strengthening their sense of self as learner and future professional.

The foregoing two chapters have focussed on the data relating to the time students spent at university. The next chapter describes how students talked about the outcomes from their time at university.

8.   Chapter Eight: Moving on from university

8.1   Introduction

The lack of consensus about the purposes of higher education described in Chapter One has consequences for the development of undergraduate learner identity. The extent to which higher education primarily functions to build human, economic or social capital is illustrated by the debate between the employability agenda and broader aspirations for human development, such as Walker's capabilities (2006, 2008) or Archer's social mobility (2003). Where the focus lies will influence the learning experiences of students. The degree of congruence between the system's aims and the student's motivations will nurture or threaten the security of an individual's learner identity. In other words, if the individual values the outcomes available they are more likely to feel a sense of identification with the system (or field).

An area that is particularly contested relates to employability and what this means in practice. Acquiring skills and knowledge which can be applied to the workplace has always featured in higher education, but the interpretation has shifted, particularly for the 'new' vocational courses upon which the students in this study were enrolled. The extent to which they felt the content of their course, and the pedagogy employed, aligned to their motivations should have had important implications for their disposition to learning, or the value they attached to that learning. Recognition that their degree would make a difference to their future, and valuing that difference, should have helped to sustain their motivation for study.

The data presented so far explored the students' choices of, preparation for, and subsequent academic and social experiences at university. This chapter focuses on the outcomes of their studies, their reflections on time spent at university and how they envisaged their futures. Students were interviewed in the final few weeks of their third year, after examinations but before results were known, the exception being Samuel who was interviewed after his results.

The first section considers the changes over time in students' descriptions of their goals and aspirations at university. The second section describes the outcomes for the students, first in a summary table and then in more detail as they reflected upon the academic, professional, social and personal outcomes from their time at university; where possible, post-university details from students six months after they left university have been included in the data. These were shared through private Facebook connections with some students. How students saw their future possibilities will then be outlined.

8.2   Changing perceptions of success

The study explored the changes over time as described by the students in their interviews and one aspect was to consider how their definitions of success changed. At each stage of the research students were asked to define what success at university would mean to them and responses are recorded and discussed below.

Carol's original motivation for studying for a nursing degree centred on her subject interest in Biology and career prospects offered by the profession:

> I'd always been quite interested in biology, that side of it and the disease process, … if my friends had a cut on their hand, or something, I'd be there, I wanted to treat it! Quite a few things drew me to it, the prospects afterwards, of the job, the diversity that there is in nursing. There's not just one, solid, you pass your degree and then that's it.

At the end of her first year, Carol defined her greatest achievement in terms of marks and

position in relation to peers:

> I got 94%, which was actually the highest in the year! I was really pleased about
> that!... It made me feel really good because I had revised really hard for it, as well. So
> it's not like a fluke. And I did quite well on the biology exam, I got in the 60s. I was a
> bit disappointed with a couple of the essays, I kind of got 48% or low fifties, I think I
> just haven't got that technique yet. But I wouldn't really expect to just start university
> and be getting 80% on things. It would be a bit weird!

Asked at this stage how she would define success, she answered: getting a 1st or 2.1 before

adding:

> As long as I feel quite happy in myself, about what I've got. Because you know when
> you've done badly and you know when you've done quite well. And just as long as I
> know that I've tried and I haven't done badly because I haven't tried.

Carol continued to gain high marks and at the end of her second year described her greatest

achievement:

> I got 67 which I was really pleased with, mainly because the top person got 70, so it
> made me come second in the class….I was really pleased with that. If everyone else
> had got 90 I probably wouldn't have felt so chuffed about it. It gave me a bit of a
> boost. I thought, well I can do it… I was quite pleased with myself that I did get
> through last term though it was horrific. I did do all my work, I didn't drop out, I
> didn't go crazy, I've still got my boyfriend, so you know, it didn't all go down the
> pan!

Her definitions of success remained consistent, focussing on classification:

> I'd like to get a 2.1, it's what I'm aiming for. I know I wouldn't get a first. …But
> also, just that I've made the most of it. … I think I just want to feel, overall, that I had
> a good three years and that I enjoyed it, and made friends and did well academically
> and things like that.

Helen had described her original motivations as arising from her family history and her desire

to work in a medical environment. By the end of her first year, she defined her greatest

achievement:

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I'd say, passing everything! And I've passed them at standards that I like. I'm getting 2.2s and 2.1s which for me is acceptable. But I've also made really great friends on the course. I just feel like I've made a really good foundation for next year. Friend-wise and work-wise, I've proved to myself that I'm amongst people who are similar to me, and I've got the grades..

Her definition of success at university at this point centred in a different cultural experience as well as getting a degree:

I think if you go to university, get the degree you went for, at a standard that suits you, and you had a really enriching time while you were there, you met some nice people, you experienced a whole different lifestyle away from home, and a whole different culture.

The theme of personal and social development was evident at the end of her second year:

I've grown in confidence. I'm sure I've grown in knowledge somewhere… Skills, definitely skills on the actual ward, definitely learnt a lot more skills. I've learnt how to cope with difficult situations, and people.

The importance of social skills was again reinforced by her definitions of success at this point:

It would be nice to get good marks, but I'm not that bothered; to feel that I'm confident in going out to get a job, to do nursing and to influence people's lives. I've realised that most of it is having experience of people. When I'm out in practice, it's always about communication skills and improving them so if I felt like I had further improved what I do now, and I had some skills under my belt, and confidence to do it, then I think I'd be satisfied, that my training had done something with this person that I am!

Jane argued Nursing was a good profession to join, with prospects for career progression. By the end of her first year, she too was describing personal and social achievements:

Just getting through it, really. And having the little thing to say that I've cleared the year. To know that I've got into the second year at the moment!... Just making friends as well. Because I've never had a lot of friends, but I've got a lot more people who I'm friends with now than I ever had.

At this stage, Jane described success at university:

It would just be coming out at the end with a degree at the end of it, and hopefully having some job prospects and stuff. Because I'd be very disappointed in myself if I

failed and dropped out, or anything like that, so really it's just trying to do my best and then hopefully getting a decent degree at the end.

By the end of her second year, Jane was seeing her greatest achievement in terms of passing the units and success in relation to getting employment as she began to see the end of her course:

> Hopefully a job! Definitely a job as without a job you can't really do anything.. so, I'm just sort of hoping that I do qualify… But I need a job! (laughs) Like a proper one that's got a decent…

The fourth Nursing student, Louise described wanting to work with people and the apparent 'excitement' in nursing. By the end of her first year, Louise described herself as 'satisfied' with her performance:

> Passing I think! Because doing things like Biological Science, I haven't done that since school, which is a long, long time ago for me. That was quite a challenge, trying to get my head back into gear and learning formulas, and chemical names. But I passed them with quite good marks, so I was chuffed about that.

At this stage, success was defined in terms of her degree classification and job prospects:

> Probably achieving what I set out to do. Get a good degree so that I can get a good job afterwards, and be a good nurse. … At least a 2.2.

At the end of her second year, Louise described other achievements:

> … probably mixing more with people, more than last year now, (pauses) I'm more vocal, (laughs) whether that's a good thing… there's been some (assignments) where I've actually surprised myself, I've done really well and I really wasn't expecting it, and that's been quite good.

Her definition of success still centred on nursing:

> qualifying, I think, I want to qualify as a nurse and get a job and be good at what I train to do.

The Nursing students were consistent in their descriptions of their achievements and in their definitions of success, based on academic and professional recognition.

Rebecca had been motivated to enter higher education by subject interest, to fulfil potential

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and to get away from a job she found boring. At the end of her first year she saw her greatest achievement at university as confirmation of her ability to succeed in higher education, describing her first A grade:

> When I got my first A16. That was my proudest moment! … Because you've always got that little niggle of doubt that this is a degree now, and can you do it?

At this point, she defined success at university as:

> A first, or maybe a 2.1, but I would like a first.

Rebecca continued to enjoy her BioMedical Sciences course and at the end of her second year her definition of success and achievement centred again on grades and degree classifications:

> All the actual assignments. The essays and the practical reports that I've got an A in, which I counted them. I think I got 7 As this year. … Success will be a First or a 2.1.

Two more students described multiple motivations for starting their courses but over time their focus moved to passing, grades and possible employment. Samuel had begun his course in Social Work because he felt he had something to offer, was good with people and had received encouragement from his brother. At the end of his first year, he described his greatest achievement as:

> Getting through the course. … It's a biggy to me! I'm going to start the second year…

Success would be 'Oh, passing the course'. By the end of his second year, he remained pleased and relieved to have passed his year although his description was more complicated:

> At practice, satisfied with practice work, very, very satisfied in practice. Very, very good feedback, excellent feedback. I actually felt I made a difference. Wonderful feeling. And did it in the right way, the right manner, everything was spot on with practice. Academically no, a few personal problems around Christmas coupled with, computer failures meant that I got a couple of Ds. At the start of the year I'm getting Bs, B12s, all of a sudden it fell to C. When I got the problems, the personal problems

and the computer problems it fell to D, two Ds. So yeah, I could have done better, but I passed, it doesn't matter, I passed. I've won the £18,000 gamble, this year…

And his definition of success remained rooted in his professional future:

Licensed to practice, the ability and the tools to be the best social worker I can be.

Unfortunately, by his final interview, Samuel had learnt that he had been referred and would have to resubmit his portfolio.

Simon's initial interest in alternative therapies had prompted him to join the BioMedical Sciences course and he had described how he altered his original choice to meet his need to study for a qualification which was likely to lead to employment. At the end of his first year he was focussed on his grades, reporting his greatest achievement as:

Passing the exam is, for me, it's like, I don't even think about passing it, it doesn't enter my head, the thought of failing an exam, it's the grade.

Success at university for him was: 'The bottom line is a first.'

By the end of his second year his interpretation of achievement was, like Samuel's, more complex:

Going up a level, … it's not lay-man at all, … It means that I completely understand the basics of the subject which the man in the street wouldn't. Everybody knows what DNA is, or thinks they know, but they don't and I do. And I'm finding that things are clicking better with me now, … I know where the gaps are in my knowledge. And I know where to find the information from.

Yet his definition of success at university was blunt:

A piece of paper with my degree written on it I suppose! It is just a piece of paper at the end of the day but it's proof, isn't it? It's proof that you've done it. Even though you know that you're capable, you've still got to go ahead and do it.

Veronica had begun her course motivated to gain knowledge so that she could set up her own enterprise. She presented a multiple definition of achievement throughout her studies. In her

first year she described her (many) achievements:

> My first main achievement was that I chose the right path in my life. And I don't regret it. So that was the first success for me. The fact that I got to have a greater development in myself, to go through three years in university that made me more focussed as well. So when I see certain people and I can see the direction they are going to, it makes you want to sort of intervene and say you know, I don't think you should do this, because if you do that, you could do better. So having the opportunity to help make a difference in other peoples' lives while I'm at university has been another great success, getting to meet new cultures has been another one.

Her definition of success was similarly complex:

> I will have made use of all the resources that have been made available to me. I will have come out with a first or a 2:1, that's another way I will have been successful! I will have made friends that I can keep for all my life. I would have made myself employable, but at the same time I would have had a degree so that no matter where life takes me, I will always have a degree so that I can always go a bit further in life.

By the end of her second year, her achievements were a little more focused and reflected her wider interests:

> I received funding from the SPEED programme as well to sustain myself, and also I am now finishing all my planning to create my own business to be launched this weekend. I did some paintings over last year, worked in several large corporations …I am now doing an experience programme to work as a Business Consultant and I was offered by one of the ladies to work for. I'm helping another lady in Columbia set up her business as well, and I was recently offered by an events management company to work with them. And I am, of course, at university, finished, that's the first thing, and I've grown as a person.

As the students moved through their courses, there was considerable consistency in their definitions of achievement and success, related to their motivations for studying the course and future employment plans.

The two students for whom the final outcomes seemed to represent a change from their original intentions were Samuel, because of his referral although he did not wish to move away from Social Work and still hoped to achieve qualification and Veronica who was now

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discussing the possibility of studying a different subject, Anthropology, as a result of developing an interest, through her Business Studies course, in the way that people behaved.

The consistent message throughout the earlier interviews with all the students was the desire to stay at university, in some cases to achieve high grades, and in others to qualify. These goals were reported across all three years in the students' interviews.

At the end of their courses, students' reflections concerned academic, professional, social and personal outcomes. Before discussing these it is helpful to reflect on students' descriptions of their greatest achievements at the end of their courses.

8.3   Greatest achievements

In their final interviews students explained what had been their greatest achievement at university. Among their descriptions, the theme of 'sticking with it', of completing the course, emerged from six interviews. This suggested that students had periods of doubt when not completing was seen as a possibility. In the case of two students, achievement was also linked to qualifying for the nursing profession. Seven of the students knew they had been successful at the time of the final interview. One student, Samuel had learnt the week before that his Practice Portfolio for Social Work had been referred. After the interview, he did not respond to my further attempt to make contact and so the final outcome of his study is not known. Table 9 below summarises what the students said in their final interviews about what they felt their greatest achievements were and what classification of degree they expected.

Carol and Louise mentioned their final grades as having particular significance. Carol highlighted her mark for her dissertation, which was the highest in her class. She was especially pleased with this since in her second year she had found the research component of

her course hard. Louise was pleased to have passed, in her words 'quite well'. Carol mentioned doing cardiopulmonary resuscitation on a patient as a further achievement describing this as a transforming moment in her training.

Rebecca mentioned her pride in being the first in her family to succeed in higher education, alongside 'passing well and sticking to it'. This pride had been a recurring theme in Rebecca's interviews and her delight in anticipating seeing her family at her graduation was evident.

Jane, Helen and Simon referred to completing or gaining qualification as the ultimate achievement, in Simon's words to 'win the war'. Veronica took a different perspective when describing what she saw as her greatest achievement. She referred to maturity, meeting different people and learning to reflect but she, too, emphasised the completion of her course:

> Greatest achievement? Getting the degree, that's so important because you've invested time and money into it. There's no point going to go and study a degree then if you don't graduate.

Students were responding to questions about their greatest achievement and were therefore focussing on one or two aspects, mainly qualification and successful completion. In the rest of their interviews they expanded on broader outcomes including academic, professional, social and personal capacities illustrating the variety of outcomes they recognised.

Table 2: Student outcomes, as reported in final year interviews and postscript correspondence where possible.

Student	Academic qualification expected in final interview	Greatest achievement that student named	Known outcomes in postscript correspondence where possible
Carol, Nursing	2.1	Getting 80% and highest in year for her dissertation. Doing CPR on a patient in the clinical setting.	1st degree Staff nurse in Accident and Emergency department
Helen, Nursing	2.1	Getting to the end.	2.1 Staff nurse on Oncology ward
Jane, Nursing	2.2	Success in qualifying	Unknown – planned to take time out before pursuing employment
Louise, Nursing	2.2	Passing dissertation with 55% ('quite well') 'Just getting the degree and qualifying'.	2.2 Staff nurse on Plastic Surgery ward
Rebecca, BioMedical Sciences	2.1	To be the first in her family to graduate. Passing well and sticking to it.	2.1 BioMedical Scientist in laboratory work
Samuel, Social Work	Referred on practise portfolio	Hopefully a license to practise. Learning, 'for want of a better word, class'.	Unknown
Simon, BioMedical Sciences	2.1	Completion, 'to win the war is to get the degree certificate because that is the end of the journey'.	2.1 Employment unknown
Veronica, Business	2.1	Getting the degree, reflecting on her experiences, maturing and growing, meeting different people.	Three month contract with events management company

8.4   Developing academic capacities

At the end of their studies, as students reflected on the academic outcomes of their endeavours, there were common themes. All of the students described themselves as being more efficient in how they studied, more familiar with academic terminology and in greater control of what they needed to know.

A common reflection was that students no longer felt obliged to read whole texts but were able to judge a source's worth more quickly. This stemmed from necessity, coping with busy workloads, and from a clearer understanding of terminology and subject. For example, Carol described how she had developed the ability to skim read and to make judgements about what and how to read:

> From thinking back to my first years, I've spent weeks and weeks and weeks researching for an essay and I did OK, whereas now I think I can, I still have to spend quite a bit of time, but probably not as much. Or maybe I'm just more confident to think OK, now I can stop, I've got enough, at that point I'll move on to the next bit.

Not only were they more efficient in their reading, but they had all grasped that they needed to provide evidence for their arguments and used multiple sources to do this as Louise described:

> I look at a lot more journals, rather than relying on textbooks and taking things at face value. I think, whether that's because with nursing you have to everything evidence based, I question things more now so I don't just take it at face value.

Louise went on to explain why she felt it took her three years of study to reach this point:

> I think on this course it's probably difficult to get it in that first year because you are so overwhelmed with so much stuff, like basics of nursing, just to help you survive on the wards that I think it would just be too much. We're allowed to get through the basics to understand, because you're told that you do have to question things but you've got time then to do that through your second year and then by the time you've

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got to the third year you've kind of built on that and actually question things in practice.

The combination of growing efficiency and critical awareness in their reading was evident too. They had moved from relying on teachers for advice on what to read, to choosing sources and taking a critical approach to material:

> I can definitely read sort of academic things a lot, I couldn't have done it at all before, I couldn't have read an article and understood it. Now I sort of skip past all the boring methodology bit, but then I'll still know, you know, if it's a study of one person and it's supposed to be a randomised trial and there's only one person in it. You sort of know, right, ignore that, move on. So that's been really good and skim reading, and things like that and probably my vocabulary has developed. (Carol, Final Year)

The combination of university teaching and in some cases professional practice placements meant that students were now more familiar with and comfortable using, professional terminology.

Alongside being more efficient in their reading five students described a growing awareness of gaps in their knowledge and reported knowing where to go to address the gaps. These students talked about being clearer about what they needed to know, often as a result of their experience on placement where practice had revealed shortcomings in knowledge and understandings. For example, Helen reflected on the changes she recognised in her approach:

> And placement-wise, I've been pretty steady, but I think it's just because as I've neared qualifying, I'm clearer on what I actually need to know. So I go out and get it a bit more. So I've become better at seeing the bits of my practice or my academic work that I need to hone, or I need to focus on because I'm not doing quite so well on and then I'm more pro-active in going out and actually getting someone to show me that skill.

What the students all agreed upon was that it had taken time to understand and reflect on their learning, as Simon reported:

> Even though you've done your A Levels or Foundation course, you're not really going to understand any. It will take some time, three years in fact, for you to get to the point where you can understand it and produce a beautiful dissertation that encompasses everything that this whole thing is about.

The combination of time, teaching and study had allowed the students to think about the ways in which they studied best and to find their individual preferences both about the practical process of learning and how they could apply the knowledge gained.

8.5   Professional knowledge

Seven of the eight students had studied courses carrying professional accreditation, which contained a placement element, either as part of the course for the Nursing and Social Work students or as an additional element completed in vacations by the BioMedical Scientists. As chapter 6 described, the practice elements were to prove crucial in helping students make sense of the academic learning they were undertaking. As they looked back at the end of the course, the seven students recognised the need for academic theory to underpin their knowledge in the workplace, as Jane described:

> I mean obviously you need the academic part to get the degree and it is what helps to build your knowledge base, you need the theory behind things to know, because obviously with nursing a lot of it's evidence based practice, you can't do something without there being a reason for you doing it.

For two students, the practice element had stimulated their academic interests. For Rebecca this renewed her 'passion' for her subject, as she described it, and for Carol it reawakened her interest in Physiology:

> I think now, my interest in Physiology came back after my last placement and it's sort of been buried under all the other academic work that we'd have and I've suddenly realised that when I was looking for doing nursing it was because I'd done well in GCSE Biology.

A further dimension to students' reflections on practice was the impending sense of professional accountability they described. For example, the nursing students, as they neared the end of their courses, recognised they would be held to account professionally for their practice and this served as an incentive to focus on identifying gaps in, and taking steps to improve, their understanding in particular areas. What was clear was that for all the students who undertook some kind of professional practice there was growing ability to link academic knowledge with practice and reflect on how important academic knowledge would be in future practice.

8.6 Expanding political and cultural horizons

Two students described developing greater awareness of the political context in which they would work. Louise's experiences led her to an understanding of the implications of policy development in her work:

> I think I've got more awareness of things happening, you take account of the media and all that kind of stuff, you're aware of everything but I was very stuck into, right this is how to lumber puncture, this is how to do another thing. Now you are aware of policies that are coming out on the radio, and you've got a lot of swine flu stuff coming out. So you're starting to think right, how is that going to affect me and my practice? Because you think you don't need to know about politics. And now you think oh, actually, I do, it's relevant.

Samuel reflected on the way his course had taught him what he described as 'class':

> I've realised that different cultures within society, as in the culture of academia, the culture of social work, the culture of service users, has changed. They are supposed to be part of one society with the same norms and values. But they're not! The norms and values used predominantly through academia are very middle class. And a lot of the assumption is that as a student you will understand that. I don't. I've had to learn that. And learning that has probably been the biggest thing that I've done. Learning the different, for want of a better word, class.

Samuel's experiences of having to learn new ways of behaving on his course, together with reflections as part of his required reflective practice, had led him to an understanding of academic practices and professional practice that suggested a different cultural awareness from the start of his course.

8.7   Personal capacities

The fourth theme in the data as students reflected on the outcomes of their time at university was a shift in personal capacities, primarily focussed on what they described as developing maturity and confidence.

Six students used the word 'confidence' to describe how they had changed and in all cases this was linked to having developed subject or practical knowledge. The link between knowledge and confidence was illustrated by their willingness to ask questions and challenge others based on the more secure knowledge they had gained through their course, exemplified by Louise:

> It's easier to, because you feel that because you, they know you and you know them you've got more confidence to kind of ask a question. If you're confused or you think 'well hang on, that doesn't quite fit', or something I've read you can bring it up and they don't mind.

Louise's belief in her increased confidence was confirmed when she described using her nursing skills in public to aid a road traffic accident victim and how her family had doubted her initial ability to complete the nursing course:

> So I wasn't the most confident of people when I started and I think they did wonder whether I would get through it.

One consequence of increased personal confidence brought about through developing knowledge was the ability to communicate, as Helen reported:

> I think when I feel confident I communicate more and better because I know I know it or I am good at it, so I think that I realised when I was on that placement, I'd suddenly had this big surge of confidence in my ability to do a job and that's carried me through my next couple of placements.

In the students' descriptions, confidence seemed to be centred on subject knowledge which allowed them to challenge or question in ways they would not have done at the start of their courses. The combination of knowledge and communication skills they had developed gave them confidence in themselves as learners and soon to be newly qualified professionals.

8.7.1 Maturity, or 'growing up'

Alongside their impressions of growing confidence, students talked about growing up, or of increased maturity, describing these as a consequence of their studies, placements and the passage of time. The four students for whom maturity was an identified outcome described this in different ways:

> You can look back and think yes I had a horrible time but there were moments like this that really helped me, then you mature from it, grow from it, learn from it, so that when you go into the future, you learn not to make the same mistakes again. (Veronica)

> I think that I might have grown up a little bit in the last year, as well…. Sticking to it, I think as well, just growing up and being a, I'm not going to say a proper grown up but actually being ready to go and do a proper job! (Rebecca)

> I think I've become more mature in the way I approach things now (Louise)

> I've probably grown a little bit more mature than I was, because obviously as a nurse, you've got a lot of responsibility when you're working with other people, especially with mental health, … you do have quite a lot of responsibility and that obviously helps you grow as a person. And just having to be, as a student, just flung in there and having to integrate as part of a team within a few weeks, and start becoming like a working member. (Jane)

These quotes illustrate the different dimensions to developing maturity that these students experienced. For both Veronica and Rebecca the theme of having to stick to something when

it was hard and when they would rather walk away had developed in them a degree of resilience. They now knew they could learn from mistakes and would apply this in their work. Louise thought of her maturity in terms of how she approached her studies, in planning more effectively and understanding the challenge she was facing. For Jane, increased maturity was a consequence of the professional responsibility assumed in her work as well as the experience of having to fit into the workplace. This was echoed by Carol who described having started twelve new jobs (on placement) and having to fit in to a range of different working environments. The emphasis in their reflections was more often on their experiences of practice settings than on academic settings, suggesting that as they looked back, it was through their work placements that they could recognise the greatest personal changes.

8.8   Reflections on their studies

The students were asked what advice they would offer to new students coming into university for the first time. Carol's centred on her new found confidence and her ability to take control of her learning, particularly on placement:

> I think, people always said to me, it's your placement, you have to be in control of getting the most out of it, and I think that probably is true. … If there is something you want to do, like in my first placement I wanted to spend time with the diabetic specialist nurse, and my mentor said 'oh, really, is that something you'd want to do?' but she said it in that tone of voice that makes you, puts you off it as if 'oh, should I not?' And I didn't in the end because I didn't feel confident enough to ring up myself and she clearly wasn't going to ring up for me, and she put me off in the way that she said about it. And I regretted it after. And I've spent time with them since. So I think, being confident to, if there is something that you particularly want to do, just do it.

Helen was keen to encourage new students to relax and have fun but she too mentioned being in control of her own learning:

> Have fun in your first year … It gets harder. And you're going to have less and less time for yourself. And if you get into the habit of coming off a shift and finding the

energy to go and do something, then start now. Because there's one, there are a couple of people on my course who did, they're amazing. They go kayaking on the weekends and they'll come off a shift and go running and do something, or go out, or whatever, but they've been doing that since the first year. … Studying I would say 'plan ahead, and keep chipping away and for independent, always keep independently learning. Don't rely on the information that's given to you from the university. If you've got a skill or knowledge that you think you're going to need, go out and learn it.

The theme of having not 'getting stressed' was common to 6 of the students and Jane was no different:

Tell them to enjoy themselves and to not get too stressed about the work. To use the library! At least remember it's there! Even though personally I haven't used it that much.

Louise reflected her own experiences in her advice, telling new students to use support offered:

I think actually, use your personal tutor. That's what they are there for. If you've got any worries, even if it's not about the work, come and talk to them.

For Rebecca, advice centred on being more open to new friendships:

I'd probably be a bit more open to talking to different people, because a lot of times we've been in the library and in those study rooms and things and we'll be going in and coming out and there's someone off our course and we'll have a little chat and 'oh, they're really nice, why didn't we speak to them before?

But she too returned to the theme of having more fun in the first year:

Honestly, I would say don't take it too seriously in the first year. Have some fun, but try to learn as much as you can but don't kill yourself, because you only need to pass. But really in the second year, you need to start knuckling down, read as many journals as you can, try to find out what discipline, or what area interests you the most, and really learn about that.

What the students were describing seemed to relate to broader issues than studying. Yet there was a disjuncture between those descriptions and the priority they seemed to give in their own definitions of achievement and success to gaining high grades. The theme of having more fun seemed to suggest a degree of nostalgia and regret in the students as they came to the end of

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their studies and looked to their futures.

8.9   Envisaged futures

There is a range of problems associated with relating the outcomes of higher education to employment patterns, not least the need to consider patterns over an extended period of time. The outcomes reported here are the immediate outcomes reported by the students at the end of their courses and their early first impressions as they sought employment.

Five of the eight students were clearly focussed on professions based largely within the public sector and were graduating in the year before the budget deficit reduction programme of the UK Coalition Government began to take effect. Predictably perhaps they were most certain of their job prospects and three of the four nursing students moved straight into relevant, graduate employment within three months of qualifying. All three reported positive experiences once they began work.

The fourth Nursing graduate, Jane, chose to take time out before looking for work, although she remained concerned about her job prospects. Her concern was the limited number of graduate entry level jobs in Mental Health nursing and the high number of applicants for those jobs. She was also worried that once she began to progress in her profession, she would be increasingly occupied with paperwork and her contact with patients would diminish. She remained uncertain about her future.

Samuel aimed to enter Social Work although his concern was whether he would qualify. Once his referral was confirmed he knew he would have to wait a year before receiving his license to practice and his employment prospects in the meantime remained uncertain.

The two BioMedical Sciences students achieved 2.1 degree classifications. Rebecca had applied to study Medicine as a postgraduate but had not been invited for interview. In her view this was because of the stigma attached to being a graduate from a post-1992 university, and her status as an undergraduate:

> I think there's some sort of stigma from coming from here, for one, and I don't think they like taking graduates on until they've got their qualification, their degree. And I think they like, I've heard, that they like you to keep applying to prove your dedication..

By her final interview she had applied for twenty jobs and had several interviews before successfully gaining employment as a laboratory assistant with a local Health Authority within three months of graduation. She reported being happy with her work and reminisced fondly about her time at university.

Simon, like Samuel, had experienced a sense of disappointment at the end of his course. He had undertaken BioMedical placements as a voluntary part of his course but he was finding it hard to get a job in the first few weeks after gaining his degree. Although his personal interest in the subject had motivated him to participate in higher education, he had nevertheless chosen his course with a view to gaining employment. With a young family to support, he was acutely aware of the responsibilities he faced. His early attempts to move into the labour market had met with disappointment when he was unsuccessful at a job interview. Despite feeling that he met all relevant criteria, preference was given to another applicant who had more work experience. Simon felt trapped; on the one hand he lacked relevant work experience (despite having placement experience) and on the other he was over qualified for jobs where he argued employers might see that he would not remain in the job for long before progressing. For him, getting a job was essential, practically in order to support his family and also to justify his investment in his degree, 'if you're investing four years of time, really you

want a job at the end of it, thank you very much'. Simon found himself in a highly competitive work market:

> The word on the street is that for every job that's advertised, it doesn't matter what it is, for trainee or bona fide Band 6, there's 300 people applying in this kind of area. So an MLA I went for at N, in Chemistry, they had people with PhDs applying to be a lab assistant!

Simon was considering voluntary work in a laboratory as a way of getting some work experience and he held on to his goal of studying for a PhD in the future.

Veronica had maintained her commitment to learning about Business as a prelude to developing her own enterprise. She obtained work directly after graduation on a three months' probationary contract with an Events Management company. She intended to pursue that work for a couple of years to acquire some experience and a working knowledge of the hospitality industry. However, in her final interview, she was questioning her commitment to Business and was considering doing a second undergraduate degree, or a postgraduate qualification in Anthropology because she argued that it was more important to study something that interested you than something that would simply lead to employment:

> Biggest advice: do something that makes you happy. Because if you don't study anything that makes you happy, chances are, when it gets tough you're going to lose focus and you're going to lose your way. And another thing as well, when you're doing something that you're really happy with, you tend to put 100% of yourself into.

This was in contrast to comments in her earlier interviews when she had been clear that her main priority was gaining knowledge of an industry.

For those students who had been focussed on employment as the primary goal in undertaking the degree, the professional outcomes involved an element of risk in that they were at the mercy of the vagaries of the labour market upon graduation. Three of the nursing students

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seemed reassured by the availability of jobs, confident that their degrees from the Russell Group university would be favourably viewed by potential employers.

8.10   Motivational capacities: having an envisaged future

How students saw themselves in the future, as professionals and experts, shaped their engagement in learning (Mann 2001; Ashwin and McClean 2004). Dominant in the data was evidence of the ways in which potential participation in the workplace influenced learning, with those students who had clear professional goals showing greatest persistence in their studies. Students in this study were undertaking vocationally related courses and the link between their studies and future work was a feature of their descriptions and reflections. However, for some this was problematic. They stressed future career options available to them as a strong motivating factor in choosing their courses and progressing through university. Building upon Bhatti's concept of instrumentalism in undergraduates' attitudes to learning (2003), this study revealed the contingent nature of motivation. In the early days of their university lives students spoke of their confidence in the link between gaining a degree and employment. As they moved towards graduation against a background of changing economic circumstances, the earlier confidence was challenged for some. There were emerging contradictions between their confidence in the value of a degree and the value employers might place on the qualification. Students felt over-qualified for lower grade jobs but lacked the experience to move straight into higher level employment. Once the link to employment looked more fragile (Burgaz 2007; Cranmer 2006), students began to question the value of their degree and this impacted on how they saw themselves as undergraduates. What mattered was whether they could envisage a purposeful future for themselves (Walker 2006) and how their degree would contribute to that.

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In their final year students were beginning to look to the future beyond university and as already argued, the relationship between university, qualification and employment was complicated (Hesketh 2000) and firmly situated within the broader economic climate. However, they began to talk about the capacities they had built in the construction of their undergraduate learner identities and how these might relate to future work. There was recognition that there would be further transition to negotiate but those capacities would enhance that transition. So for example having robust and secure subject knowledge, including command over practice provided a solid foundation for progression into work. Similarly, the social experiences of building support networks had given students the confidence that they would be able to integrate within teams and manage others. The final year had been a period of consolidation during which students had exercised greater control over their studies, had felt able to make more informed contributions to work and were more able to recognise the shortfalls in their knowledge. They had become critical learners (Wheelahan 2007) themselves.

8.11   Summary

As the students contemplated life beyond university, a number of themes emerged: how university had prepared them for work, what capacities they had built upon at university and whether they had made the most of their time in higher education. Students recognised there was a further period of transition to go through as they sought, found and adapted to employment. Some questioned the link between university and work, arguing that the labour market failed to recognise the value of their degree. One student's subject interest had changed and they contemplated exploring further study in an unrelated field. Students described building upon academic and personal capacities and described a process of maturing as a consequence of carrying responsibilities in professional and personal work.

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Finally, there was some recognition of the social relationships they had built at university but they had been unable to access other aspects of university life because of the demands of their vocationally related courses.

As students faced uncertainty upon graduation, the impact of the different risks (Beck 1992) they had taken in entering higher education became more apparent. For some, access to relevant forms of capital (Bourdieu 1997) had mitigated those risks but for others the risk remained. Students described individualised risks (Beck-Gurnstein 2002) as they sought to reconcile their futures amid the competing purposes for higher education (Layer 2005b).

9.   Chapter Nine: A summary of the main findings

9.1   Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesis of the data presented in chapters four to eight. It revisits the four research questions this study set out to address and describes the way in which the data and its analysis addresses salient points raised by those questions. Chapter Ten will then interpret findings in the light of the literature and theoretical concepts described in Chapter Two.

9.2   Research Question One: processes of adaptation and integration

What are the processes whereby students adapt to and thrive in the university environment?

The first research question focussed on the university environment; environment encompassing not only formal teaching exchanges but the myriad of other possible interactions, including social, cultural and political engagements students encounter at university. The data revealed three aspects of adaptation and integration: how students settle in to university in the initial transition, how they begin to learn about the academic practices required in the classroom, independent study and assessed work, and the importance of time as a part of the process.

9.2.1   Early transition: Not knowing what to expect

Arriving at any new situation is stressful and the students in this study described that stress in their early interviews. Fear of not knowing enough about the subject, appearing different from their peers or unfamiliar with the language and conventions of the university classroom were mentioned as contributing to discomfort in the new environment.

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As the students moved through their courses, the importance of peer support in sustaining them was highlighted. At the start, as relationships were not yet formed, making friends and finding a group of peers they could identify with helped them feel more comfortable.

There were some examples of institutional practices facilitating transition, including library tours, introductions to course units and meetings with teaching staff although these were reported as having only limited benefit. Opportunities to meet other year groups and more structured social interactions were two suggestions mentioned by four students offered that could have helped them acclimatise more quickly.

However, students had to learn to rely upon themselves to find ways to cope with the demands of university. This raises the question of the extent to which students can be prepared for university life or whether developing self-reliance is more important in ensuring successful transition.

9.2.2   Learning academic practices

Understanding academic practices was a recurring theme in the student interviews. It was not until much later in their course that familiarity with those conventions was described, and contrasted with earlier descriptions that involved confusion and frustration. Such practices included using multiple and appropriate sources, referencing, developing valid academic arguments and avoiding plagiarism.

From the perspective of their third year, it was clear the students had grasped the need to show evidence of using multiple texts from reliable and respected sources as part of the process of presenting their work. What seemed to help them to understand this practice was when they first experienced research methods modules, most often in the second year. In

particular, they reported not having used journal articles before, either for practical reasons (not knowing how to access them) or because, at school or college, they had relied on books and were unaware of journals as a valid source.

Writing within the constraints of academic argument also caused frustration. This was sometimes reported in terms of learning to keep personal opinion out of assessed work and relying on academic, rather than anecdotal evidence. Understanding the tension between having a personal interest in the subject and maintaining objectivity had to be learnt. The ways in which assessment reinforces the power teachers have over students was one aspect of this but understanding the nature of academic conventions was another. The other aspect to this was meeting the criteria set out by teachers in assessments. Here again there was a tension between using those criteria as a means of structuring work and interpreting them as a literal checklist. The latter strategy led to some frustration when that interpretation differed from those of the teacher.

Finally, understanding what constituted plagiarism featured strongly throughout early interviews. There were examples where the fear of being accused of plagiarism limited the willingness of students to work together and even to discuss the work required or share early thoughts on how to approach pieces of work. A deeper understanding of plagiarism might have helped students to form learning groups or peer support networks, encouraging the earlier formation of friendships and working relationships.

9.2.3   The temporal dimension to learning

Ultimately, students were settling in to a new institution and required to work with its practices and conventions. Inevitably, transition took time and there was a question whether it

would have been smoother, even if they had been prepared differently. As they acquired a better understanding of what was required so they adapted to suit those expectations.

A further aspect of time and transition were the personal changes students described. In later interviews they talked about 'growing up' or 'maturing', and this raises the question of how much of the learning process involves the acquisition of skills and knowledge and what part is played by developing personal maturity and, indeed, what personal maturity means in this context. Issues of confidence and self-reliance seemed important here but required time to develop.

Adaptation to the university environment involved building friendship groups that allowed students to feel comfortable in their new surroundings and finding personal strategies to cope with demands made upon them. Institutional processes were described as limited in their effects. Students had to learn academic practices, and were helped by having to produce independent research work. Finally, the importance of time in the transition process should not be under-estimated, as it allows students to learn from mistakes, respond to feedback and develop personally.

9.3 Research Question Two: Factors in achievement

What are the capacities that help students adapt to and succeed at university?

The second research question focussed on the capacities students who adapted to and succeeded in the university environment showed. There is potential contention here, not least what successful in this context means and this was highly subjective according to the different subjects. It is nevertheless possible to look at the capacities students themselves described as being helpful which, in this study, were: academic capacity, being well supported by others, identification with the discipline, and having clear purposes and motivations.

9.3.1 Academic capacities: Being able to 'bat'

As Simon said in two of his interviews, it is helpful to know how to bat if you are playing cricket. To progress, students had to pass assessments requiring particular standards of writing, knowledge and interpretation. These were in part developed in previous educational settings, and those who reported doing well at school or college reported least frustration with the academic demands at university. Acquiring subject knowledge allowed students to feel confident in demonstrating their abilities and this confidence increased as subject knowledge increased, in part a result of becoming more familiar with professional and academic language. It may also arise from understanding the value of feedback as a learning tool rather than simply as a judgement, resulting in assessments being used as part of a development process.

9.3.2   Social integration: Building frameworks of support

To succeed in higher education, students described needing a 'network' of support upon which they could draw. 'Network' describes the way in which multiple sources of support connected the student with others, sometimes engaged in similar work, others detached from the university experience.

Students described valuing the availability of help when needed, whether on placement, in university or at home. Support came in different forms, including academic guidance, professional advice and friendship. Having family at home who understood the university environment was valuable for those who had access to it and the understanding of peers was valued where shared experiences gave credibility to the support offered.

Another important aspect of support was in descriptions students gave of particular teachers or placement mentors who modelled professional behaviours. What these people offered fitted with the students' own envisaged personas, where they could see what success in their chosen subject or profession might mean.

9.3.3   Specific disciplinary capacities: identification with the subject

A keen interest in the subject studied, whether expressed in terms of the job or the subject content kept students engaged with their studies. Interest in the subject encouraged a spirit of enquiry, often expressed as a fascination with specific subject knowledge. This manifested itself in students doing independent work to satisfy that curiosity, thinking beyond the specific requirements for assessment and taking a pride in being involved in the subject. This seemed to mirror the behaviour of the teachers described by the students as 'good' teachers.

9.3.4 Envisaging a realistic, purposeful life beyond university

The decision to study a broadly vocational course suggests a clear work-related purpose for taking the course and the nursing, social work and biomedical science students described the link to employment as a strong motivating factor. However, when that link began to look tenuous approaching the final year and the realities of the labour market became more visible and problematic for some, questions were raised about the ways in which a degree influenced progression at work. Questions were asked of the balance between needing the qualification and yet appearing over-qualified for entry level jobs, while what had looked in earlier years like a near guarantee of work began to seem less certain. Nevertheless, the link to the end goal of a profession had sustained the students and allowed them to envisage a future which was worth working towards.

9.3.5 Avoiding disappointment

Students reported finding new sources of support and strategies for coping with the insecurities inherent in new situations. The stress some felt about their responsibilities, including the burden of debt, was intense and, at times affected students' concentration on their studies. This stress was exacerbated when things went wrong.

The data revealed having unmet expectations caused frustration, for example when students felt they should have gained better marks or received more feedback on work. Where experiences matched expectations, there were fewer reports of frustration and less antagonism towards the learning process. Expectations related to three sources: the students themselves, their teachers and the family and friends to whom they looked for support.

Some students reported expecting to do well and set themselves high targets in terms of marks and placement reports. Others were content to achieve what was required to stay on the course. When they had done well at school and been top of the class some adjustment of expectations was needed to fit with the different circumstances of university.

Some confusion was evident in the way relationships with teachers were discussed. Informal relationships were seen as positive by some, describing the relationship as one of friendship. The degree of formality varied between teachers and this created expectations of all relationships which then were not realised in others. What seemed to be important was whether or not expectations of help were realistic and met. Similarly, having realistic expectations of others, including friends and family, about what support was available was important.

In summary, factors in ensuring success related to having academic capacities upon which to build knowledge, a strong social network of support, a strong identification with the discipline, and finally being able to see a purposeful future life, often employed in a specific career.

9.4   Research Question Three: Helpful academic environments

In relation to students, teachers, curriculum, pedagogy and organisation, what are the important facilitators or inhibitors to this process?

Factors relating to teaching, curriculum and pedagogy are first summarised, followed by a summary of the ways students engaged with their institutions.

9.4.1   Inspirational and professionally relevant teaching

From the descriptions of good teaching, two themes dominated: inspirational and relevant teaching. Descriptions of inspirational teaching centred upon the classroom behaviour of teachers, particularly how they presented their material. Body language was often mentioned as one factor: animated movement was described as synonymous with enthusiasm for the subject. Other aspects included contribution of knowledge beyond the confines of the specific presentation or personal experiences that showed engagement with the subject. Approachability was also seen to indicate an interest in the students' welfare.

Teaching explicitly linked to the requirements of the profession was valued, helping students understand why they were learning particular subject matter and its importance to their future work. Theory was described as harder to understand and often described as less relevant to professional learning, although there was a reluctant acceptance it was necessary. Teaching from external staff, brought in from the workplace was seen as having credibility whereas, by the end of their courses, some students questioned whether their own knowledge was more up to date and relevant than their teachers'.

9.4.2 Respecting knowledge, challenging authority

Another dominant theme was how students described their relationships with teachers. As well as needing to have their expectations met, there was clear movement over the three years in the way teachers were viewed. Difference in knowledge was one factor, as was the recognition that teachers had already gained qualifications and this endowed them with status. In some cases these differentials led teachers to be held in some awe and created a barrier that made questioning problematic. With time, this lessened although the power teachers retained in assessment processes was present throughout.

9.4.3 Organisation of teaching is important to students

Teaching was organised similarly in all the courses in the study: large lectures formed the basis for first year teaching, complemented by smaller seminar groups and class sizes tended to diminish over the three years as a result of specialisation within courses and as people withdrew from their courses. There were examples of teachers making lectures as interactive as possible despite large class sizes but, in the main, lectures were seen as impersonal and teacher-dominated. Small group teaching, allowing for more interaction between students and teachers was preferred and seen as a safer environment to ask questions or debate ideas. They also allowed students to get to know one another, build friendships and peer support.

9.4.4 Assessment-driven study

The dominant awareness of assessment, particularly in the early years, was clearly evident and its requirements determined and limited the breadth of the educational experience. Passing the unit became the goal and meeting the criteria set the parameters. There were few examples of students having control over these parameters and not until later in their course were they able to exercise more choice about what they researched and wrote about. A clear

motivator was when students received what they deemed to be good marks as this served to convince them they were capable of succeeding, giving them confidence for future work.

Another important aspect of the assessment processes was the role of feedback for facilitating learning. When asked in later years how they had come to know what teachers expected of them, the most frequent answer was the feedback they received on their work. However, for feedback to be useful, it was reported as needing to be timely and appropriate and frustration was expressed when feedback was delayed or not understood. Frustration also occurred when students did not understand the feedback and could not see where they had gone wrong. This frustration sometimes left students feeling unsupported by teachers and this limited the value they gained from the feedback. However, when feedback was understood and accepted, it allowed the learner to improve their work in the future.

9.4.5 Institutional engagement and detachment

How students positioned themselves in relation to their choice of institution revealed not only the limits some faced in making those choices but also the pride in being at a particular university. There were explanations for the choices made about institutions and courses and it was clear students had positioned themselves in relation to the constraints they felt applied to their circumstances.

What was less clear was how relationships with the institution were developed once students enrolled. The heavy timetables and interruptions of placements for some vocational students left little time to engage with institutional facilities. Students were sceptical of what they described as stereotypical portrayals of student life and this led to some ambiguity about what

was expected of them. In later interviews some reflected on whether they had missed out on social aspects of their university experiences as a result of commitment to their work.

The central support services available to students were seen as peripheral by most, until there was some kind of crisis that required an intervention. These services were seen as a safety net, to be used if the need arose rather than part of a strategically built support network. Often, students were unaware even of the existence of services.

Identification with the university as an institution was seen as secondary to the course and immediate peers, except where students could not access facilities in any other way, such as needing a book from the library.

The evidence suggests that lively, enthusiastic teaching engaged students who also valued well organised, structured programmes of study. Where the boundaries and expectations were understood, strong relationships with teachers helped students to cope with academic processes. Primary identification was with the course and peers, rather than the wider institution which was often seen as peripheral.

9.5   Research Question Four: Socio-cultural influences on undergraduates

What impact, if any, do students' educational, economic, social and cultural backgrounds have on their ability to adapt to higher education?

Educational background refers to the type of institution and course previously studied, but also includes attitudes to learning developed in previous settings. In this study, students' educational biographies, or how they experienced and remembered previous education influenced their engagement in learning at university. The ways in which they were taught and relationships with teachers seemed to dominate in the aspects of educational background students described as important. Social backgrounds varied according to: family experiences of higher education, responsibilities to family members in the home, and the links students made with significant others outside the university. Cultural backgrounds encompassed understandings of expected learning and professional cultures and behaviour, and the symmetry between the students' understandings of the world and those portrayed in the courses they studied.

9.5.1   Students' educational backgrounds

Access to university is largely determined by previous educational attainment (Williams, 1997) and all students in this study had achieved some accredited recognition of learning to earn their places on courses. However, the students who discussed their academic work at university with the greatest confidence were those who had achieved the highest marks in previous settings.

 Educational background seemed to endow students with particular capacities upon which they were able to build in university. The most obvious of these was an understanding of what

constitutes academic work, particularly the ability to write in an accepted academic style. Previous education played a role in developing academic capacity that served as a foundation for further learning.

A crucial aspect of that foundation was independence in learning. Students differed in the extent to which they fully understood the requirement to be independent and it was interpreted in different ways and understood in relation to previous educational experiences. In particular, relationships with teachers and the ways in which school or college teachers had supported learning influenced expectations. The move from small personalised group learning in schools and colleges to large lecture groups meant expectations of individual support were often unrealistic and adjustments had to be made. Those who could draw upon the advice of others were more easily able to make that transition.

9.5.2   Drawing on different capital

Social background was characterised in different ways but having a family with a background of experience in higher education was highlighted in the data. Family experience of higher education varied between participants. Those whose families had extensive experience of university enjoyed knowledgeable support which endured beyond the initial decision making processes. For example, their families were able to advise on essay writing and structuring, provide reassurance when problems arose and share students' pride in their work. Conversely, those students whose families had no experience of higher education described a lack of understanding of what was being expected and achieved. What families with Higher Education experiences were able to offer was reinforcement of academic values which bolstered the confidence of learners in their work.

Another aspect of social background which three students described was the extent to which the family competed for attention with study. The two mature men in the study described how their role in maintaining home and cars served as additional responsibilities in addition to childcare responsibilities. Another student was caring for her disabled mother and this responsibility sometimes conflicted with her commitment to her course and her wish to build a social life. Families serve as both enablers and distractions and influence study in different ways.

Comparisons between students are not possible and limits what can be said about the role of class, gender and race in relation to students' experiences in Higher Education. Nevertheless, it is useful briefly to summarise ways in which these factors were revealed in the data. One student, for example, described a principal aspect of his learning being to 'learn class', by which he meant the norms and expectations of his profession. He also described being conscious of his maleness and his 'whiteness' in a predominately female, ethnically diverse classroom. Here, it was difference that seemed to be highlighted and indeed when class, race or gender is highlighted in the study it is to do with being different. In contrast, the white female students with professional family backgrounds were within groups of individuals with similar backgrounds and, therefore, did not experience difference in these ways. This suggests an alignment of cultural background, often fostered through family engagement with Higher Education, with the dominant cultural practices at university assists students in understanding their role.

9.5.3 Understanding the rules of engagement

For these students to feel secure in the higher education learning environment, they needed to understand its 'rules of engagement' and possess the capacities to participate in its practices.

Cultural background in this context is taken to refer to ways in which a person's background helps them understand, accept and adhere to those rules. Where those rules were not understood, ran counter to previous understandings or were felt to be unjust, students described a disrupted engagement with their studies, particularly in terms of passing assignments and placement assessments. The rules were different according to their settings.

In the classroom, the degree of student interaction possible or allowed varied, as well as the extent of collaboration with peers in group and individual work. In assessments, the rigour of academic conventions, expectations of individual teachers and requirements of assessment criteria all caused disruption to learning at some points for some students. These disruptions are unsurprising but students needed academic capacities to deal with them.

In placement settings, the often unspoken professional rules needed to be learnt and understood, but seemed to be specific to particular workplaces. This meant previous understandings were often challenged in new settings, with different expectations from supervisors, requiring some understandings to be revised to meet the new requirements. Thus, practices learnt in one placement might conflict with learning at university. Part of learning to be a student in higher education was to learn there *may* not be a right or wrong answer either in subject knowledge or in professional practice.

Students described ways in which they felt they fitted in, understood and agreed with dominant cultures within the university. Whether they described their peers' attitudes to learning, the dynamics of classroom teaching, professional outcomes of placements or social engagements in which they took part, students described a process of fitting in.

9.6   Summary

This chapter has summarised the main findings from the data around four research questions. It has addressed the ways students reported navigating the norms of academia, drawing upon different forms of capital and how these influences endured or changed over time. In many ways, the themes identified align with previous research in this field. However, by revisiting questions against longitudinal data the changes in these students' under-graduate learner identities are revealed and this raises questions about the relationship with a broader student population. The next chapter examines these changes within the analytical and theoretical framework of the study.

10.   Chapter Ten: Discussion and implications

10.1   Introduction

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings summarised in the previous chapter drawing upon literature and theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter Two. At university, students move through a process of acclimatisation during which they build on particular capacities (Nussbaum 2002; Walker 2008) which help them to succeed in higher education. I argue these capacities help students to build robust undergraduate learner identities which enable them to exercise agency in their learning (Mann 2008). Here I argue that students enrol at university with learner identities shaped by their different educational and social backgrounds (Archer and Leathwood 2003) and propose a model for understanding how educational biographies (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) impact upon experiences at university. However, as students move through higher education, they carry with them varying degrees of risk (Beck 1992) and have to negotiate the disjuncture between expectation and reality in a number of different aspects of undergraduate experiences. An understanding of the impact of risk and disjuncture has implications in the rapidly changing world of higher education and these are discussed.

The concept of capacities needs clarification. Building upon the work of Walker (2006), I use the term capacities to refer to a combination of conditions, knowledge and capital (Bourdieu 1997) which allow the holder to exercise agency in a particular area, in this case undergraduate learning. So for example, when I describe subject knowledge as a capacity, I mean the mastery of specific technical knowledge (e.g., how blood clots), command over terminology (scientific or professional jargon), an understanding of the context in which that

knowledge might be applied, and access to that context in order to make that application. In other words I recognise the social context of knowledge (Gamache 2002) as well as the possession of facts. I use the term capacities to encompass that broader context of knowledge.

10.2   Building capacities: becoming more robust

The concepts of academic and social integration (Rhodes and Nevill 2004) did not provide sufficient explanation of participants' experiences. In this study, two further concepts were important: the subject discipline (Ecclestone 2004) and the envisaged future. What students were describing was a process of building strength in their identities as undergraduates and I use the term 'robust' to reflect that strength. As they moved through their studies, participants needed to develop robust undergraduate identities to see them through the difficult times: robust in this context means the ability to draw upon capacities, sustain motivation, see a way through for themselves and meet the requirements of their courses. This then enabled them to exercise agency in their learning. They did this by questioning what they were taught, developing criticality in their reading and by producing independent work in which they had confidence. The degree to which individuals exercised agency was in part determined by the different forms of capital upon which they were able to draw (Bourdieu 1997). Of particular significance were family experience of higher education (Gorard et al 1999b) and previous educational biographies. The data suggest there are four capacities to consider as students develop robust undergraduate identities: academic, social, disciplinary and motivational, which I describe as 'having an envisaged future'. Students arrive at university with different capacities and they experience teaching and learning in different ways (Christie et al 2008, Archer et al 2001), yet this study demonstrates how progress is unlikely to be without disruption, as critical moments in personal, professional and academic lives serve to challenge the construction of an undergraduate identity. Persisting through those moments helps to

reinforce the strength of that identity and allows the student to withstand future distractions and disruptions. Figure 2 below illustrates four capacities in a robust learner identity.

Generic academic capacities and command of studying

Command of specific disciplinary knowledge and practices

Social integration through support networks

A robust undergraduate identity

Motivation: having an envisaged future
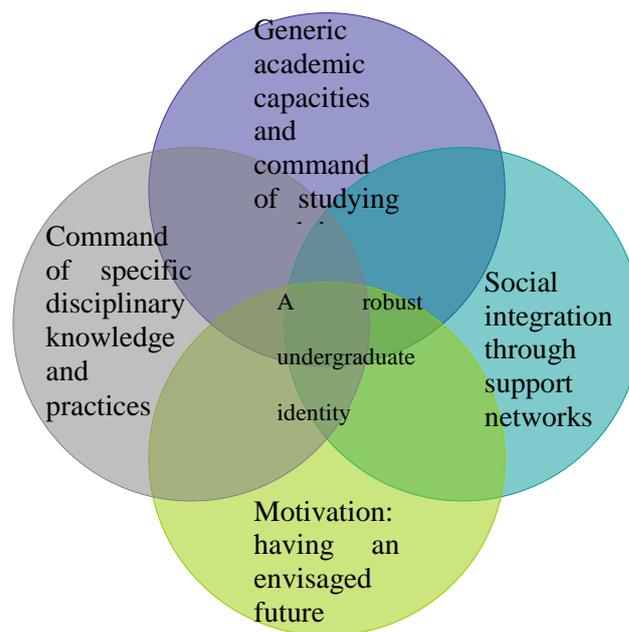
Figure 2: Four capacities in a robust undergraduate identity

The capacities are depicted in this way to illustrate their interconnectedness but also their flexibility since not all students will build capacities in all areas to the same extent. Students described developing these capacities in some form and strength in one area may have compensated for weakness in another. For example a student might have less academic capacity as they struggle to write appropriately or they find note taking problematic. A high

level of subject knowledge might help them to compensate for lesser academic capacities but not their complete absence. Similarly, a student who is well integrated socially at university may have strong networks of support to draw upon which may help to sustain them through times of challenge to their envisaged future but which will not compensate if that future is thought to be beyond reach.

10.3   Undergraduate Learning Journeys: developing identities as learners at university

As the students described how they thought about higher education it was clear that for some, choice was both limited and problematic (Gorard et al 2007). Constraints on choice included economic resources, social obligations and cultural expectations. There was a significant reliance on friends and family members for advice and knowledge as students sought to interpret and negotiate the institutional hierarchy in higher education (Reay et al 2005). It was apparent that students felt different degrees of entitlement to enter into higher education, largely dependent on their family and community experiences of education. They were drawing upon different forms of capital in making their decisions (Bourdieu 1997) and as they did so they made individualised calculations of the risks faced (Beck and Beck-Gurnsteim 2002). They sought to mitigate those risks by choosing subjects they felt were likely to reward them economically, or institutions where they felt they would have access to appropriate social capital, through the friends they would study alongside. Their initial negotiation of the field of higher education (Naidoo 2004), together with their different sense of entitlement to participate (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) led them to describe varying degrees of social and cultural belonging. This sense of belonging shaped their identities as learners on entry to higher education.

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A model of pre-undergraduate learner identity was proposed which described three positions: un-mediated, partially mediated and extensively mediated by previous educational and employment biographies. For some, the disruption to their expected biography (Du Bois-Reymond 1998) left them with fewer markers against which to anchor their sense of self as learner. Some were able to draw upon family knowledge and experience of higher education to learn about the new environment, others were left to draw upon their own resources. However, as they described their expectations, students highlighted the disjuncture between stereotypical depictions of student life and their own motivations and values. There appeared to be a mismatch between their sense of self, the dominant institutional habitus (Bourdieu 1990a, Bowl 2003) and the information and guidance they had received. Some described the value of knowledge gained from peers as this was grounded in the experiences of people faced with similar situations. It was evident that individual educational biographies had constructed different learner identities in students, particularly in relation to teacher authority and expectations of their own capacities as undergraduates.

As students moved through university, their stories were analysed within the broad concepts of academic and social integration (Rhodes and Nevill 2004). Their academic experiences seemed to involve a lengthy period of understanding and then learning the rules of the field of higher education (Crozier et al 2010). This was framed (Bernstein 1996) within academic conventions which were new to most students. They had to learn how to be a student before they could fully participate in the learning situation. Their identity as learner had to fit in with the dominant learning culture (James and Biesta 2007).

For students, having varying understandings of the relationship between student and teacher meant the new undergraduates had to negotiate those relationships afresh. They reported

variations between teachers in how they related to students and thus there was a constant process of negotiation and re-negotiation in those relationships. At first, the dominance of the teachers' institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997), based on their possessions of multiple qualifications, overwhelmed students and left them hesitant and reluctant to critique teachers' knowledge. The dominance of assessment in the learning process underlined the teachers' role as enforcer of the rules and regulations of the field (Bernstein 1996). They had the power to grant or deny membership of the learning community (Wenger 1998). Developing informal learning environments within the classroom seemed to help in rebalancing the impact of that power.

Students built up subject specific knowledge over time and this appeared to allow them to acquire relevant cultural capital of their own. They were more able to speak the dominant language and understood the required behaviour which encouraged them to feel legitimate participants in their learning. Their sense of self as learner became more compatible with dominant discourses as they developed the capacities required to succeed in their field.

Developing academic capacities helped in acquiring cultural capital necessary to succeed. The other important task was developing social capital (Bourdieu 1997), described by students as forming a support network. This needed to be relevant to their learning and so the emphasis was on small groups of students studying on the same course. This offered a sense of inclusion within a community and thus allowed students to feel a sense of belonging, reinforcing their confidence in themselves as learners: it strengthened their learner identity. This social capital relied on a shared positioning within the field of higher education (Crozier et al 2010) and students reported this gave the support added authenticity. However, as they progressed, students faced critical moments which brought into question their ability to

succeed. This then heightened their exposure to risk. Risk appeared to be highly individualised (Beck and Beck-Gurnstein 2002) and left students having to negotiate their own ways of mitigating that risk, drawing upon whatever social, cultural or economic capital they were able to access. The dominant impression was that they survived despite, rather than because, of the system.

One strong motivating factor for the students in this study was the link with an envisaged future: the professional focus and confidence that they were working towards the acquisition of a useful qualification kept them engaged when facing critical moments. Their confidence in future prospects made the risk seem worthwhile; however when this was challenged by worsening labour market conditions or academic disappointment the risk was emphasised rather than the rewards (Beck 1992). This led some to question the value of their endeavours.

As they moved through their studies students were exposed to new social and cultural environments. They had to acclimatise and adapt to those environments, acquiring capital and negotiating the field for themselves. However, the identification with the profession helped to confirm their sense of identity, this was a future field to which they would be admitted and they were acquiring appropriate and necessary social and cultural capital to help them navigate entry (Bourdieu 1990a). This was emphasised as they began to describe themselves as knowledgeable and confident professionals. Those who were slower to acquire appropriate capital felt less secure in their position, and were therefore more concerned with risk.

10.4   Theoretical interpretations: risk and disjuncture

Thinking about undergraduate experiences through the lens of learner identity allowed me to offer an extension to Tinto's model and incorporate more recent work recognising the socially

situated nature of those experiences. The concept of integration helped to describe the processes of acclimatisation, but I was not convinced how integrated these students felt at university. In developing the model of a robust undergraduate identity, I found the extensive literature using Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital (Naidoo 2004; Reay 2003; Bowl 2003) helpful in thinking about how the students' identities had been shaped prior to, and throughout their time at, university. However, they did not explain the whole story. Two other theoretical insights helped in my interpretation: the concept of risk (Beck 1992) and of the disjuncture between expectation and reality.

10.4.1 The concept of risk: experiencing different forms of risk

The different types of risk (Beck 1992; Reay 2003) students carried as they studied were evident in their stories. For some, risk manifested itself in economic terms, as a gamble because of the debts they accrued in the process. Others experienced risk as emotional pressure to meet family expectations where pride was at stake. Some students who lived in the parental home, enrolled at university straight from school and had few other responsibilities moved through university describing fewer risks, at an apparently lower level than others. However, this may be because their risks were of a less obvious nature, such as family expectation, where it is not necessarily consciously felt and therefore was not described as such. Some had family responsibilities and in their cases studentship became a family endeavour and there were pressures to perform in order to justify the cost of university study. As Archer and Hutchings (2000) described in their work, the risk of failure was keenly felt amongst the students in this study. Risk to identity was apparent as students sought to establish themselves as undergraduates, adapting to new environments and learning the rules.

Yet risk was not always experienced negatively: it could also be a motivating factor and provided a justification for sticking with the course through critical moments of uncertainty and difficulty. Here I build upon the work of Bowl (2003) and Reay (2003) who described the conflicting priorities families posed for mature students. In this study, such responsibilities could serve to motivate as well as being a source of stress, and the support available from families endured throughout the period of study. The use of narrative approaches in this research revealed the impact perceptions of risk had on undergraduate dispositions to learning as they moved through their time at university. The tensions posed by risk, particularly in relation to financing university study, and how the enduring perception of risk impacts on undergraduates requires further attention.

10.4.2 Disjuncture: the gap between expectations and reality

The theme of disjuncture was apparent throughout the data. This manifested itself in the mis-match between expectations and reality as students moved into university, as they experienced being undergraduates and as they prepared for entry to work. For example, the data show how students had expectations of university life built in prior educational settings, from family stories and via the media. The stereotypical image of a hedonistic student lifestyle did not seem to fit with the ways the students in this study saw themselves. They experienced disjuncture between the messages they had absorbed and the lives they wanted, or had, to live. Yet they reflected on whether they had 'missed out' (Weil 1986) on something as a result of not participating more in social activities. They were describing a mis-match between images and experiences. For these students, the priority given to study, placements and in some cases family left little room for the stereotypical student social life (Bowl 2003).

Disjuncture was felt too as they contemplated moving into a job and expected to obtain graduate level employment but found their lack of work experience excluded them from it (Morley 2001). They had believed studying for a degree would equip them for a brighter future yet the reality at that moment looked different. Disjuncture left students having to make their own sense of university, finding their way through the sometimes conflicting messages they were hearing. What was significant here was the gap between students' expectations and the reality they found themselves living and raises questions about how students can be given more realistic guidance on what to expect at, and from, university study.

10.5   Implications from the research

This thesis has contributed to understanding students' experiences in English higher education in the 21st century. This understanding has implications for academic debate, practice within higher education institutions and for policy development more broadly.

10.5.1 Implications for academic debate

This study focussed on undergraduate experiences at university from a longitudinal perspective. It was set in a policy context in which higher education is in a state of flux, with debate about the purposes (Smith and Webster 1997, Jary and Parker 1998), funding (Furlong and Cartmel 2009), and stratification (Reay et al 2005) of universities. Initially, I was drawn to the literature about how people who shared particular socio-economic characteristics experienced higher education (Archer et al 2003; Reay 2003; Bowl 2003; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). However, this literature does not focus on teaching and learning specifically, and in order to understand what students in this study described as important, I needed to explore other literature.

I found Bloomer's (1997) notion of 'studentship' useful because it highlights the social conditions of being a student and links this to what happens in the classroom. Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) model of learning careers helped me to make sense of university as one stage in these students' learning lives. This led me to Hodkinson et al's (2007a) work on learning cultures which helped me to recognise the complexity of the learning environment. It encouraged me to see the students' experiences as being shaped by and shaping their identities as learners and undergraduates.

Using learner identity (Bathmaker 2010) as a lens through which to understand students' experiences provided a theoretical framework for understanding the processes of change (Lawy 2003) students were describing, the critical moments they experienced and how they persisted and succeeded (Crozier et al 2010). Relating this process of adaptation and acclimatisation to Rhodes and Nevill's (2004) notions of academic and social integration led me to develop a model illustrating how students build robust undergraduate learner identities which enable them to exercise agency (Brannen and Nilsen 2005) in their learning.

Finally, Melanie Walker's (2008, 2010) work on capabilities encouraged me to think more creatively about what outcomes could be expected from higher education. Walker's attempts to relate debates on the purposes and values of an ethical higher education with a supportive pedagogy provided a basis upon which I have been able to build. I suggest that for these students, capacities was a useful description of the components of a robust identity; having an envisaged future that was realistic, and developing applied discipline-specific knowledge and understanding, were aspects that I felt had been previously under-estimated in the literature.

Therefore, I see this work as building upon the literature which seeks to explain aspects of twenty-first century higher education in England.

10.5.2 Implications for practice

The focus on how students build a robust undergraduate learner identity has implications for higher education practitioners. Those engaged in the development of teaching and learning practice in institutions, often in centres for academic development, are offered a new perspective on the way undergraduates experience learning at university. Recognising the different types of pre-entry identities such as those proposed within the model may have implications for how teachers accommodate those differences in the classroom. For example, the differences suggest diverse attitudes to teacher authority, understandings of academic conventions and dispositions to learning which need to be recognised in teaching. Specifically, this could include more choice in assessment processes, where assessment can be tailored to focus on particular aspects of learning which students feel they need to address. Publication of the findings of this study in practitioner literature and at teaching and learning conferences in HEIs will help to inform that debate.

Similarly, there are lessons for those engaged in recruitment, transition and student support services in HEIs. Developing induction programmes which offer links to existing students for example might help with social integration. Central services tailored to issues identified here might help students integrate more broadly into their institutions. Recognising the different forms of capital students are able to draw upon has implications for the levels of support they need and the ways in which they are able to access support. Despite a wealth of literature on the impact of forms of capital, engagement with practitioners has been given less priority. Living arrangements are changing and this too has implications for institutional responses to students' experiences.

There are messages here too for Post-16 providers in how students felt prepared for university learning. Students from A Level backgrounds felt unprepared for independent learning; those from Access courses unprepared for individualised study which was not shared with colleagues. Joint continuous professional development opportunities between schools, colleges and higher education would be helpful so that teachers in all settings were able to have a clearer perspective on each other's practice. Similarly, practitioners engaged in advising students about what university life is about need to heed the lessons from this study which suggest current practice is out of touch with what students want to know about higher education, and how they actually experience university once there.

10.5.3 Implications for policy

Chapter Four described how students chose their higher education courses. The concept of 'choice' was seen to be problematic, implying more freedom than students actually felt in making their decisions. Those decisions were constrained by social and economic factors, often based on highly contingent circumstances and against a background of hierarchical positioning within the 'field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) of higher education. The drive to intensify market forces into that field (BIS 2011) is based on the premise that as students pay more towards the costs of their studies, they become more consumer orientated, more discerning about their choices and that this leads to greater competition amongst providers. This in turn, it is argued, will lead to an improved student experience. Yet the extent of choice varies amongst students. The evidence here suggests that some students, particularly those who are mature or who have caring responsibilities, are not able to choose freely. Others are bound by family expectations and histories, making subject choices in relation to future earning capacity. As the numbers of students who do not obtain a place at university increases, availability of places is likely to constrain choice further. As Ball (2003) has

argued, the unequal possession of particular forms of capital allows some people to navigate markets in education more effectively than others so there is no level playing field. This suggests that aiming to improve provision by increasing 'consumer choice', is likely to lead to more, not less, social inequality.

Alongside insights to help develop practice, the data also revealed the day to day nature of these students' engagement with university. The combination of family, financial and professional responsibilities left little time to engage in social activities. Support frameworks provided by the universities were seen as a safety net for use in emergencies. These students were too busy to look beyond the immediate course group yet they had absorbed messages about university life which suggested they were missing out on a more fulfilling university experience. The recent Access Agreements (OFFA 2011) for the institutions in this study and others highlight the need to focus on 'the student experience' to ensure good retention and success rates amongst their students. They will need to reflect the need for more individual, flexible and accessible support frameworks to achieve their stated aspirations to accommodate the reality of undergraduates' lives on vocationally related courses, yet this individual approach requires significant investment. In particular they will need to address the needs of students whose lives do not revolve around campus. Further research into the day to day experiences of students is needed to ensure resources are targeted in the most efficient way.

Future participation and progression in the workplace motivated these students and featured strongly in their reasons for persevering in higher education. Yet as the economic climate changed from 2008 onwards and they realised they were facing a more difficult employment market, the link between a degree, getting a good job and progressing within it began to look more tenuous. In an increasingly uncertain labour market the progression from graduation to

employment looked problematic. This suggests that promoting higher education primarily as a route to better career prospects may be misleading. As more people gain degrees, so the graduate premium may diminish. At the same time, students are now to be asked to contribute more towards the costs of their studies. The returns from the graduate premium are not evenly spread (Purcell et al 2007) and some students will face more of a struggle to repay the debts they have incurred.

Non work-related motivations to study in higher education, such as civic engagement, broadening horizons, critical engagement with society featured less strongly in the students' narratives. Currently, publicity for the universities in this study focuses on the acquisition of academic knowledge and employment prospects. As universities seek to convince students their institution is worth paying to go to, so the temptation for them to concentrate on financial rewards from higher education increases. This means that messages promoting a broader approach to the benefits of study at this level are likely to be sacrificed and the focus on individual employability and workplace engagement likely to increase. There is a danger that the multiple purposes of higher education, discussed in Chapter One, are at risk, with some students experiencing the kind of dis-interested academic engagement described by Newman (1976) as well as employment advantage, and others struggling within a higher education market in which qualifications are sold as a commodity.

Further research is needed to understand the impact of the policy of increased fees on students throughout their undergraduate careers and beyond. This policy is likely to shape decisions about participation, attitudes towards study and expectations of the outcomes from higher education. Increasing the level of the contribution which students are expected to make is also likely to increase the financial risk for students, and those risks are not distributed evenly

amongst the student population. It will also be likely to change the nature of the relationship between the student and the institution, further encouraging consumerist approaches (Batchelor 2008). The emphasis in the 2011 White Paper (BIS 2011) on putting students 'at the heart of the system' is misleading, focussing as it does on a range of surveys and indicators (such as teaching hours, subject 'performance', etc.), suggesting decisions can be taken in an objective, isolated way, aside from social circumstances. First indications from Access Agreements (OFFA 2011) have seen universities stressing the information they will provide to future students, alongside the enhanced academic experience and employability programmes they will offer. At the same time, the nature of the risks they will, in effect, be asking students to take is changing. This will add a further dimension to the dynamics this study has illustrated that students have to negotiate as they experience higher education.

10.6   Contribution to knowledge

This study set out to address four research questions concerning students' experiences of higher education in England between 2006 and 2009, identifying those characteristics that either encouraged success or hindered progress. Through the research I identify:

- how students negotiate university life and study, to build robust undergraduate identities which enable them to withstand critical moments and succeed in higher education;
- capacities needed to build a robust undergraduate identity include academic and social integration, specific disciplinary knowledge and motivational capacity;
- a model to illustrate a range of pre-undergraduate identities; and

- how, alongside concepts of field, habitus, capital, academic and social integration, the concepts of risk and disjuncture between expectations and reality help to explain undergraduate experiences.

The study highlights complexities of undergraduate learning experiences at a time when the future of higher education is uncertain. It shows the individual nature of those experiences, set as they are in a highly politicised and dynamic field.

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Appendix I: The two universities in the study

The post-1992 University

The pre-1992 University

HEFCE Performance Indicators in the year 2006/07: Retention statistics for destination after one year of study for universities in the study

	Young entrants			Mature entrants			All entrants		
	Completing or Continuing at institution	Transferring to other HE	Not continuing in HE	Completing or Continuing at institution	Transferring to other HE	Not continuing in HE	Completing or Continuing at institution	Transferring to other HE	Not continuing in HE
post 1992	84.6%	2.9%	12.5%	76.1%	2.1%	21.8%	82%	2.7%	15.3%
pre-1992	93.4%	2.6%	4%	86.3%	3.2%	10.5%	92.8%	2.7%	15.3%

HEFCE Performance Indicators in the year 2006/07: Widening Participation statistics for universities in the study

	Intake in student numbers		State school entrants		NS-SEC Classes 4,5,6 & 7		Low participation neighbourhoods	
	TOTAL	% YOUNG	ACTUAL	PI BNCHMK	ACTUAL	PI BNCHMK	ACTUAL	PI BNCHMK
POST-1992	3245	70.4%	99%	96%	51.3%	39.2%	18.6%	12.4%
PRE-1992	4360	91.5%	78.1%	81.2%	22.1%	23.7%	6.8%	6.8%

Appendix II: Students in the study

Name	Subject/University	Age on entry	School background	1st generation	Parents/ own SEC	Ethnicity	Declared disability	Gender
Rebecca	BioMedical Sciences / post 1992	25	Access course	Yes	W/class	White	None	F
Simon	BioMedical Sciences / post 1992	44	Access course	Yes	W/class	White	None	M
Samuel	Social Work / post 1992	~40	Access course	Brother	W/class	White	Dyslexia	M
Veronica	Business Studies/ post 1992	18	6th Form	Sisters	W/class	Black British	None	F
Helen	Nursing / pre-1992	20	Private school/ A levels	No	M/class	White	None	F
Carol	Nursing / pre-1992	18	State school A levels	No	M/class	White	None	F
Jane	Nursing / pre-1992	18	School Int Bacc	Yes	W/class	White	Mild dyslexia	F
Louise	Nursing / pre-1992	22	State school + College A Levels	No	M/class	White	None	F

Rebecca

Rebecca was 25 when she enrolled on the BioMedical Science degree at the post-1992 university. She is white and had been living with her parents prior to moving into Halls of Residence in her first year. She had been working for seven years in the haberdashery section of a local department store and studied on an Access to Science course at her local Further Education college. Her initial intention was to study Marine Biology but she changed her mind and chose BioMedical Sciences. She described this change in terms of both future employment prospects and because her close friend, Simon (also in this study) chose the course and she thought she would prefer to move into university alongside a familiar face. Her father was an engineer and her mother a careers officer in a college, neither of them had been to university.

Rebecca had been successful at Level 2 study in school, gaining ten GCSEs. She started A Levels but left half-way through, attracted by the prospect of earning a wage. She described her decision to move into higher education as *'needing to do something'* and was heavily influenced by an older woman in the department store where she worked *'pestering'* her to fulfil her potential in study. Rebecca had no children of her own and lived alone in Halls briefly before moving into shared rented accommodation with friends from her course. She undertook placements during her vacations to enable her to gain professional accreditation alongside her degree.

Simon

Simon was 45 when he enrolled on the BioMedical Science degree at the post-1992 university. He is white and lived in his own home with his wife and two children, one of whom was just three years old, the other an older teenager. His wife had not been to university. He had run his own sandwich business prior to university and had sold the business in part to finance his studies. He had successfully completed an Access to Science course at his local Further Education college (alongside Rebecca) and chose the course at Newtown because he had a keen interest in Herbalism. On advice from his tutors he chose the BioMedical Science degree as the closest thing to his interests that would also have reasonable employment prospects upon completion. His father had '*come and gone'* and his mother he described as '*the female Arthur Daly'*, bringing up seven children by herself and 'was a bit of a wheeler and dealer' with no history of higher education participation. He had a brother studying for a music degree at Newtown and another brother, living in Australia, who went to Newtown University when it was a polytechnic.

Simon described his school days as *'I'd rather forget. It was catastrophic.'* He felt bullied and intimidated at school, gaining '*six or seven'* GCSEs and leaving half-way through his A Levels. His decision to go to college for the Access course was prompted by questioning: '*I really wish I'd continued through the A Levels and gone to university, got a proper job. And you think to yourself, 'can I still do it?'* He described '*getting rid'* of his business and '*kind of putting a ghost to rest'* when he successfully passed his Access course. He undertook placements in his vacations to gain professional accreditation alongside his degree.

Veronica

Veronica was enrolled on a Business Studies Degree at the post-1992 university, having transferred after completing the first year of a Law Degree at the same university. Veronica is Black African and grew up in Sierra Leone. Her natural parents were killed in the civil war and she was brought up by her grandmother. She moved to live in the Gambia with adoptive family members, whom she called mother and father when she was 10 and settled in the UK at the age of 11. Her schooling was therefore disrupted and she joined a state comprehensive school in London for her secondary education. Her brother was sent to a private school. When she was 16, Veronica moved to a '*better, kind of private*' sixth form school.

She described feeling disadvantaged at school in the UK because she struggled with English and how her teachers failed to recognise her abilities. She passed four A Levels, Business and Economics both at C grade, Art and English both at B. Her motivation for studying Business was linked to her wish to develop an enterprise which would provide trade and business opportunities with Sierra Leone. She enrolled on the Law course in the first instance because she wanted to work in Human Rights but later felt Business offered more opportunities. She lived in Halls of Residence for most of her course apart from a brief spell in shared rented accommodation. She retained a keen interest in Art throughout her course, exhibiting in the local Art Gallery. Each interview saw another idea for enterprise and Veronica accessed her universities enterprise schemes to support her in her endeavours.

Samuel

Samuel was 43 when he enrolled on a Social Work Degree at the post-1992 university. He is white and grew up in the local area. His children had grown up and left home and he lived with his wife, seeing his young grandchildren on a very regular basis. Both his parents were deceased, his father having worked as a metal polisher and spent some time in car factories. His mother had been a housewife. He had one older brother who worked for the Post Office and in manufacturing industry before re-training in university as a Social Worker. His younger sister also went to university as a mature student.

Samuel had been to a comprehensive school, achieving 'some CSEs' before he completed an Apprenticeship in mechanical maintenance. His time at school was clouded by his inability to understand the written word, *'he's not too good, he's not too bright'*, only discovering his dyslexia on enrolment at the local Further Education college for an Access to Social Work course. He described his dyslexia as *'The words move ways, or sometimes, depending on the print, they crawl, and I can spell the same word three different ways on the page'*. His brother encouraged him to go back to education and he enjoyed the Access course. His experience as a recovering alcoholic was prominent in his interviews, having encouraged him in reflective processes he found useful on his course. His motivation on the Social Work course centred on the prospect of work at the end and he was acutely aware throughout his studies of the burden of debt he carried.

Carol

Carol is white and was 18 when she enrolled on the Nursing Degree at the pre-1992 university. She lived at home with her parents throughout her course, close to the university. She attended a local sixth form college prior to university and gained A Levels in Psychology (Grade A) and Biology (C) as well as Grade A In AVCE Health and Social Care. She described having known for 'quite a while' during her last year of school that she wanted to nurse and chose her Post 16 options with nursing in mind. She felt she did not want to sit at a desk all day and liked the idea of variety in nursing and working with people.

Her father and two brothers all went to the same university that Carol was enrolled into and she described how '*pretty much everyone in my family has been to university. Cousins and everything.*' Her now retired father was a chartered engineer and her mother was trained as a radiographer and now worked as a medical receptionist. Carol chose to live at home for her studies but worried that she might have been '*missing out on the whole experience*' by doing so. Her boyfriend, whom she knew before she started university, worked in the parts department for a local car company and had been out of education since leaving school at 16.

Helen

Helen is white and enrolled on the Nursing Degree course at the pre-1992 university at the age of 21. Prior to this she had studied one year of an Education Studies degree at another Russell Group university. She had been privately educated at school, achieving three A Levels in English, History and Psychology all at Grade B. Her father was a GP and her mother had been a nurse before her premature death. Her father and cousins had all attended university. She moved away from the family home and lived in Halls of Residence for her first year before moving out into shared rented accommodation.

Helen's strong determination to be a nurse was apparent throughout her studies and was influenced she said by her parents' medical backgrounds. She enrolled originally on the Education Studies degree with a view to doing PostGraduate Nursing study but did not enjoy her time at university because she felt she did not '*fit*' the stereotypical student images she felt she was expected to live up to. She was very committed and focussed on her studies as her primary goal.

Jane

Jane was 18 when she enrolled on the Nursing Degree at the pre-1992 university. She is white and lived locally with her parents while at university. Her father had completed an Open University course as a mature student and worked as a Facilities Manager. Her mother did a part time course at college and worked as an administrator in a college.

Jane had studied at a local technology college for both her GCSE qualifications and for an International Baccalaureate Post 16. This had involved completing an extended essay, community service and six subjects. She gained 24 points which in her words were *'the lowest pass you can get'*. Her decision to live at home for her studies was prompted in part by financial considerations and because she felt she would have more distractions if she lived with students. She described herself as having mild dyslexia for which she later sought some support at university. In her second year, Jane chose to specialise in Mental Health Nursing. Her motivation was always closely linked to employment and being a nurse.

Louise

Louise was 23 when she enrolled on the Nursing Degree at the pre-1992 university. She is white and had previously studies for a degree in Multimedia Technology at another local (post-1992) university, gaining a first class honours degree. She had attended a local state secondary school passing A Levels in Chemistry and Biology at Grade E and Geography at Grade C. Although successful on her first degree, Louise was keen to study something completely different, specifically focussed on working with people. Her choice to do nursing was in part influenced by her caring responsibilities for her disabled mother who was a wheelchair user who required regular care.

Prior to enrolling on the nursing course Louise had spent a year caring for her mother full time. She had also cared for her grandfather before he died. Louise's father was a telephone engineer and her mother had been unable to work because of her disability but was then contemplating a return to work. Neither parent had experience of higher education. Louise also had periods of mental illness prior to her studies. She lived at home during her studies and was an active cyclist, taking part in activities initially linked to the university but in later years independent from it.

Appendix III: Information for students and consent form

The distance travelled: how undergraduates from diverse backgrounds adapt to learning and teaching in their first year at university.

This project builds upon the work already begun in the Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference project that you took part in earlier in your university studies. I am now conducting research as part of a Doctoral Thesis, to look at how different students adapt to learning and teaching at university. The aim of the research is to better understand why some students do well at university and some find it harder, and indeed to explore what 'doing well' at university means for different students.

I am asking you to take part in further research. This means that I would like to conduct an informal interview with you at the end of your first year. I hope to be able to come back and interview you again at the end of your second year too. The interview can be by telephone or in person and need not last more than half an hour. I would like to digitally record it if you do not object, for ease of analysis.

If at any time you do not wish to continue to participate in this research, you are, of course, quite at liberty to withdraw at any time. You are also perfectly entitled to refuse to answer particular questions where you feel uncomfortable doing so.

Any information you give me will remain confidential to the research. I intend to ensure that any reporting or publication of information is done in such a way as to ensure complete confidentiality. If you wish to do so, you may choose your own pseudonym, or I will choose one for you if you prefer. You will also be asked to review the transcript of the discussion in case you decide later that you wanted to say something differently, or not at all.

If you have any concerns about the research, please do not hesitate to contact me on **********, or email me on ************

The distance travelled: how undergraduates from diverse backgrounds adapt to learning and teaching in their first year at university.

Consent form

I am happy to participate in this research project. I have understood the commitment I am being asked to make (to take part in two interviews) and that all findings will be anonomised and presented in such a way as to retain confidentiality.

I understand that I will be offered the opportunity to amend or withdraw transcripts of my interview at any stage. I also understand that I can withdraw at any stage of the research, should I wish to do so.

If I have any concerns, I am happy to raise them as they arise.

Signed:

Print name:

Date:

Appendix IV: Initial interview schedule (TLRP Project)[2]

Confirm student details/confidentiality/understanding of the project/contact details

Questions

1. How did you come to choose your degree subject? What influenced you in that choice?

2. Could you describe to me how you think about your subject?

3. What is it about the subject which appeals to you?

4. Is there anything about the subject that you do not like?

5. How do you cope with the boring, or hard, parts of your course?

6. Can you think of something that you've learnt at university which has made you think about something in a different way? Can you explain why?

7. If you are learning something new, how do you go about learning it?

8. What connections, if any, do you make between your subject learning at university and the rest of your life or personal interests?

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[2] This interview schedule was drawn up by the project team for the original TLRP/ESRC project: Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference

9. Do you feel that there is anything that you can personally contribute to university learning?

10. How do you think your teachers accommodate the diversity within the classroom?

11. We often know when we do not know something, but how do you know that you *do* know something in your subject?

12. What do you do if you get conflicting information from different teachers? How do you resolve those differences?

13. Thinking about your family or educational background, what helped you to prepare for higher education?

14. Since being at university do you think you have changed as a person? If so, how do you think you have changed?

15. And how do you see yourself in relation to other students?

16. How do you think this impacts on your learning?

17. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Thanks, best wishes, confirm next steps.

Appendix V: First Year interview schedule

The distance travelled: how undergraduates from diverse backgrounds adapt to learning and teaching in their first year at university.

End of first year interview schedule

1.   About yourself.

Please can you confirm your name and contact details for me?

Do you mind telling me how old you are?

What ethnic group do you belong to?

Did either of your parents or other family members go to university?

What job do your parents do?

What type of school did you attend (private/public/school/college)?

What qualifications did you take before coming to university? Do you mind telling me what grades you got?

Do you regard yourself as having a disability of any kind? Is this declared to the university?

Do you have any family commitments outside of university?

Do you live in halls of residence/independent accommodation/family home?

2. Before you came to university.

Thinking back to your school or college, what did they do that helped you to prepare for university?

Thinking back to your school or college, what did they do that was really unhelpful in preparing you for university?

Thinking back to how you felt when you began at university, what could your school or college have done differently, to help you to prepare for university learning?

When you compare yourself to other students, how well prepared do you think you were to learn at university?

3. Motivation for studying

Can you please remind me of what your reasons were for choosing this course, at this university?

How do you think your degree will help you in the future, both in your career and outside of it?

When things have been tough this year, what has kept you going?

4. Learning experiences

What aspects of the learning and teaching at university have you enjoyed?

What aspects of the learning and teaching at university have you found difficult?

Thinking about knowledge and whose knowledge is important, what do you do if you disagree with your tutor?

How would you describe your relationship with your tutors compared to how you related to your teachers at school/college?

What access do you have to learning facilities at university, and what use do you make of them? Is this important to you? (eg access to library, computers, web-based learning).

Is there anything that you can think of that would make a significant difference (improvement) to your learning?

5.   Coping strategies

Do you think you have changed your personal organisation around learning in anyway since starting at university? If so, how?

What study skills, or learning techniques have you changed since coming to university? How have these changed?

When you are learning by yourself, what helps you to do this?

How do you manage the social demands/learning demands/employment demands mix?

What access do you have, and what use have you made, of 'support services'?

6. Social integration

Do you feel comfortable with your fellow students?

How do those relationships impact on your learning behaviour?

What other activities do you do outside of university and do you think they relate to your studies in anyway?

7. Defining success

What have been your main achievements in this first year?

What have been your main disappointments in this first year?

Have you been satisfied with your work, or performance, this year?

How would you describe success, for you, at university?

Appendix VI: Second Year interview schedule

Hello, and thank you once again for coming along to speak with me. This should take no more than half an hour. Some of my questions are repeating things I asked you in earlier interviews, because I am interested in hearing from you about the changes you have found this year. If you do not want to answer any questions, or feel you have already said all you can, please just say so. When we are finished I will send you a transcript of our conversation and you are welcome to change anything that you do not agree with.

So, thinking about preparation for university, now that you are nearing the end of your second year.

1.   Thinking back to your school or college, what did they do that helped you to prepare for university?

2.   When you compare yourself to other students, how well prepared do you think you were to learn at university?

Now thinking about what motivates you to study.

3.   How do you think your degree will help you in the future, both in your career and outside of it?

4.   When things have been tough this year, what has kept you going?

And now, moving on to the actual teaching and learning experience.

5.   What aspects of the learning and teaching at university have you enjoyed?

6.   What aspects of the learning and teaching at university have you found difficult?

And thinking about your relationship with the tutors.

7.   How would you describe your relationship with your tutors compared to how you related to your tutors in the first year?

And thinking about the university more widely.

8.   What access do you have to learning facilities at university, and what use do you make of them? Is this important to you? (eg access to library, computers, web-based learning).

9.   What access do you have, and what use have you made, of 'support services'?

Thinking about study skills.

10.   Do you think you have changed your personal organisation around learning   in anyway since starting at university? If so, how?

11.   What study skills, or learning techniques have you changed since coming to university? How have these changed?

Moving on to social integration.

12.   How do you manage the social demands/learning demands/employment demands mix?

13.   What other activities do you do outside of university and do you think they relate to your studies in anyway?

14.   Do you feel comfortable with your fellow students?

15.   How do those relationships impact on your learning behaviour?

And finally, I would like to ask you a few questions about success and what it means to you.

16.   What have been your main achievements in this second year?

17.   Have you been satisfied with your work, or performance, this year?

18.   What have been your main disappointments in this first year?

19.   How would you describe success, for you, at university?

Now I have asked you a lot of questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add, that I have not covered?

Appendix VII: Third Year interview schedule

Interview Schedule: Year Three

Confirm student details

Confirm willingness to proceed

Confirm confidentiality

Check up on how the final year, exams and placement have gone

Questions:

1. Thinking back across your undergraduate experiences, how do you think your learning changed?

2. What do you think made a difference to the way that you learned at university?

3. If you had your time again, what do you think you would do differently as a student?

4. How do you think your relationships with your fellow students changed over the three years at university?

5. How do you think your relationships with your teachers changed over the three years at university?

6. What impact (if there were any) did these changes have on your learning at university?

7. How do you think about your subject now?

8. Can you say something about the way in which you integrated into the university community while you were here?

9. What do you think you have got out of doing your degree? (Or: what does getting a degree mean to you?)

10. If you had to give a future student one piece of advice, what would it be?

11. How would you describe your greatest achievement on your course?

12. What does success at university mean to you?

Confirm if they would like a transcript

Confirm forwarding contact details

Thanks and best wishes

The distance travelled : experiences of learning and teaching at university.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this third phase of research about how students are experiencing learning and teaching at university. You are now coming to the end of your second year at university and I am interested to hear how you have got on this year. I will be asking you to take part in a short, half hour interview later on, but for now I would like you to complete a short task. I am particularly interested in the people and things that have influenced you before you came to university and over the first two years of study here.

Please draw a 'map', or 'spider diagram', with you at the centre. Add to the diagram those *people, events, or texts* that you feel have done most to shape your becoming a student in higher education. They may have occurred before coming to university or while you were here. You may want to think about :

- ❖ Significant teachers, family members, friends or famous personalities who helped, advised or inspired you;

- ❖ Events that you now think changed your way of seeing your future – it may, for example, be a film you watched, a lesson you had, or a visit you made;

❖ Any particular books, journal articles, magazines or newspaper articles you read, which helped you to see your future in higher education.

Please include as many, or as few, of each category as you like. If you wish to add notes that will be very helpful. When I meet up with you for our interview, there will be a further chance for you to comment on your diagram.

When you are happy with your diagram, please return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope enclosed.

Many thanks, once again, for giving your time so generously. I look forward to meeting up with you in the next few weeks.
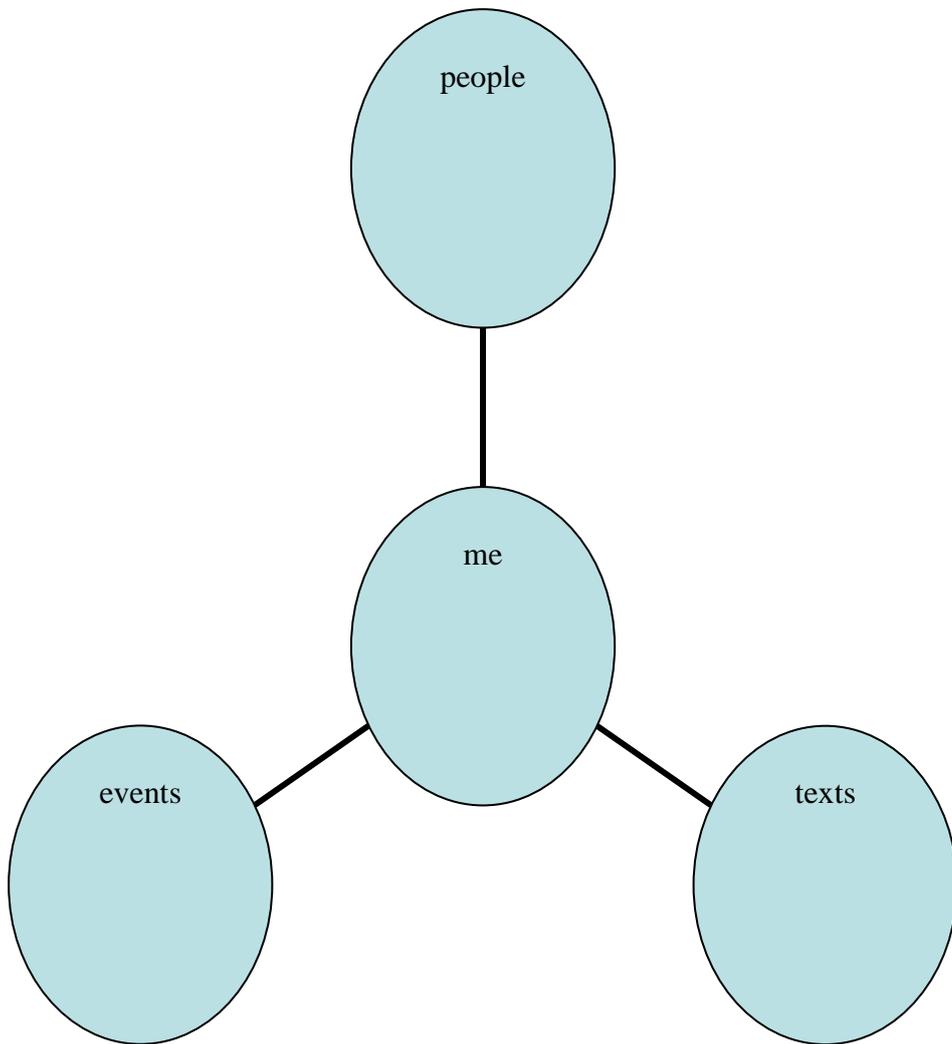
Appendix IX: Examples of spider diagrams

Sty

♥ ★

★ ♥

85%

friends at college

Rach

Pathology Lab

my interests
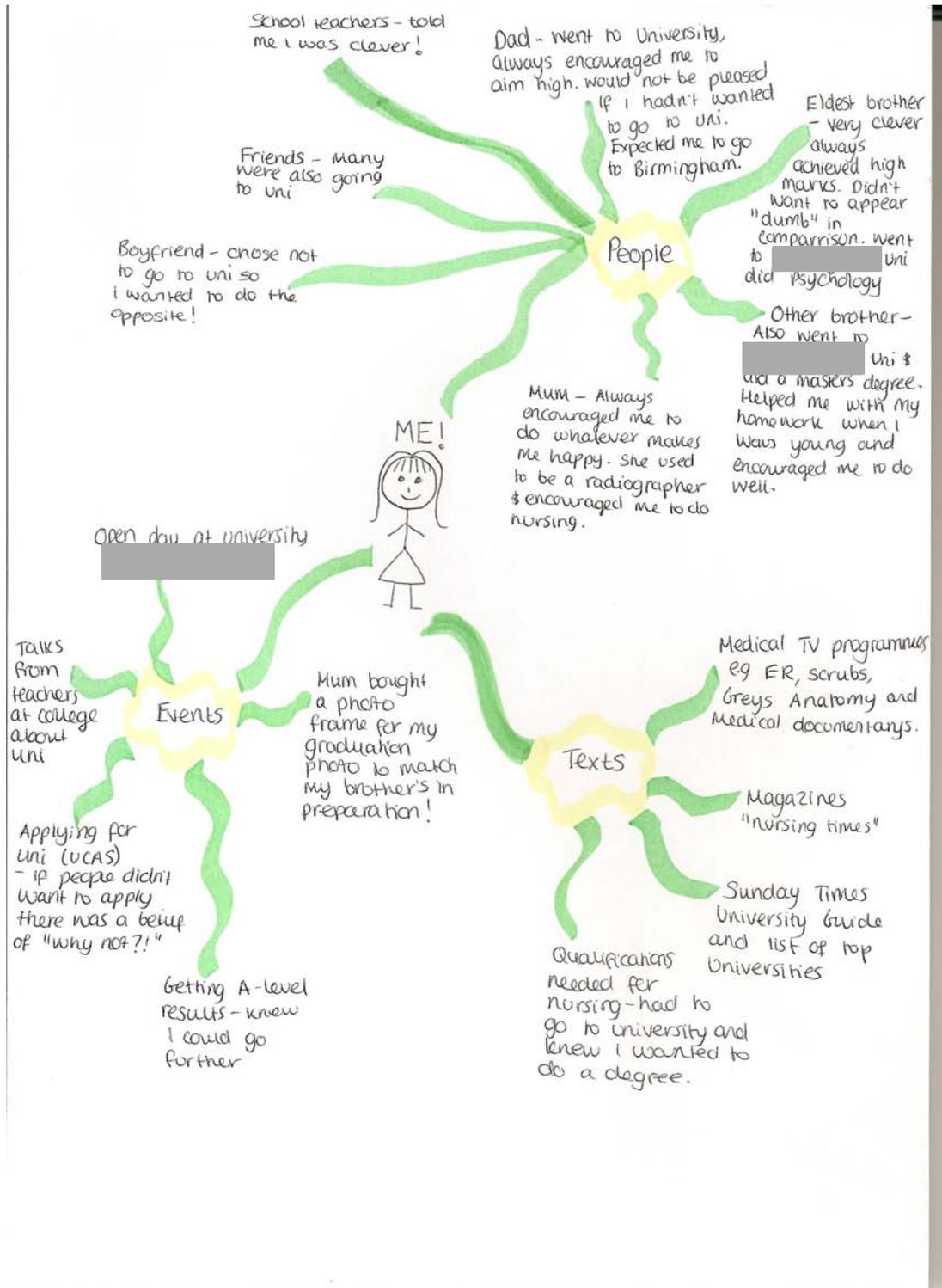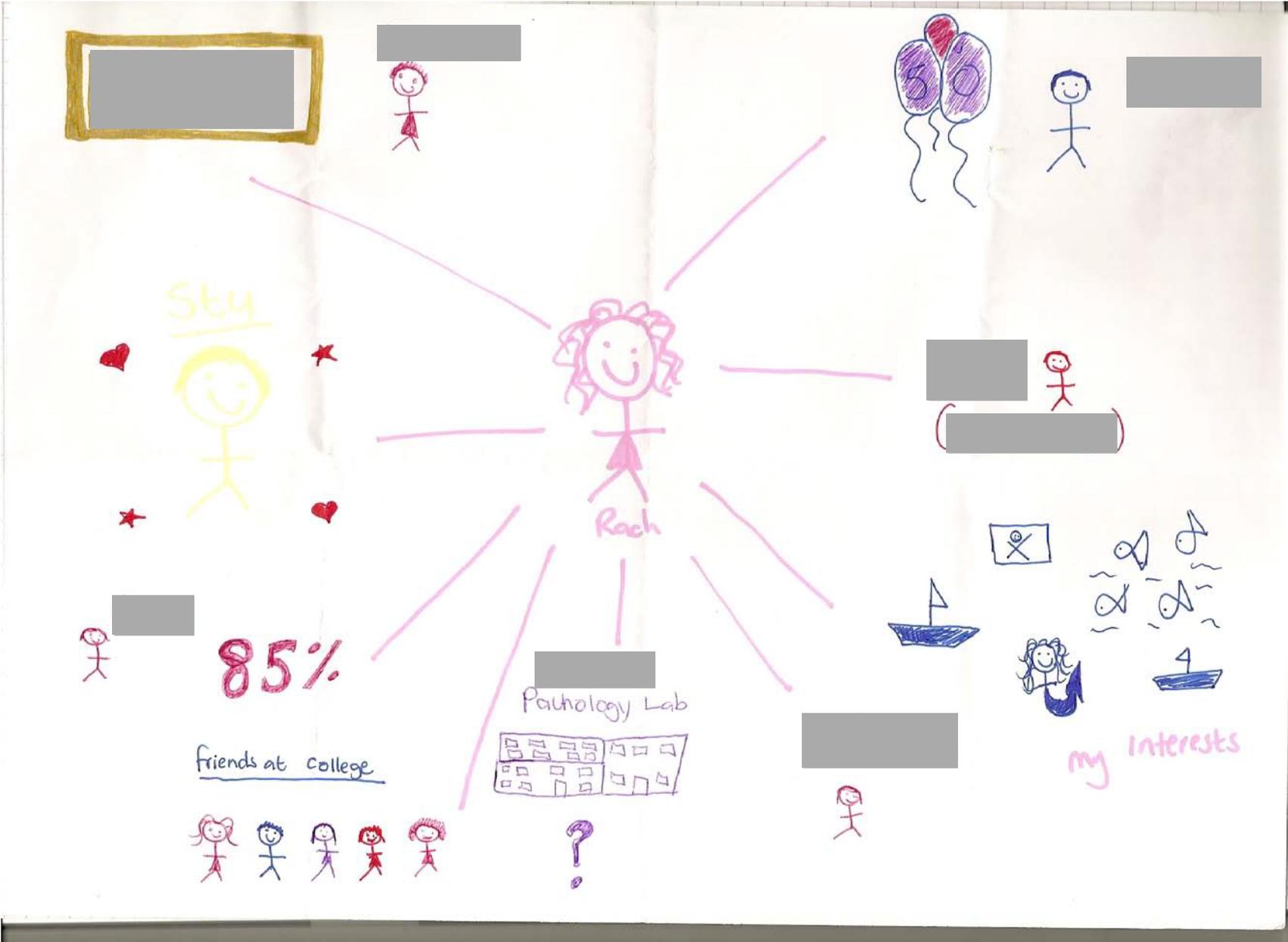
Appendix X: Nvivo Coding Structure

Tree Nodes

Name	Sources		Reference	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
A and G preparation for univ	17		44	27/05/2010 09:0	SC	01/06/2010 12:1	SC
Academic and social integrat	32		219	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	31/01/2011 11:2	SC
Assessment	24		130	05/08/2010 06:3	SC	05/08/2010 11:0	SC
Changes at the end	0		0	31/01/2011 09:2	SC	31/01/2011 09:2	SC
Acade	8	113	31/01/2011 09:22	SC		31/01/2011 11:36	SC
Confide	8	37	31/01/2011 09:23	SC		31/01/2011 11:34	SC
Profess	8	74	31/01/2011 09:23	SC		31/01/2011 11:33	SC
Social	8	106	31/01/2011 09:23	SC		31/01/2011 11:36	SC
Changes to learning habits	16		60	10/11/2009 11:0	SC	30/11/2009 10:5	SC
Educational background	28		129	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	23/11/2009 14:3	SC
Effects of participation in proj	10		17	28/10/2009 09:3	SC	30/11/2009 11:1	SC
Employability	30		140	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	30/11/2009 11:2	SC
Family background	31		134	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	31/01/2011 11:2	SC
Future plans	14		29	28/10/2009 09:3	SC	30/11/2009 11:2	SC
Knowledge and knowing	30		177	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	30/11/2009 11:0	SC
Learning and Teaching	30		214	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	31/01/2011 11:2	SC
Classro	30	107	27/10/2008 11:21	SC		30/11/2009 11:10	SC
Out of c	30	113	27/10/2008 11:22	SC		31/01/2011 11:23	SC
Motivation for studying	32		203	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	31/01/2011 11:2	SC
motivati	5	7	03/02/2010 12:27	SC		04/02/2010 11:36	SC
motivati	3	4	03/02/2010 12:10	SC		04/02/2010 11:25	SC
motivati	29	88	03/02/2010 10:53	SC		04/02/2010 11:37	SC
motivati	4	8	03/02/2010 11:01	SC		04/02/2010 11:14	SC
motivati	8	11	03/02/2010 10:55	SC		04/02/2010 11:21	SC
motivati	15	31	03/02/2010 10:54	SC		04/02/2010 11:22	SC
motivati	21	42	03/02/2010 10:55	SC		31/01/2011 11:23	SC
motivati	23	47	03/02/2010 10:52	SC		04/02/2010 11:36	SC

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Tree Nodes

Name	Sources		Reference	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
motivati	8	14	03/02/2010 11:33	SC		04/02/2010 11:32	SC
Personal development	31		127	28/10/2008 09:5	SC	30/11/2009 11:1	SC
Relationships with students	32		145	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	30/11/2009 11:2	SC
Relationships with teachers i	30		105	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	30/11/2009 11:1	SC
serious demotivator	3		5	03/02/2010 11:5	SC	04/02/2010 11:1	SC
Support networks	31		120	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	30/11/2009 11:1	SC
Instituti	26	114	28/10/2008 09:57	SC		30/11/2009 11:21	SC
T and L Preparation for univ	28		114	27/05/2010 09:0	SC	01/06/2010 12:2	SC
Views of the subject	24		53	27/10/2008 11:1	SC	01/06/2010 09:2	SC
Views on Higher Education	18		45	27/05/2010 08:5	SC	01/06/2010 12:2	SC
Why this institution	15		27	27/05/2010 08:5	SC	01/06/2010 12:1	SC
Why this subject	25		49	27/05/2010 08:5	SC	01/06/2010 12:2	SC

Appendix XI: Ethics form (Abridged)

This form MUST be completed by ALL students studying for postgraduate research degrees and can be included as part of the thesis even in cases where no formal submission is made to the Ethics Committee. Supervisors are also responsible for checking and conforming to the ethical guidelines and frameworks of other societies, bodies or agencies that may be relevant to the student's work.

Part A: to be completed by the STUDENT

NAME: Sandra Cooke

COURSE OF STUDY (MPhil; PhD; EdD etc):   PhD

POSTAL ADDRESS FOR REPLY:

CONTACT TELEPHONE NUMBER:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

DATE: 07 June 2007

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: Hywel Thomas

PROPOSED PROJECT TITLE: The distance travelled : how undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds adapt to learning and teaching at university.

BRIEF OUTLINE OF PROJECT: (100-250 words; this may be attached separately) :

The proposed study will examine the learning journey taken by students from different educational, social and cultural backgrounds during their first year at university in different subject areas. It is widely recognised that students learn in different ways and at different speeds. The principal focus of existing work has been on how students experience the pre-entry and the initial phase of university learning, rather than their views on their journey at the end of their first year. The proposed study will explore the nature of that journey and examine whether and how it is influenced by a student's background. The aim is to understand the journey from the student's perspective. The study will build on work currently taking place in the ESRC TLRP project, Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference which examines the concept of academic engagement within a diverse student population.

Research questions

The research will address the following research questions:

Who are the students who adapt to and succeed in the university academy?

What are the processes whereby students adapt to and thrive in the university environment?

In relation to students, teachers, curriculum, pedagogy and organisation, what are the important facilitators or inhibitors to this process?

What impact, if any, do students' educational, social and cultural background have on their ability to adapt?

MAIN ETHICAL CONSIDERATION(S) OF THE PROJECT (e.g. working with vulnerable adults; children with disabilities; photographs of participants; material that could give offence etc):

All participants will be over 18. Students will be studying and therefore care will be taken to ensure that the research does not interfere with studies. Students will be reminded of their right to opt out of the research. It is not anticipated that the adults taking part will be vulnerable.

Data from the ESRC/TLRP project will be used, although all participants where this is the case will be made well aware of the development of the data.

RESEARCH FUNDING AGENCY (if any): School of Education

DURATION OF PROPOSED PROJECT (please provide dates as month/year): Oct 07 to Jul 10

DATE YOU WISH TO START DATA COLLECTION: June 2007. This is before the official start of the project. This is because I will be building on research already undertaken and the students concerned will be completing their first year this summer. It is important that I interview as many of them as possible before they begin their second year.

Please provide details on the following aspects of the research:

1. What are your intended methods of recruitment, data collection and analysis? [see note 1]

Selected students have already taken part in focus groups and interviews as part of the TLRP Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference project. I intend to contact them again as soon as possible to renew their commitment to the research and to interview them in semi-structured interviews. Interviews will be conducted in person or by telephone, at the students' convenience. Interviews will be recorded digitally, transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 7.

2. How will you make sure that all participants understand the process in which they are to be engaged and that they provide their voluntary and informed consent? If the study involves working with children or other vulnerable groups, how have you considered their rights and protection? [see note 2]

Students will be offered a project summary, both verbally and in writing, before being asked to give consent. The summary will include an explanation of what students will be asked to do as participants in the research. Students will be asked to sign a form of agreement to confirm that they understand the implications of participation.

3. How will you make sure that participants clearly understand their right to withdraw from the study?

This will be explained in the summary and reiterated at the start of each interview. Students will be given copies of transcripts and offered the chance to amend or withdraw any part of the transcript at any stage in the research.

4. Please describe how you will ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Where this is not guaranteed, please justify your approach. [see note 3]

 In all cases pseudonyms will be used in writing up and publishing material from the study. Students will be offered the chance to choose their own pseudonym. Data will not be released to any third party, except in writing up and published material. I will complete the transcription process, so no one else will need access to the data.

5. Describe any possible detrimental effects of the study and your strategies for dealing with them. [see note 4]

The main concern is to avoid interfering with students' study. To minimise this, I will discuss timing with relevant tutors (without identifying specific students) and discuss appropriate times with students. Methods of data collection (telephone versus in person) will be used at the convenience of the student. Students will be reminded of their right to opt out of the research at any stage should they wish.

6. How will you ensure the safe and appropriate storage and handling of data?

The database of student contacts will be kept electronically on a USB datastick, backed up on CD. The Nvivo project and all transcripts will be stored in a similar way. All USB datasticks, CDs and paper-based material will be stored within a secure, locked office environment.

7. If during the course of the research you are made aware of harmful or illegal behaviour, how do you intend to handle disclosure or nondisclosure of such information? [see note 5]

Students will be warned that disclosure of such information may place the researcher under different obligations. If the student persists in disclosing harmful or sensitive material, I would refer the matter to my supervisor, or Director of PostGraduate Studies, or Head of School depending on availability.

8. If the research design demands some degree of subterfuge or undisclosed research activity, how have you justified this and how and when will this be discussed with participants?

Not applicable.

9. How do you intend to disseminate your research findings to participants?

Students will be offered transcripts for amendment and agreement to ensure that they know what data they are contributing.

The final report, together with any published material drawing on the data, will be made available to them on request. I intend to maintain email contact with the students over the course of the research project, so will update them on material as it becomes available.