

Title: An investigation into what defines the student experience of undergraduate students at Newcastle University Business School; and the implications for the School for the design and delivery of its undergraduate education.

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Abstract

This is a study about the student experience of undergraduates at Newcastle University Business School, and the implications for the design and delivery of undergraduate Business education.

I find that while the term “student experience” is used widely in practice, it is remarkably under-developed as a construct in the academic literature. By identifying themes within the literature, I develop a conceptual framework for the student experience, which is then tested and refined during the pilot project and main data collection and analysis phases.

My research approach is based around the use of semi-structured focus groups of students. A questionnaire is used to give structure, but participants were encouraged to develop their own ideas in open discussion, thereby generating a rich set of data which has allowed me to explore the themes and nuances of what defines the student experience.

In the concluding chapter, I propose a conceptual framework where the student experience is defined as a broad, multi-faceted, psycho-social construct and where the student develops and matures as a result of meaningful interactions with seven key microsystems, which represent the most significant influences on student life. I also propose that in order to have a satisfying student experience, an undergraduate needs to engage in meaningful interactions with these microsystems, the extent of those interactions being linked to the level of individual personal development.

Accordingly, the implications for practice are that a broader conception of undergraduate Business education is required, stretching beyond the degree programme, to facilitate interaction with these key microsystems. It is proposed that the most appropriate perspective is that of the student as an active fee-paying member of an academic community rather than as a passive consumer. Such a perspective balances the rights of students to expect academic staff to show accountability to them with students own responsibilities to realise their own potential.

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Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Motivation for the Study

The purpose of this opening section is to summarise my interests and explain my motivations for completing this study. There are two main elements to this. Firstly, I had a desire, stemming from my role as Director of Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University Business School, to understand better the perspectives of students and to use that understanding to increase the possibilities of a satisfying experience for undergraduate business students at Newcastle. In doing this, I wanted to engage with the academic literature to inform my thinking and understanding about practice; with the purpose of developing a deeper understanding and perspective forged by a rigorous research process rather than one based solely around a combination of my own knowledge, experience and ideas. In short, these are the aims and the approach of a typical DBA.

Secondly, I wanted my study to have academic merit and to make a contribution to theory as well as practice. As I will explain in the following sections, the concept of an overarching framework for the student experience is not well developed - a gap that has been noted and commented on by a number of established authors. Thus my study aims to make a contribution in an area that has been identified as a gap in the literature. In short, these are the aims and the approach of a typical PhD.

It is important to clarify what I mean when using terms like ‘a satisfying student experience’. My perspective, drawn from practice, is that in order to be satisfied, students need to experience a period of personal development between the time they start university and the time they finish; in this context, satisfied means “fulfilled” and “content” rather than merely “OK about things”. This is profoundly different from a perspective where good means comfortable and easy. For example, a good experience in a hotel might be defined as a passive experience where every conceivable need of the guest is catered for and the guest has a very relaxing and enjoyable time. In this case, perhaps the most significant input from the guest comes when they pay the bill. A satisfying experience linked to personal development is different and requires some active involvement from the individual.

A further fundamental aspect of this study is that I want to understand the student's perspective rather than the academic's. Thus studies which seek to capture the student's views and understand their perspective are of particular value to my research. This reflects a desire to understand more about how students are, rather than starting with a preconception about how they should be. It is also key to understanding students' perceptions of their own experience. It is recognised that the undergraduate student body (even in a study limited to a single Business School) is diverse and therefore it is necessary to be wary about seeking a one-size-fits-all set of judgements. Accordingly part of this study is exploratory in nature and limits its aims to identifying factors that are relevant to the majority of the student body for a significant proportion of their time.

However, moving beyond my personal perspectives, it is also important to place this study into its broader context. As I will explore in Chapter Two, the term "student experience" is widely used in the practice of higher education. Many universities have explicit policy statements, addressing how they aim to provide an excellent student experience. Often they will also explicitly devote staffing and resources to this area. The recent increase in the cap on UK/EU undergraduate student fees, from £3,000 to £9,000 per annum, and the revisions to the quota system for the allocation of student numbers to institutions have also contributed to greater debate concerning the value of an undergraduate degree. This has prompted many institutions to reflect further on the student experience of their undergraduates.

Furthermore the results of the National Student Survey (NSS), first introduced in 2005, are now widely reported. Component data from the NSS, along with data relating to teaching, finance and employability form the Key Information Sets (KIS) that universities are required to display on course web pages and which perspective students, and others, can use to compare different institutions.

Also, during Chapter Two, I will explore the student experience from the perspective of the academic literature. I had expected to find that the meaning of this term would have been well developed and theorised in the literature, given its widespread use and relevance in practice. However, while there is a well-developed literature on student engagement, and there are many other studies that consider elements of the student experience, I was unable to identify any that have sought to define the term "student

experience”, or any that have attempted to provide a framework to explain how it might be constructed.

Thus, this is a study that will investigate a topical and relevant construct. It will make a contribution by addressing a gap in the existing literature and by proposing a conceptual framework that models the main influences that the student experience from the perspective of undergraduate Business students at Newcastle University Business School.

1.2 Developing the Research Questions

With these perspectives in mind, my two main research questions are as follows. Firstly, what defines the student experience for undergraduate business students at Newcastle University Business School? Secondly, based on findings from the first question, what are the implications for the School in the design and delivery of its undergraduate education? Within these broad topics there are a number of component and/or supplementary questions that will need to be addressed in working towards that overall aim. However, the primary focus will be on the term “student experience” and the influences and factors that define that experience.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter two reviews the academic literature and starts to develop a conceptual framework for the student experience. The chapter examines the meaning of the term “student experience” from the perspectives of practice and the academic literature, including placing the study within the broader context of educational research. Themes identified in the literature are brought together to develop a working hypothesis for the conceptual framework, based around the influence of seven key microsystems which, the literature suggests, are key in shaping the student experience.

Chapter three addresses research design and approach. The chapter explains how I linked my research questions to my choice of research approach, before reporting on the pilot project, where I evaluated the feasibility of using these methods in practice.

Finally, I explain in detail the research methods adopted for the main data collection stage, including the approach to data analysis.

Chapter four considers the first two of the seven microsystems identified in my conceptual framework. The first part of the chapter considers the pre-university phase, examining the knowledge, experience and attitudes that students had about university prior to starting their degree. The second part considers the transition phase, the process that commences when a new student arrives and continues until the student feels established as an undergraduate student. Taken together these two elements examine the process of becoming a student.

Chapter five examines social and cultural influences. Firstly, it examines the influence of university-based peer and friendship groups. Students spend a lot of time with their peers and friends, giving them great immediacy in the student experience. The rest of the chapter considers the influence of parents, family, friends and popular culture and the media. These two groupings form the third and fourth microsystems identified in the conceptual framework.

Chapter six examines the formal learning experience - the Degree Programme (the fifth microsystem). The chapter is sub-divided into five main sections, discussing in turn: the curriculum; the delivery of the teaching programme; academic staff; assessment and feedback and finally, an overview considering the nature and extent of academic development over the duration of the degree programme.

Chapter seven examines the process of preparing for life after graduation. Having undergone a period of transition when first arriving at university, students spend a relatively short period of time settled in university life before they need to start addressing a new transition into life after graduation. The chapter discusses the role of extra-curricula activity in personal development and preparing for this next transition as well as the theme that student life is a stepping stone into independent adult life, including working life. Extra-curricula activity and preparing for life post-graduation are the sixth and seventh microsystems in the model.

Chapter eight forms the conclusion to my study. It discusses my findings in relation to the two overarching research questions of what defines the student experience for

undergraduate business students at Newcastle and what are the implications for the design and delivery of undergraduate business education. Using the evidence from my data analysis in chapters four to seven, I develop further the conceptual framework for the student experience that I introduced in the second half of chapter two. I consider the processes by which individual microsystems become more or less influential in defining the overall student experience. Thereafter I apply the findings of the focus group data and the conceptual framework to identify the implications for the design and delivery of undergraduate business education at Newcastle. The chapter is completed by discussing the contribution that the study makes to pedagogic research and also its limitations before finally, considering the implications for further study.

Chapter Two – Review of the Literature and the Development of a Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

During chapter one I identified two main research questions. These were: What defines the student experience for undergraduate business students at Newcastle University Business School? What are the implications (of this) for the School in the design and delivery of its undergraduate education? This chapter will begin to address those questions by reviewing the academic literature and then, based on the themes emerging, starting to develop a working hypothesis for my conceptual framework for the student experience.

To begin, section 2.2 will examine the meaning of the term “student experience” from the perspective of practice. It will draw from a number of sources to give a flavour of how the term has come to be used. Next, section 2.3 will examine the academic literature related to the term and to the first research question generally. This will include placing the study within the broader context of educational research and grouping the literature into the key themes that correspond with the key influences on the student experience.

Section 2.4 takes the themes and influences identified in section 2.3 and then overlays them onto a landscape on which the various influences and how they inter-act can be mapped. This landscape is derived from the fields of learning and developmental psychology. This is in line with one of the main aims of the study, outlined in section 2.1.1 above, that of understanding what makes a satisfying experience for students where a satisfying student experience equates with a period of significant personal development for the student. Taken together the themes and the landscape will comprise the conceptual framework upon which my study is based.

To finish the chapter, Section 2.5 summarises and concludes as a prelude to Chapter 3 which examines the research approach and the results of the pilot project.

2.2 What is the Student Experience? The Perspective of Practice

This section provides an overview of the use of the term “student experience” in practice. It is apparent that the use of the term in higher education practice is broad and wide ranging. For example, Newcastle University’s Learning Teaching and Student Experience Strategy (2012) make a specific differentiation between the (more narrowly defined) student learning experience and the wider student experience stating:

Our commitment, however, extends well beyond the student learning experience to embrace all aspects of a student’s time at Newcastle. This wider student experience includes a sense of involvement in the life of the university within its local communities and globally, an attractive social and residential experience, active participation in cultural, sporting and work experiences, and a sense of wellbeing and support.

The 1994 Group is a group of UK research intensive Universities. Its policy statement on the student experience - 1994 Group (2007) – also emphasises that the teaching and learning associated with the student’s degree programme forms only one part of the student experience. The policy statement identifies seven priority areas to which the higher education sector needs to respond in order to meet the challenges of the changing environment of student experiences and expectations. The seven areas are as follows:

- 1) A requirement to provide transparent and accurate information around the student experience
 - 2) Towards the 2020 Workforce: Promoting the well-rounded graduate
 - 3) Promoting the student voice
 - 4) Engagement with schools and colleges
 - 5) Student focused resources
 - 6) International strategy and internationalisation
 - 7) Excellence and enhancement in teaching and learning
- (1994 Group (2007) pp. 12-16)

Again, it is interesting to note that only one of these priorities could be said to relate directly to the teaching that students receive as part of their degree programme. Many of these points are to do with other aspects of their student experience and priority number 2 specifically refers to the “well rounded” graduate who has benefitted from skills and experiences developed both inside and outside the formal curriculum.

The 1994 Group policy statement also makes the point that the nature of the student experience has changed and is changing over time, noting that it is only appropriate to think in terms of a snapshot of the experience at a given point. It also notes that:

Student experience is a wide-ranging term meaning different things to different kinds of students. (1994 Group, 2007, p.2.)

It goes on to explain this by contrasting the circumstances and perspectives of an 18 year old undergraduate living away from home for the first time, with a 40 year old masters student balancing the demands of work and family life with a Chinese student coming to the UK for the first time.

A further perspective on the student experience is provided through the use of questionnaires and surveys. The National Student Survey (2013) asks UK final year undergraduate students to answer 22 questions about their experiences. The questions focus on aspects relating to the specific content and delivery of their degree e.g. the teaching or assessment as well as some broader aspects e.g. opportunities for personal development. The nature of the questions are directed more towards the student's degree programme although considerable attention is given to the answer to question 22 which asks about overall satisfaction.

The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (2013) also assesses student perceptions about 22 factors, however while eight of the questions relate more directly to the programme of study e.g. high-quality staff/lectures, helpful/interested staff, a further 15 relate to student life more generally e.g. good social life, good community atmosphere, good extracurricular activities/societies, while the last question asks whether the respondent would recommend the university to a friend.

These sources suggest that in higher education practice, the student experience is about more than just the student's degree programme. The degree may be the primary reason why a student comes to university, but it may not be the primary influence on the student's life and development while they are at university.

It is apparent that context is important. Influences on the student experience have changed over time. Changes to and differences in age, sex, geographic and socio-economic background of the student intake will affect students, their needs and wants

and their expectations both on entering university and for the duration of their time there.

The sources also underline how the experience of university involves students in change and exposure to new influences. For new undergraduates, this change can be significant and challenging, especially if the new student has little relevant life experience to draw from in order to help them adjust to these changes. Accordingly for some students, their experience will have a strong emotional aspect as they learn to adapt to a new environment with differing cultures and values. This needs to be viewed in terms of an individual's natural desire to achieve a sense of belonging and identity.

2.3 What is the Student Experience? The Perspective of the Academic Literature

2.3.1 *Positioning my Study in the Context of the Academic Literature*

On commencing my study, I had assumed that because the term 'student experience' was widely used in UK higher education, there would be a robust and relevant definition for the term. While I found plenty of evidence from practice (section 2.2 above), despite my best efforts no authoritative definition emerged in the academic literature. My review did identify many studies which investigate single issues that affect students during their time at university as undergraduates. These studies do contribute to understanding aspects of the student experience. Other studies attempt to bring one or more of these influences together, thereby developing a broader perspective on the subject. Occasionally, authors attempt to thread together several influences to propose a model for an aspect of the student experience.

Some of the most significant, influential and widely cited studies are those which attempt to provide a conceptual framework for an aspect of the student experience. Typically these bring together theory and ideas and fashion these into a new and coherent theoretical perspective. These include Bloom *et al.*'s taxonomy of educational objectives (1956), Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia's framework of the affective domain of education (1964), Tinto (1975) who applied Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide to develop a theory of why students drop out of university and Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement.

The field of student involvement and its related field of student engagement has been explored in considerable depth over the last 10 years and it is an area that I will explore later on in sections 2.3 and 2.4. While there are a number of important studies that explore aspects of engagement (and alienation), I am most drawn to studies such as Kahu (2013) who attempts to place student engagement within a broader conceptual framework which explores the various elements of this construct and how these interact.

Given my desire to study the student experience in a more holistic way I am influenced considerably by the approach of conceptualising and theorising about the whole process rather than just concentrating on an in depth study of a single component element.

However in the absence of an extensive literature on the subject, I need to tread carefully if I am to explore the subject with sufficient depth and rigour. Fortunately I am not alone in my desire to approach the subject from a different perspective.

For example, Haggis (2009) undertook a large literature review of the output of key journals stretching back to the 1970s. She raises a number of questions about what she sees as the limited perspectives and assumptions underpinning a significant volume of the published work. She states:

In response to the repeated finding that large numbers of students appear not to be taking a deep approach, the question implied by the research seems to be why do so many students take a surface approach to learning. Despite nearly 40 years of concentrated research activity, this question appears to remain still largely unanswered. (Haggis, 2009, p.377.)

Haggis is also critical of research based around an individualistic approach to the study of student learning stating:

There is as yet little research that attempts to document different types of dynamic interaction and process through time in relation to “learning” situations in higher education. (p.389).

Malcolm and Zukas (2001) take a similar line arguing that this approach represents the student as:

An anonymous, decontextualized, degendered being. (p.38).

Mann (2001) argues in favour of re-framing the student’s experience of higher education away from the surface/deep learning perspective towards a focus on engaged or alienated experiences of learning. She explores the concept of alienation, recognising

the broader socio-political landscape as well as the individual's circumstances and experiences.

Ainley (2008) welcomes the greater level of interest in the student experience as a concept but is disappointed that:

Studies have focused almost exclusively on classroom/learning examples, with fewer attempts to understand life more generally. (p.619.)

Instead he argues for a greater emphasis on what is learnt rather than what is taught as a more relevant approach to understanding the student experience.

Astin (1999) echoes this theme. He advances a theory of student involvement and contrasts this with other approaches based around subject matter or content, resources and individualised theory. He argues that in order for students to have a good student experience, they need to be involved or engaged with their programme of study and student life generally, stating:

Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms ... according to the theory, the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. (p.528.)

Astin's (1999) analysis has relevance to my study as it emphasises that the student experience is about both learning and personal development. It is also significant as it emphasises the importance of the individual student's input/contribution to the quality of their own experience.

Ashworth and Lucas (2000) discuss phenomenographic research in higher education, an approach which requires the researcher to step aside from their own pre-conceived ideas about students and learning, instead seeking to develop understanding through empathy and engagement with the world as it is articulated by the student. They use the term student lifeworld and differentiate it from the academic's lifeworld.

Keup (2006) discusses how the role and purpose of university education has changed over time just as society has changed over time, although arguing that a common core theme exists which is to educate and imbue students:

With a set of intellectual and personal skills to be successful individuals in society. (p.27.)

Yorke (2000) examines data relating to non-completion of university courses in the UK. His analysis highlights a variety of factors causing drop-out and that some of these are far beyond the influence or control of the university such as health problems, family issues, dislike of the town/city or fear of crime. Tinto (1975) approaches this from a psychological perspective articulating a theory as to why students drop-out. This underlines the point that while there are many factors that influence the type and quality of the student experience, only some of these are attributable to or, indeed, influenced by the university.

The common theme underpinning all of these studies is that they all recognise the importance of a broader perspective by placing student learning within a wider context incorporating social, psychological, cultural, behavioural, emotional and context specific factors. This rings true with my personal perspective that student learning is not confined to that which takes place within the modules of a degree programme. Student learning is a much broader concept that takes places in a variety of environments, not just the formal curriculum. Thus my interest lies in the broader perspective of researchers such as Kahu (2013) who argues for a conceptual framework of student engagement where:

Viewing student engagement as a psycho-social process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context, integrates the socio-cultural perspective with the psychological and behavioural views. (p.768.)

Accordingly in conducting my review of the literature, I placed particular emphasis on studies which tried to place the student perspective in this broader context. I also paid particular attention to the perspectives presented in well-known journals covering the field of education and business and to widely cited studies.

In order to provide structure to my analysis, I created groupings for the factors identified as influencing the student experience. Developing the groupings was not

always easy as the student experience is a complex and dynamic phenomenon where many factors inter-play with each other. However once I had begun to identify the groupings by specific terms and words based on the themes in the studies I was able to clarify the groupings further by searching for additional articles using the same terms and words. This gave greater clarity to the groupings and improved the structure of the analysis. I also applied a sense check to ensure that the groupings appeared logical given the literature that I had reviewed and the nature of my study.

It is recognised though that the groupings are not always simply defined and that some of the groupings overlap and blur. They should not be thought of as separate, distinct and tightly defined forces directing events in the same ways as factors such as force, air resistance and gravity shape the progress of a rocket heading towards space. A more appropriate analogy is that they are ingredients in a mix and that the weightings of the ingredients will vary from individual to individual so that the results in each case will be unique. My aim is not to provide a one size fits all model but it is to gain an understanding of what the major influences are for most students, most of the time.

Hence this section will concentrate on trying to develop my understanding of what these factors are and how they influence the student experience before, in the next section, attempting to develop a conceptual framework by combining them and considering how they interact and fit together.

2.3.2 Pre-University – Factors that Influence Students’ Expectations about University and Student Life

In understanding the undergraduate student experience, it is important to recognise that I am considering a specific three or four year period linked to study for a degree programme. Thus there is a beginning, middle and an end after which the student moves on. Accordingly, the logical point to start is at the beginning by considering the perspectives and expectations that students have immediately before they start university. Once students arrive at university they are exposed to new influences and experiences. However, part of making sense of their experiences requires them to draw on some reference points and their perspectives and expectations pre-arrival are significant in doing this. Accordingly this section will examine the pre-university period.

Brooks (2002) undertook a review of the research on the factors that influence higher education choices. Her study emphasized the significance of social networks – particularly family and friends and schools/colleges in the decision making processes. It was also noted that access to information plays a part. However, this appeared to be secondary to the influence of socio-economic factors which contributed to students' expectations about what constituted success. Brooks (2003, 2004) develops these themes further, in particular by examining how peer and friendship groups influenced student's perceptions as to what was a feasible choice of university and by examining the active role of both mothers and fathers in choosing which university to apply to.

Hockings, Cooke and Bowl (2007) asked 225 UK school and college students who were planning to go to university but had not yet enrolled about what they thought university would be like. The four themes were money, debt and work; making friends, being alone and fitting in; identity; fair and equal treatment. It is instructive that the themes identified are mainly to do with settling in and achieving a sense of belonging. The aspects to do with money, debt and work are pragmatic, immediate issues. Nevill and Rhodes (2004) in another study of UK first year undergraduate students found that similar themes persisted once students had entered university.

Lowe and Cook (2003) surveyed first year students at the University of Ulster to determine whether their prior perceptions of university life were consistent with their experiences after one term at university. They identified that there was a gap between expectation and reality, although most students were unconcerned about the gap and appeared to have managed the process of transition from school or college to university effectively. However, around 20% had found the transition difficult experiencing some form of academic or personal problem or both. For these students the gap between expectation and reality was a problem and while it may not have been the direct source of their academic or personal problems, it was seen as a contributory factor.

Similar themes are identified by Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009). They identify a state of "in-between-ness" where students are in transition between a sense that they belong at home and a sense that they belong at university. The authors recognise the efforts made by universities to address this problem and the value of some of the initiatives introduced. However they also argue for the need for a greater level of understanding of the students' perspective, including the influence of students'

expectations prior to arriving at university. They note students' frustrations when university does not turn out as expected – or promised even:

At the Open Days and Induction Days they praise the wonderful new business school building and then there are no lectures there. (Palmer *et al.*, 2009, p.44.)

It takes time to adjust to university; there are so many challenges that happen all at once. At times I doubt myself – whether it is the right one, the wrong one and I doubt the various promises made to me during Freshers' week. (*ibid* p.45.)

A number of studies look at the influences on students entering higher education at the start of the 21st century. These are relevant as they help with the understanding of the influences and experiences that have shaped students' expectations prior to their arrival at university. Coomes (2004), Coomes and DeBard (2004), DeBard (2004), Keup (2006) and Taub (2008) all discuss the characteristics of students entering higher education in the 21st century.

They emphasise the point that the influences and experiences of this group of students differs quite significantly from those of academic staff who teach those students. They discuss the gap between students and academics that arises from this difference in influences and experiences and try to explain why academics sometimes find it difficult to understand the actions of students and why students sometimes find it difficult to understand the actions of academics. This resonates personally, indeed, one of the motivations for undertaking this study was hearing academic and administrative colleagues express frustration at the behaviour of some students. Sometimes this was drawn from a belief that particular actions or behaviours were irrational, but on other occasions it seemed that colleagues had difficulty in identifying and empathising with students' behaviour.

Coomes (2004) considers the historical and cultural influences that shape generations. He identifies some of the major events and the cultural changes affecting students growing up over the last 10 years, stating:

The importance of popular culture should not be trivialised. (p.25.)

He argues that culture has a deep and widespread effect on how people look at things and how they behave. Specifically he identifies how the growth in the use of mobile

phones, text messaging and instant messaging is having a major impact on how students interact with others. While this article was written before the development of social networking sites like Facebook, the development and popularity of such sites merely emphasises the significance of the trends he discusses.

DeBard (2004) discusses the greater emphasis placed on rules and complying with rules within schools and society generally as well as the greater emphasis being placed on health and safety and its influence on today's students. He argues that this influence has shaped students' expectations to the extent that:

This has resulted in a need for and expectation of structure on the part of millennial students. (p.35.)

Of course there is a risk in assuming that there are certain universal truths about students and their learning. Haggis (2004) considered the background and motivations of a number of mature students who were entering university via an access course. Such students are unlikely to form a significant proportion of the students to be considered in this study, but nonetheless the paper does provide an interesting analysis of the motivations of a group of learners. Furthermore the maturity, broader experiences and more developed self-awareness of the group means that they are able to reflect on their circumstances with perhaps greater insight than more traditional students can. While Haggis stresses the need to recognize the individual circumstances of students, she also recognizes that there are some common themes:

This highlighting of difference does not imply that commonalities do not exist. (Haggis, 2004, p.348.)

However she argues that care needs to be taken in the application of these themes:

One implication of an awareness of difference is that it can guard against tendencies to stereotype on the basis of research generalizations. (*ibid.* p.349.)

In conclusion, it seems clear that prior expectations are important, not least for their role in helping students to make sense of what they experience once they arrive at university. However, those expectations are frequently general and possibly inaccurate. In some cases this is immaterial and students are unconcerned by this difference while for some students this can trigger feelings of alienation rather than belonging. These issues also arise in the next section which discusses the process of transition into student life.

2.3.3 Transition - Factors that Influence how Students Settle into Student Life

This section will focus more precisely on the transition process from being a new student to one that has settled into and achieved a sense of comfort with student life. A key theme emerging in the literature is that of belonging. Students search for a sense of belonging when they first arrive and thereafter use the presence or absence of those feelings of belonging as a reference point for their overall perceptions about their student experience. The absence of a sense of belonging can lead to feelings of alienation and even contribute to a student withdrawing from university.

Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) and Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) examine the experiences of students coming to university for the first time. Both of these studies find that the emotional aspects of transition are very important and have a big impact on how quickly the student assimilates into student life and develops a sense of belonging. Christie *et al.* (2008) argue that joining university is:

An emotional process that can incorporate feelings of alienation and exclusion, as well as of excitement and exhilaration. (p.567.)

While on one level these findings appear self-evident, both studies question whether the design of student provision and of teaching and learning fully appreciates how important this emotional aspect is to the transition process. Certainly it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that the extent to which a student feels a sense of belonging and involvement is a key aspect of the student experience.

The paper by Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) spans the pre-university and transition period and is therefore relevant in this section as well as the previous one. The discussions with students reported underline the emotional aspect of the student experience and the power and depth of these emotions.

They also discuss the impact of what are described as turning-points in a new student’s early experiences of university life and that these turning-points can arise from a number of influences related both directly and indirectly to the university. A further interesting factor identified is that while some of the turning-points were quite traumatic for the students, there was a sense that university staff did not belong in the process of sorting the problems out. However, peers were seen as a valuable support mechanism.

Kember, Lee and Li (2001) interviewed part-time students in Hong Kong to investigate their sense of belonging. Their study identified some of the difficulties faced by part-time students and noted that some of the peer support networks established by full-time students, e.g. getting to know other students who were living in the same halls of residence, were not available to part-time students as they did not tend to live on campus. The study identified ways in which universities might engage in activities that would contribute to a sense of belonging for part-time students specifically. Overall they concluded that the data showed that a sense of belonging contributed to improved student learning and progression.

A similar perspective is provided by Thomas (2000). He found a strong degree of correlation between increasing levels of social inter-activity and the level of a number of variables including academic performance, academic progression rates and levels of satisfaction. Thomas' paper also contributes to the evidence that peers, and an individual student's interaction with peers, are an important influence, a factor which is discussed in some detail in the next section.

Tinto (1975) applies Durkheim's (1961) theories of suicide to develop a theory of why students drop out of university. The parallel between these two seemingly unrelated actions arises in each case from the absence of integration. In the case of suicide, Durkheim argues that this can be due to a lack of integration into the fabric of society using the term "anomie". This can arise from the individual holding values that are highly divergent from the rest of society and/or the individual having insufficient personal interaction with the other members of society. Tinto uses Durkheim's theory to develop a detailed model that attempts to articulate the factors leading to drop-out. Where a student does not identify with the values of the university and has little or no interaction with the university, then the risk of drop-out rises significantly.

During his analysis Tinto (1975) makes a point of distinguishing between voluntary withdrawal (which he likens to suicide) and forced withdrawal or dismissal resulting from inadequate academic performance. Where the feelings of belonging and connection with the institution occur, the likelihood of voluntary withdrawal will be lower. Tinto's analysis underlines the significance of the transition process recognising the role of emotional and social factors as much as the academic aspects.

Tinto's work took place in universities in the USA. These themes are examined in the UK context by Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) who argue that equal emphasis needs to be placed on successful social integration into student life as to the academic aspects. Bennett (2003) also emphasises the importance of social and emotional factors as well as academic.

This links to another important theme in the transition process, the student's assimilation to the teaching, learning and assessment culture of university. Yorke (2000) examined why students withdraw from university before completing their course. His survey examined the academic aspects of transition covering a range of institutions and subjects, including specific results for Business and Management students. While factors directly related to perceived quality of the delivery of the programme featured, it is noticeable that a number of the more significant factors were those related to the appropriateness of the choice of course, e.g. chose the wrong field of study, lack of commitment to the programme, programme not as expected and so on. Failure to make the academic transition can also result in the student failing to progress and/or complete their degree or in the student graduating with a lower degree classification than the majority of their peers.

Bloxham and West (2007) discuss some of the difficulties students have in adapting to assessment in higher education. They discuss the use of an innovation in peer assessment, where first year students were asked to comment on and grade the work of other students. The aim of the innovation was to encourage students to engage with the assessment process and for them to benefit by doing so. However, the authors report that students viewed the innovation as no substitute for further contact from lecturers, especially in relation to what students perceived to be the tacit language and meaning of assessment. The authors also discuss the difficulty of meeting this request for greater contact.

In some ways this paper neatly sums up some of the key issues about transition and student engagement. Both students and academics are aware that university involves change for the student population. Academics would like their students to engage with the academic community and start to assimilate some of the values of university teaching and learning. However students find some of these values to be unfamiliar and

expect academics to help fill in the gaps of their understanding. This creates a sense of frustration amongst students when they perceive that academics are not helpful enough in filling in the gaps.

Durkin and Main (2002) discuss their experiences in using study skills support (both peer led and tutor led) to help fill these gaps. They note that there are skills gaps in new students entering university:

Lecturers ... have recognised for some time that many students entering the degree course do not have the necessary study skills to achieve good marks in written assignments and examinations. Students often have difficulty in differentiating clearly between essay and report formats, they lack confidence and knowledge of how to structure assignments and some appear to have had little practice in writing critical evaluations. (p.25.)

In this research, tutor-led skills sessions or peer-led mentoring sessions were used to try to fill this gap with some success. However, even after this input the same authors concluded that there exists a gap between:

Lecturers' expectations and the assessment criteria, and the students' awareness and understanding of these. (p.37.)

Taken together, the various studies emphasise the importance of a sense of belonging to the student experience and the search for that sense of belonging that characterises the transition process. A student's degree programme can undoubtedly contribute to this sense of belonging. However, irrespective of whether or not their degree programme might otherwise be seen as high quality, e.g. good course content, high quality teaching or good learning resources, without that sense of belonging and involvement, the student is less likely to consider themselves to have had a good experience.

The literature also points to some differences between the attitudes and expectations that students have towards academic staff and the attitudes and expectations that students have towards their own peers. While these are different groups and some differences are to be expected, this is an area that is worth considering further. Accordingly, the next section considers the influence of peers.

2.3.4 The Influence of University Peer and Friendship Groups

There is a considerable body of literature that examines the influence of peers and friendship groups. For the purposes of this discussion, university peer and friendship groups are taken to be other students at the same institution studying for an undergraduate degree programme. It is recognised that this excludes some who might in other circumstances be regarded as peers but this is allowed for in the next section by considering the influence of other groups. The aim of this section is to identify and summarise some of the key themes relating to this group in relation to how they influence the student experience.

Brooks (2007) explores the nature of peer and friendship group interactions at university. She found that almost all of the respondents in her study reported that these were closer, deeper and more open than the friendships they had experienced previously. Thus peer and friendship groups fulfilled an important role in providing emotional support, especially through the transition phase as well as helping respondents to feel more confident about themselves and their identity. These findings are supported by Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) who identify how peers and friends can fulfil the role at university that family had previously occupied at home. Brooks and Waters (2010) report on the positive role that friendship groups can have in encouraging and building the confidence of UK students to study abroad. All three studies emphasise the role of peers and friends in providing emotional support, building confidence and developing a sense of belonging.

Hanushek, Kain, Markman and Rivkin (2003) attempt to model the impact of peers on the achievement of students. While the study is based on data from US high schools, it still has relevance as it attempts to model and explain the relationship in an educational context. Broadly, they found that an able peer group re-inforced the academic achievement of the whole cohort of students, because a strong peer group provides a positive re-inforcement of the values of achievement and success.

Eggens, Werf and Bosker (2008) try to identify the influence that personal networks and social support have on study attainment. The relevance of this paper is that it considers the influence that personal networks and social support can have on one crucial area of the student experience – that of academic achievement. For the purposes of the paper,

personal networks referred to peer based groups while social support referred to family and friendship groups outside university.

The early part of their paper summarises some of the predictors of academic attainment in higher education. They summarise the evidence showing that students who perform well in secondary education usually continue this high performance in higher education. They also refer to studies showing that younger students generally perform better than older students and that in general women are more successful than men. In addition, socioeconomic status and motivation are also positively linked to student attainment. In part this re-inforces the findings of Hanushek *et al.* (2003) as it emphasises that a strong peer group tends to re-inforce a pattern of continued success.

The study found that personal networks (i.e. interaction with individuals who counsel and contribute to the wider personal development of the student) contribute to academic achievement while social networks (e.g. social interaction with family and friends) do not. There is some discussion as to why this might be. The authors state:

Personal networks influence students' behaviour, possibly by means of peer pressure and social control, but also by providing students with information on how to behave and on what goals to achieve. (p.564.)

Schlee, Curren, Harich, and Kiesler (2007) examined business students' perceptions of themselves and their peers for a number of business-related programmes in three US Universities. The authors asked students studying for a variety of business majors (accounting, economics, finance, MIS, international business, management and marketing) about the personal characteristics that they associated with themselves and others (e.g. creative, ambitious, risk-taker, independent etc.) and the career potential that they associated with themselves and others (e.g. leadership positions, opportunities, income and benefit to society).

There was significant evidence of stereotyping by students about other students and also by students about themselves. For example accounting students were perceived both by themselves and others to be studious, talented in maths and well organised. However, they also gave themselves and received from others low ratings for creativity and risk taking. Marketing students were perceived both by themselves and others to be creative, people-orientated, team players and good communicators. They also gave themselves

and received from others low ratings for being studious and talented in maths. The article does not go into detail as to why the results are the way they are, it merely notes and summarises the results observed. However, it does underline the importance of perceptions to the opinion forming process, recognising that it is not so much *how* it is that matters but *how people think* it is that matters.

Allen, McManus and Russell (1999) found empirical evidence of the valuable role that more experienced peers could serve in mentoring new students and enhancing new students' sense of belonging and involvement, a process they refer to as socialization.

Miller and Packham (1999) and Packham and Miller (2000) report how involving students in the teaching and learning process by giving them the role of mentors can lead to benefits for both the mentors and the mentees. Jackling and MacDowell (2008) and Peat, Dalziel and Grant (2001) discuss similar schemes, identifying similar positive results. Peat *et al.* (2001) in particular discuss the value of strong peer networks in contributing to enhanced study and self-motivation as well as greater enjoyment of university life generally.

All of the studies referred to above provide good evidence that peers do influence or contribute to the student experience. Renn and Arnold (2003) add to this perspective by applying a framework to assess the influence of peer groups. The approach they take is to apply human ecology theory to the context of students and their peer groups. They draw from the work of developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner and apply it to the world of a university student.

Renn and Arnold (2003) identify a number of microsystems in which the university student operates. Peers can form one or more of these microsystems and the significance of each microsystem is determined by the regularity and extent of the interaction between the student and the microsystem. The microsystems operate in a mesosystem which defines the closest influences on the student. Beyond the mesosystem lies the exosystem, where further individual microsystems operate, but these systems have less influence on the student because they are not in as close proximity. An example of this could be the student's extended family. Finally, there is the macrosystem which is a step further removed and comprises factors like social forces and cultural expectations.

Renn and Arnold's (2003) model is useful to this study because it considers the relative strength and weaknesses of particular influences and provides a clear reasoning for why peer and friendship groups might be a more (or less) significant influence than other factors. However, it also recognises that not all students are the same and that, while some may interact significantly with the peer and friendship groups microsystem(s), others may not. It also resonates with some of the findings elsewhere in the literature. For example, Palmer *et al.* (2009) quote a student as follows:

I think that had I not entered a relationship in the first few weeks I would have dropped out. Getting into a relationship was vital. Up to then I was very frustrated and even angry. What was I doing here? I've never had a girlfriend before. This has put me into a sunny mind-set but now it seems that I have to hang onto this girl for the sake of my happiness. I'm a bit trapped in a way. (p.47.)

On first reading this quote, one is left with the impression of a rather immature and perhaps selfish individual who would benefit from some emotional development. It is notable that the student does not characterise his feelings for his girlfriend in terms of emotional closeness or love. Instead he seems to assess his relationship with her as being a turning point in his transition into student life.

However, in the context of Renn and Arnold's (2003) discussion of Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999), there does appear to be an additional explanation for his attitudes and sentiments. The individual is under-going a process of personal development as a result of his close interaction with one of his peers and an on-going and perhaps more serious relationship facilitates the individual's development still further. Currently the individual's girlfriend is perhaps the dominant microsystem in his life, to the extent that he views her as essential to his well-being at university.

Overall, as might be expected there is considerable evidence that peers can be a very powerful influence on the student experience. In line with Renn and Arnold's (2003) framework one would expect that part of the transition process involves the replacement (at least in part) of a student's pre-university social and support networks with new networks in which peers and friends would figure prominently. Therefore one would expect peers to have a stronger influence than they did at school.

One group whose influence would be expected to wane would be parents as, for most students; the proximity of the influence of their parents would diminish as the student spends more time at university. Similarly other influences would be at least one step removed from the students and therefore carry less weight. Accordingly, in the next section I have sought to consider the influence of other groups, including parents.

2.3.5 *Parents, Family, Friends, Culture and the Media*

Sewell and Shah (1968), in a large scale study of US students, confirmed that children of higher social class were more likely to aspire to high educational and occupational goals than children of lower social class. Further, that high parental educational achievement tended to be linked to high educational achievement amongst their children. While this study was based in the US and was based on data that is over 50 years old, this relationship has since been repeatedly confirmed by a succession of other studies. Consequently this relationship between parental achievement and the achievement of their children is largely uncontested in the literature.

Taking this factor as a starting point, other studies have sought to understand the reasons for this dynamic and to look at its implications. Davis-Kean (2005) examined how parental socio-economic status indirectly affected their children's academic achievement through parental beliefs and behaviours. She found that a combination of expectations, values and re-inforcing behaviours contributed a culture that was supportive of child academic achievement, developing a model supported by statistical analysis.

Elkins, Braxton and James (2000) used Tinto's (1975) model to analyse the role of various groups in contributing to the transition of new students into university life. They found that successful passage through the early stages of transition was aided to a significant degree by pre-existing support networks, especially where parents had experience of making that transition themselves.

Bank, Slavings and Biddle (1990) found that parents continued to be a strong influence on students once they were studying at university. They also found little evidence that parental influence waned to be replaced by that of peers or friendship groups. While the influence of the norms and conventions of peer and friendship group behaviours was influential, so was the influence of parents as role models for their children.

Interestingly, this seems to contradict the model of university friends acting as a surrogate family while the student is at university (Brooks, 2007; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005) suggesting that that the interplay between the roles of family and university friends may be complex. This is an issue that I will explore further in later chapters of my study.

Thomas (2002) examines the issue of parental and family support from a different perspective by examining the experiences of widening access students in a UK new university. She discusses how students who are the first in their family to come to university may not have access to the same levels of support, as their parents and family would lack the tacit knowledge and experience of student life thereby impacting on their family's capacity to provide such support.

Taub (2008) discusses the impact of parental involvement on student development once the student has started their studies at university. She argues that although much of the literature is based on the idea that students as adults are the central focus, this ignores the role of parents. However, recent cultural and technological changes mean that students are much more likely to stay in close contact with their parents after coming to university meaning that parents continue to exert a significant influence on students' lives. Taub (2008) refers to the concept of helicopter parents:

Helicopter parents are criticised by professionals in higher education for swooping in to try to solve all of their college students' problems – whether those problems are roommate conflicts, grade disputes, or conduct issues. (p.17).

Taub discusses the risks of this behaviour in terms of how it discourages students from learning how to cope and deal with such problems. The analysis is consistent with the discussion in the previous section on peers as it highlights how proximity is significant in determining the level of influence and it also underlines how culture and technology can maintain proximity even if traditional face to face contact is limited.

It also highlights the importance of familiarity and trust in navigating through difficult issues. Palmer *et al.* (2009) identified how new students were reluctant to turn to university staff for support in dealing with transition issues because students felt that staff didn't belong in the problem solving process, a finding consistent with Bank *et al.* (1990). This is both logical and illogical: logical, as new students will not yet have established a sufficiently strong relationship to have the trust and confidence in

university staff required to go to them with difficult issues; illogical, as university staff are more likely to possess the knowledge and experience required to help students with resolving such issues.

Byrne and Willis (2005), Cory, Kerr and Todd (2007) and Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) look at how students form impressions about different careers and types of employment. Significant themes include the influence of family and peers as well as the impact of popular culture and the presence of stereotyping. Byrne and Willis (2005) discuss the importance of perceptions, cultural norms and the influence of how society was seen to view things as being significant influences. Cory *et al.* (2007) discuss how US high school and college students could come to quite definite conclusions about an issue based on very limited information. They also discuss the influence of popular culture, an issue discussed at length by DeBard (2004) and Coomes and DeBard (2004). These issues are also consistent with the Schlee *et al.* (2007) study, discussed earlier.

Coomes and DeBard (2004) identify a number of generational groupings of US students, ending with the most current group, millennials, which they define as being born in the years 1982 to 2002. They discuss how this grouping has been shaped by their environment and experiences and how this differs from previous time periods. Coomes (2004) discusses the historical and cultural influences that have/are shaping this group, in particular, trends and innovations in media and technology which have a significant influence on behaviours and attitudes.

Overall, there is clear evidence that parents, family, friends, culture and the media can be a powerful influence both on students' motivation to apply to study at university and on students' experiences and perceptions during their time at university, especially where the student has limited first-hand experience of an issue. Specifically, the pervasiveness of modern electronic media has made on-going communication much easier thereby reducing the impact of the barriers generated by geographical remoteness.

2.3.6 *The Degree Programme*

This section discusses the literature concerning the influence of the formal degree programme. For the purposes of this analysis, I use "degree programme" as a catch-all term to cover major aspects of the student's formal academic learning experience.

Accordingly, it includes the syllabus, teaching, assessment, student interaction with university staff as well as the student's own learning. As with previous sections, my emphasis is on student perceptions and judgments about their programme. This is consistent with my overall aim to understand better the student perspective.

In line with Haggis's (2009) assertion that a large proportion of student learning research originates from the perspective of surface and deep learning, I found many studies that addressed this theme. However, I have chosen not to base this section around this literature as I am more concerned about how students perceive their degree programme and the role that the degree programme plays within the wider student experience.

The formal degree programme starts to have an influence and students start to form impressions from fairly early on in their studies. This process was examined by Geiger and Ogilby (2000) who considered how students' perceptions of a first introductory module in accounting at two US universities impacted on students' decision on whether or not to major in accounting. The study involved surveying students at the start and the end of a semester. Overall the results showed that students' views were more negative at the end of the module than at the start, suggesting that first impressions of the student experience were not particularly good.

Students rated the course as more boring, less rewarding and rated themselves as less highly motivated at the end of the module compared with the start. Thus the paper illustrates how students can lose interest in a subject very quickly. The study also underlines the impact academics can have as there were some significant variations in the ratings from good to bad depending on who taught the classes.

Wingate (2007) also discusses undergraduate students' early experiences and their transition to university study. She argues that there needs to be much more of a coordinated approach to helping students understand what is expected from them at university. She is critical of what she sees as the current piecemeal approach to academic skills development because it fails to get the message across adequately.

Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) used a questionnaire to explore first year undergraduate students' expectations of and preferences in teaching, learning and

assessment. They discuss the possible merits of an “outside in” approach where the teaching and learning strategies adopted explicitly respond to the needs and preferences of students rather than an “inside out” approach where those on the inside assume that they know best. One would expect that such an approach would be more likely to engage students as they would find it more accessible.

The authors found that the most popular form of teaching and learning method was an interactive lecture. However, the form that students expected to receive the most was a formal lecture. Of course much hangs on the definition of formal and interactive but there was a clear signal that students prefer teaching and learning methods that facilitate their engagement with the subject material.

The paper also raises an interesting discussion point in relation to student presentations. In many ways requiring a student to complete a presentation would seem to be a really effective way of facilitating student engagement with the material. However, the first year students expressed a strong preference for examinations rather than presentations as a preferred method of assessment. Given that both assessment methods require student effort, it would too simplistic to take this preference as a sign of a lack of effort or commitment to studying. Instead, one can look at the issues of confidence and lack of familiarity as possible explanations.

The Geiger and Ogilby (2000) paper is also useful because it puts its finding into context by making use of Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia’s (1964) framework of the affective domain of education which considers the impact of feelings and emotions on how a student responds to their education. The Krathwohl *et al.* (1964) framework identifies a five stage hierarchy governing student’s attitudes and perceptions of learning. The five stages are receiving or attending, responding, valuing, organizing (of the values in stage three) and integrating them into an overall philosophy. The hierarchy is consistent with the principles of student involvement theory (Astin 1999), which was discussed earlier in the chapter. The higher up the hierarchy the student is, the more engaged in their studies they are likely to be and the more likely they are to rate their student experience as satisfying. Clearly the students in Geiger and Ogilby’s (2000) study did not progress far up the hierarchy and were dis-satisfied with their experience as a result.

A recurring theme in the student-centred studies is the concept of student engagement. Hand and Bryson (2008) discuss student engagement and its impact on student learning. They give meaning to the term by considering the extent to which the student identifies with the values of learning and ceases to think solely in terms of marks achieved and their progress towards a degree classification.

Their publication has a number of contributors and seeks to explore the issue in a number of different contexts. Data is drawn mainly from discussions with students and student focus groups. Having discussed the meaning of student engagement, subsequent chapters go on to look at the concept in the context of transition, student support and assessment. The various authors acknowledge that student engagement is a complex concept and that while many students value the feeling of engagement, they do not always behave in a manner that is consistent with them achieving this state i.e. through a consistent and conscientious approach to their studies.

This complements an earlier paper (Bryson and Hand, 2007) in which the authors argue that engagement is a complex but important concept and that the extent to which a student feels engaged (or otherwise) has a significant impact on the quality and depth of their learning experience, a finding which is consistent with Trigwell, Ellis and Han (2012). They also highlight the importance of teaching staff in setting the tone for this process of engagement, stating:

Sometimes our best and well-meant intentions are destroyed by not giving sufficient attention to the issues that matter to students, e.g. poor relationships, or too much prioritizing on aspects such as learning outcomes, which is key to quality audit but trivial to the students. (p.360.)

Indeed, so significant is this perspective of engagement that Mann (2001) argues that we should no longer seek to frame the student experience in the traditional terms of surface or deep learning but instead we should think in terms of an engaged or alienated experience of learning. Mann also urges academics to think about how they might contribute to this process of engagement or alienation, a point re-inforced by Bryson and Hand (2007) who state:

At the levels of class or task, the disposition of the teacher appears to make an enormous difference to the disposition of the student. (p.359.)

The principle that academics need to concentrate first and foremost on the desired outcome in terms of student experience and student engagement rather than delivering or following a process or procedure is echoed elsewhere in the literature. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identify seven principles for good practice in higher education. They suggest that time and effort needs to be directed towards generating this desired set of outcomes and that process should be used to deliver the required outcome not to be an end in itself. Specifically, the seven principles identified are:

- 1) Encourages student-faculty contact;
- 2) Encourages co-operation among students;
- 3) Encourages active learning;
- 4) Gives prompt feedback;
- 5) Emphasizes time on task;
- 6) Communicates high expectations;
- 7) Respects diverse talents and ways of learning. (pp. 1-2.)

A similar perspective is taken by Vermeulen and Schmidt (2008) who discuss the components of a high quality learning environment. They identify three key components of the learning environment. Firstly are positive interactions with staff (including informal contact), the provision of feedback to students and enthusiastic and engaging delivery of teaching. Secondly are positive interactions with peers. Finally, there is the curriculum. The importance of positive interaction between staff and students (including informal contact) is also emphasized by Pascarella and Terenzini (1980).

There is a clear feeling in the literature that much of the quality assurance agenda in the UK since the 1990s is actually missing the point as it is diverting staff away from students and on to the bureaucracy of paperwork. Krause and Coates (2008) who discuss student engagement in the first year of university state that:

Student engagement develops from the dynamic interplay between student and institutional activities and conditions. (p.495.)

They go on to discuss engagement in transition, academic, peer, student-staff, intellectual, on-line and beyond class terms, emphasizing that it is a multi-faceted subject and linking it to the sense and feelings of belonging discussed in the previous section on transition. They also emphasize the point that it is the outcomes not the processes that are key. The criticism is that some quality assurance processes have become an end in their own right rather than a mechanism to help with delivering the

desired outcome of a high quality student learning experience. Put simply it is difficult to see how a state of student engagement could arise from the dynamic interplay which would take place as a result of a student reading a module outline form and listing a set of learning outcomes.

There are two clear themes which emerge from these papers. Firstly, student engagement is crucial. It is crucial not just in terms of high levels of academic achievement among students but also to a sense of satisfaction and well-being amongst students, in a similar way to which developing a sense of belonging is crucial to the process of transition. Secondly, the position and power which academics hold over students makes them crucial in achieving this sense of engagement and that staff can just as readily alienate students as they can engage them.

There is also a common theme in these papers that innovative teaching and learning methods can be used to improve the teaching and learning process by encouraging students to engage with their studies. However, there is also recognition that the innovative can also be unfamiliar and possibly unwelcome for some students and therefore alienate rather than engage.

Tregear, Kuznesof and Brennan (2007) discuss how incorporating a critical approach to the study of marketing has the potential to bring benefits to students in terms of improved appraisal skills, self-awareness and the ability to deal with uncertainties and ambiguities. All of these would seem to contribute to the skill of problem solving, a skill that Hesketh (2000) identified as being significant to employers.

Interestingly though, the module discussed by the Tregear *et al.* (2007) is taken by final year students who have had experience of university life and of their degree programme. However, the authors identify how students perceive critically orientated modules as more labour intensive and intellectually challenging and that students needed support in this task as:

Self-belief appears to be an important precursor to tackling the critical task (p.422.)

The authors discuss how student perceptions change over the course of their programme of study and that there is a willingness to accept change and development even though

this makes students' lives more difficult. It is an interesting idea as to the extent to which student perceptions of a good experience are associated with aspects of the programme that take them outside their comfort zone or surprise them.

On the one hand, an easy and predictable programme of study would seem to be associated with achieving a good degree. On the other hand, students might recognise that it is more difficult to motivate themselves where there is little or no challenge. Tregear *at al.* (2007) underline the importance of confidence and confidence-building activities in helping to feel sufficiently well prepared to take on the challenge of unfamiliar and challenging activities.

van Eps, Cooke, Creedy, and Walker (2006) provide a further perspective on this. They looked at how a mentorship programme could facilitate later stage nursing students to engage further with the theory and practice of nursing. They report on how mentors helped give students the confidence to engage with the professional practice of nursing.

Friedlan (1995) discusses how the use of a non-traditional approach to the delivery of an introductory financial accounting module was a more positive and engaging experience which shaped their opinions about accounting as a subject and accountancy as a career.

Weil, Oyelere, Yeoh, and Firer (2001) report on how case studies can fulfil a similar beneficial role in encouraging students to engage with their learning by exposing students to the complexity of managing situations in practice and by encouraging them to link theory to practice.

Overall, there is a sense that while the formal degree programme is the primary reason why a student attends university, it is not the only reason. Indeed in some cases it may only be a modest influence on the student's experience. In order for the degree to have a significant and positive influence, the student needs to feel a sense of engagement with their studies.

2.3.7 *Extra-Curricula Activity*

Having considered the formal degree programme, this section will focus on the extra-curricula. As with the degree programme, I will use the term extra-curricula as a catch-

all term to cover those things which are outside the formal degree programme but are not covered by one of the other groupings. Accordingly, it will include sports, societies, travel, placements and part-time work along with any other significant life events. In essence, it is those experiences and interactions which are not part of the formal curriculum but have arisen directly or indirectly as a result of being at university.

Kuh (1995) reports on a study involving 149 students from twelve US institutions. The study involved interviewing the students to identify out of class experiences and their effect on student learning and personal development. Kuh discusses the significant role that extra-curricula involvement has in student development and how extra-curricula activity can have a formative effect on students' development, referring to it as the "other curriculum". He states:

The curriculum is, without dispute, the organising framework for academic institutions. At the same time, students benefit in many ways from out-of-class experiences, ranging from gains in critical thinking to relational and organizational skills, attributes that are highly correlated with satisfaction and success after college. (p.150.)

He also identifies how this process can be experienced by a range of students across a range of institutions, with evidence of gains accruing irrespective of race, sex or background.

Kuh's (1995) conclusions are supported by Atkins (1999), who discusses the value of students' extra-curricula participation as a mechanism for learning. Her article discusses the difficulties of incorporating employability skills into the curriculum and whether some skills are developed better through extra-curricula participation than through the formal curriculum. Atkins (1999) argues that:

It is likely that many of the gains in confidence and maturity reported by students as a consequence of being at university can be attributed to their lives outside the formal curriculum as much as their learning experiences within it. (p.276.)

Both Kuh and Atkins also identify how the extra-curricula can support the taught curriculum by providing an opportunity to see in practice some of the issues discussed in class. This is particularly the case for business students.

Jones and Hill (2003) discuss the value to university students of participation in community service activities, but also the difficulties of engaging students in such activities. This echoes Kuh (1995), as many of the benefits of extra-curricula involvement only arise as a result of sustained commitment to the activity, with patchy or low-level commitment being unlikely to result in significant gains.

Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh and Knight (2001) discuss how work experience can contribute to the student experience. Work experience is an interesting area. It can form part of a formal degree programme through an assessed integrated placement. Alternatively it may be unrelated to a student's degree and be something a student does entirely of their own volition. It might also sit somewhere in between as might be the case of a placement year, organised by the student and related only indirectly to the programme of study. Work experience is also significant because it involves the discipline of a formal contract where the student has to complete certain activities if they wish to remain in paid employment.

Blackwell *et al.* (2001) consider four different studies and look for common themes or findings. While they are reluctant to generalise they do identify that there is a link between work experience and higher graduate employment rates and that there is a link between work experience and a more positive view of the learning experience of the programme in general. A similar study by Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) suggested that there were significant early career advantages for undergraduates with internship experience. Again this emphasises the contribution that extra-curricula involvement can make to personal development and to the quality of the student experience.

Overall, there is a clear consensus that extra-curricula involvement can have a significant influence on the student experience and that for many students there is a wide variety of routes through which this experience can be gained. Paid employment may not be thought of as extra-curricula in a traditional sense, but there is evidence that it is an effective route for students to develop wider skills.

2.3.8 *Preparing for Life after Graduation*

While the main focus of this piece of work is on the student experience while at university, there is no doubt that what happens after university, particularly in terms of

employment, is an influence on students' thinking. While the level of awareness of this factor will vary from student to student, the introduction of tuition fees in England and Wales has brought the question of the worth of a university degree into sharper focus. Not only is this area of direct interest to students but it is also of interest to policy makers.

Much of the popularity of business programmes both at undergraduate and postgraduate level derives from their perceived relevance to employment post-graduation. Accordingly many students have an expectation that their undergraduate degree programme will make them more attractive to employers and will also prepare them for employment.

However, this expectation is not merely confined to students themselves. The QAA Benchmark Statement for General Business and Management (2007) states that:

Business and management degrees are strongly related to practice and therefore there should be a strong link between the development of skills and employability of graduates. (p.3.)

Graduates should be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills together with techniques specific to business and management. Graduates should also be able to demonstrate relevant personal and interpersonal skills. (p.3.)

Government also supports this view as do both the Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) and the Leitch Report. Leitch (2006) argues for the need for all undergraduate degree programmes (not just business related ones) to provide for the development of employment related skills.

However, despite a significant consensus that this area is important and that higher education and employability are and should be linked, there is no clear consensus as to how this link might work in practice. In particular, there are a number of studies which suggest that while students cite employability as a key reason for coming to university, they have only a moderate level of awareness as to how and why their experiences in higher education can be linked to future success in the labour market (Atkins, 1999; Glover, Law and Youngman, 2002; Lucas, Cox, Croudace and Milford, 2004). Students are likely to have only limited direct experience of the labour market and are likely to develop their opinions indirectly; based on the views of others e.g. parents,

teachers, the media etc. (Byrne and Willis, 2005). Students' views that employability is important are likely to lead to a preference for their programmes of study to be professionally or vocationally "relevant".

El Ansari and Oskrochi (2006) studied students on programmes designed to prepare them to work in the health service. The study found that students had a strong preference for modules to be of direct use in the students' careers and that this was seen as a primary factor in determining the quality of the student experience.

Bierstaker, Howe and Seol (2004) discuss the attitudes towards and perceptions of final year students towards a professional body-led requirement for a minimum level of university education for those wishing to complete the professional qualification. While the majority of the students in the study did not support the requirement, they were willing to complete the required education in order to realise their career aim of qualifying as an accountant.

Carr, Chua and Perera (2006) sought the opinions of recent graduates from an accounting degree programme who were employed as practising accountants. The aim of the study was to ask the graduates to reflect on their experiences post-graduation and consider the relevance of their student experience to their employment post-graduation. They found that such graduates stressed the importance of practical accountancy skills relevant to the workplace as a sign of quality.

However, it should be noted that the survey was conducted with early career accountants and its findings are contradicted to some extent by Morgan (1997). Morgan surveyed a more broadly based and more experienced sample of qualified accountants, finding that the development of more broadly based and higher level written and verbal communication skills were highly valued by employers amongst accounting graduates.

These differences are significant and raise some interesting issues. The skills required to be successful in a career are likely to change over time both because the labour market has become more complex and dynamic and also because the skills required to progress up the hierarchies of most organisations change with progression to more senior and complex roles. As a result the skills required to enter the labour market and

the skills required at more senior levels might be quite different, with the result that concentrated effort devoted to the former might be at the expense of the latter.

Tomlinson (2007) interviewed 53 students at a pre-1992 UK university Business School. Through the interviews he identified a high level of awareness amongst students about the employment process:

The evidence further suggests that instrumental rationality is extending beyond the attainment of formal educational credentials. Students were increasingly aware of the need to develop and package their credentials in a way which highlighted their added-value attributes and “selling points”. (p.291).

He also identified approximately half of the sample as careerists where their career was seen as a life project:

For the careerists, work and careers formed a central part of their future aspirations. These students were beginning to define themselves largely around their aspired careers. (p.293).

However Tomlinson (2007) also identified another group of approximately similar size who held quite different values:

For these students, work is viewed largely as a means to an end and tangential to their lives as a whole. (p.297).

In conclusion, there is considerable evidence that preparing for life after graduation is a significant influence on the student experience and one which grows in importance as the student moves towards graduation.

2.3.9 Conclusions

This final section will draw together some key conclusions arising from the preceding discussion and analysis. In this chapter I have identified seven main categories of influence. These are summarized in figure 2.1 below.

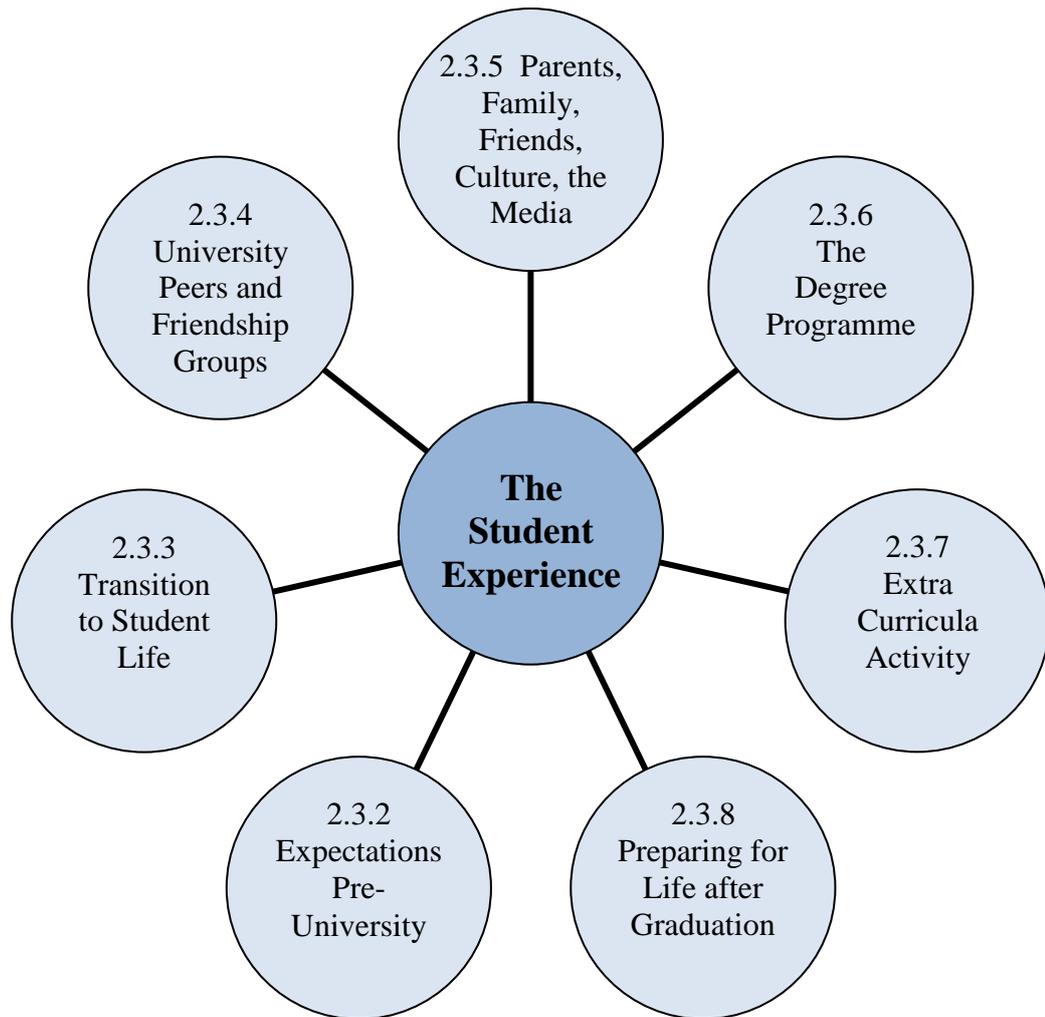


Figure 2.1 – Factors Shaping the Student Experience.

At this stage I have not sought to rank these categories in order of importance. I propose to address this in the next section of this chapter. However, at this stage it is interesting to note that while the degree might be the primary reason why students come to university with the degree qualification being the main tangible outcome arising as a result of the time at university, there is a weight of evidence that for students it is but one of a number of influences and factors shaping their overall student experience. The data collection and analysis phase will give the opportunity to explore the different categories of influence in greater depth and understand the student perspective.

A second significant point is that UK undergraduates are a diverse group reflecting a range of backgrounds. It is inevitable the student experience will be influenced by the background of the students. However, this leads into a third significant point in that once at university, background becomes less of an influence as the student becomes

exposed to new people and influences. The transition process is significant as it involves a range of practical and emotional steps towards a sense of comfort and belonging in student life. The experiences and influences encountered by a student both during and after this transition phase are key to the extent to which the student feels engaged with student life and the extent of their intellectual and personal development over the course of their time at university.

Finally, while this study hopes to improve my understanding of what shapes the student experience for Newcastle University Business School undergraduates and the implications for the provision of education to this group, it is apparent that at best I can only hope to identify and understand the factors that shape the experience for most students for most of the time. The student experience is an individual experience which depends on the precise mix of background, influences, experiences and capabilities of that individual student.

2.4 The Development of a Conceptual Framework

2.4.1 Introduction

In section 2.3, I identified key factors emerging from the literature that shape the student experience. The literature that I examined adopted a range of perspectives and approaches including both large scale surveys and qualitative approaches. While there was a lot of material to draw from covering a wide range of topics, I was able to group these into seven categories as summarised in figure 2.1 above. My main conclusion at the end of section 2.3 was that there is a substantial body of established research that suggests these seven groupings help to define the social, psychological, cultural, behavioural, emotional and context-specific factors that define the student experience and form a reasonable starting point from which to develop a conceptual framework.

In this section, I will explore these issues further with the aim of developing a working hypothesis which can be tested during the pilot and main data collection phases. This links back to a central aim of my study which is to develop an overall conception of the student experience, as discussed in section 2.3.1 above. Accordingly in order to develop a rounded working hypothesis for the student experience I need to develop my thinking about the individual factors, the forces that determine the size and significance of these factors and how they work together to create the overall student experience. In

order to do this I will refer back to the relevant literature to help guide my discussion further.

Thus the next part of this chapter will focus on discussion of the following three questions. Firstly, how can I represent differences in the significance of an individual factor to the overall student experience? Secondly, why are the forces that determine significance important? Finally, how can the individual factors be combined in order to develop a working hypothesis for the conceptual framework for the student experience, that I can go on to develop and test in the pilot and main data collection stages?

2.4.2 Allowing for differences in the significance of factors

While figure 2.1 does provide a useful summary, it does (implicitly) suggest that the seven groupings carry equal weight in defining the student experience. It also suggests that the groupings operate independently from each other. However this does not seem plausible. One would expect that different factors would be more or less important to different students at different stages of their time as an undergraduate. For example, one would expect that transition would be an important factor for all undergraduates in their first few weeks at university. However, once this period is past, one would expect transition to fade into the background as the student becomes more comfortable with student life.

In section 2.3.4, I discussed how Renn and Arnold (2003) referred to the work of Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999) to provide a framework for their analysis.

Bronfenbrenner's work attempts to provide a theoretical and operational model that incorporates the influence of the individual's environment in shaping their development. While his work has relevance for education, the model is not confined to education and has potentially a very wide relevance. Thus the pertinence of Bronfenbrenner's work to my study is that he provides a broader framework of personal development through which the student experience can be interpreted. Bronfenbrenner (1999) summarises the defining properties of his ecological model in two propositions. Proposition 1 states:

Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. (p.5.)

Bronfenbrenner refers to these reciprocal interactions as proximal processes. It is important to emphasise the key elements of the proposition that characterise the proximal processes. The activity must take place on a regular basis over a period of time. Next it must involve activity that becomes increasingly complex over time. Finally, it requires a process of reciprocal interaction rather than transmission of information to a passive recipient i.e. the individual needs to engage with the activity through a dynamic that involves both initiation and feedback.

In the same paper, Bronfenbrenner (1999) then moves to define Proposition 2, stating that:

The form, power, content and direction of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environment – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place, the nature of the development outcomes under consideration and the social continuities and changes occurring over time during the historical period through which the person has lived. (p.5.)

This perspective is directly relevant to my study as it begins to describe a process whereby factors can influence the student and contribute to their personal development. Bronfenbrenner's propositions are further explored in a number of papers. In Bronfenbrenner (1994), he summarises how Proposition 2 is operationalized, providing a framework through which the concepts can be explored. In essence, this involves a series of nested structures like a set of Russian dolls starting with the smallest inside and working outwards to the largest.

At the first level is the microsystem, which, as has previously been discussed, is conceived as a pattern of activities, roles and relationships experienced in the immediate environment e.g. family, school, work. The concept of the microsystem corresponds very well with the seven groupings identified in figure 2.1. For example, university peer and friendship groups involve repeated interaction between the individual student and their peers and friends resulting in activities and the development of roles and relationships. The proximal processes (referred to above) work within the microsystem influencing the development of the individual.

At the next level is the mesosystem. The mesosystem is where two or more microsystems interact. Interactions within the mesosystem have the capacity to be highly influential on the individual as they are effectively at the centre of the individual's life. In the context of my study this would be where microsystems such as the transition process, university peer and friendship groups, the degree programme and extra-curricula involvement operate, interact and overlap.

Beyond the mesosystem lies the exosystem. This is where microsystems which relate to the individual interact with microsystems that do not directly involve the individual but which affect them indirectly. For example, the employment status of the student's parents does not involve the student directly (especially while they are away at university) but it is likely to affect them indirectly as a result of the ability of the parents to provide financial support should either or both parents become unemployed. Aspects of this process are illustrated in the diagram below.

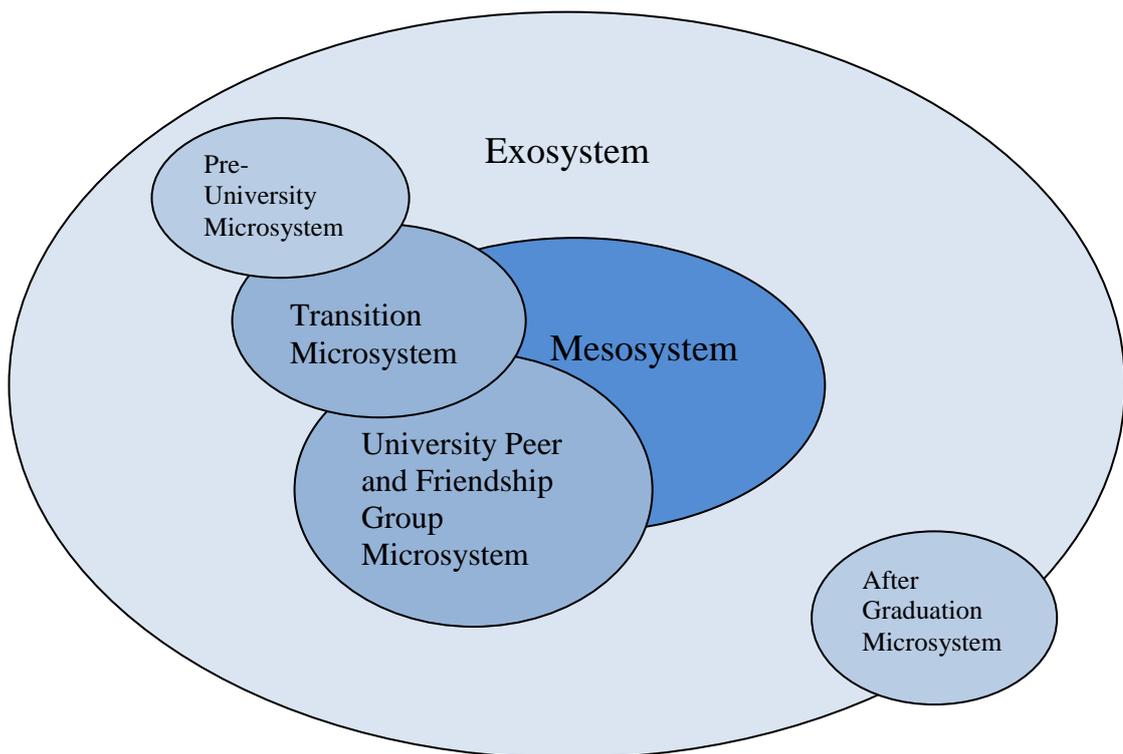


Figure 2.2 – Allowing for differences in the size and significance of factors – a part representation of the early weeks of the undergraduate student experience.

Figure 2.2 above provides an illustrative part representation of aspects of the student experience during the first few weeks of the first year. During the first few weeks of the first year, transition to student life would be a significant influence on the student experience (represented by one of the large ovals in the centre of the diagram i.e. the mesosystem above). Meanwhile the student's pre-university expectations of student life would still be important but would be receding as expectations were replaced by the reality of experience (represented by a smaller oval moving away from the centre and into the exosystem).

Both the literature and my own experiences as an academic confirm that making friends is important for new students. As a consequence one would expect that the university peer and friendship group microsystem would also be important and influential for new students (represented by the other large oval in the centre of the diagram above). In contrast, preparing for life after graduation sits at the periphery (the exosystem) as the student attempts to address the immediate priority of settling in and becoming a student. However, if I fast forward to the final few weeks of the undergraduate experience, one would expect to see the after graduation microsystem assuming much greater size and significance, perhaps pushing friendship groups away from the centre and towards the periphery.

My proposition is that the seven groupings summarised in Figure 2.1 above can be conceived of as individual psycho-social systems operating through a pattern of activities, roles and relationships experienced in the immediate environment, an entity defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994) as a microsystem. In this context I think it is important to recognise that the groupings should be thought of as more than principles or concepts as they are likely to be more relevant and immediate than that to the individual. Accordingly I propose to use the term "microsystem" to describe them from now on rather than the more vague and indistinct term "grouping".

Before I consider the second question of how the individual microsystems interact and inter-relate with each other, I will consider in more depth the issue of what leads to an increase or decrease in the significance of the factor i.e. moving the factor towards the centre (mesosystem) or pushing it out to the periphery.

Consistent with Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999) and the overall aims of this study I take the view that significance can be thought of in terms of the degree of influence an activity has on an individual and its capacity to contribute to the personal development of that individual. In other words significance is the potential of that microsystem to shape the individual. It should be noted that there are many situations where a microsystem might exert considerable influence over an individual. For example one might expect a prisoner to be shaped by their experiences in prison. In this case the process would involve significant elements of compulsion. The prisoner would have to learn certain behaviours to cope with prison life. Possible sanctions for not doing this might include punishment from the prison authorities or fellow prisoners. Therefore perhaps the main forces pushing the prisoner towards engagement or alienation would be about force and the requirement to comply rather than compliance being optional.

However, the situation of an undergraduate student is different. Perhaps like a prisoner entering prison for the first time they would be undergoing a period of great change. Unlike the prisoner the action of going to university would introduce a whole range of new freedoms, especially if coming to university also involved living away from home for the first time. Thus, while some pressures to comply exist because of the freedoms that undergraduate students experience as well as the control they have over their time, the forces pushing the student towards feelings of engagement or alienation are more subtle and involve a much higher proportion of ‘carrots’ rather than ‘sticks’. In short, the undergraduate student cannot be compelled to learn and develop as an individual, he/she needs to be persuaded that it is beneficial and in their best interests.

Hence in understanding the forces that take a student towards a sense of engagement or alienation, it is vital to recognise the context of the undergraduate student. While there is still the potential to require the student to do something, that potential to develop engagement through compulsion is much less than in many other situations.

This dynamic is recognised by Astin (1999), who discusses a student development theory based on student involvement. Astin’s theory is directly relevant here as it helps to explain a force that contributes to an increase both in the size and the significance of a component factor in the student experience.

He describes student involvement as:

The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. (p.518.)

He contrasts this with a number of other theories. There is subject matter theory which suggests that the key element of student learning is about course content and delivery of the correct knowledge. Resource theory which contends that if sufficient resources, both physical and human are brought together then student learning will occur. The individualised theory which argues that no single approach is adequate for all students and therefore that students should be afforded maximum choice both in terms of course content and learning style.

In Astin's opinion these approaches are all flawed as they fail to recognise that the most important variable in the student experience is the time and effort that the student puts into their studies. If students are engaged and motivated then academic learning will occur whereas if the student is dis-engaged and alienated then academic learning will be superficial and ephemeral. This perspective is consistent with the studies on student engagement discussed earlier in the chapter (Bryson and Hand, 2007; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Hand and Bryson, 2008; Krause and Coates, 2008).

The implication for my study is that engagement is key and that it is the sense of engagement that leads students to embrace willingly the various experiences of student life. Unless this sense of engagement exists, then the student is unlikely to have a good experience as the student will not interact with, shape and be shaped by their experiences. As part of my study I wish to understand the forces that move the factors in and out of the student's consciousness. The principles underpinning Astin's (1999) theory begin to shed light on these forces.

Astin characterises engagement broadly as a positive force which contributes powerfully to the learning process. The corollary to Astin's work is provided by Tinto (1975) in his work on disengagement and alienation. Tinto's work identifies that just as engagement can be a powerful force that brings learning towards the centre of the student experience so feelings of alienation can push learning, and indeed all aspects of student life, outwards towards the periphery.

Mann (2001) aims to enhance understanding of alienation as a concept by identifying seven theoretical perspectives from which to view the concept. The analysis underlines the point that just as engagement can act as a magnetic force to pull learning towards the centre of the mesosystem, so alienation can act as a repelling force pushing it away to the periphery.

Dean and Jolly (2012) explore alienation further by discussing how learning experiences can be threatening as well as energising, noting that the teacher has to think about context when providing a challenge. Students are likely to respond well to challenge if it accords with the development path that they have identified for their future. Learning and/or development activities that do not correspond closely enough with this perception of future-self carry a threat and where, in the mind of the student, the threat is perceived to be too great, then the student will respond negatively and the student will feel alienation rather than engagement. Thus an experience needs to be relevant and credible to trigger engagement otherwise the risk is one of alienation.

Thus, for the purposes of my study, engagement and alienation can be thought of as forces either attracting a microsystem towards the centre of the mesosystem or repelling it outwards to the periphery as illustrated in Figure 2.3 below.

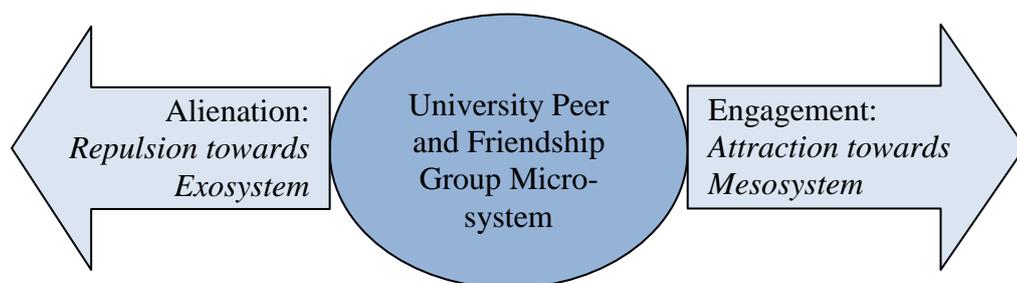


Figure 2.3 – Engagement and alienation as forces determining the extent of the influence of a microsystem.

Microsystems that spend time in the centre of the mesosystem are more likely to be influential and to contribute to personal development because as proximal processes they exhibit the key characteristics required for development i.e. regularity, increasing complexity and reciprocal interaction. However, I think it would be unduly restrictive and, indeed, unrealistic to think of these forces as working on a straight line going

forwards and backwards, as the potential exists for sideways movement especially as this would allow microsystems to intersect. Thus the effect of simultaneous forces engaging and alienating the student might be a stalemate with the microsystem remaining stationary or drifting sideways.

A similar and complementary perspective to Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999) is provided by Lave (1991) who discusses the concept of situating learning in communities of practice. The discussion summarises some of the points developed in a more extensive piece, Lave and Wenger (1991). Lave (1991) states that learning is:

Neither wholly subjective nor fully encompassed in social interaction, and it is not constituted separately from the social world (with its own structures and meanings) of which it is part. This recommends a decentred view of the locus and meaning of learning, in which learning is recognised as a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in on-going social practice; (p.64.)

He defines learning as:

Legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. (p.81.)

Similar perspectives are provided by Kolb and Kolb (2005) who use the concepts of experiential learning and learning space to develop a framework for understanding student learning in higher education. Their theory of experiential learning is built on six propositions:

- 1) Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. To improve learning in higher education the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning.
- 2) All learning is relearning.
- 3) Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaption to the world.
- 4) Learning is a holistic process of adaption to the world.
- 5) Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
- 6) Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

(p.194.)

There is a strong common theme which links the work of these researchers. Namely that learning takes place in a broader context (they use the term community) and that where an individual engages in sustained inter-action with that community over a period of time then that individual will assimilate the customs and values of the community

resulting in increasingly deep learning. It is the sustained inter-action that is key and for that to happen the individual needs to feel engaged with the community rather than alienated from it.

The implication for my study is that understanding the student experience requires me to think about the whole learning community (as a system or process) rather than thinking solely in terms of the component parts. If one thinks of the student experience as situated social practice, understanding how the participants behave and make sense of the component elements and how these component elements inter-relate and interact must be central to understanding the student experience.

2.4.3 *Why are the forces that determine significance important?*

In the previous section, I discussed how the influence of a microsystem was linked with its centrality and how engagement was the attracting force that could pull a microsystem towards the centre of the student's personal development. Given the relatively less structured nature of student life and the freedoms afforded to undergraduates in terms of how they spend their time, it was identified that the softer factors of engagement and alienation were the major drivers in determining the centrality of a factor because students could choose to ignore factors without incurring the same sort of consequences as, for example, those faced by individuals in paid employment.

However, while the student experience may be more permissive than the employment experience, there are some other factors which make the forces of engagement and alienation especially significant and powerful for undergraduate students. These are related to the life stage of students covered by this study and to their wider development as individuals and can be explored further with reference to the literature in this area.

Erikson (1988) discusses the various life stages in human development. He identifies eight life stages, two of which are particularly relevant to my study. Firstly, there is "Fidelity", the fifth of eight stages within Erikson's overall framework, lasting through the teenage years and ending at around the age of 20. Thus for the majority of Business School undergraduates the later stages of the fidelity stage correspond with the first year or two years of the degree programme. Secondly, there is "Intimacy", the sixth of the eight stages, which commences at around 20 and extends into the mid-twenties,

corresponding with the latter part of the typical Business School undergraduate student experience.

In Erikson's (1998) view, fidelity:

When fully matured is the strength of disciplined devotion. It is gained in the involvement of youth in such experiences as reveal the essence of the era they are to join as the beneficiaries of its tradition. (p.20.)

He states further:

Adolescent development comprises a new set of identification processes, both with significant persons and with ideological forces, which give importance to individual life by relating it to a living community and to on-going history, and by counterpointing the newly won individual identity with some communal solidarity. (p.20.)

It seems to me to be wholly appropriate to attempt to place the concept of the student experience within the wider context of the broader personal development that this group of students will be going through. Erikson's relevance to my study lies in his exploration of the perspectives and motivations of that age group and life stage. He identifies the need of this age group to find meaning and identity in their lives and emphasises how powerful this drive is.

Thus not only is engagement a powerful force, but there is greater potential for it because of the changes associated with coming to university and because of the lifestage at which most Newcastle University Business School undergraduates start their studies. This perspective is consistent with the findings of Christie *et al.* (2008) and Palmer *et al.* (2009) in relation to the emotional aspects of being a student.

Erikson (1998) also discusses the need for the fidelity age group to assert independence and to seek meaning and their own identity, issues which I intend to explore during the collection and analysis of data for this study. He expresses this as follows:

The most widespread expression of the discontented search of youth is the craving for locomotion, whether expressed in a general "being on the go", "tearing after something" or "running around" ... the need for feeling "moved" and for feeling essential in moving something along toward an open future. (p.10.)

However this desire for independence, meaning and identity does not take place without reference to existing structures and elites, and on occasion this manifests itself in:

A plea for being recognised as individuals who can be more than they seem to be and whose potentials are needed by the order that is or will be. (p.13.)

Some of the themes in Erikson's analysis are echoed by Jary and Lebeau (2009). Jary and Lebeau use three variables to create a typology for student experience and subject engagement. While their study focuses predominantly on sociology students at UK universities and has a slightly different focus than my study, it does have considerable relevance because it examines some of the inter-relationships between variables.

The three variables are as follows. Firstly, the nature of the student project i.e. what is the motivation for choosing a sociology degree; is it related to longer term career or professional aims, to intellectual or educational aims such as earning the qualification, or is there no particular aim in mind. Secondly, there is the degree of integration that the student has (both academic and non-academic) in student life. Thirdly, the degree of engagement with their academic degree programme, including involvement and active participation in subject related learning.

Jary and Lebeau's (2009) paper endorses some of the preceding discussion concerning how feelings of engagement and alienation either drive the degree programme towards the centre of the student experience or allow it to drift towards the periphery. In particular, the concept of the student project is seen as key to understanding the broader motivations of students as well as providing a framework within which to appraise attitudes and behaviours.

2.4.4 How can the individual factors be combined in order to develop a conceptual framework for the student experience?

In this section I will draw together the preceding discussion and analysis in order to outline the working hypothesis for my conceptual framework for the student experience.

It is interesting to consider the themes that link together the literature discussed in section 2.4. Bronfenbrenners's emphasis on extended participation in an activity with increasing complexity (1994, 1999) echoes the concept of legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice developed by Lave (1991) and Lave and

Wenger (1991). The importance of reciprocal interaction or, by another name, engagement corresponds very closely with the views expressed by Kolb and Kolb (2005) and Astin (1999).

Furthermore the desire for independence, meaning and identity inherent in Erikson's (1998) "Fidelity" stage is indicative of a strong motivation for learning which, as Jary and Lebeau (2009) discuss, can be founded in a personal project based around career identity and success as well as achievement of academic success through earning a degree. All emphasise that learning is a two way personal development process underlining the potential for alienation to disrupt learning and personal development (Dean and Jolly, 2012; Mann, 2001).

In line with this literature, I propose a model of the student experience as a psycho-social construct in which individual microsystems (corresponding to groupings of factors which affect each student) influence the student and the extent of his/her personal development. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1994, 1999) ecological model as a backdrop, I propose that microsystems spending time at the centre of the mesosystem will have the greatest influence, with the engagement and alienation being the forces pulling or pushing individual microsystems towards or away from the centre.

Thus at the start of university life there is a shift whereby microsystems that were previously inside the mesosystem move towards the periphery e.g. friendship groups established at school. Moving to university leads to the creation of new microsystems e.g. peer or friendship groups which rapidly replace existing structures. The level of engagement with the microsystem determines its relative significance. Thus for a student who has strong ties with parents and siblings prior to university but who subsequently develops a strong social network soon after arriving at university, there is the potential for the peer/social group microsystem to replace the family group microsystem within the mesosystem, with the family group microsystem pushed to the periphery (for at least the period of time when the student is living away from home and attending university).

The result is the potential for the peer and friendship group to become a dominant influence on the student experience. This is because the conditions identified in Bronfenbrenner's (1999) proposition 1 are present; specifically, the opportunity for

regular interaction between the student and the peer/friendship group over a period of time and, as the relationships cement, progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between the individual and the peer/friendship group can take place.

2.4.5 Conclusions

Thus my working hypothesis is that the student experience can be conceived as a collection of microsystems which are overlaid on a psycho-social topography concerned with the personal development of the individual undergraduate student. The most significant microsystems for the majority of students correspond with the seven groupings identified in section 2.3 and summarised in Figure 2.1 above.

As illustrated in Figure 2.2, the microsystems can operate independently of each other but they can interact, overlap or exert influence over each other depending on the circumstances, reflecting the fact that they represent components of, rather than the whole of, student life.

Where a microsystem assumes a threshold of significance (i.e. the individual engages to a high level), that microsystem will shape the individual. For a student the forces that increase or decrease the level of significance may be harder forces of requirement or compulsion or, more likely, softer forces of persuasion or challenge. In understanding these forces, the concepts of engagement and alienation are key largely because of the greater freedoms that the students have as they (mostly) move away from home and enter university, as illustrated in Figure 2.3.

Taking this perspective has important consequences for the remainder of the study. Firstly, it underlines the point that the student experience is personal and individual for each student. Therefore I need to be wary about making assertions that are too definitive about the nature of the student experience for an individual student. Instead it is appropriate to look at the key factors which when taken together shape that experience.

Secondly, much of the meaning of the experience to the students derives from context. Understanding context requires an appreciation of the specific factors influencing this group of students and how that influence takes place from the perspective of the students. This requirement will be a key influence on the development of my research

approach. Accordingly having reviewed the literature and used this to help me develop a working hypothesis for the student experience in this chapter, the research design and approach are considered in the next chapter.

Chapter Three – Research Design and Approach

3.1 Introduction

Having developed a working hypothesis of my conceptual framework for the student experience during chapter two, chapter three examines how I developed and tested my research design and approach. The chapter is organised as follows. Firstly, I consider the nature of my study, including the research questions that I wish to address, identifying the implications for the choice of research approach. Secondly, I discuss how I narrowed down my choice of methods with reference to the relevant literature. Thirdly, I report on the pilot project where I evaluated the feasibility of using these methods in practice, including my conclusions on the pilot project. Fourthly, I explain in detail the research methods adopted for the main data collection stage, including the approach to data analysis. Discussion and analysis of the data collected then follows in chapters four, five, six and seven.

3.2 Determination of an Appropriate Research Approach for my Research Questions

In determining the most appropriate research approach to collect and analyse data for my study, I need to refer back to the fundamental objective of this study – namely to understand the student experience from the student’s perspective. This requires me to empathise with students so that I can understand and analyse their outlook and perspectives as opposed to reporting my perspective of students as an academic member of staff.

This perspective does not require me to accept students’ outlook uncritically. Indeed, one of the outcomes of the study might be finding ways to challenge these perspectives as part of what is required to provide a satisfying student experience. However, I need to collect the data and then analyse it in a way that gives the students a clear voice without being clouded by my own pre-conceptions of how things are or should be.

Furthermore having conceptualised the student experience as a psycho-social construct involving the interaction of a variety of microsystems, I need to adopt an approach that is consistent with this epistemological perspective in line with Hammersley (2004).

This requires me to recognise the influences of constructivism and relativism in how I am approaching this study and in determining my research approach.

During chapter two, I chose specifically to refer to research that aimed to capture the perspectives of undergraduate business students, especially those studying in the UK. This enabled me to develop a conceptual framework which I wish to explore through the collection and analysis of appropriate data. This will allow me to understand better its operation and consider its validity and limitations. However, I fully expect to refine and develop the model as I gather and evaluate data and develop further my understanding of how the various influences interact. Thus, I have clear objectives for the data collection phase. In these circumstances, a relatively structured approach seems appropriate, which will allow me to meet these objectives. Albeit one which leaves open the possibility of revision if necessary (Maxwell, 2005).

I acknowledge at the outset that the student experience will vary from student to student according to the different factors (and their relative weightings) that influence each student and also according to how those factors interact. Furthermore, my involvement as an academic in the Business School being researched does mean that I have access to other less formal data which occurs in the day-to-day of my working life. However, at the start of chapter two I did identify that a key purpose of my study was to develop a deeper understanding and perspective forged by a rigorous research process rather than one based solely around a combination of knowledge, experience and ideas. I seek to understand how different factors interact to create the student experience. To quote Maxwell (2005), my emphasis is on:

Understanding processes and mechanisms, rather than demonstrating regularities in the relationships between variables. (p.23.)

Accordingly I need to gather data of sufficient quality and quantity to achieve these aims. In the following sections I will discuss how I narrowed down the various options to arrive at my chosen approach and design.

3.2.1 *Qualitative or Quantitative?*

While it could be argued that the title of this section does present matters in an overly-simplistic way, there is some merit in considering the fundamentals. One of the main generally accepted ways of gathering student opinion about their experiences at

university is the structured questionnaire or survey. Once gathered, statistical analysis can then be applied to this data. Thus I could legitimately adopt an approach that is solely or primarily based on a quantitative approach.

Ginns, Prosser and Barrie (2007) report on the experience of using course experience questionnaires at the University of Sydney. Their paper provides a balanced account of the use of questionnaires for evaluating the student experience. They argue that well designed questionnaires carry a statistical validity and that they facilitate comparisons both between institutions and over time within a single institution. However they note the limitations of this approach:

It is important to recognise that the Student Course Experience Questionnaire ... is not designed for use as a tool for gathering specific diagnostic feedback about particular subjects or teachers. (p.611.)

The article also highlights how a questionnaire can provide information as to “how it is” but is less useful in determining “why it is”. The authors continue:

Student Course Experience Questionnaire scores may be used more fruitfully by degree co-ordinators and faculty managers for initiating discussions and more focused investigations of the issues facing specific programmes and/or faculties. (p.613.)

Much depends on the nature of the research question and the data being sought. Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000) used a questionnaire to explore first year undergraduate students’ expectations of and preferences in teaching, learning and assessment. They argued that the use of a questionnaire in these circumstances was entirely appropriate:

The questionnaire developed for and used in this study shows that students’ expectations can be easily collected. (p.319.)

However, for the most part the study refers to largely generic concepts which the student group will have observed/have recent direct experience of e.g. a lecture. The use of questionnaires as a sole means of data collection can be criticised where the nature of the data/information being sought is more abstract or complex.

Ramsden (1991) also promotes the merits of a Course Experience Questionnaire, stating that it offers:

A reliable, verifiable and useful means of determining the perceived teaching quality of academic units. (p.129.)

The logical inference of this conclusion is that the questionnaire is a strong enough measure to be used as a key performance indicator and one which should influence decision making within an institution. However, Ramsden (1991) is reluctant to come to such a strong conclusion, stating:

The proper relationship of this PI (i.e. the questionnaire) to resource allocation nevertheless remains uncertain. The greatest benefits at present seem likely to be gained from the use of the data within universities and colleges for diagnostic purposes. (p.148.)

In other words the questionnaire might be useful for identifying a problem, but it can't fully define that problem and neither can it suggest possible responses to the problems identified. What is needed is a follow up discussion with the group surveyed, to develop a greater understanding of the issues.

Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) considered a different element of the student experience by surveying students at three UK Universities to identify students' perceptions of how employable they were. The completed questionnaires were analysed statistically. One of the findings was that expectations were, in the view of the authors, relatively modest. The expectations of students at the highest ranked (most established) university were lower than those of students at the other two Universities. The paper highlights some of the problems of using a quantitative approach when trying to understand and evaluate opinions. The study was confined to statistical analysis of the questionnaire and as a result, there was no opportunity to test out why this (surprising) result had arisen.

Similar issues are apparent when considering the work of Eggans, van der Werf and Bosker (2008) in relation to the influence that personal networks and social support have on study attainment. Using statistical analysis the authors find that social support has no effect on study attainment but that personal networks do have an effect on study attainment.

The authors acknowledge that the concepts of personal networks and social support are inter-related and therefore one criticism of the work is the extent to which the two

concepts can be clearly defined and differentiated. The authors were considering a complex system based on human behaviours and interactions. While the quantitative analysis does allow a statistically valid conclusion to be drawn, providing evidence of a link, it leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

Eggens *et al.* (2008) acknowledge this in the concluding paragraph of the paper, where they state:

Further research is necessary to explain why personal networks have an effect on students' attainment. (p.564.)

In addition to the “why” questions, there is also the “how” question. It is not clear from the paper whether personal networks arise from, or are easier to form as a result of, a student's background or whether they occur as a result of the efforts of the students themselves. It is possible that a well-motivated student would seek to form well developed social networks as one way of getting the most from their time at university just as a well-motivated student might study harder and therefore increase their chances of a good degree. On the other hand, a student whose parents come from a higher socio-economic group might be better prepared to establish networks and to understand the benefits of being part of such networks.

The five studies discussed above all examined aspects of the student experience by using solely or primarily a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis. In each case the authors were able to collect a sufficient volume of quantitative data in order to undertake statistical analysis, enabling them to draw conclusions. However, taken together they highlight some of the difficulties of using a quantitative approach as the method of data collection and analysis for my study. In each case the data collected has enabled the researchers to identify “how” it is but not necessarily “why” it is. In order to establish the answers to these questions, the authors need to interrogate the data further. However, they are not able to do this, because data collection ends as soon as they have collected the completed questionnaires.

Returning to Maxwell (2005), my emphasis is on:

Understanding processes and mechanisms, rather than demonstrating regularities in the relationships between variables. (p.23).

For example, in my study I want to understand more about how the microsystems identified in my conceptual framework operate, how they interact and how the forces of engagement and alienation pull and push these microsystems towards and away from the centre of the student experience.

In the studies discussed above the use of interviews and/or focus groups would have allowed the authors to interrogate and interact further with the data to look beyond the initial answers to establish the factors behind or giving cause to the answers given. This is what I need to do in order to answer my research question. This is not to say that I wish to dismiss the quantitative approach. After all, how can I given the volume of studies using this approach? Indeed, in developing my conceptual framework I have drawn heavily from studies that have surveyed students in order to understand aspects of the student experience. Reference to these studies forms a fundamental part of my study. However, while the quantitative studies have informed my thinking, I do not view the quantitative approach as being the best template for the issues that I seek to explore during the data collection process.

3.2.2 A *Qualitative Approach*?

Ashworth and Lucas (2000) discuss the potential of, and difficulties in, using phenomenography as a methodology for conducting research into higher education. They recognise the value of this methodology; indeed they draw attention to its value and influence. However, they also emphasise the need for rigour in its application and caution researchers against allowing their own preconceptions and values to cloud their research and analysis. In short, they argue that the researcher needs to understand what the students think, and why, rather than determining what they think the student ought to think. There needs to be empathy in order to develop understanding of the students' perspective.

Ashworth and Lucas's (2000) perspective is relevant to my study. While I do not propose to follow a strict phenomenographic approach, the thinking behind it does give me some clues as to what is an appropriate research approach for my study. In seeking to understand what the students think and why, I need to adopt a research approach that allows me both to capture their opinions and be able to explore how and why those opinions were developed. Logically, this suggests that I should be primarily adopting an interview-based approach where issues can be explored through interaction with

participants. However, I also seek depth and richness in the data I collect, something that requires reflection by students on their experiences i.e. not just what students think but why they think it. Thus I need an approach that facilitates this process; specifically, one where participants feel comfortable expressing their views and where they have the time and opportunity to reflect on, develop and articulate why they think the way they do.

This leaves me with a choice as to whether to conduct individual interviews or use a group based approach such as focus groups. My decision needs to be driven by which approach will provide the best set of data for my study. In guiding this decision I refer back to the literature.

Kitzinger (1995) discusses focus group methodology. She states:

The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview. (p.299.)

She adds:

Interviews may be more appropriate for tapping into individual biographies but focus groups are more suitable for examining how knowledge, and more importantly, ideas, develop and operate within a given cultural context. (p.302.)

Kitzinger's (1995) perspective suggests that focus groups are well suited to the requirements of my study. Her views are consistent with Morgan (1996) who argues that the real strength of focus groups is not simply exploring what people have to say, but in providing insights into the sources of complex behaviours and motivations.

Kevern and Webb (2001) echo this theme stating:

If the aim of the investigation is to gain insight into how students actively construct and describe their social experiences of the course, then focus groups offer a unique form of naturally occurring interactive and contextual data. (p.331.)

Morgan (1996) also discusses how focus groups have been used in many applied settings where there is a difference in perspective between the researchers and those with whom they need to work – thereby addressing one of the key concerns identified at the start of this section, that of capturing the student perspective rather than that of the academic.

Kitzinger (1994) reports on the use of focus groups in a study examining AIDS and the media. Specifically, focus groups were used to explore how messages in the media were processed and how understandings of AIDS were constructed. Frith (2000) discusses the potential benefits of focus groups in the context of research into sexual behaviour. Vogt, King and King (2004) report similar benefits in discussing a study examining the experiences of Gulf War veterans. Taken together, these studies underline the capacity of focus groups to provide high quality and relevant data when examining sometimes intensely personal and sensitive issues, thereby confirming the capacity of this research approach to generate the type of data that I require for my study.

Kitzinger (1994) also notes that focus groups can provide elements of participant observation especially where participants know each other already. They also have the potential to develop pre-existing views through engagement and dialogue between group members which facilitates the development and articulation of ideas (Frith, 2000). It is this sharing of ideas and experiences that provides a further source of data as it helps the researcher to understand better the phenomenon that they are studying.

Kitzinger (1994) refers to this process as “argumentative interactions” p113 whereby discussion (including disagreement) helps the researcher to understand the meaning attributed to certain events, concepts or feelings by participants and to stimulate further discussion as concepts and ideas are explored. She identifies this as a key strength of focus groups compared with one-to-one interviewing, stating:

Had the data been collected by interviews the researcher might have been faced with “armchair” theorising about the causes of such difference but in a focus group these can be explored “in situ” with the help of the research participants. (p.113.)

This also addresses one of the concerns that I had about conducting one-to-one interviews, namely that I wanted students to be able to reflect on their experiences during the data collection process, so that they could provide richer, more considered responses. I did have concerns that the process of asking them to reflect during a one-to-one interview might put additional pressure on them. Reflection requires thinking time and this is more readily available in a group dynamic, where an individual has time to think while others are talking. Furthermore, the interaction between participants

allows them to develop ideas. Wilson (1997) discusses the risk of “cornering” a participant in a one-to-one interview in a way that leads to the participant providing the answers that they think the interviewer wishes to hear rather than giving their own views.

While the work of Kitzinger (1994, 1995) and Wilson (1997) relates to research in the fields of health and social policy, Williams and Katz (2001) discuss the merits of using focus groups as a research method in education specifically. Overall they endorse the merits of focus groups concluding that focus groups have the capacity to:

Generate rich data that can facilitate decision-making and provide useful information for the development, evaluation and modification of curriculum, learning tools and programs – information that might not be accessible from other research methods. (p.7.)

Barbour (2005) also discusses the usefulness of focus group in eliciting the student perspective. Her study, which examines focus group research in the context of medical education, notes the capacity of the focus group approach to identify and reflect the views of students rather than the views of teaching staff. These perspectives again endorse the relevance of the use of focus groups for my study.

However, while a focus group approach does seem to be a very good fit for my study there are still some issues that I need to resolve. Hollander (2004) discusses the concepts of “problematic silences”, where participants do not share their thoughts and experiences during the focus group and “problematic speech” where participants are reluctant to express their true feelings and instead conform to a perceived group norm.

In order to address these concerns I need to ensure that participants are able to and confident enough to express a range of views and are not constrained by the norms of the group which might result in a fairly bland and unrepresentative set of data. I also need to ensure that my focus group data is a good representation of the views of all the participants not just the most vocal. I need to ensure that participants are confident enough to be critical about their experience. Perhaps most importantly I need to ensure that the focus groups realise their potential by actually generating the data I need to answer my research question.

These issues and possible solutions are discussed further in sections 3.2.3 and 3.3 below.

3.2.3 *A Qualitative Hybrid?*

In the previous section I identified some concerns about focus groups as a method for data collection in my study. While I feel that there is a strong case for using them as the primary method of data collection, my concerns are significant enough for me to conclude that they should not be the sole method. Accordingly in this section I will discuss these concerns before explaining my response to the issues identified.

The first of these concerns was the risk that participants would not be able to or confident enough to express a range of views because of the constraints of the norms of the group. These circumstances, where group norms or accepted values silence dissenting views, are referred to in the literature as “groupthink” (Chioncel, Van Der Veen, Wildemeersch and Jarvis, 2003; Hollander, 2004; Williams and Katz, 2001). Concerns are also expressed about the validity of focus group findings. For example, Kevern and Webb (2001) discuss the risk that the anecdotal evidence can be given too much weight resulting in conclusions that lack validity.

The second of the concerns was how to ensure that the focus group data produced would be a good representation of the views of all the participants not just the most vocal. Chioncel *et al.* (2003) also stress the importance of taking the group, rather than individuals, as the unit of analysis recognising the need to reflect the views overall rather than those of the most vocal individuals.

As a result, I decided that I wanted to introduce a validity check into the way in which I conducted the focus groups to address these specific concerns. This approach is advocated by Hollander (2004) who discusses the benefits of “triangulation of methods” (p.632.) I had already decided that during the focus groups I wanted to be able to refer to a set of questions to ensure that a common range of issues was discussed in each group. However, it occurred to me that there could be value in using a questionnaire more strategically as part of the way the focus group was structured. The use of a bespoke research approach is advocated where it provides a better data set to address a specific research question (Maxwell, 2005; Morgan, 1996). Therefore I resolved to include a questionnaire in the focus group discussions where participants were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with a question or assertion using a 5 point Likert scale.

The advantage of this was that participants would already be familiar with this sort of questionnaire as they are used heavily by the Business School for feedback on students' learning experience. It would also give me an additional source of data about the strength of feeling about particular issues and enable me to analyse the views of the whole group. This provides a validity check on the risk of over-emphasising anecdotal evidence and giving disproportionate weighting to the views of the most vocal participants.

It also occurred to me that I could improve the data collection process further by making participants aware of the scores given by the other members of the group as soon as they had completed the question. This would give an indication to each participant (and to me as the moderator) how they felt about the issue, identifying areas where the views were similar, as well as identifying areas of diverging views, thereby facilitating Kitzinger's (1994) concept of argumentative interactions.

Kitzinger (1994) also identified that a further benefit of focus groups was the capacity of the group to provide mutual support in expressing feelings that are common to the group but may differ from what they might perceive to be the views of the researcher. She argues that this mutual support makes the expression of criticism and the exploration of different types of solution easier. However such an outcome is only possible where group members are aware of the views of the other participants.

Thus, I needed to find a methodological solution which would allow the recording of the views of participants and also allow the scores to be communicated back to participants during the focus groups. The way I chose to do this was through the use of Turning Technologies' Turning Point software. Turning Point works by allowing participants to express preferences electronically through the use of wireless keypads. Thus once participants had circled their answer on a paper questionnaire they pressed the corresponding button on the key pad. The software stored the answers until everyone had responded and then allowed the moderator to display the answers on a computer screen.

Figure 3.1 below shows what the 6 participants in focus group 1 saw once they had all pressed the keypad.

1) Did you have clear expectations about what student life would be like **before** you started your degree in Newcastle?

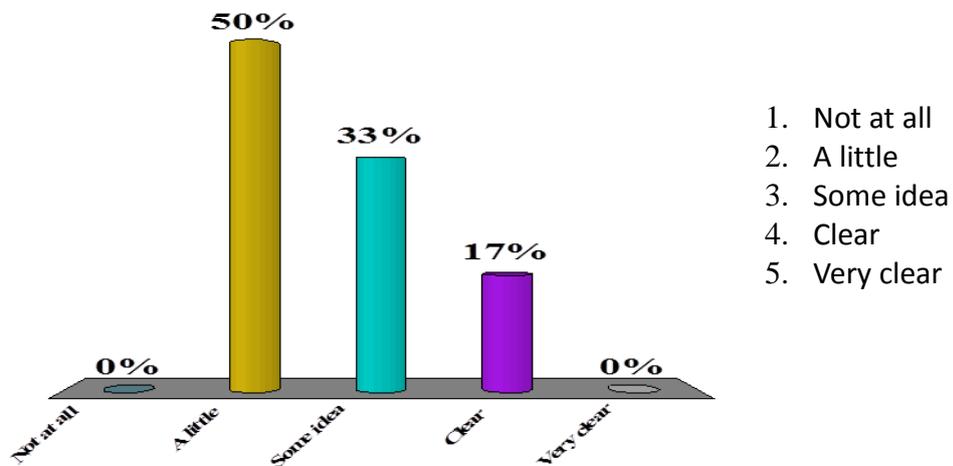


Figure 3.1 – Screen shot of answers given by focus group 1 to question 1.

The most popular response was option 2 “a little” chosen by 50% of the participants i.e. 3 out of 6.

The benefit of this approach was that it immediately gave both the participants and the moderator an idea of the range of opinions and enabled both the discussion and any follow up questions to focus on gathering more information about participants’ views and why they held those views. This gave me considerable assurance that I was capturing what the focus group felt as a whole and gave me greater confidence to explore the range of opinions with the group and allow the discussions and ideas to develop naturally from the group’s interaction.

I also determined that, for the study as a whole, I wished to select participants mostly from final year undergraduates. The reason for this is that I wanted to collect data from a group who had experienced the bulk of their student experience and therefore were in a position to reflect on their experiences. My judgement was that such participants would be better able to reflect on the relative influence of the various student experience microsystems over the duration of their time at university. Thus I determined to conduct the focus groups towards the end of the Easter term just as final year students were starting to prepare for their final examinations. Co-incidentally this is also the

time during which the National Student Survey (NSS) takes place, a survey which also asks undergraduate students to reflect on their time at university.

To conclude, I have titled this section “a qualitative hybrid” as it describes how I chose to adopt a mixed methods approach. In doing so, I have followed most of the precepts of a qualitative approach. However, I have also made use of questionnaires to survey group members, which is generally thought of as a quantitative approach. I would argue that this approach is well suited to collecting the data needed to answer my research question and that the questionnaire enhances the focus group approach by contributing to its validity and by helping to stimulate discussion and the sharing of ideas amongst the focus groups. In the next section, I will describe how I assessed the feasibility of this research approach during the pilot project.

3.3 Pilot Project

3.3.1 *Aims of the Pilot Project*

My overall aims and objectives for the pilot project were that I wanted to gather evidence to help me develop and evaluate the student experience model that I had developed in chapter two but also that I wanted to assess the feasibility and practicality of my research methods by using them in practice. Accordingly I identified the following seven aims and objectives:

- 1) To develop my understanding of the individual microsystems (and how they interact) identified in the student experience model, that I developed following completion of the literature review;
- 2) To make revisions to the model as/where appropriate based on the evidence gained in the pilot project;
- 3) To make an assessment as to whether the model is robust enough for me to design the data collection phase around the model and the testing of its validity;
- 4) To test the feasibility and appropriateness of the research methods that I had planned to use in the data collection phase;

- 5) To improve my knowledge, skills, experience and understanding of using focus groups as research methods;
- 6) To deepen my understanding of the student experience of undergraduate students at Newcastle University Business School;
- 7) To develop my data analysis skills and to identify relevant themes and issues that can be investigated further during the main data collection phase.

Completion of these seven aims and objectives would fulfil an important role in the overall development of my study as collectively the seven objectives provided evidence (or otherwise) as to the feasibility and appropriateness of the conceptual framework, the research methods and analysis and interpretation of data collected. It advanced my study because a successful pilot meant that the main data collection phase could become a larger scale version of the pilot project, albeit one where the approach taken had been refined to incorporate lessons learned.

3.3.2 How the Research was Undertaken

For the pilot project, I asked for volunteers from undergraduate students across the Business School. The request was included in a school wide undergraduate bulletin and I also spoke at the start of lectures to ask for volunteers. I had already decided to use final year students for the main data collection phase (in line with the explanation in section 3.2.3 above), however for the pilot I decided to include first and second year participants as well to see whether the points raised by them differed greatly from the final year students. I also sought to recruit from a range of degree programmes and a range of nationalities. In order to complete the pilot study I did not feel it was necessary to identify a rigorous, representative sample and neither did I wish to consciously restrict participation.

I arranged a total of 4 focus groups involving 21 students from across the Business School. The composition is summarised in Figure 3.2 below:

Degree Programme	Stage	Number
Accounting and Finance	1	1
Accounting and Finance	3	8
Economics and Business	1	1
Business Management	1	3
Business Management	2	1
Business Management	3	1
Marketing	1	1
Marketing	2	1
Marketing	3	1
Marketing and Management	2	1
Marketing and Management	3	2
Total		21

Figure 3.2 – Composition of Pilot Study Participants.

The majority of the students were in their second and third years and the participants had an average age of 20.8 years. For the main part of data collection, I wish to concentrate on final year students as they are in a position to reflect on their experiences as a student in a way that first year students cannot. However, for the pilot project I included some first year students to see if any different themes emerged. It is also worth noting that the proportion of Accounting and Finance students is above the average for the School as a whole.

Each focus group followed a similar format. Focus groups consisted of 4, 5 or 6 students. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire as well as discussing and commenting on the issues raised. The Turning Point software was used and each participant was issued with a handset. Students were asked to record their answer to each question on a paper questionnaire. They were also asked to record their answers using the Turning Point software. The questions were designed so that they could be answered on a 5 point Likert scale.

Once each student had registered the answer to a question electronically, the answers for the focus group as a whole were revealed. The range of answers was then discussed and participants asked to give additional background as to why they had expressed a particular opinion. As discussed in section 3.2.3 above, the graphs produced by Turning Point allowed both the participants and me (as the moderator) to see the full range of opinions and to encourage all the group members to express their opinions. Following

the discussion, I moved on to the next question, whereupon the process was repeated. As part of the moderation process, I was keen to use the questions as a catalyst for more open discussion rather than as a constraining factor. Thus I was content for discussion to develop openly and spontaneously.

Finally, in order to allow me to be able to reflect on and analyse the comments made, the focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

3.3.3 Findings - Analysis of the Data Collected

Given that one of the primary aims of the pilot was to gather preliminary evidence as to the validity of the student experience model that I developed, I decided to group the questions around the model, splitting them into seven main groupings. I encouraged the discussion to develop around the questions asked, the responses given and the themes emerging.

Questions about Expectations at the Pre-University Stage

These questions aimed to identify the expectations that students had about university and student life prior to starting university and the significance of these to their overall student experience. In each case answers were sought on a 5 point Likert scale, which is summarised in brackets at the end of each question. The questions asked in this section were as follows:

- 1) Did you have clear expectations about what student life would be like before you started your degree in Newcastle? (1 – not at all through to 5 - very clear).
- 2) Were those expectations accurate i.e. was student life generally what you expected? (1 – no very different through to 5 - yes very similar).
- 3) Was your degree programme and how it was delivered as you expected? (1 – no very different through to 5 - yes very similar).
- 4) You are still disappointed that student life has failed to live up to your expectations. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

Questions 1 to 4 received an average score of 2.7 on a 1 to 5 scale, some distance below the average of 3.5 for the whole questionnaire. These answers, which indicated that this was not a strong influence for most participants, were supported by the comments made.

It was clear that students did not have strong expectations about university prior to arriving and in some cases were not even sure why they were here:

I wasn't very clear because I didn't know anyone at university before I came up and I hadn't much of an idea about university as a whole

Participant Pilot Focus Group 2

There was however a feeling that there was an expectation of going to university after school or college. In addition to the influence from family and school friends, a number of participants indicated that they had received a very strong steer from their school to apply to university.

Where participants did have a clear view about university, it was usually as a result of the recent experiences of a close family member:

I was quite clear about it because my sister came to Newcastle the year before me, so I'd seen her experience and came to visit her.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 2

It became apparent during the discussions that question four needed revision. It was seen as too leading and needed to be revised to make it more balanced. Accordingly, I decided to re-word the question to be: "where your expectations prior to university have differed from the reality, does this matter? Has that difference affected your time at university?"

Questions about Transition to Higher Education

This group of questions was aimed at participants' experiences and perceptions about transition from secondary to higher education i.e. the process of settling into student life. The questions asked in this section were as follows:

- 5) How easy did you find it to adjust to student life at university? (1 – very difficult through to 5 - very easy).
- 6) How quickly did you settle into student life at university? (1 - slowly, I'm not sure I have or will ever feel settled through to 5 - very quickly, by Christmas of my first year).
- 7) How important is having a sense of belonging to the university in feeling settled? (1 – very unimportant through to 5 - very important).

- 8) How important is having a sense of belonging to the Business School/your degree programme in feeling settled? (1 – very unimportant through to 5- very important).
- 9) My experiences in adjusting to student life have left a lasting impression on me. I still think about how I felt at that time. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

Questions 5 to 8 received an average score of 3.6 on a 1 to 5 scale, slightly above the average of 3.5 for the whole questionnaire. Transition was not seen as a trivial matter but most students expressed confidence that it had been achieved fairly smoothly.

Questions 7 and 8 about achieving a sense of belonging, received average scores of 3.8 showing that students felt a sense of belonging to the University/Business School/Degree Programme was important.

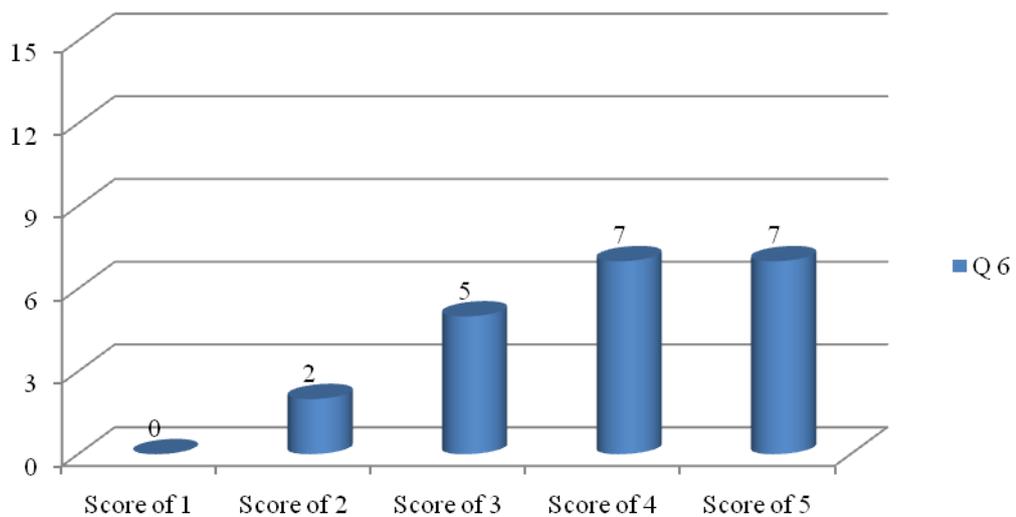
Students were predominantly from outside the city and they had moved to Newcastle to study, rather than living at home. This meant that looking after themselves and managing money and accommodation were important for them. Friendship groups seemed to be established mainly in student accommodation, rather than through the degree programme. Establishment of a friendship group was seen as very important to feeling settled, with feelings of homesickness being overcome by getting to know others:

You kind of make like a little mini family so you all tend to depend on each other and do everything together.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 1

Question 6 was about how quickly students had settled into student life. The scale for the responses was 1 to 5 where 1 was “slowly - I'm not sure I have or will ever feel settled”, 3 was “relatively - by the end of my first year” and 5 was “very quickly - by Christmas of my first year”. The average score was 3.9 and the range of answers are shown in Figure 3.3 below. Overall this shows that transition was not an especially difficult process. Indeed some participants commented as such.

Question 6



Question 6: How quickly did you settle into student life at university?

Mean Average Score	3.9
Standard Deviation	1.0

Figure 3.3: Summary of Pilot Project Focus Groups' Answers to Question 6, how quickly did you settle into student life at university?

One aspect that emerged during the discussion was that students expressed a disappointment about the level of interaction with academic staff. They felt they had only passing contact with staff, including personal tutors. There wasn't a clear view on what the expectations were in this area, merely that the general expectations were not being met. This is an area that I feel I should explore further in the main data collection phase.

Questions about University Peer and Friendship Groups

The significance of the influence of university peer and friendship groups started to be touched upon in the previous section. The questions in this section aimed to identify the significance of this group and the extent of the influence.

10) It is important to have a network of friends while at university. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

11) I spend a lot of time with other students and I feel part of a social group. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

12) The views of other students influence how you feel about your degree programme, the Business School and the University. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

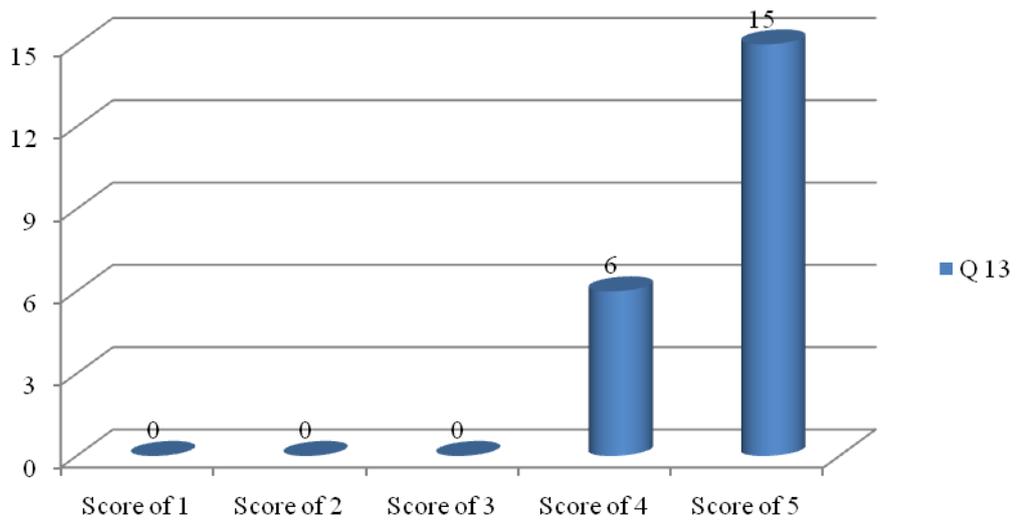
13) Your peer group (including friends) are a vital part of your student experience. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

Overall university peer and friendship groups were seen as very important, and were the most significant grouping of influences of any used in the model. Questions 10 to 13 were positive assertions and students were asked to score on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The average scores for the 4 questions from 10 to 13 were 4.8, 4.3, 2.8 and 4.7.

This is illustrated further by the answers to question 13 which are shown in Figure 3.4 below. 15 of 21 participants answered 5 – strongly agree, with the remaining 6, all scoring the question as 4. The standard deviation of the scoring of 0.5 was the second lowest of all the questions, with the lowest standard deviation of 0.4 arising from question 10, which was also about the importance of peers.

Question 13



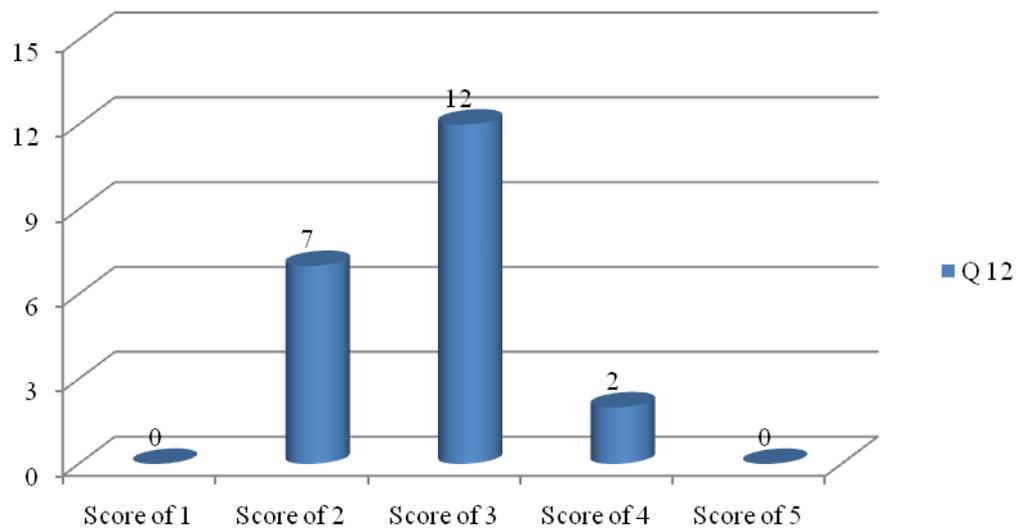
Question 13: Your peer group (including friends) are a vital part of your student experience.

Mean Average Score 4.7
Standard Deviation 0.5

Figure 3.4: Summary of Pilot Project Focus Groups' Answers to Question 13, your peer group (including friends) are a vital part of your student experience.

It is interesting to note that, although peers were seen as a very important part of the student experience, and that the participants spent a lot of time with peers, participants generally did not accept that other students were an influence on their views about the student experience. This is apparent from the answers to question 12, the views of other students' influence how you feel about your degree programme, the Business School and the University, and the discussion that followed. The average score for this question was just 2.8, as shown in Figure 3.5 below.

Question 12



Question 12: The views of other students influence how you feel about your Degree Programme, the Business School and the University.

Mean Average Score	2.8
Standard Deviation	0.6

Figure 3.5: Summary of Pilot Project Focus Groups' Answers to Question 12, the views of other students influence how you feel about your Degree Programme, the Business School and the University.

The theme of the importance, and the influence, of university peer and friendship groups is one that I will explore further during the main data collection phase.

Questions about the Influence of Others: Parents, Family, Friends, Popular Culture and the Media

This group of questions tried to examine the influence of others.

14) You keep in contact with family and/or friends from outside university. (1 – monthly through to 5 - daily).

15) If you had a problem at university, would you discuss it with your parents/family? (1 – no through to 5 - yes).

16) Your family have been a big influence on your experiences as a student. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

17) The information you get from popular culture/the media about university and student life is 1 – inaccurate through to 5 - accurate.

18) Popular culture and the media have been a big influence on your experiences as a student. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

There was evidence that peer or friendship groups were starting to take on some of the roles previously occupied by parents and family. While the advent of new communications innovations e.g. mobile phone texting, Facebook, Skype, had clearly contributed to the ease and regularity of contact with parents (and others) away from the university, there was some evidence that parents and family were shifting away from being in the centre of students' lives. In Bronfenbrenner's (1994, 1999) terms, university peers and friends appeared to be being drawn towards the centre of the mesosystem while parents and family drifted outwards towards the exosystem.

Comments about parents made by participants included:

I think it may make them uncomfortable if we have to tell them all our lives. It would be like an hour long conversation like this happened, this happened and they'd be like, oh God! This is boring!

Participant Pilot Focus Group 4

They're kind of in it like for the bigger issues you meet, things that are beyond what you can do.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 3

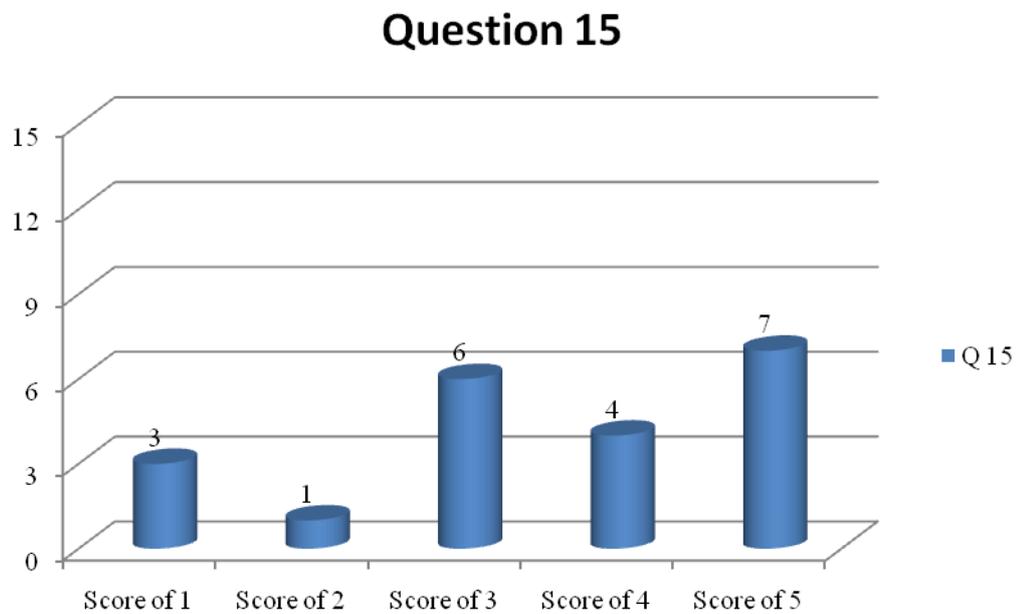
This re-inforces the view that parents didn't really belong in the student experience but still held an important role in students' lives. There was also the view that this was probably a good thing for the maturity and development of the students themselves:

I don't know how I would have grown up if I hadn't come to uni.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 2

Question 15 asked participants if you had a problem at university, would you discuss it with your parents/family. A score of 1 meant "no", 3 meant "maybe" and 5 meant "yes". During the discussion I had to clarify what the problem might be and after the first focus group I settled on the example of an argument with a housemate or a poor mark in some assessment. This indicates the need to clarify this question by including an example in the final version of the questionnaire.

The average mark for this question was 3.5, but interestingly the standard deviation of 1.4 was higher than for any other question, suggesting some divergence in participants' views. This is illustrated in the graph below where answers from 1 to 5 were selected by participants. There were a number of comments made identifying the tension between being pragmatic and asking for advice from parents and the desire to assert independence.



Question 15: If you had a problem at university, would you discuss it with your parents/family?

Mean Average Score	3.5
Standard Deviation	1.4

Figure 3.6: Summary of Pilot Project Focus Groups' Answers to Question 15, if you had a problem at university, would you discuss it with your parents/family?

Questions about the Degree Programme

These questions tried to examine the influence of the degree programme.

19) Overall, your knowledge, skills and abilities have developed significantly over the course of your degree programme. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

- 20) As a whole, your lecturers have helped you to develop your own ideas about business/economics. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).
- 21) Overall, your degree programme has been a big influence on you and changed the way you think about things. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

It was apparent from the discussion that the questions in this section needed the most development as they did not really cover all the issues. In particular, they do not mention staff explicitly and it was clear that for students, academic staff figured prominently in how they thought about their degree programme. Therefore following the pilot study, I decided to revise the questions significantly, changing the wording and adding in some new questions as follows:

- 19) Overall, your knowledge, skills and abilities have developed significantly over the course of your degree programme.
- 20) Overall, your contact with teaching staff has been a big influence on your studies.
- 21) Overall, your contact with university staff has contributed positively to your experiences as a student.
- 22) Overall, your degree programme has stretched you intellectually and changed the way you think about things.
- 23) Overall, what matters is the class of degree you obtain, not whether you actually learn anything during your degree.

The average score for the original question 19 was 4.1, representing a consistent and widely held view that participants had developed across a range of areas. In some degrees there was a sense of developing a particular occupational or disciplinary skill, for example, Accountancy and Economics. There was also awareness of the need to develop higher level skills such research skills, as well as softer skills, for example team working, particularly with future employment in mind.

The responses to the original questions 20 and 21 were less positive with average scores of 2.9 and 3.6 respectively. Some of the comments made were critical of the quality of the teaching, with some participants noting that the teaching standards were generally better at school, although big variations were noted with some lecturers identified as

very good and passionate about their subject while others were said to do little more than read from their slides. Comments included:

I think you can tell who is passionate about wanting to teach and who is there just because they're there just to do the lecture – they're not that bothered.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 2

I think a lot of them are just here for research and they just lecture on the side – they don't really care about teaching or whether the student understands it or not.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 3

There was some desire and indeed expectation that the teaching process would involve an exchange of ideas and discussion as had been the case at school. However participants generally felt disappointed in this area.

There was no doubt though that the degree programme was important. It was noted that more people focus on the teaching because there was a tangible outcome that was important in the job market:

Your degree class ... everyone is here for a 2.1 or a first.

Participant Pilot Focus Group 4

The usual requirement of graduate employers for their recruits to achieve an upper second class honours degree was seen as an over-riding factor; this being the level of achievement required by most employers for entry into graduate level employment. This meant that any desire for intellectual or academic independence in line with the desire expressed by participants for individual independence was placed secondary to this overwhelming factor. As a result, participants expressed a willingness to side with or repeat a lecturer's point of view, as this was seen as more likely to result in the coveted higher grade.

There were also comments about the value of seminars for developing understanding and ideas and the dislike of what were perceived to be easy subjects where the average mark was high and where it was more difficult to differentiate oneself from other students.

Questions about Extra-Curricula Activity

- 22) You have been actively involved in a range of extra-curricula activities outside your degree programme. (1 – no none through to 5 – yes lots).
- 23) Involvement in extra-curricula activity has given you a greater sense of purpose. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).
- 24) Involvement in extra-curricula activity has helped you to develop new skills and abilities which have complemented your studies. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).
- 25) Your involvement in extra-curricula activity at university has been a big influence on you. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

A slight contradiction emerged during this section. Previously, students had spoken of the need to maintain a focus on their own personal development in order to realise their ambitions to be successful. The average score for question 23, has involvement in extra-curricula activity given you a greater sense of purpose, was 4.1, showing that there was widespread support for this proposition. Furthermore, the average scores for questions 24 and 25 were 3.7 and 3.5, indicating that participants also supported the view that extra-curricula involvement contributed to their development both as a student and more widely.

However, even though participants could choose from a very wide choice of extra-curricula activity, there was a reticence to get involved. The average score for question 22 was 3.3; consistent with some involvement, but 7 of the 21 participants indicated that they had little or no involvement by scoring 1 or 2. During the discussion that followed there was a general consensus that social confidence was important to getting involved in extra-curricula activity and some of the participants lacked enough confidence to push themselves forward into an extra-curricula group. Although some participants also conceded that inertia (and possibly laziness) played a part.

The discussion around this section warrants further consideration and analysis. It touches on some interesting issues about what the participants thought they should be doing outside class and what they actually did. It also gives an interesting perspective on different personality types and their levels of motivation. It is also significant given

the views expressed in the final section about employment and the need to demonstrate a good range of skills and abilities to employers to compete in the job market.

Finally it was clear that it would be helpful to clarify in the questions that extra-curricula involvement also includes part-time work. There was some confusion initially in the first focus group about this. Thereafter I made a point of clarifying this issue at the start of the section.

Questions about what happens after graduation

This set of questions was designed to identify how strong the influence of what the student would be doing after graduation was on their thinking while at university.

- 26) When you came to university you had a clear idea of what you would do once you graduated. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).
- 27) Your primary reason for coming to university was to enhance your career prospects/prospects for post-graduate study. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).
- 28) Your desire to improve your skills and abilities has influenced your behaviour at university. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).
- 29) The desire to gain a well-paid graduate job/post graduate study has been a major influence on how you have approached university. (1 – strongly disagree through to 5 - strongly agree).

Discussion of the Findings

The average scores for these 4 questions were 3.4, 3.9, 4.1 and 4.2. Both the discussion and the score for question 26 showed that there was some uncertainty about what might happen post-graduation. Some students had a fairly clear idea and others had little or no idea. Scores ranged from 1 to 5. In contrast, though, there was a clear consensus that what happened post-graduation was important and that it affected participants' behaviour as students.

Think about your student experience overall. How significant have the following been for your own overall student experience?

The purpose of these 8 questions was to identify whether the opinions expressed in earlier questions were confirmed when students were asked to think about their student experience overall. Thus the 8 questions attempted to paraphrase or summarise the 8 groupings of questions covered previously. The questions asked were as follows:

- 30) The expectations you had before coming to university and whether those expectations have been met. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 31) The transition process of moving from secondary to higher education and settling into student life at the university. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 32) The other students that you have met in the Business School. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 33) The other Newcastle students that you have met from elsewhere in the university. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 34) Other groups your family, popular culture, the media. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 35) Your Degree Programme. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 36) Your extra-curricula involvement. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).
- 37) What happens once you graduate e.g. getting a job. (1 – very insignificant through to 5 – very significant).

Discussion of the Findings

The picture emerging from questions 30 to 37 is that three aspects of the student experience are more important than the others. These are university peer and friendship groups, the degree programme (and more particularly the classification of degree obtained) and getting a good, well paid job on graduation. This is largely consistent with the views discussed and reported on earlier in the chapter.

However, one additional theme did emerge from the discussion. That was the sense of progression and development as the student moved through the successive stages of pre-university, becoming a student, student life and then preparation for life after graduation. Throughout these stages intangible and emotional issues and feelings figured prominently. That, along with intellectual development, emphasised the significant psychological and personality development taking place during this time.

It appears that failure to recognise and account for these developments has the potential to leave students feeling dissatisfied, even if a programme would otherwise be regarded as good quality due to its teaching, syllabus and assessment.

3.3.4 *Conclusions from the Pilot Project*

My overall aims and objectives for the pilot project were that I wanted to gather evidence to help me develop and evaluate my student experience model and that I wanted to assess the feasibility and practicality of my research methods by using them in practice.

During the pilot project I was able to gather evidence that advanced my understanding of the elements of the model and there was also evidence that the elements of the model were recognised by and were relevant to the focus group participants, albeit with some signals on how to revise the questions used in the data collection phase.

Running the focus groups gave me further experience of using focus groups as a research method and I found the format very effective. Asking students to complete the questionnaire within the focus group and then displaying the results encouraged students to reflect on why they had scored each question the way they did and the interactive setting allowed me to test my understanding of what they said and to encourage them to develop their ideas in open discussion. Overall, I felt very comfortable that this was a powerful and effective mechanism to gather data for my study.

Thus, the pilot project provided evidence that my overall study is feasible and I can be confident that if I follow the plan through I can complete a study that will achieve its aims and objectives.

The data collection stage will be directed to identifying and developing a more detailed understanding of the component microsystems of my model. Part of this will involve examining how and why these microsystems wax and wane in significance and the competing forces of engagement and alienation. I wish to understand more about the process whereby a student becomes engaged or alienated from a microsystem. It will also involve examining how the microsystems interact with each other. It is only during

the analysis and evaluation stage that I will attempt to form any definite judgements about students' views. This will be necessary to be able to assess the implications for design and delivery.

3.4 Research Approach Adopted

This section will cover the approach used to collect and analyse data for the main phase of my study.

3.4.1 Recruitment of the Focus Groups

For the pilot study I had recruited 21 participants drawn from a range of degree programmes and from all three stages. The focus groups had taken place during the Easter Term. For the main study I again wanted to recruit from a range of degree programmes and to hold the focus groups towards the end of the Easter Term.

However, I decided that I wanted to recruit final year students exclusively. The reason for this is that final year students have experienced nearly all of their time as an undergraduate with the result that all the microsystems identified in my student experience model would have had the opportunity to exert an influence. For example, a second year student might be less likely to have been influenced by the life after university microsystem but it was reasonable to expect that a final year student approaching graduation would have been influenced by these considerations. I also felt that this group was likely to have more experience and perspective to draw from, thereby contributing to a richer data set.

As with the pilot study, I sought volunteers both by a request in the School's undergraduate newsletter and by making an announcement at the start of core lectures for each of the degree programmes. I explained the nature of my study, including its relevance to delivery of the School's undergraduate provision. I also offered a £10 shopping voucher to each student who participated as an incentive.

My experience from the pilot study was that by the time I had completed four groups, I was starting to observe the recurrence of themes, while none of the participants had identified any significant new issues to define the student experience which had not already been discussed. Thus in line with the principle of saturation I resolved to

double the size of the data collection for the main phase, aiming for eight groups with approximately 40 participants in total.

In the event, there were 54 students who expressed an interest in participating. However, I excluded five of these because they were from programmes outside the Business School, where business comprised only a small proportion of the overall programme of study. The complexities of timetabling the focus groups to accommodate the availability of volunteers and myself meant that a further four volunteers were unable to participate, leaving 45 students who were invited to participate in a focus group discussion.

I endeavoured to ensure that the composition of the groups fairly reflected the composition of the school. However, even though I tried to engineer an optimal outcome, there was still the unknown variable of non-attendance by participants. Of the 45 students invited, 35 actually attended, a drop-out rate of 22%, which is comparable with that reported in the literature (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips and Davidson, 2007; Hydén and Bülow, 2003). I tried to arrange groups with between four and six participants in each group, in line with Kitzinger (1994) and Wilson (1997). However, in the event I held eight focus groups involving a total of 35 participants with focus groups ranging in size from three to six, during the Easter Term of the 2010-11 academic year. The composition of the participants is summarised in Figure 3.7 below:

Degree Programme	Number of Participants	% of Total Participants	Number of Final Year Students	% of Total Students
Accounting and Finance	8	23%	115	21%
Business Accounting and Finance	5	14%	42	8%
Business Management	5	14%	138	26%
Economics and Business	4	12%	61	11%
Marketing	6	17%	73	13%
Marketing and Management	7	20%	111	21%
Total	35	100%	540	100%
Male	14	40%	293	54%
Female	21	60%	247	46%
Total	35	100%	540	100%
Home	21	60%	398	74%
International	14	40%	142	26%
Total	35	100%	540	100%

Figure 3.7 – Analysis of Composition of Main Phase Focus Group Participants compared with the Composition of Final Year Business School students 2010-11.

Generally, the overall composition of the main phase focus groups was broadly representative of final year Business School students as a whole. The proportion of Business Management students was lower, at 14%, than the 26% of Business School students who were studying Business Management. However, if one considers the wider grouping, of students who were studying Business as a significant named element of their degree, (i.e. all courses excluding Accounting and Finance and Marketing), the figure for the focus groups was 60% compared with 58% for the School overall.

The proportion of female to male students was higher for the focus groups than for the School. However, no significant gender orientated issues relevant to my study were apparent either in the literature or the pilot project. Therefore, as both sexes were well represented in the focus groups, I was content to proceed without looking specifically to increase the proportion of males participating.

The proportion of International students participating was also higher in the focus groups than for the School overall. Again, I was content to proceed, as I wanted to feel

comfortable that International students had a voice in my study. It was apparent from the pilot study that much of the student experience of UK and International students is similar. However, where differences arose, they could be significant. Therefore, I was keen to ensure that there was sufficient representation of International students in the focus groups for these issues to be brought out in the focus group discussions.

Taking the pilot and the main phase together, 56 students participated in the focus groups. The composition of the focus groups compared with the total number of students studying business is set out in the table below.

Degree Programme	Number of Participants	% of Total Participants	Total Students in School	% of Total Students
Accounting and Finance	17	30%	288	18%
Business Accounting and Finance	5	9%	186	12%
Business Management	10	18%	423	27%
Economics and Business	5	9%	185	12%
Marketing	9	16%	197	12%
Marketing and Management	10	18%	111	19%
Total	56	100%	1,590	100%
Male	23	41%	857	54%
Female	33	59%	733	46%
Total	56	100%	1,590	100%
Home	34	61%	1,136	71%
International	22	39%	454	29%
Total	56	100%	1,590	100%

Figure 3.8 – Analysis of Composition of All Focus Group Participants compared with the Composition of Business School students overall for 2010-11.

Again there were some areas where the focus group proportions were not directly in line with the School overall. However, I felt comfortable to proceed given that there were no major discrepancies and the fact that all the main component groups were well represented.

There is also a further point concerning the origin of the students. My general perception, based on my experience of working in the School, was that the vast majority of Newcastle University Business School students move away from home to come to live and study in Newcastle, rather than continuing to live in the family home and commuting to the University to study. While there was no readily available statistic demonstrating this point, I was able to identify a proxy figure by analysing student data, and identifying the postcode of students' permanent home addresses, rather than their term-time addresses.

The postcodes NE (Newcastle), SR (Sunderland) and DH (Durham) correspond with an area stretching approximately 50 miles north, 40 miles west and 25 miles south of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is reasonable to assume that few students will continue to live at home and commute from outside the area represented by these three postcodes, owing to the time and cost involved in making a daily journey. Meanwhile, a proportion of those living within this area, are likely to choose to move out of the family home to live and study in Newcastle. The proportion of Business School undergraduates with a permanent home address in the post codes NE, SR and DH was 14% in 2010-11. Thus 86% had a permanent home address outside this area.

This figure supports my perception that the overwhelming majority of Newcastle University Business School undergraduates move away from home to live and study in Newcastle, a factor particularly relevant to understanding the processes of transition and becoming a student that are discussed in chapter four.

3.4.2 Design and Operation of the Focus Groups

In line with Kitzinger (1994) and Wilson (1997), and my own experiences from the pilot study, I determined to run focus groups of up to six participants which, based on the material to be covered, would last somewhere between one and a half and two hours. My experience in the pilot was that this allowed all the participants to speak and also for discussion between participants to develop whilst maintaining a sense of momentum.

Morgan (1996) states that the design and operation of focus groups should be based on:

A conscious assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of standardization with regard to the goals of a particular project. (p.142.)

In the case of my study I wanted to gather similar evidence from all the participants about a single phenomenon, i.e. the student experience. Accordingly, I determined that a similar, consistent approach to the format of each focus group was the most appropriate way to ensure the validity of the data I collected. I did encourage discussion to develop, thereby taking the focus groups beyond the questions on the questionnaire, to facilitate the development of a richer data set through the collaborative interactions and reflections of participants.

Krueger (1993) discusses some of the problems that challenge effective moderation of focus groups. These include where moderators are too close to the topic, are not prepared to listen carefully, cannot maintain energy within the group and are not successful in drawing out responses from all participants. I decided to moderate the focus groups myself. In doing so I acknowledged Krueger's concerns about the moderator being too close to the subject and I also had concerns that participants may be less candid because I held a senior position within the Business School.

I decided on a number of measures to counteract these potential problems. These were aimed at ensuring that the focus group participants felt relaxed and confident enough to engage fully with the subject material. As Wilson (1997) notes, participants have the capacity to be more candid in a group situation than they might be in a one to one interview, especially if the group is encouraged to discuss and develop their ideas. Firstly, I tried to create a less formal tone to proceedings. This involved stressing to participants that I wanted to know what they thought, using a relaxed but measured tone in how I moderated the groups and by providing refreshments. I am also a trained interviewer with substantial experience of conducting interviews and discussions with students covering sensitive or personal matters. Further my experience in chairing meetings in a variety of contexts helped me to ensure that I listened, maintained the energy of the group and encouraged everyone to participate.

As with the pilot study, I worked my way through the questionnaire, asking participants to record their score for each question both on the paper and electronically using the Turning Point keypad. After all the group participants had recorded their score, the range of answers chosen by the group was displayed on the laptop screen (see figure 3.1 above) and I used this information to facilitate discussion, giving all participants the opportunity to talk about why they had given a particular answer. This was repeated in

turn as each group moved through the questionnaire. My experience was that this was an effective way of encouraging participants to engage in dialogue and for the discussion to develop naturally. Where circumstances seemed appropriate I used supplementary or follow up questions to probe for further information or encourage discussion.

I found the use of the questionnaire and the Turning Point software to be a useful variant on focus group methodology. Organising the discussion around the questionnaire helped to give structure to the discussion, without restricting or limiting it. Rather than slavishly following the questionnaire, I was willing to allow the discussion to develop naturally building on themes identified by the participants.

Using the Turning Point software enabled me to record and share with participants both the range of opinions held and the strength of opinions, thereby complementing and stimulating discussion amongst participants. As each group progressed, I became confident that participants were content to express a range of (sometimes diverging) opinions, thereby addressing the risk that participants would simply agree with each other out of politeness, shyness or a desire to conform with the group.

3.4.3 Data Generated by the Focus Groups

Taking the pilot and the main data collection stage together, I held 12 focus groups comprising 56 participants each of whom completed the questionnaire. Each focus group was recorded and once these had been transcribed this amounted to a total of 148,000 words.

The questionnaire data and the Turning Point scores generated additional quantitative data, which could be used alongside the spoken words to develop my understanding of the attitudes of the participants towards the various issues. Thus, a score which was consistent with focus group participants' thinking that a particular matter was important, reinforced and gave additional weight to the opinions expressed in the spoken word. It both verified, and gave additional context to, the transcripts as it helped to show not just what was said but also the importance and emphasis attached to what was said. Furthermore, if discrepancies arose, it gave a warning to me to review the data carefully, and to make sure that I was not giving undue weight to the views of more vocal members of the focus group.

3.4.4 *Analysis of the Data*

The first task to be undertaken was to read and re-read the transcripts whilst listening to the recordings. I listened to the tapes as these gave a clue to the strength of opinion through the intonation and expression as well as the vocabulary. As I listened I made notes on the transcripts.

Having completed this process I was comfortable that the structure of the questionnaire, which had been derived from the student experience model was still sufficiently relevant to form a basis for the coding of the transcripts. Accordingly, I marked up the transcripts according to the seven main groupings in my student experience model, identifying any sub themes emerging both in the text and the questionnaire data. Having marked up the transcripts the text was grouped into themes using a combination of Nvivo and Microsoft Word software.

Once the transcripts were grouped, I again read through the groupings carefully to identify and clarify each of the themes and sub themes emerging in the discussions. These were then written up in the relevant chapter using the transcript and questionnaire data accumulated.

3.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored how I developed and then tested my research design and approach. Given my research questions and the context of my study I settled on focus groups as the most effective research approach, with some specific modifications to test and improve the validity of the data. I tested my approach during the pilot study and found it to be effective. Accordingly, with some minor modifications based on my experiences in the pilot, this is the approach that I used in the main data collection phase. Discussion and analysis of the data collected follows in chapters four, five, six and seven.

Chapter Four – Becoming a Student

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the first two microsystems identified in my student experience model; pre-university and transition. I have chosen to group these within the same chapter because together they correspond with the process of becoming a student. In sections 4.2 to 4.4, I consider the pre-university phase. These sections examine the knowledge, experiences and attitudes that students had about university prior to starting their degree. In sections 4.5 to 4.10 I consider the transition phase. By transition I mean the process that commences when a new student arrives and continues until the student feels established as an undergraduate student. I have chosen to use the term “transition” because it is consistent with the overarching theme of this study that the student experience involves a process of change as the student progresses through a number of stages.

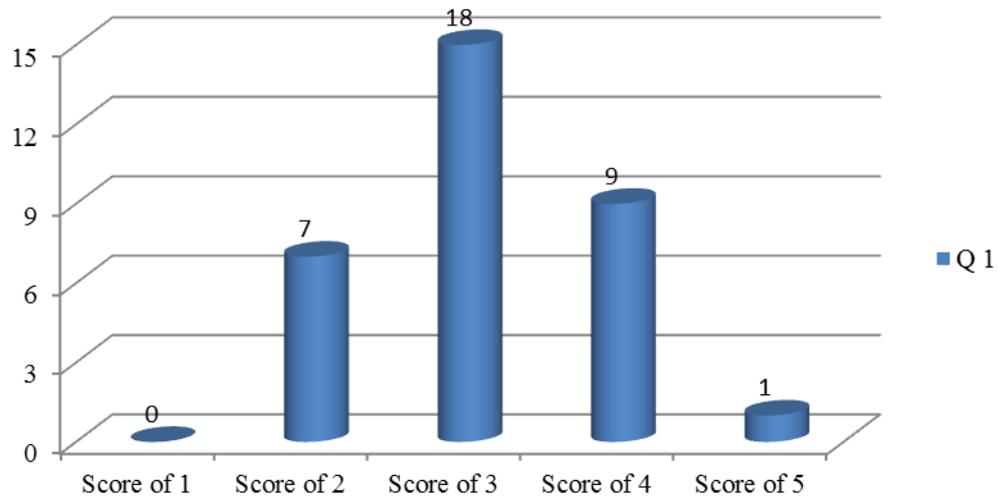
During the data analysis process it became apparent that there were a number of factors that differentiated the experience of UK and International students. Accordingly these have been grouped together and are discussed separately in section 4.11.

4.2 What did students know about student life before they started university?

During the focus groups two questions were asked which sought participants’ views about this part of their experience. In line with the research approach adopted for the focus groups, the questions were designed to open up discussion amongst participants and generate rich, qualitative data.

Following the preliminary introductions, the focus groups started with question one - “did participants have clear expectations about what life as a student would be like before they started their degree in Newcastle?” Answers were sought on a scale of 1 to 5; with 1 identified as “not at all clear”, 3 identified as “some idea” and 5 as “very clear”. The participants’ answers are summarised in Figure 4.1 below.

Question 1



Question Grouping: The expectations you had about university and student life before you started university.

Mean Average Score 3.1
Standard Deviation 0.8

Figure 4.1: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 1, did you have clear expectations about what student life would be like before you started your degree in Newcastle?

Overall the answers were a mix. Most had some idea. The quotes below was typical of the responses and discussions within the focus groups. Note the text in bold and italics was spoken by me. The text in standard format was that spoken by participants.

Did you have clear expectations about what student life would be like before you started your degree in Newcastle? So, three of you 'little', a couple of you 'some idea' and only one of you 'clear'.

I said 'a little' because I don't have any older brothers and sisters. I suppose I had some older friends who had been to university, so I knew a little bit from them but I didn't have any first-hand experience; only maybe from my parents and that was obviously quite a few years ago, so I reckon things have changed quite a lot since then.

I had 'clear' just because my boyfriend at the time came to Newcastle and did the same degree I'm doing and also I had quite a few friends up here, so I'd come up to visit them. So I did know what I was letting myself in for. My boyfriend had already graduated and said that I'd like it.

Participants Focus Group 1

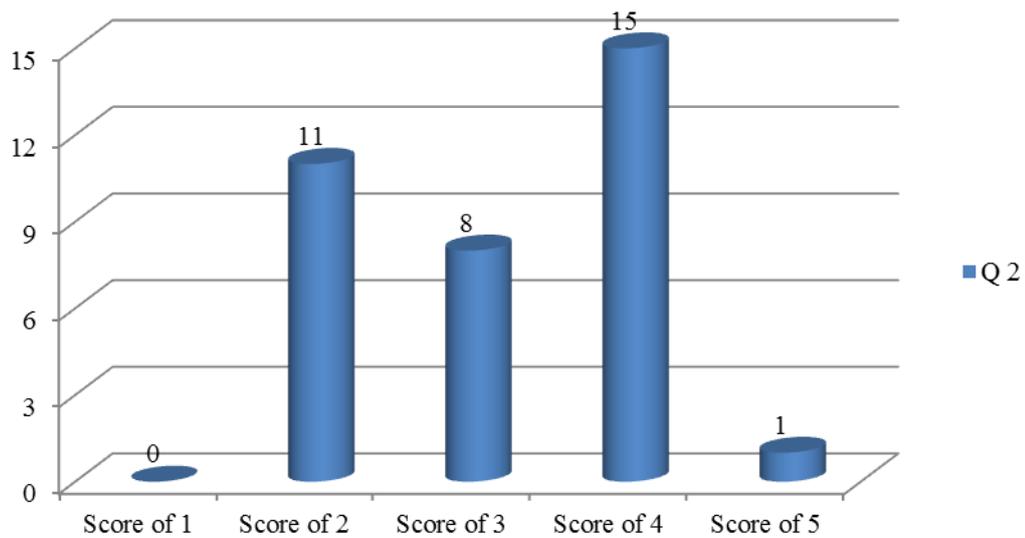
As found by Brooks (2002), family and friends were influential in forming expectations, although participants reported a general awareness of what student life would be like rather than a specific detailed understanding. Consistent with the findings of Hockings, Cooke and Bowl (2007), participants were seeking to form a general overview of student life and thus were re-assured by positive images of student life which tended to skate over the more challenging and demanding aspects. As a consequence, some aspects of academic work came as a surprise to participants (Lowe and Cooke, 2003). This was not so much because the opportunity to find out wasn't available; many participants had access to extended networks that had experienced student life. Instead it appeared to be related more to the generally positive image of student life which gave the impression that difficulties could be readily overcome.

When you talk to people, like brothers for example, my brothers, they'd already left university before I'd even started and it was the best time of their lives. So from other people, you have really high expectations of it because everybody seems to love it.

Participant Focus Group 4

Question two, see Figure 4.2 below, asked participants whether the learning experience i.e. the teaching, the sort of work required, the subjects studied etc. had been similar to what they had expected.

Question 2



Question Grouping: The expectations you had about university and student life before you started university.

Mean Average Score 3.2
Standard Deviation 0.9

Figure 4.2: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 2, has the learning experience i.e. the teaching, the sort of work required, the subjects studied etc. been similar to what you expected?

As with question one, there was a range of answers. Again the picture was one of general awareness rather than specific detailed understanding. In line with Lowe and Cooke (2003) and Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates (2000), there were gaps between expectation and experience although for the most parts the expectation gaps were readily negotiated by participants. During the focus group discussion, there were some comments expressing dis-satisfaction with aspects of the teaching and learning experience and these are discussed further in chapter six on the influence of the degree programme.

It took me until at least second year to realise that you're supposed to be reading and ... like, all the things that we know now, I didn't really have ... it sort of clicked and I was like 'Oh, you're supposed to do that and not just go out a lot!'

Participant Focus Group 1

I put 'neutral' because I didn't know what to expect from the course at all.

Participant Focus Group 1

My problem was I didn't know the whole structure of it. Like you hear about going to lectures and going to seminars and stuff, but I didn't know what they entailed. So I didn't really know what a seminar was.

Participant Focus Group 4

4.3 Sources of information about student life

Participants typically derived their knowledge from the personal experiences of family and friends. Siblings were sometimes quoted as a source and some students referred to instances where they had visited older siblings at university. These were generally seen as influential experiences. Other students had not given the matter that much thought, assuming that as many of their age group went to university, that the experience would generally be a good one.

What you did know, was that mainly from family?

Yes, I said 'some' because I'd been to visit my sister at uni but I'd say I had more idea of the social aspect than the actual work.

Participant Focus Group 1

Yeah. Because I have a twin sister and she went to uni the year before me. And also my ex-boyfriend was here the year before so he was doing the same core subjects the whole time.

Participant Focus Group 3

4.4 Progression to University

For many participants there was a general expectation that coming to university represented the next step in their personal development – something that people in their family and their peer group did and expected to do. Parents were influential in this process, as found by Elkins, Braxton and James (2000). While students were aware of the costs of university, there was no evidence that they had undertaken a detailed evaluation of the costs and benefits of their degree studies (Hockings *et al.*, (2007).

Schools were also identified as influential (Brooks, 2002) as they appeared to equate success with going to university rather than getting a job immediately. Teaching is predominantly a graduate profession and therefore whether this “steer” reflects the personal values and experiences of teachers themselves, or whether schools regard the proportion of its students going to university as a measure of its success, is unclear.

Did you guys ever think about the question, ‘Do I need to go to university?’ or ‘Shall I go to university?’ or was it almost a given that you would?

It was just a progression, the next step sort of thing.

I don’t think I considered not going, I didn’t really think of what the alternative would be,

My school was very geared to sending people to university; nobody I knew didn’t go to university.

If you hadn’t have gone, to some extent would you have felt automatically as though you had missed out or were left behind?

Probably yes because all my friends at home went off to different universities and everyone I knew that was older seemed to have moved on and gone to university as well, with very few exceptions. So it just seemed like the next step to go away to university.

Participants Focus Group 8

Of course not every participant fitted this category and some had to learn how to make their own way without this support (Thomas, 2002). However, participants who were not part of a network who had been to university were in the minority.

I’m the one who said ‘a little’. None of my family have been to university before, so I didn’t have a mum or dad who could tell me what it’s like, and I don’t have any older brothers or anything like that and most of my friends were people my age; so in all honesty I didn’t really know what it was going to be like.

Participant Focus Group 8

4.5 Adjustment to Student Life

4.5.1 Freedom

In the previous section about the pre-university phase I discussed how participants’ expectations about what student life would be like tended to be general and lacking in

detail. Participants also had a sense of anticipation and excitement about starting university and possibly part of this was the adventure into the unknown. Accordingly, one would expect a settling in period where new students came to terms with student life and that this would highlight some changes compared with what they were used to.

The first example of this that came through strongly in the focus groups was the greater freedom that participants experienced once they came to university. Most participants were used to a fairly structured existence revolving around school or college, family life, social life and extra-curricular involvement. This meant that most days had a common routine and that family and friends had a role in the routine. Student life also has a structure with classes to attend and work to do outside class, but in the early weeks of their first year, students became acutely aware that they now had the power to set their own priorities and structure without the moderating influence of family and existing school friends.

Never being away from home before, you're in charge of your own time and have to do everything yourself, but it wasn't all difficult, some parts of it were easy.

Slightly apprehensive in the first week, but after that I got friendly with people and just felt comfortable.

Participant Focus Group 8

One of the most obvious ways in which freedoms were manifested was in relation to social life. Newcastle upon Tyne has a very well developed nightlife and this is a contributory factor for some students in deciding to study in the city. The quote below illustrates that for some students this party atmosphere is particularly alluring, especially during the first year.

In terms of when I first moved out, that freedom kind of went to my head a little bit even though I was only twenty miles from home; I was out every night and signed up for every society in first year and you think you're going to do everything, but the reality is you spend most of your mornings hung over, you do as little work as possible, you scrape to get through first year

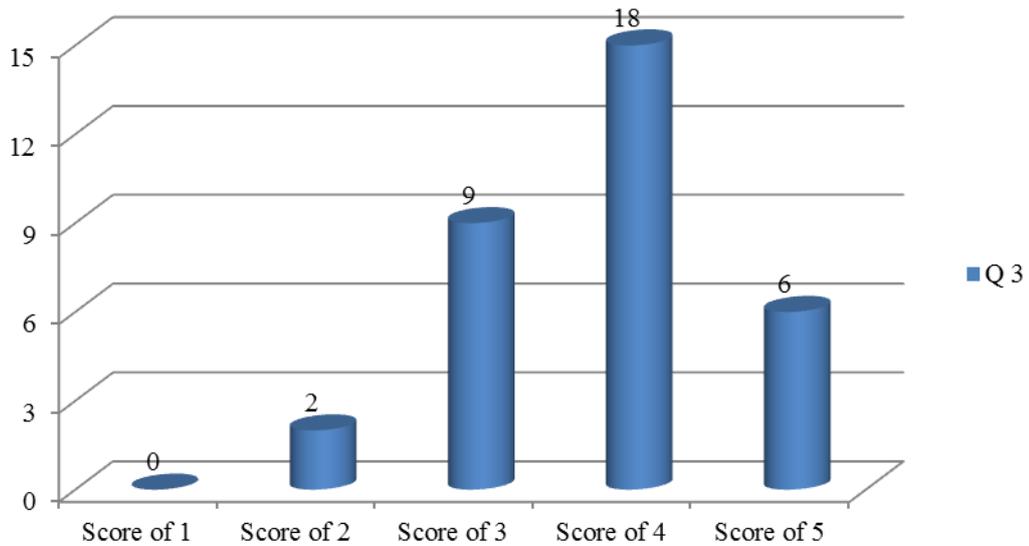
Participant Focus Group 6

4.5.2 *Coping with Freedoms*

A further part of the transition process is the recognition that the additional freedoms are only part of the story. Participants discussed how exciting these freedoms seemed but as with any period of change, perceived benefits also brought perceived challenges or difficulties. Participants liked the freedoms of being away from home and the independence it gave them, however the absence of structure was also problematic. For some this meant there was too much freedom and too little structure requiring participants to introduce their own structure to fill the gap (DeBard, 2004).

This issue had also arisen during the pilot study and I was keen to understand more. In the literature there was some discussion about the role of expectations, specifically, that transition was easier if student life was in line with expectations and much more difficult where there was evidence of a more profound culture shock. This theme is also discussed in the studies by Coomes (2004), Lowe and Cook (2003) and Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009). Accordingly, question 3, presented in Figure 4.3 below, asked the participants whether other aspects of student life i.e. the freedoms, what you spend your time doing, student culture etc., had been similar to what they had expected. Participants were asked to rate their answers on a 5 point scale with “1” rated as ‘no’ - very different, “3” as neutral and “5” as ‘yes’ - very similar.

Question 3



Question Grouping: The expectations you had about university and student life before you started university.

Mean Average Score 3.8
Standard Deviation 0.8

Figure 4.3: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 3, have the other aspects of student life i.e. the freedoms, what you spend your time doing, student culture etc. been similar to what you expected?

The distribution of responses suggested that participants' expectations were broadly in line with their experience. However, both the scores and the comments made during the discussion suggested that the understanding was general rather than specific, a point already identified in the section on pre-university. Participants generally enjoyed the party atmosphere of Induction Week and the first few weeks of term thereafter but once things had settled down they weren't sure what they should be spending their time doing. Previously, such direction had come from their school and their family but in the absence of both of these influences, something of a vacuum existed:

when I first came I enjoyed the social life, I liked getting out and doing all the different stuff, but on the other hand I felt like I was on my own a lot and I had to structure my social life myself and sometimes I didn't know what to do, what not to do, or which was best.

Participant Focus Group 7

I didn't realise how much free time there is in the day (*talking about first year*). I kind of got quite bored. I wished I had more stuff to do - more structure.

Participant Focus Group 3

Participants spoke about how coming to university involved more intangible aspects of personal development such as developing independence and autonomy and a sense of growing up. However, there was not a well-developed understanding of what this involved (Christie *et al.*, 2008). While participants recognised that they needed to figure some of this out themselves as part of a process of developing maturity and independence, they also felt that they experienced a vacuum of sorts with the implication being that the Business School could provide more direction in how to shape this time to encourage the students to develop their own structure and activities in order to fill this vacuum (Palmer *et al.*, 2009).

Some participants experienced this transition more easily than others especially if they had already encountered a degree of freedom and independence, suggesting that in this instance there is no substitute for experience.

Obviously having a gap year as well, and realising it was time to fly the nest. I definitely think that having a gap year made me really ... like just coming to uni was so easy. Because you've been away and met new people, I wasn't scared of stuff and getting into it was easier.

Participant Focus Group 1

Nonetheless participants did view the process of making the transition (however painful) as valuable in terms of their overall personal development and in equipping them to cope with adult life after graduation.

At the time it would be negative but that would be probably the best thing I've taken away from university, is just learning how to handle any situation. Even the things it teaches you outside, living with housemates, having to pay bills, having to co-ordinate people who don't want to be co-ordinated. So that's just been something that I've definitely learned and I'll take away.

Participant Focus Group 5

4.6 Opportunities and Challenges of Communal Living

As discussed in chapter three, section 3.4.1, the vast majority of Newcastle University Business School students originate from outside the locality and therefore follow the traditional model of moving away from home to come to university. For the majority of first years this involves living with other first years in university-managed accommodation, usually either catered halls of residence or self-catered flats. It was clear from the focus groups that this formed a key element of their experience as found by Brooks (2007) and Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005). This issue is explored further in chapter five in the sections on peers and friendship groups. However, there are some issues that are particularly relevant to the issue of transition that are explored further below.

The process of co-locating a group of people of similar ages from similar backgrounds together is highly likely to lead to the development of friendships (Kember, Lee and Li, 2001). Furthermore the process of change involved in adjusting to student life creates a common shared experience that all of the group are going through at the same time. These factors facilitate the creation of bonds as people discuss and make sense of their new shared experiences in an uncertain situation where more familiar reference points are absent. Such bonds contribute to a feeling of being settled. Indeed, in the absence of more familiar patterns friendship groups can establish something of a cultural norm (Brooks, 2007).

In addition, as discussed in Chapter Five, new students feel they need to find a substitute for pre-existing support networks such as family and friends (who are no longer present in the day-to-day life) with others who are part of this new experience. Participants generally reported that being in an environment with lots of people who were also experiencing these changes was a powerful beneficial influence.

I think the transition for me is easier when you're living with so many other students; everyone was out all the time, it became a way of life really, really quickly.

Participant Focus Group 6

I think it is still important in terms of how much it helps you or reassures you. Again confidence to have some people around you at university really does help.

Participant Focus Group 7

However it could also present challenges, especially where the circumstances jarred significantly with pre-existing norms for participants such as having their own room or social arrangements. In these circumstances, communal living could make transition even more difficult rather than helping with it (Brooks, 2007):

I thought I was going to be in a flat with a few people but it turns out I had to share a room with a girl from China and I only found this out the week before I went and obviously I was devastated because it was a room for one person. I had to deal with not knowing anyone to go and live on top of someone, like getting changed in front of them, so I was gutted about that.

Participant Focus Group 2

I mean for me it was particularly hard because I've always been with my twin sister and we've done everything together. And then suddenly I had to come here and make friends by myself which was so hard because I'm not confident.

Participant Focus Group 3

4.7 Differences between School and University Study

Given the preceding discussion on student life, it might be easy to overlook that the primary reason for coming to university is to study, a point acknowledged by participants in the discussion:

I think for me, it was from the people I'd spoken to, there seemed to be more of a focus on the social side of student life and so coming here and realising that actually you have to factor in your own study time, was quite different from my expectations.

Participant Focus Group 7

The role of the degree programme in the student experience is explored in more detail in chapter six. Therefore in this section I will limit the discussion to the main issues identified in relation to transition. At school or college participants had been used to a style where the teacher provided a highly structured environment with lots of guidance and support. Teaching was delivered in fairly small groups, typically of no more than 20. As a result they had become used to a personalised experience where their progress and achievement (both individually and as a group) was the main focus:

I think the problem is, unlike school, you don't have the structure so you're going from loads of structure to no structure at all. Like obviously 1st year is designed for people to adapt, which is why it doesn't count.

Participant Focus Group 4

That's something I maybe didn't expect when I came to university, was the actual size of our course and of the classes.

Participant Focus Group 5

Clearly, the shift from school to university where students now received a much lower level of input in terms of personal attention and structure represented something of a culture shock. Furthermore, in some cases the nature of the subject had changed with a different emphasis, as illustrated below:

At school, Economics was a lot more labour markets and what's going on in general, whereas at university, it's a lot more mathematical, empirical and it's nothing like I expected.

Participant Focus Group 4

Several participants identified that they had to develop their existing capabilities in numeracy or essay writing in an environment that gave them noticeably less support than had been the case at school or college. The result for these participants was that transition involved a significant degree of challenge as they struggled to overcome perceived inadequacies in a particular area (Bloxham and West, 2007). Interestingly, the impression made on participants was not one of academic development within a discipline but instead one of personal development as the student showed the personal qualities of persistence and application to achieve the required degree of competence to

pass the assessment. For example, one participant described her struggle to master a first year quantitative methods module, thus:

Can I just stick with that one? That's been quite a powerful experience for you. Is that a good thing, a bad thing or a bit of both?

It's actually worked out all right because I have worked hard and now I get it. Once you get maths, you get it and you can do it, so it's not that bad. But I think it really demoralised me in 1st year, when I went to the first mathematics lecture and I sat there and I didn't have a clue. And the whole way through, I didn't have a clue and it wasn't until the end, when I really kicked myself into gear

Participant Focus Group 4

4.8 Differences in Level of Involvement: Extra-curricula Activity

A further example of the differences between school and university experienced by participants related to the size and scale of the university and the effect this had on their opportunity to get involved. Sports were quoted as a particular example of this, as good school and club team players found that they were not good enough to get into the university squads:

I think the sport was the only thing that is not what I expected because I played quite a lot of sport at school but I found that the sports societies here are very competitive, so unless you're amazing, you can only play in the inter-mural things and that surprised me quite a lot. I really wanted to play netball, properly play netball, but I'm not good enough to do that, even though I thoroughly enjoy it.

Participant Focus Group 4

4.9 Gaining a Place at Newcastle University

4.9.1 Russell Group Status

One of the significant themes emerging during the focus group discussions on transition was how participants felt about earning a place at Newcastle University. There was a strong sense of personal pride amongst participants in being associated with the University and a sense of achievement in gaining admission. When asked to develop this further they explained that studying at Newcastle carries the prestige of having achieved entry into a Russell Group university. Put simply, Russell Group status was seen as meaning they were at a "top" or "proper" university and therefore gaining a

place was a sign of success. Interestingly even though the former polytechnics changed their status to universities some 20 or more years ago, some participants still identified new universities as “polys” and suggested they were automatically inferior:

If I met someone up here, and they said, ‘What do you do?’ I wouldn’t automatically say I’m a Newcastle student, you’d just say you’re a student and then the next question is ‘Where do you go to uni?’ So then you’d say ‘Newcastle’ and it’s obviously great to be part of Newcastle, not Northumbria! And if you say ‘Newcastle’, they’re like, ‘Oh, OK.’

Yes, you always get a positive reaction when you say it, there’s always a positive reaction about going to Newcastle.

And what is it that differentiates Newcastle from Northumbria?

It’s people’s perceptions. I suspect Northumbria is a really good uni as well but it’s just obviously people automatically associate Newcastle with the cleverer people. It’s the fact that it’s a red brick and a part of the Russell group, as well.

Participants Focus Group 2

Because it’s such a big part of your life. I think for the majority of students, it’s the biggest thing in your life and you want to feel a part of something. It’s important for the university to be a good university and I think for you to be happy and in that position.

Participant Focus Group 4

Situations where this view was confirmed by others, especially where it involved the views of employers were also used to amplify the point:

When I was at IBM everyone would say, ‘What university are you at?’ and with Newcastle you have a bit of pride.

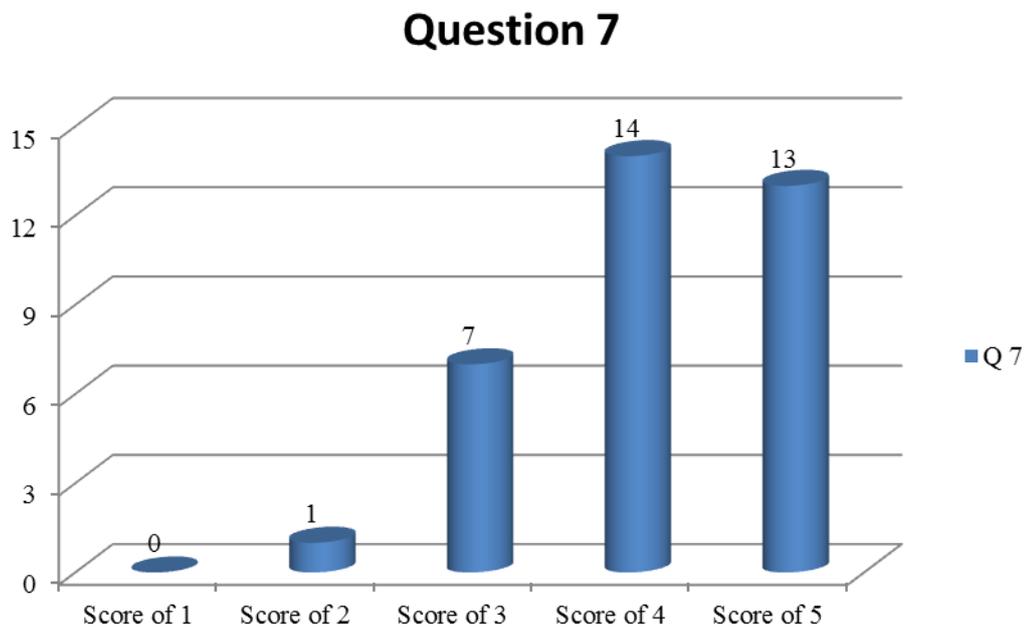
Participant Focus Group 6

In terms of belonging, I had an interview a couple of weeks ago and one of the boys who interviewed me had gone to Newcastle, and he said, ‘Oh so you go to Newcastle, it is the real Newcastle isn’t it’ and we bonded because we’d both been at university, and he hadn’t been for like 20 years, but we still had that thing.

Participant Focus Group 6

4.9.2 Establishing a Sense of Belonging

In the previous section, I discussed how participants felt a sense of pride in being associated with Newcastle University. In addition the focus group participants were generally keen to establish a sense of belonging and saw this as important. Question seven, presented in Figure 4.4 below, asked whether it was important for students to feel a sense of belonging to the University. Participants answered on a 5 point scale with “1” rated as strongly disagree, “3” as neutral and “5” as strongly agree.



Question Grouping: Transition from secondary to higher education: settling into student life.

Mean Average Score 4.1
Standard Deviation 0.8

Figure 4.4: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 7, it is important for students to feel a sense of belonging to the university?

As can be seen from the distribution of answers, only one participant rated the assertion as unimportant and scored their answer as “2” disagree, while the majority (27 out of 35) agreed or strongly agreed. It was apparent both from the answers and the accompanying discussion that establishing a sense of belonging taps into both the emotional as well as the rational perspective. These feelings of belonging and engagement (Krause and Coates, 2008) are powerful forces drawing university life

towards the centre of the student's life and are the direct opposite of the feelings of alienation identified by Tinto (1975):

I have a strong sense of Newcastle University, the belonging and it means quite a lot to me.

Participant Focus Group 4

I thought it was very important, I think it's quite nice to feel that you belong to something and to be proud that you go to the university you go to. I think it helps you feel more settled.

Participant Focus Group 8

An example of these feelings of the desire to be associated with the University was the willingness of many participants to wear something branded with the university name and logo such as a hoodie, almost in the way the supporter of a football club would show their allegiance to their club by wearing a replica shirt.

I quite like wearing the hoodie with Newcastle University on.

Participant Focus Group 2

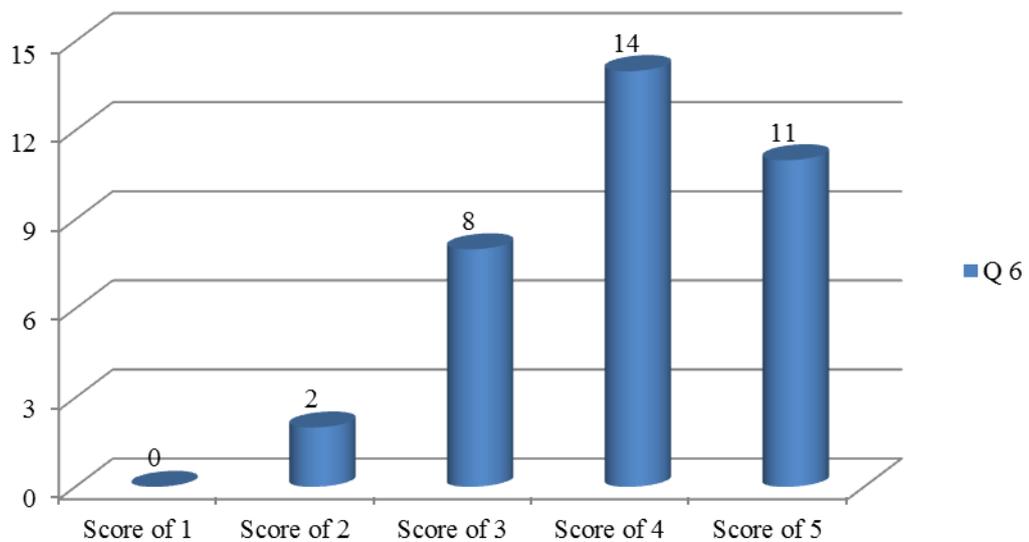
4.10 Becoming a Student – Crossing the Threshold

4.10.1 Timing

A significant theme in the literature was that of turning points and crossing thresholds (Bennett, 2003; Christie *et al.*, 2008; Haggis, 2004; Kember *et al.*, 2001; Palmer *et al.*, 2009; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, these were events or instances which carried disproportionate weight because they signified that something more significant had occurred. In that context, I sought to understand how and when participants felt that they had made significant progress with their transitional experiences.

To begin with, I looked at timing. Question six asked the participants how quickly they had settled into student life at university. Again a 1 to 5 scale was used where “1” corresponded to “slowly - I'm not sure I have or will ever feel settled”, “3” to “relatively - by the end of my first year” and “5” to “very - by Christmas of my first year”. The results are summarised in Figure 4.5 below.

Question 6



Question Grouping: Transition from secondary to higher education: settling into student life.

Mean Average Score 4.0
Standard Deviation 0.9

Figure 4.5: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 6, how quickly did you settle into student life at university?

The vast majority felt settled by the end of year 1. This was evident both in the question scores and in the discussion. There was also a high degree of similarity in the results between the pilot study and the main study with similar mean averages and distribution of scores. There was also similarity in average scores between UK and International students, although the average for women at 4.1 was slightly higher than that for men at 3.7.

Participants reported that being settled into student life had more to do with the social and domestic aspects of their lives than the academic, again underlining the importance of “social success” in establishing and being part of a well-developed social network.

So by the end of first year, you have cemented all your friends, your house for next year; you're just in a good position where you feel like, 'OK, this is my home now.'

Participant Focus Group 5

That time of year is when you start finding a house for the next year, and it's like, 'Now I've signed for a house here, with other people', so that makes you feel more settled in then.

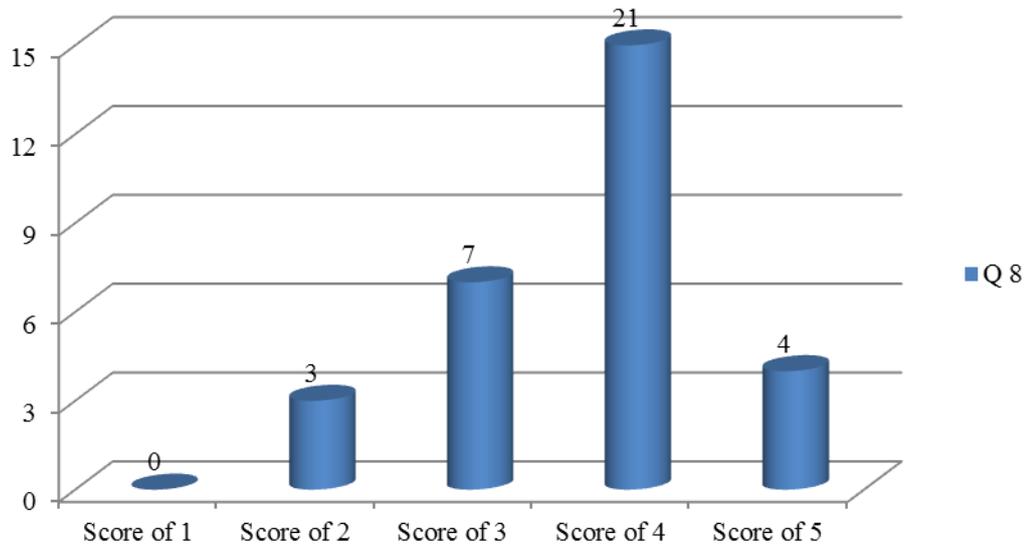
Participant Focus Group 8

4.10.2 Identification with the School/Degree Programme

Section 4.9.1 examines the participants' feelings about and towards the university. This next section will consider students' feelings towards the Business School. One of the themes coming through in section 4.9.1 was the high regard of participants towards the University; there was a sense of pride in being associated with it and a desire to feel a sense of belonging. However, for the majority of students their direct contact is with their School, discipline and degree programme. Accordingly this next section considers feelings and attitudes towards the Business School and their degree programme.

Question eight asked is it important for students to feel a sense of belonging to their degree programme and the Business School. Again participants were asked to score on the same 1 to 5 scale as question seven with "1" rated as strongly disagree, "3" as neutral and "5" as strongly agree. The results are summarised in Figure 4.6 below.

Question 8



Question Grouping: Transition from secondary to higher education: settling into student life.

Mean Average Score 3.7
Standard Deviation 0.8

Figure 4.6: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 8, it is important for students to feel a sense of belonging to their degree programme and the Business School?

It is noticeable that both the average score (3.7 versus 4.1) and the distribution are consistent with participants believing that this was less important than their feelings towards the University. This was unexpected because a much greater level of day-to-day contact takes place between the student and the School/Degree Programme and therefore one would have expected that participants would have thought that a sense of belonging was very important.

In the discussion that followed, it began to occur to me that participants had not actually answered the question as set. Rather than answering the question: "is it important for students to feel a sense of belonging", it seemed instead they were expressing a view as to whether they felt a sense of belonging. Furthermore the juxtaposition of questions seven and eight had caused them to think about how they felt in relative terms about the university versus the school.

During the discussions a number of key points emerged. Firstly, a sense of belonging to and identification with their degree programme and the school was important:

If you feel involved or comfortable with something, then you're going to take a lot more pride in it, to try and do your best in it. Whereas if you're a bit aside from everything, you definitely don't take as much of an interest in what you're doing.

Participant Focus Group 5

Yes because...this is the degree programme that you have chosen, so it should mean something to you.

Participant Focus Group 5

Secondly, that in some parts of the Business School a strong sense of identity with the degree programme did exist, although the identification was with the degree programme rather than the Business School:

The programme as well, other people may feel slight jealousy towards ... there is such a tight knit group that other courses don't seem to have,

Participant Focus Group 8

You get to know people a lot better; everyone is going through the same thing. It's different for us because we're all doing the same modules as well, it's easier and everyone knows what you're going through. I think the Business School is too big almost, I don't think you would ever feel the same affinity towards it as you would towards your degree.

Participant Focus Group 8

Thirdly, that the Business School does not project a strong image or identity towards the participants. At the time of the focus groups, the School was spread across four different buildings making it difficult to create the sense of a single entity.

I said 'disagree' because I think the Business School is kind of a massive area, there's so many people studying there isn't there?

Participant Focus Group 1

Obviously it will change with having the Business School building, but to have everyone in the same building, and to have a common room and lectures in the same place, it will make a massive difference, rather than being spread out.

Participant Focus Group 1

Fourthly, that in those parts of the University that participants perceived to represent best practice, there was a sense of a single entity and students did feel that sense of belonging and identification.

Like the medical school building, everyone knows everyone, so most of the lecturers are in the building, they have their own library in the same building, they have a small community.

Participant Focus Group 4

As you were talking about medics, I've got quite a lot of medic friends, and they really do know the large majority of people on their course. And they'll go out with them, have fun, they will do things together. And I think part of it is the building and the fact that they're always in the same place together.

Participant Focus Group 4

Finally, such feelings are important in creating a good student experience as feelings and emotions do influence opinion and behaviour. Just as the University benefits from the high regard that students have for it, so the Business School suffers as a result of the lack of regard that participants have for it:

If I feel like I know loads of people in my class and I'm involved in different activities and feel like I really represent Newcastle, then I'm more inclined to get up out of my bed, go to lectures, go to the library and actually be at work, so in the long run it's better for me because I do better in exams. I think it's very important.

Participant Focus Group 7

The evidence pointed to feeling a sense of belonging to the degree programme and the School as being important. The issue appears to be that participants feel less of a sense of belonging at the degree programme and School level than they do at the University level.

It should be noted that participants had all chosen their programme of study and all of the Business School programmes are popular with a high demand for places. By the final year, participants would have spent a lot of time studying together with other students on the same programme. Thus the conditions should be there to develop a programme identity and a sense of belonging in the same way as living in university accommodation creates an environment that is conducive to making new friends for first year students. However, it was clear from both the scores and the comments made that many participants did not feel a strong identity with, or sense of belonging to, the Business School. Indeed, for some the School was an unrecognisable and largely meaningless concept.

It is easy to underestimate the significance of these feelings and dismiss them as trivial. However, the evidence from the literature suggests that they are anything but. Tinto's (1975) study examines feelings of alienation, while Mann (2001) and Dean and Jolly (2012) articulate how these feelings develop and how powerful they can be. Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999) stresses the role of reciprocal interaction and Astin (1999) underlines the significance of student engagement. Indeed, central to my study is the proposition that significant personal development will not take place if the degree programme microsystem is pushed to the periphery by the repelling forces of alienation.

Looking ahead to the final section of this study, these findings present both a challenge and an opportunity for the school. Engendering similar feelings about the school as participants have about the university could contribute to a much improved student experience for Business School students and bring benefits to the School itself. As discussed above, the participants' feeling about identity, success and belonging are powerful emotional themes that influence opinions and behaviour.

4.10.3 *Engagement with Staff*

The relationship with academic staff is considered at length in chapter six on the degree programme. However, a theme emerging from the data analysis that has particular significance in relation to the transition process is the importance of students knowing staff and staff knowing students. Along with Chickering and Gamson (1987), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) and Vermeulen and Schmidt (2008), a degree of

recognition and interaction between staff and students was seen as important as explained below:

You know in the Ridley Building as you walk up the stairs, they've got all the faces of the tutors and stuff, I think in the Business School it would be a very good idea to literally have a huge board of all the Business School lecturers and staff, and all the pictures and their names. Because I think it is quite important. And I think it actually really works as well when you walk down a corridor and you see a lecturer who really recognises you.

Participant Focus Group 4

I think it's good to put a face to all of the staff within the Business School so it makes it much more interactive.

Participant Focus Group 4

It starts to happen in third year, when lecturers start to recognise you, you realise you've had an impact. It gets you more involved.

Participant Focus Group 4

Both Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Tinto (1975) stress the importance of academic staff in helping to generate positive feelings towards the programme of study. Focus group participants helped to give meaning to this factor, emphasising the role of both formal and informal contact.

4.10.4 *Development of a Sense of Achievement and Growing Up*

Going to university is a massive step and if I can do that I can do anything, like settle into a job.

Participant Focus Group 2

I chose to start this section with the above quote because it neatly summarises the views expressed by a number of participants as to why they had chosen to study Business at university. It recognises that coming to university involves change and that the experience has the potential for significant personal development. It also recognises that, for many students, university only makes sense in the context of making themselves more attractive in the labour market. Of course not all academics might agree with this perspective. However, given the proportion of income generated by

student fees in a typical business school, there is a certain irony in questioning the motives of students while at the same time drawing a salary that depends on those fees.

One of the themes emerging in the focus group discussions on transition was that participants could look back and identify a time when they had settled into student life and when student life started to be a catalyst for their own personal development. Once this happened, participants developed a sense that they were growing up and developing as a result of being in the student life environment. Once they were able to identify examples of this process and point to specific things that they were now able to do they expressed a sense of achievement, evident both in the vocabulary used during the discussions and in the more animated and expressive manner in which they expressed those views. For example:

Well. I strongly agreed with it because it really helped me to grow up. Before I came to university, life was structured - I don't know whether it was my parents that structured it or just generally it was very structured and then when I came to uni I didn't really know what to do. So, I spent most of first year and a bit of the second year not knowing what really what to do with my time but I've come to learn to structure my day and I've come to know what to do myself and I think that's very, very important to getting a job and growing up, really.

Participant Focus Group 7

I agreed because I think in that time you grew up a lot and you change a lot and learn a lot about yourself because you've never.....well, I'd never been put into that situation before, having to meet new people and living on your own. I do think it changed me because it made me grow up a bit.

Participant Focus Group 8

The process of crossing the threshold and becoming a student was not necessarily a smooth one. Participants reported how uncomfortable experiences could delay or interfere with their progress. This is consistent with the findings of Palmer *et al.* (2009), who term these experiences as “turning points” as successful negotiation of difficult experiences gave the students in their study confidence to move forward. There were echoes of this theme in the focus group data as for most, once the first part of settling in had passed; participants became more confident and resilient in dealing with and overcoming challenges.

Yes. One of the girls that I made very close friends with left, at Christmas; she quit uni. So I thought it was all going fine and then obviously it was a bit of a bump. But I was really surprised at how quickly I moved on and managed to cope with it.

Participant Focus Group 4

The first time I'd realised that I'd really settled was at the end of the year when I realised I didn't want to go home any more.

Participant Focus Group 7

There was a sense that transition was a stage that had to be passed through in order to progress onto the other aspects of student life and that once that had been done, participants had the confidence to move on. By Easter of the first year, the process was largely complete for most participants and they were ready for the next stage. However, prior to that point being reached there was evidence that transition was a very significant influence in the student experience. There was also the sense that during this time the transition process was not one that the student could closely control. Instead, it was more something that they had to navigate through:

Student life has different forms in different years. First year, you're getting involved in the union and doing whatever, it's more extra-curricular in first year in terms of the fun. In second year, student life becomes, actually I do need to do some background readings, journal articles are things I will have to look at and in third year it's like student life is work.

Participant Focus Group 6

Everything just slots into your comfort zone.

Participant Focus Group 8

4.11 Differing Perspectives of UK and International Students

Because as an international student, the first days when I came here, I have so many things to adjust to. I think that's just a special case for us.

Participant Focus Group 1

4.11.1 *The Pre-University Phase*

Differences in experiences between UK and International students were apparent from the pre-university phase onwards. This is to be expected because International students did not have the same connections to UK university student life through family and friends. This meant that International students did not have access to the same tacit information as UK students, leaving them less well prepared.

I'm not that clear about what will happen here because I just feel it might be totally different from the way we do in China.

Participant Focus Group 1

For high school I was in China, so I don't really know what will happen

Participant Focus Group 5

In the absence of family and friends, International students had to rely much more on web pages and pre-joining information. Overseas agents were not mentioned as a source of information although it is reasonable to assume that they would be for some students.

Everything I knew was from booklets, Internet. A lot the university sent me. I was the first one from my high school going abroad to university so there was no-one to speak to.

Participant Focus Group 3

4.11.2 *English Language*

When reflecting on their own experiences of transition, the first and possibly most significant point raised by International student participants was their command of the English language. It was identified as a factor in connection with their studies and also its impact on their ability to engage with other students, particularly UK students. It was also apparent that this factor was at its most acute in the period immediately following their arrival, a time when there is probably the greatest level of uncertainty and new experiences.

Interestingly, my experience of the participants during the focus groups was that the International students were able to articulate their views clearly with a varied

vocabulary. Thus any deficiency in skill at the start of their studies appeared to have been rectified by the final year. However, International students were rarely the first to contribute in the focus group discussions, usually allowing the UK students to speak first:

I thought it was going to be easier because I did very well in school, I got maximum from my English exams and I thought I could do it. But I was struggling with the accent; you watch the BBC and think you can understand everything but here is a little different.

Participant Focus Group 2

I just want to add that language was the main thing that was difficult for me when I came, in the first year. It was really difficult when we had those lectures, not numbers but actually the essay based ones, so not just understanding but writing essays was quite difficult; that was an issue.

Participant Focus Group 1

4.11.3 Culture and Priorities

There were also differing perspectives arising from perceived differences in culture and priorities. For example, there was a concern that some UK students would be more rowdy and less diligent and that this would interfere with studying. There was also the observation that differences in culture contributed to a different dynamic between UK and some International students, with less emphasis on joining in with collective pursuits and more emphasis on the individual.

Another thing I want to mention is the culture difference. In our country it's more collective. Here is more individual, individualism. For example, in our class in China, we have a representative - a monitor - maybe several representatives but one monitor. We will hold many social activities like sporting - football match, basketball match. Many activities like that. And we like being a family - a group but based on previous experience, I think it's more individualism. We go to the library myself - ourselves - and go to the sports centre individually. So everything - you make friends yourself. I think it's a bit different.

Participant Focus Group 7

4.11.4 Higher Education System and Practices

International student participants also identified difference in the design, content and delivery of their programme of study, a further practical aspect that they needed to get used to.

It was just a personal experience of getting used to the discipline and different from my home country.

Participant Focus Group 2

Sometimes we can discuss but we haven't experienced such methods in China so I feel a little difficult for me.

Participant Focus Group 7

4.11.5 Potential for Peer Mentoring

Some of the issues raised related to contextual and tacit knowledge about how things are and how they might differ from previous experiences. During the time of the study I initiated a peer mentoring scheme for new International students whereby existing, more established, UK and International students provided a support network to new International students through timetabled, themed sessions. Some of the focus group participants had experience of the scheme and volunteered their opinions on its effectiveness and potential.

I think especially the peer mentoring sessions; they helped International students to settle down into university life. So at the time I was mentee so I feel it was extremely helpful, those suggestions from the peer mentors. And in the second year, I became the mentor – for two years. So trying to help the other people as well.

Participant Focus Group 5

Yes, the peer mentoring is really good, especially for International students. Although we're new to this environment here, although we got all the maps and information from the school outside, we don't really ... like, how can we get into it? And how can we participate in that activity? And also peer mentors; they all give us advice to where we can do it. And they would even suggest some activities that they have already participated in. And they would encourage us to get a go on it, so I think that's really great.

Participant Focus Group 5

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter considered the process of becoming a student by examining the pre-university and transition phases. Most participants had only a general awareness about student life before starting. UK students tended to rely on family and friends for information while International students often had to rely on websites and promotional information. Coming to university was seen as the next stage in the personal development for most UK participants, something that they and their peer group expected to do, rather than a conscious, reasoned decision arrived at by weighing up the alternatives.

Section 4.5 onwards examined the period of time between a student first arriving at university and the time when they began to feel properly settled into student life. I have termed this “transition”. Transition is a complex process and I identified seven key themes. These are summarised in Figure 4.7 below.

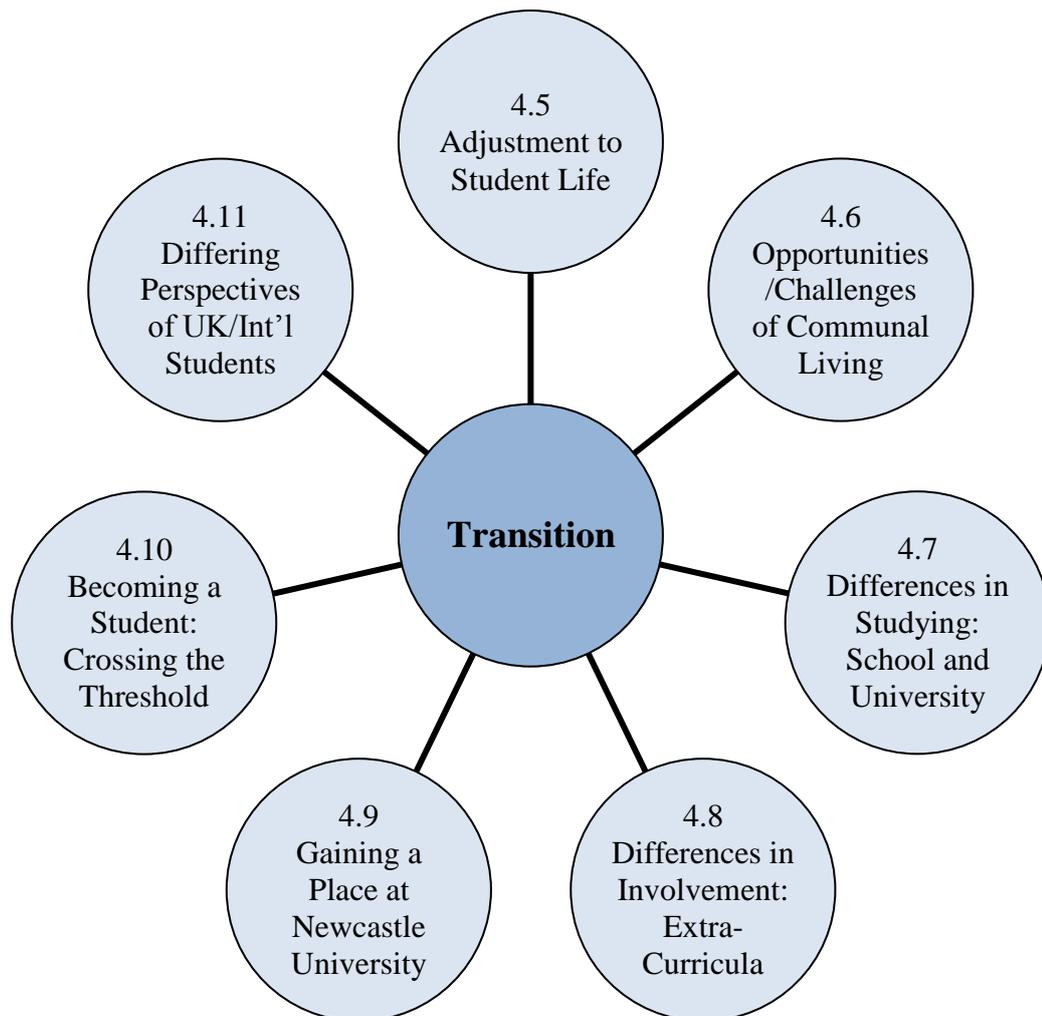


Figure 4.7: A Diagrammatic Representation of the Transition Process

Section 4.5 examined adjustment to student life and in particular the greater freedoms available to new undergraduates and the difficulties participants faced in coping with, and adjusting to, these freedoms. Section 4.6 examined how communal living in university halls of residence or student flats could ease or complicate the transition process. Section 4.7 looked at differences in studying at university compared with school, and how participants addressed these challenges. One of the issues identified was the difference in size and scale, and in section 4.8 it was identified that this could affect extra-curricular involvement as well the formal programme of study.

Section 4.9 examined participants' feelings about securing a place at Newcastle University and how this influenced their behaviour and their desire to establish a sense of belonging. Section 4.10 examined the concept of crossing the threshold of transition

and becoming a student, starting with timing. Thereafter the importance of a sense of identification with the participants' programme of study and with academic staff was considered. This was a problematic area for some participants, something that is considered further in chapter six, on the degree programme. However, crossing the threshold did contribute to a sense of achievement and growing up amongst participants, building confidence to move onto the next stage of student life.

Finally, section 4.11 examined the differing perspectives of International students examining issues of language, culture and the differences in practices of the UK higher education system. It also considered how some of these issues could be overcome through the dissemination of tacit knowledge and understanding.

Overall, there was evidence underlining the power of the forces of engagement and alienation and how these influenced the attitudes and behaviour of participants. Overcoming difficult situations were often seen as turning points and gave participants the confidence to move forward. However, the need to feel an on-going sense of belonging and involvement was also very important and participants' experiences with academic staff were influential in whether this developed in relation to the Business School and the degree programme.

Chapter Five – Social and Cultural Influences: Peers, Parents and Others

5.1 Introduction

In this section I will examine social and cultural influences on the student experience by looking at two microsystems: firstly, university-based peer and friendship groups; and secondly, parents, family, friends, popular culture and the media. The common theme linking the first of these groups is that they are situated geographically within student life and therefore have the greater immediacy to the overall student experience. The common theme linking the second group is that, for the vast majority of Newcastle University Business School students, they are not situated geographically within student life but still have the capacity to affect student life. This is because the vast majority of Newcastle business undergraduates move away from home to study at university.

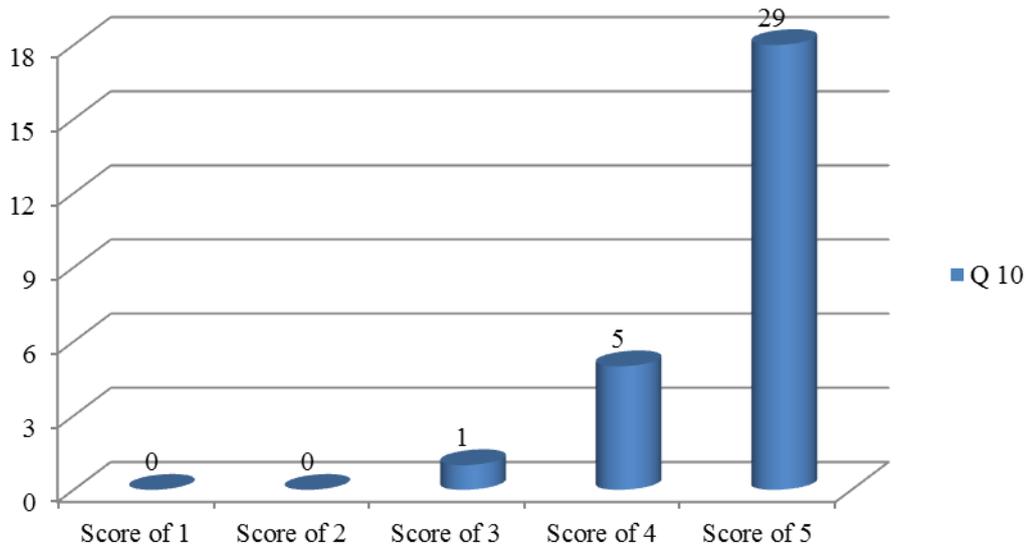
Based on the themes emerging in the literature I sub-divided the second group into three. Firstly, parents and immediate family with whom the student is likely to have a close personal bond. Secondly, friends from home with whom the student might have spent a lot of time prior to coming to university. Thirdly, the broad grouping of popular culture and the media.

5.2 University peer and friendship groups are a significant element of the student experience

During the focus groups, I had used the questionnaire and the answers generated by the Turning Point software as a way to capture both the range of opinion and the strength of opinion in relation to different topics. This range of opinion could then be explored during the subsequent discussion. The answers to the questions about university peer and friendship groups suggested that these groups are a very important part of the overall student experience.

Question ten asked participants whether they agreed with the statement: ‘it is important to have a network of friends while at university’. Participants were asked to answer on a five point Likert scale where “1” was strongly disagree, “3” was neutral and “5” strongly agree. The results are summarised in Figure 5.1 below.

Question 10



Question Grouping: The influence of peers and friendship groups

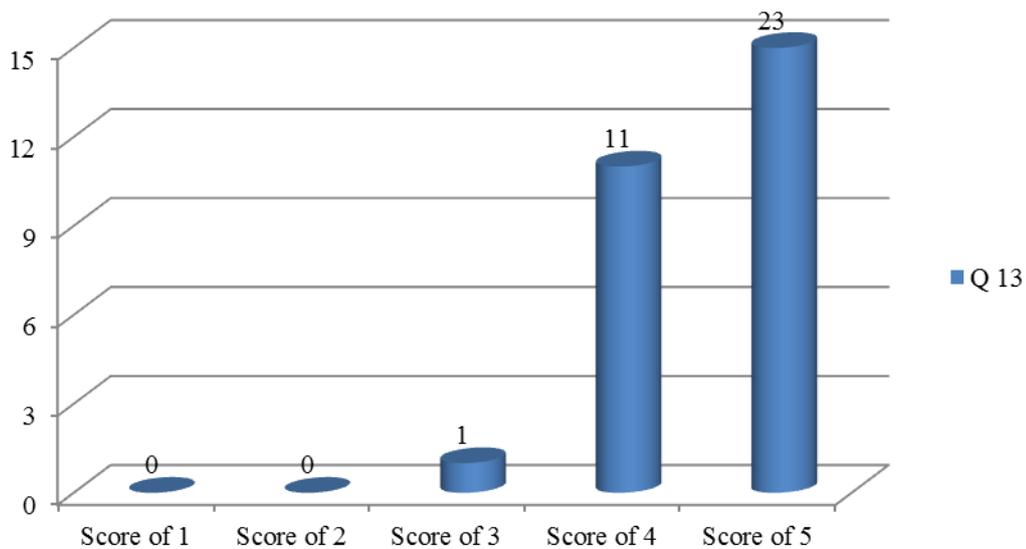
Mean Average Score 4.8
Standard Deviation 0.5

Figure 5.1: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 10, it is important to have a network of friends while at university.

The mean average score for this question was 4.8, which was the highest of any question used during the focus groups. This was the same for both the pilot and the main data collection phase. 29 out of 36 participants strongly agreed with the statement. The answers were very similar whether the participants were male or female, UK or International students.

This strength of feeling was confirmed by the answers to question 13 (summarised in Figure 5.2) which asked participants whether they agreed with the statement - "your peer group (including friends) are an important part of your student experience." Again the same five point scale was used to record the answers.

Question 13



Question Grouping: The influence of peers and friendship groups

Mean Average Score	4.6
Standard Deviation	0.5

Figure 5.2: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 13, your peer group (including friends) are an important part of your student experience.

The mean average score for this question of 4.6 was the second highest of any question in the pilot and third highest of any question in the main data collection phase. Again this was the case whether the participants were male or female, UK or International students.

Clearly the questions resonated with the focus groups and stimulated some interesting discussion which confirmed that university peer and friendship groups are a very important part of the overall student experience. This finding is consistent with numerous studies taking place in a variety of higher education institutions, for example Bank *et al.*, (1990), Brooks (2007), Kember *et al.*, (2001) and Wilcox *et al.*, (2005).

The focus group discussions highlighted that in most cases initial friendship groups had been established because participants had spent their first year in university accommodation and had met other first year students who lived nearby; Thomas (2002) and Wilcox *et al.* (2005). Many friendship groups had developed linked to a hall of

residence/block of student flats. With the exception of one programme, it seemed to take longer for students to establish friendship groups based around their degree programme.

Once initial contact was made, friendship groups tended to become established quickly. There was a clear theme arising that establishment of a strong social network was seen as key to establishing a sense of belonging and wellbeing at university. This theme of how and why friendships form and develop is considered further in the next section.

5.3 Developing relationships with peers and friendship groups

A significant theme emerging in the focus group discussions was that university friendships were different from friendships established prior to coming to university, consistent with Brooks (2007), Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) and Thomas (2002). There were a number of reasons for this. Most Newcastle University Business School students move away from home to come to university and this means that the social and support networks that existed around the home are no longer present. The student has to find a way to replace these. Coming to university also creates access to a much greater range of choices and freedoms for most students. Students also start to make more significant choices about their lives e.g. who they live with, how they socialise and who with, what they spend their time doing. These issues were explored previously in the section on transition and it was apparent that peer and friendship groups play an important role in how students make sense of these changes.

5.3.1 *The support role of peers and friendship groups*

One area in which university based peer and friendship groups provide a substitute to pre-existing networks is in relation to practical and emotional support. For example, within a student house, a group of housemates might form a cohesive entity where housemates were supportive of each other and had concern for each other:

Basically, they’re like your family when you’re here. Especially like first year, and then you live with people and stuff. It’s kind of like in our house, if you’re not home, people are like, ‘Oh, where are they?’ You’re friends but you’re not friends like you were with your friends at home because they’re more like your family. If you have any problems, they’re the only people you can go to, really.

Participant Focus Group 1

Friends provided companionship, especially in times of stress. It was important for participants to feel as though they were part of a group. Most students move out of university accommodation after their first year and into private rented accommodation. Students have to organise themselves into groups and find suitable accommodation. The process of finding a group with which to live carried important symbolic and practical signals about a participant's relative social popularity and success:

You want to feel like you have someone to talk to if there is something wrong. If you've not got any friends then you are just sat alone and you get bored, if you've got friends then you've got something to do.

You need someone to live with in second year - I didn't want to live on my own. It's important to make good friends.

Participants Focus Group 2

Participants noted how a sense of empathy developed amongst their friendship group and how this might be displayed by acts of kindness and support during illness:

Living with all my friends in a house, they're actually your family when you're here. They're the ones that if you feel really ill and you need someone to run and get you paracetamol, they're actually the people that are looking after you, as well as you looking after them. So it's really important, I think.

Participant Focus Group 4

Participants felt that in view of the extent of change and the physical distance away from pre-existing support networks, they were likely to face situations that were unknown territory, situations which they would prefer not to face alone:

Most people have just moved a long way from home, where you feel comfortable. Just things like that, having that group of friends, even if you don't need to rely on them for doing things for you, it can just give you the support you need; there's just times where you obviously do need it.

Participant Focus Group 5

In summary, for many participants friendship groups fulfilled the role of surrogate family:

Like my friends up here, they are basically my family up here.

Participant Focus Group 3

Further, in relation to the support role, this was key, as one participant put it simply:

It's too much of a big change in your life to do it alone,

Participant Focus Group 8

Again these findings are consistent with those from other studies (Brooks, 2007; Brooks and Waters, 2010; Thomas, 2002). Furthermore, this importance is reported as having a wider impact beyond the immediate social microsystem whereby social integration also contributes to the student's wider success at university (Bank *et al.*, 1990; Bennett, 2003; Wilcox *et al.* 2005). In other words the sense of well-being derived from social integration matters in terms of the success of the student overall.

5.3.2 *Negotiating with peers and friends*

One of the themes emerging in the discussion was that student life gave participants an opportunity to make significant choices and decisions during their time at university. Without the structures of family and school life there was a greater degree of freedom but also a greater degree of uncertainty. There was much less of a pre-determined hierarchy and therefore where collective or group decisions needed to be made, these had to be made through negotiation with peers and friends. In particular, peers and friends might not operate to the same priorities and with the same degree of trust as school and family. Participants were acutely aware of these issues but they also recognised that there was potential for their own personal development as a result of learning how to deal with them:

For me as well, it absolutely is necessary for building those social skills that you get from university. University is about the degree and what you learn but really it's about the person that it makes you by being in a situation where it's so intense and you're with people all the time. And overcoming things like, 'Oh Jesus Christ, what to do in this situation. I'm going to overcome it.' And then you grow from that. And I think that's just as important for the development, personal development.

Participant Focus Group 4

We've actually just done a group presentation and for the whole week beforehand we had like a little message feed, all of us, on Facebook and all about our meetings and everything

Participant Focus Group 4

5.3.3 Developing networks of peer and friendship groups

The significance of peers and friendship groups to the student experience is underlined by the efforts participants had made to develop networks of peers and friends:

But whenever I first came to university ... I felt a lot of pressure to go out and find friends because I realised how important they would be. So, in my personal experience, I went out and I made friends with as many people as I could. So, at the minute I've got like a few different social networks rather than one really strong social network.

Participant Focus Group 7

Participants recognised that these networks did not happen by chance and discussed how they had developed an understanding of situations where friends could be made:

I live with several different girls and we're very close knit, but then I have also got a part time job and it is really easy to make friends there and then I am also part of the netball team and it's easy to make friends there ... different groups of people are important to keep yourself busy.

Most of the people I know are people I've worked with in groups for three years. There's not really many ways to get to know people as quick as having to work with them. Especially after the first year.

Participants Focus Group 5

It was recognised that these networks would be of value to the participants while they were at university:

And you're here to enjoy yourself as well. You've got to have mates to do that with.

Participant Focus Group 2

However these networks could also be of value after graduation:

It comes with the whole university package. New friends ... the business course, it is important to have a network of friends. Like so many graduates in future, like "Oh! I may be phoning him for something"

Participant Focus Group 3

A picture emerges of participants developing greater social confidence and increasingly seeking out others that they wished to identify with. Furthermore, differing groups might be accessed or deployed for different aspects of the student experience, such as housemates, social groups, extra-curricula groups or degree programme groups. Again similar themes appear in the literature, for example Brooks (2007), Brooks and Waters (2010) and Kember *et al.* (2001).

5.3.4 *University staff don't belong in the peer and friendship group*

One of the main themes emerging both in this section and the section on transition was that of participants going through a period of change and the value of a network of peer and friendship groups in helping support participants through that change and in helping make sense of it. In that context, one might have thought a student's Personal Tutor would be able to contribute in terms of help and support. However, the consistent view from the focus groups was that however helpful university staff might want to be, that they didn't belong in the more personal aspects of the student experience, a finding consistent with Bank *et al.* (1990), Palmer *et al.* (2009) and Thomas (2002).

The following were typical of the views expressed:

I'd say I think it is important to have a network of friends at university because for most people, you are away from your family and relating the kind of pressures that you're going through, it is important to have

some sort of support system because although the university does have support links, the staff might not necessarily understand exactly what you're feeling and you do need to have a good mix of social and academic life.

Participant Focus Group 7

And also the tutor is a different age group to you. They may look at it from a different viewpoint. But your friends are the same aspect with you, so I think they can help you more.

Participant Focus Group 5

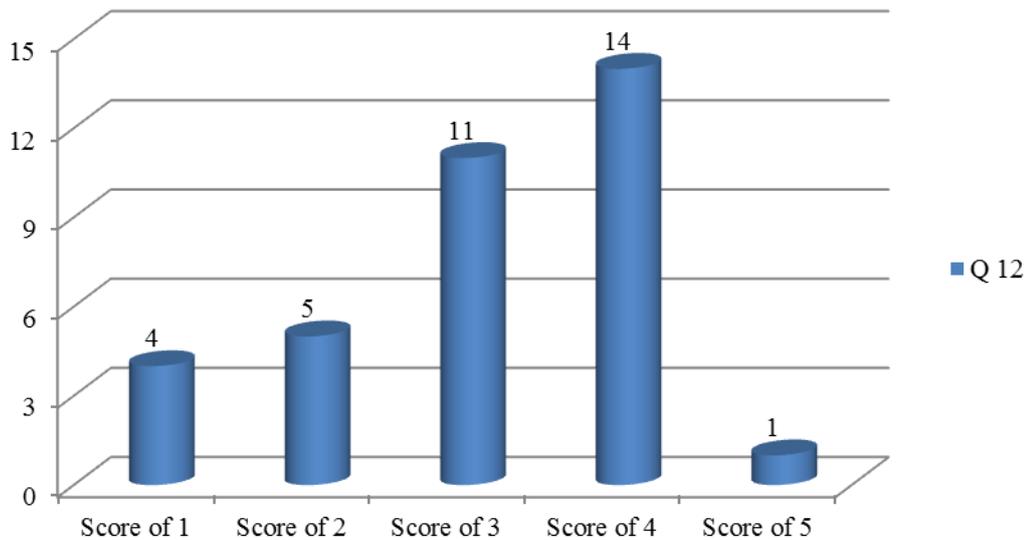
Academic and student support staff were seen as the people to go to for help and information on academic matters. Doubts were expressed about their ability to empathise or understand more personal matters.

5.3.5 *The Nature of the Influence of Peers and Friendship Groups*

In this section I explore the influence of peer and friendship groups. This is important because a major theme in this study is how students increasingly develop independence and autonomy during their time at university and, as part of this process, they move increasingly outside the sphere of parental influence. During this chapter, I have explored how peer and friendship groups fulfil a similar role to that of a family while the student is at university. Accordingly it is important to explore the nature of peer and friendship group influence to understand how it fits into this major theme of developing independence and autonomy.

To initiate a discussion of this topic amongst participants, I used Question 12 to ask whether the views of other students influenced how participants felt about their degree programme, the Business School and the University. Again I used the five point scale ranging from “1” (strongly disagree) to “3” (neutral) to “5” strongly agree and the results are summarised in Figure 5.3 below.

Question 12



Question Grouping: The influence of peers and friendship groups

Mean Average Score 3.1
Standard Deviation 1.1

Figure 5.3: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 12, the views of other students influence how you feel about your Degree Programme, the Business School and the University.

The mean average score was in line with the “neutral” point of 5. There was also a quite wide distribution of answers to this question. At one end of the scale was the viewpoint that other students were not an influence.

I put ‘disagree’ because other students’ views don’t influence how I feel about my degree and the Business School because obviously I’m doing the course, I have my own views on what’s right and wrong, good and bad about it.

Participant Focus Group 1

However, some of the views expressed seem to conform with a logic that, if peers and friends were important to the student experience and if participants spent a lot of time with them and felt part of a social group, then it was reasonable to infer that the views of other students would influence participants’ opinions. However, that viewpoint ignores one key subtlety in that participants were not wedded to a single friendship group for their time at university and could move between groups to reflect their

interests and priorities. Thus individuals might actively seek out those students who shared their own opinions rather than individuals being influenced by accepting the views of others more passively.

I think that the peers we have do influence what we do and how we behave at university. Like say for example, in first year the people I hung out with went out all the time, paid not much attention to their uni work and therefore that is the main thing we did as a peer group and then later on, started hanging out with people who did more work and then even right down to basic things like cooking, you hang out with people that don't cook, you tend to eat out more often. And then you hang out with people that do cook, you start gaining a bit more of an interest so that I think that the people - your peer groups do influence a huge part on the student experience that you have.

Participant Focus Group 7

Consistent with Debard (2004) and Eggens *et al.*, (2008), there was also evidence that participants took the views of others as a benchmark or reference point against which to view their own opinion. Peers and friends provided an additional source of information and a different perspective that helped participants to develop their own opinions. This definition of influence appears to be in line with participants' growing independence and autonomy.

Not that my friends would have an influence but discussing it with everybody, then you hear other people's opinions and things that have happened to them. And everyone seems to come to a general consensus of feeling. So I do think I'm slightly influenced in that sense, hearing different people's views and things that have happened.

Participant Focus Group 1

It's not that it would influence me but when you talk to other people it makes you think that what we do is quite good, in comparison, more than their opinions influence me. So it's comparing it to what other people experience.

Participant Focus Group 8

During chapter four in the sections on transition I discussed participants' feelings about pride in their achievement and specifically, pride in securing a place to study at Newcastle University and pride in being identified with the university. It came through in the discussions that such feelings are powerful emotions, especially amongst a group of students who are used to high levels of academic achievement. Such feelings

reinforced self-esteem and boosted the confidence to take on new challenges. However, the discussions relating to peers and friendship groups highlighted that these emotions were fragile and could be challenged and undermined, especially by peer group attitudes and comments. For example:

When I was in Manchester, I've never had people look down on me so much as when you said you went to Manchester Met; just really bad, I was really shocked at people's reaction. So much so, that I thought I can't do this!

Participant Focus Group 1

The corollary of pride in achievement is disappointment resulting from perceived underachievement. The quote above illustrates how a participant was hurt by the comments made to her because she chose initially to study at a new university rather than Newcastle. Similarly hierarchies would seem to exist within the university and indeed the Business School:

I think there is a view about Newcastle University and my housemates think Marketing and Management is a doss course. They always tease me about, 'Oh, it's such a doss course'. And that...

And what do they study?

English and Psychology. And that like really angers me. But it angers me but it doesn't really affect how I view about the course because I know, at the end of the day, I'll get a job in Marketing.

Participant Focus Group 3

These comments illustrate that other students can and do have a role in the opinion forming process. However the nature of that influence can be quite subtle, influencing opinions at the margin and providing a benchmark against which participants could judge their own opinions. Such opinions might be based on stereotypes or biases rather than any deeper or more reasoned analysis (Schlee *et al.*, 2007). However, whatever the source, there was evidence of a perceived academic hierarchy and strong evidence that the opinions of other students had a role in defining that hierarchy.

Overall, in relation to university peer and friendship groups, a picture emerges of change and to some degree substitution. Pre-university family and social networks start

to drift away from the centre of the student's life to be replaced by university based networks. Furthermore, because of the changes associated with becoming a student, the new networks have the potential to become more intense and wide-ranging. This links back to Bronfenbrenner's (1994, 1999) ecological model of human development. Pre-university social microsystems are displaced from the central mesosystem by university-based social microsystems.

Students' social skills are developed because the key elements required for personal development are present as a result of the experience of coming to university. Specifically, interaction with the university-based social microsystem takes places on a regular basis over a period of time, involving activity that becomes increasingly complex as the student integrates into student life. Finally, that interaction involves a process of reciprocal interaction between the student and their peers/friends as the student starts to make decisions and exert influence over their social group.

5.4 Sharing a Significant Experience with Others

5.4.1 *Becoming a Student, a Shared Rite of Passage*

Another indicator of the strength of influence of peers and friendship groups in the student experience is the sense of kinship apparent both in what was said during the focus groups but also how it was said. For example:

That's what left a lasting impression though, that was about a changing period and some of the best friends that you'll ever have. I could probably sit down and remember what I did in first year and the modules, but that wasn't what left a lasting impression.

Participant Focus Group 6

It's what you'll remember ten years down the line, the people you're at university with and the things you got up to.

Participant Focus Group 8

Participants spoke with clarity and conviction of their sense of a significant shared experience. In particular the experience of going through transition into student life together could make friendships appear especially deep:

That is also a weird thing that very early on you feel like you've known these people for a long time because it's an intense relationship ... in first year straight away so by Christmas, I felt like I'd known these guys for longer than my mates back home, to be honest with you.

Participant Focus Group 3

Furthermore, this sense of togetherness could engender feelings of trust and loyalty:

If you have any problems, I think your first people you find to ask or talk with will be your friends. And then maybe your tutors. Because they are your friends who know you more, they can understand you more in your situation and can give you a more better advice to you, which is fit to you because they know you more.

Participant Focus Group 5

All of these comments are evidence of powerful forces contributing to engagement between participants and university peer and friendship groups. Of course, as discussed in section 5.3.5 above, peer and friendship groups can also contribute to feelings of alienation, an example being where others were critical and/or dismissive of the academic standing of a participant's degree programme. However, by and large the emotions expressed were positive indicating that feelings of engagement outweighed those of alienation.

5.4.2 *The Shared Experiences of Placement Students*

A variation to this theme of a shared sense of kinship was apparent amongst students who had undertaken a placement as part of their programme of study. Such students had not followed the standard three year pattern for their undergraduate degree and therefore had to make additional adjustments. They had to settle into new environments of either work or study. They had to establish new social networks while on placement. They also had to establish new and re-establish existing social networks when returning to Newcastle. This was especially the case for placement students during their fourth year as by then many of their original friendship groups would have graduated.

Participants completing placements reported how these additional challenges marked them out as a different group who had shared a particular sort of development

experience with the result that placement students appeared to feel a particular bond with other placement students. Interestingly, International students also expressed a similar view concerning the special distinctiveness of their own student experience, suggesting that the act of going through an experience together could be the basis of generating strong emotions of togetherness and empathy:

Before I went to France and did that, I had no international friends whatsoever whereas now I have come back and have a lot of international friends who I would never have met.

Participant Focus Group 6

I think placements make it hard, if you're with a group of friends and then you disappear for three months and they're still having the university experience. And then come back ... it probably pulls BAF (Business Accounting and Finance) students more closely together.

Participant Focus Group 8

Similar themes of kinship based around a particular aspect of the student experience are explored by Kember *et al.* (2001) in relation to part-time students and Christie *et al.*, (2008) in relation to non-traditional students studying at an elite UK university.

5.4.3 Opportunity to meet a diverse range of people

Some interesting contradictions emerged in relation to student attitudes to diversity. I can say with confidence that I have yet to observe any outright expressions of prejudice either from participants during the focus groups or from my experiences as an academic in the Business School over a 12 year period. However the process of bringing together a multi-national group of students does result in some differences and contrasts in culture. Given that approximately a quarter of the undergraduate population originate from outside the UK, some difficulties in communication and interaction are to be expected for that group as the majority have a shared native language and the minority rely on having to develop their existing English language skills to a comparable level to the native speakers.

Instances whereby International students had the opportunity to interact with students from outside their home country were seen as very valuable. The following quote made by an International student summarises this sentiment very well.

In the first year, I was staying in the accommodation, Castle Leazes, so we are having dining together, so this is a chance for us to meet other students. So we meet some friends from Spain and Finland. And this is really good chance for me, to meet students from different cultures. And also the group project, from ACC2021, the understanding company accounts, because you are not going to choose your group members but your lecturer is going to allocate you into groups. These are tests, good and bad. Because of this module, I know two local students, they are very good friends to us, very nice to us.

Participant Focus Group 5

Similarly, UK students saw the value of meeting and interacting with a wider range of people than had been the case at school.

The different social classes you get at university is something you probably don't get in any other aspect of life. It's very interesting just to see how people react to different situations. I suppose that is your university experience, apart from your actual degree. That is what you're learning.

Participant Focus Group 5

I think university gives you opportunity to mix with a lot of people that you haven't known before from different areas, different backgrounds, which gives you more of an insight into their experiences and what other people are like; at school obviously it is a very small area that you've actually mixed with. So I think it's really important to mix with a lot of different people.

Participant Focus Group 8

However, there were concerns where UK students perceived that rather than benefitting from being part of a multi-national and multi-cultural student body they might lose out. Possibly the most significant example of this might occur where a student was placed in a group for assessed work where the individual's mark depended on the performance of the group as a whole. Put bluntly UK students did not think it fair that they might receive a lower mark in assessed work because they shared a group with some International students whose English language skills were less well developed.

While such sentiments did not surface directly during the focus groups, they did arise in other forums such as Business School staff-student committees. Furthermore they did not tend to be directed towards International students rather towards the Business School for its recruitment practices in taking students whose English language skills were not sufficiently well developed or towards the design and delivery of teaching and assessment where the implications of assessed group work had not been thought through sufficiently.

5.5 The Differing Perspectives of UK and International students – Culture and Language

While there were many similarities in the perspectives of UK and International students in relation to peers and friendship groups there were also some differences. In outline terms there was a difference of emphasis. Developing a strong peer and friendship group network was very important to UK students and indeed for some it was seen as a measure of success as evidenced in the following exchange:

You need your friends there, you need to be social, and meet with people, and they're there to support you as well.

Do you think there is a pressure on you to have a good network of friends so that somehow you're inadequate if you don't?

If you didn't, you would be quite lonely really.

It might stand out ... we are all in the situation where we see each other's network of friends ... we all know who each other's friends are really. So you know the people who have less friends, so I suppose there is a bit of pressure on!

Do you feel there is some sort of pressure to comply, or pressure to conform?

I wouldn't say pressure.

There's some incentive to?

Yes, because I think if you didn't, you would feel slightly left out, maybe.

Participants Focus Group 8

International student participants still saw peer and friendship groups as important but, amongst some, there was a sense that it should rank secondary to progress with their

studies. There was recognition of the financial investment made by their parents to come to a UK university. Consequently they were more willing to identify instances where the culture attached to the social lives of UK students might interfere with their studies:

When I found out before I came that I was going to live with 5 British people, I thought that my studies were going to be affected because I wouldn't be able to study quietly.

Participant Focus Group 2

While it could be argued that such a view amounts to stereotyping, it does nevertheless reflect perceptions and expectations. One would also expect that the degree of change encountered by many overseas students, involving a move to a different country, relying on a second language (English) for studying and most social interaction and a lack of familiarity with UK HE practices would make it even more important for there to be good support networks. While the developments in technology discussed in the section on family and others make it easier for family and others to continue to fulfil this role, International students still shared the same feelings of a need for a sense of belonging:

And as an International student, I do think that is the way that you settle in here. Quite a long distance from home now, so it's very important to feel we are attached to something, to like get us going. And I think getting friends and taking part in different activities here is a way to establish a linkage between something here.

Participant Focus Group 5

However, a repeated theme was that the process of transition generally, and in particular the process of developing peer and friendship groups, was more difficult because of the language barrier. Any feelings of uncertainty and shyness were amplified by the difficulties of having to rely on English as the principal language of communication, rather than as a second language as illustrated below:

First, when I come here, everything, I will be novice. And I was just thinking about how I will go through a sentence a few times in my mind before I actually say it. Because I make mistakes, vocabulary wise – 'Should I say it, will I sound stupid?' - I had so many issues in my mind. It takes time to overcome those ... but I have a very outgoing personality and I like to meet people. So I think that have advantage, compared to some of the Chinese, as my personality is quite lively.

Participant Focus Group 5

When I first came here ... I didn't have the confidence to speak with the locals, even though I lived with them in the uni accommodation ... I can't really catch up with their sentence at all. Although they were very considerate to speak a little bit slower, but sometimes I still couldn't catch up because sometimes they got some of their Geordie accent.

Participant Focus Group 5

Of course with perseverance, International students did demonstrate remarkable perspectives and achievements as they turned the feelings of adversity that they had at the start of their time at university into a strong positive emotion by the time of their third year:

But I do have one thing to add about that. I think talking to the locals is really good because we can develop our own accent. Even though I have incorporated the Geordie accent but I do think that is a really great thing, to have your own style of English, when you're back home. I do think that is really nice because it gives me a feeling that I got something linked with my experience in the UK but not only the degree that I can bring back home with me.

So part of the place will stay with you?

Yes, exactly. I got something from here and I can feel that there is Newcastle within my heart. I think that's a really good thing.

Participant Focus Group 5

5.6 Parents and Family

Having examined the role of university peer and friendship groups in the first half of the chapter, in the second half I move on to discuss the role of other groups that are not situated geographically within student life but still have the capacity to affect student life.

5.6.1 The impact of new technologies on how students keep in touch with parents and family

For the majority of Newcastle University Business School undergraduates, coming to university involves moving away from home to be in Newcastle during term time (at

least). This shift from being in the family home to living as a student was discussed at length during the section on transition.

A significant theme emerging during the focus groups was that of how the technological developments of the past 10 years have had an impact on the type and regularity of contact with family and friends. Whereas in the past students may have used a payphone (and possibly letters) to keep in touch, now there are a range of media to keep in contact all of which can be accessed easily and at low cost at any time:

How do you tend to keep in contact?

Skype.

Facebook.

Phone calls, texts.

Texts.

Email.

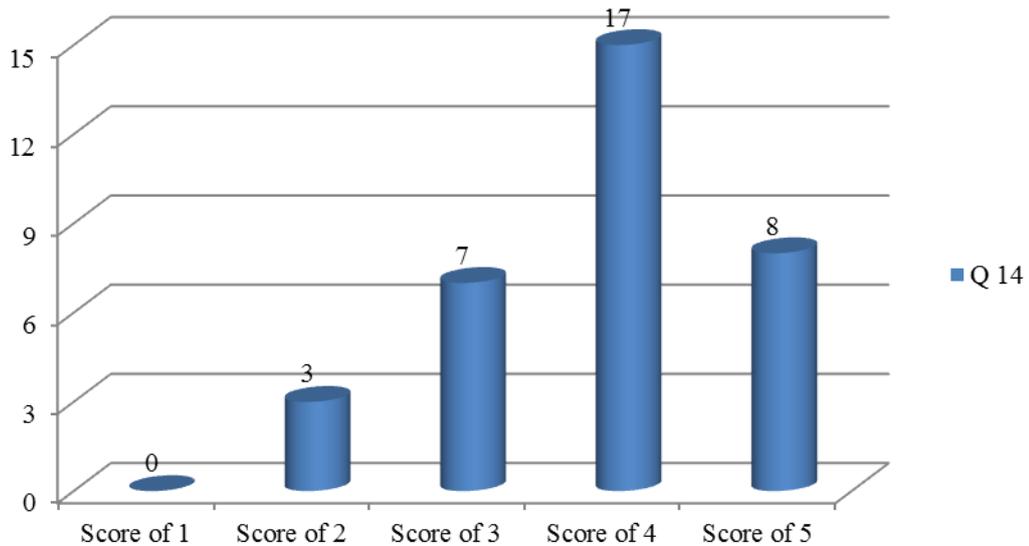
Participants Focus Group 2

I text my mum every day! I text my family quite a lot because it's really easy to just text them. But then my mum will just call me if she wants anything.

Participant Focus Group 1

Question fourteen asked participants "how often do you keep in contact with family and/or friends from outside university". Answers were sought on a 5 point scale with "1" set as monthly, "3" weekly and "5" daily and the results are summarised in Figure 5.4 below.

Question 14



Question Grouping: The influence of others: family, culture and the media

Mean Average Score 3.9
Standard Deviation 0.9

Figure 5.4: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 14, you keep in contact with family and/or friends from outside university.

The majority of participants were in contact regularly (two or more times a week). There were similar results both in terms of the mean average score and the distribution of marks in the pilot study. It is apparent that the widespread availability of electronic communication has influenced the nature and regularity of contact. Participants tended to use mobile phones for voice calls and texting with immediate family, especially parents. For friends other methods, particularly Facebook but also e-mails and Twitter, were mentioned. Most participants had smartphones (or equivalent) which allowed them to stay connected without logging on to a PC or laptop.

Participants reported how communication with immediate family usually consisted of more regular and short interactions, for example text messages or short phone calls rather than say longer weekly phone calls. Consistent with Coomes (2004) and Coomes and DeBard (2004), a consensus seemed to have emerged amongst participants and their peers about what was the "accepted" behaviour and therefore regular contact was not seen as a sign of an inability to cope or of an over-reliance on parents.

Overall, the picture emerges of short and frequent contact, for example through text messages, allowing both parties to keep up-to-date with what is going on in each other's lives and to share experiences. This also shows how the increased ease and convenience of these methods of communication can, to some extent, mediate the impact of moving away.

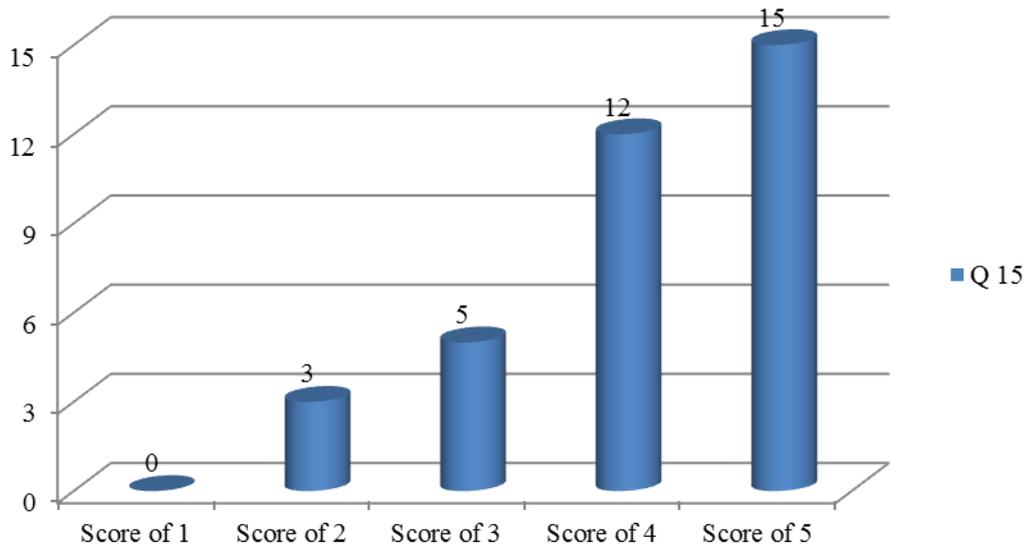
5.6.2 *Re-drafting and Re-evaluating the Relationship with Parents*

A key theme emerging in the discussions was that the action of moving away to university removed the participants and their parents from each other's day to day lives and created the freedoms to enable students to re-draft and re-evaluate their relationships with parents. However, the evidence from the focus groups was that this change did not undermine the relationship with parents as that relationship remained a very important influence on participants and their student experience. This finding is similar to those in studies by Elkins *et al.*, (2000), Coomes and DeBard (2004) and Davis-Kean (2005).

During this part of the focus group I was conscious that I was asking participants to talk about personal aspects of their relationships in front of peers. Consequently, I wanted to approach the subject sensitively so that participants felt comfortable and would be willing to volunteer information about themselves during the discussions. For that reason I chose a fairly practical situation which participants would probably have encountered and would find easy to relate to initiate the discussion. I also chose to include the wording "parents and family". This was a conscious decision as I wished participants to think about the key, most influential relationship within their immediate family. Ordinarily this would be with parents, however for a variety of reasons it could also be with other family members.

Question fifteen asked participants "if they had a problem at university, e.g. a disagreement with flat/housemates or they did worse than expected in some assessed work, would they discuss it with their parents/family". Answers were sought on a 5 point scale with "1" set as no, "3" maybe and "5" yes and these are summarised in Figure 5.5 below.

Question 15



Question Grouping: The influence of others: family, culture and the media

Mean Average Score 4.1
Standard Deviation 1.0

Figure 5.5: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 15, if you had a problem at university, e.g. you had a disagreement with flat/housemates or you did much worse than expected in some assessed work, would you discuss it with your parents/family?

This question was revised following the pilot. The original question simply said “if you had a problem would you discuss it?”. The main stage question was more explicit giving the examples of disagreement with housemates or a bad mark in a module. The average for the question increased from 3.5 for the pilot to 4.1 for the main study.

Participants spoke fluently on this subject and were willing to link their views to broader themes about independence and growing up. Discussing issues with parents did not amount to asking for permission to do something or represent inadequacy as the student had the opportunity to choose whether or not to discuss things. There was evidence of the participants making a considered decision of whether or not to raise issues and ask for advice based on the circumstances:

Yes, if I've ever got a problem, I'll always want my mum's advice, just because I trust her and I know she's not biased. Whereas friends often can be.

That's the thing, if you're talking to your parents and they're away from it, it's kind of an objective view. They're miles away but you can explain to them what's happening up here and then they can give you an honest opinion and you know you can trust it.

It's good to get that outside perspective, as well.

Participants Focus Group 1

I said maybe because it depends on the circumstances. I mean if it was something severe, yes, I would certainly tell my parents but I suppose I'm a bit stubborn. If it was a disagreement, I would want to work it out myself. Not because I can't, because if it was serious, I would seek help from my parents, yes. But if it was a disagreement, I'd want to work things out myself, really.

Participant Focus Group 7

Thus it remained the participants' choice as to whether or not to raise the issue and whether or not to follow advice given if they did raise it. This is consistent with a developing and maturing relationship with the student starting to set the agenda for the relationship rather than following a set of rules.

I would talk to my Mum about all the situations because like she feels interested. She's hearing about me, she's hearing about how I'm keeping or whatever. But if I was complaining and yapping to her all the time, she would start to worry again that I wasn't doing so well so maybe I wouldn't tell her. I don't want to worry her but I want her to know I'm doing fine. I want her to know that I am doing well and I'm growing up.

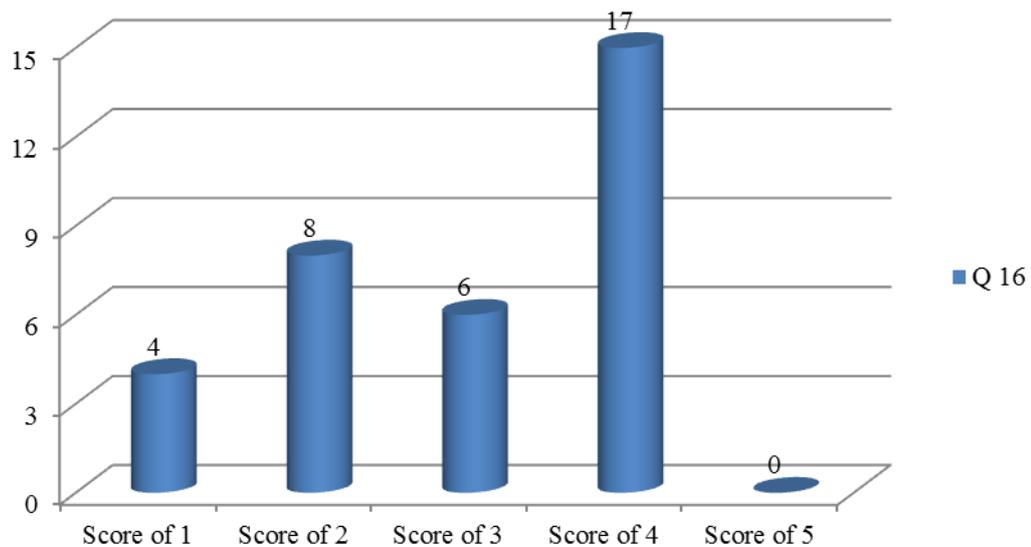
Participant Focus Group 7

Maybe when I was younger, maybe I would've just told them because I wasn't as independent before; they can sort it out - that sort of mentality. But now I think no, I can sort it out myself.

Participant Focus Group 7

I sought to develop my understanding of this theme of developing independence through question sixteen (see Figure 5.6) and the discussion that followed it. This asked participants whether family had become less of an influence on them during their time as a student. On the 5 point scale, "1" rated as strongly disagree, "3" as neutral and "5" as strongly agree.

Question 16



Question Grouping: The influence of others: family, culture and the media

Mean Average Score 3.0
Standard Deviation 1.1

Figure 5.6: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 15, your family have become less of an influence on you during your time as a student.

This brought quite a range of answers with just under half agreeing but a third disagreeing, in some cases strongly. However, in situations like these the discussion allowed me to explore the issue with participants, thereby providing a rich source of data which explored these contrasting and complementary themes.

On one level the establishment of an independent student life away from home with the student being free to make decisions about what they did and when is consistent with a reducing parental influence:

It's like you're living in a bubble and they're not in it.

Participant Focus Group 2

I think it's part of growing up as well, isn't it, and going away? Fully-fledged adults, as it were.

Participant Focus Group 7

However, for most participants there was a sense that family were not becoming more peripheral. Some reported that they still felt as close and well connected with their family, especially parents even though they didn't spend as much time together as in the past. For many participants it was not so much a case of parental influence becoming less but more a case of the nature of the parental influence becoming re-defined.

The picture emerged of parents still being a key source of values and attitudes, consistent with the findings of Bank *et al.* (1990), Brooks and Waters (2010) and Davis-Kean (2005). However the freedoms and independence of student life were giving participants the opportunity to decide on whether to retain those values through informed choice rather than through compliance, something that might have been the case when they lived at home.

I think it's more they're less of an influence because they're not there. But like your actual values and your beliefs, your family influences that; regardless of if you're at home or not, I think they're always going to influence you in that way – indirectly influence, rather than directly.

Participant Focus Group 1

I've been growing up and thankful for all the stuff they've done in the past so I want to show them I'm taking a good influence so I do listen to what they say and I do take some influence from them but at the end of the day, I feel more of an adult now so I live my own life.

Participant Focus Group 7

Again, this is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's human ecological model whereby as the parental influence recedes from the day-to-day, the level of its direct influence on the student's future development diminishes. However, the evidence from the focus groups was that the impact of the parental influence on development prior to university remains strong so that it continues to exert a significant influence on the student's values and beliefs. In effect, the parental influence continues to provide a lens through which the individual can view their future growth and development. However, the growing independence of the student means that when looking to the future, they can now choose whether or not to lift that lens to their eye. Thus, overall, there was a sense of seeking and finding a new equilibrium in the relationship, with parents being seen as a trusted source of advice but with the participants themselves believing that they should be taking responsibility for their own lives.

After four years you are more than capable of making your own decisions about things and sorting them out your own way.

If I'm concerned about something then I will speak to my mum and dad, but if I'm comfortable in myself I will go ahead and make the decision. But I'd always go to them if I was not sure about it.

Participants Focus Group 8

On occasion this could result in uncertainties about the appropriate etiquette to follow, as for example when visiting home. Were the students now guests in the family home or were they still living at home? Also what were the appropriate adjustments to make when living at home compared with being at university?

Are the terms of the relationship different or is it different being at home?

Yes, it's like, 'Why are you asking me all these questions?!'

'Are you in for tea?'

You're not as independent; I suppose you notice it more now.

Is that about practicalities or is it a little bit about boundaries within the relationship?

I think it is practical, they just want to know what you're doing because at university you can walk out the door if people aren't up and not have to tell them where you're going. It's a bit different when it's your parents because they're used to you keeping them up to date with what you're doing and when you're around, so they know to leave stuff out for you or whatever.

Participants Focus Group 8

Finally, it is interesting to reflect on how the development of new technologies may have influenced these changes to the relationship between participants and their parents. Certainly the availability, convenience and low cost have made it easier for students to keep in touch with their parents and share more of the day-to-day of their lives. Similarly a conversation by mobile phone in a student room (today) is a more conducive forum for sharing more personal matters than the setting of a public phone box on a street (the experience of 20 years ago).

5.6.3 Comparing the Relationship with Family to the Relationship with Peer and Friendship Groups

It is interesting to compare and contrast the relationship with parents and family with that with peer and friendship groups. Section 5.3.1 examined the support role of peer and friendship groups. During the discussions some participants expressed the view that friendship groups acted as a surrogate family, fulfilling the various support roles that family had provided in the home environment. However further exploration of the subject revealed that participants felt that the level and degree of support was not actually as well developed as that provided by family.

For example parental approval and praise were very powerful factors for many participants. While friends might be influential in the opinion forming process, parents could evoke an emotional response closely connected to participants' feelings of personal success and achievement. This emotional power seemed to be so well etched into participants that it had been unaffected by all the changes that had taken place since coming to university:

I think with my mum, she's the one paying my rent so she's the one supporting me through uni, so she wants to know I'm doing well. I think even if I'd got promotion at work, I'd ring and tell her because she's proud of me. You can tell your friends and they can be like, 'well done' but I don't think it's the same as getting praise from your parents or brothers and sisters. I think it means more to hear it from them.

Participant Focus Group 2

Connected to this was a sense that for many participants parents care in a way that friends don't, or maybe can't. The relationship with parents was seen as unconditional, and as a result it operated at a different level of trust and understanding:

Yes, exactly. The same with if I got a disappointing mark, although she'd probably be disappointed as well, she'd give me a kick up the bum and just be like, 'Well, now you know you need to get stuck in and get your head down and work.' Whereas if I told my friends, they'd just be like, 'Well, whatever.'

Participant Focus Group 2

It's someone to talk to, I think; someone external, as well; give you advice. Someone that knows you quite well. And wants the best for you, as well.

Participant Focus Group 4

Parents were still seen as a key source of advice or guidance. Respected for their experience and calmness, they were spoken of as someone to go to in times of uncertainty or when seeking re-assurance.

My dad has done accountancy, so if I'm revising one of my accountancy modules, I actually spend a lot of the time on the phone to him, asking him to explain stuff to me.

Participant Focus Group 4

Yes, they do influence you a lot, I think. And I was actually getting very stressed with applications in September, to the point where I was really getting behind in my work, and it was getting very stressful. And it was when my dad turned round to me and said, 'Look, get your degree. You can get a job next year; you can't get your degree next year.' You sometimes need people like that, who know what they're talking about, to say these things.

Participant Focus Group 4

A further aspect was that of emotional openness. Some participants discussed how they felt able to be more open and express emotions to their parents, in a way that they wouldn't do to anyone else. This ability did depend to some extent on the capacity of that specific relationship to explore such grounds as not everyone is given to articulating such feelings. However, what did come through was that the challenges of student life presented difficulties for participants to overcome. In some cases parents could provide a level of support in overcoming those challenges that no other group could do. This was due to the greater level of trust that existed with parents that meant that participants were more willing to articulate feelings without reservation and fear of being teased, something that might not be the case with friends:

And maybe express your emotion. Because you feel sad about it, you just want to talk with your parents maybe.

Participant Focus Group 5

They've become more of an influence. Because one time, I wouldn't go to them for anything, whereas now I basically talk to my dad about pretty much anything that's bothering us. Because he's good at just figuring stuff and he's been through similar stuff. Because he went to St Andrew's and he said he didn't really enjoy it at the time. So when I had problems, I went to him, which I'd never done, ever, before. And since then, I've thought well if I do have any problems, I can just go to him and talk to him about that. Whereas something like if you went to your mates about ... some of mine would just take the mick and wouldn't really care. I'm just talking about trivial stuff at that point, but still, they would rib us a bit; whereas he'll talk.

So being away, in a way, has redefined your relationship with your parents?

Yes.

A similar thing. When you live with someone every day for 18 years, you take each other for granted a little bit. But when you get a bit of space ... I'm sure my parents thought I was just an idiot before I came to university but now you sort of grow up a bit and they realise ... they value your decisions a little bit more and you just have a better relationship with them.

Participant Focus Group 5

5.7 Friends from Home

Friends from home were still important to participants although now they tended to be more in the background. Again, technological advances have had an impact and there were examples of how these advances had made it possible to continue to share experiences with friends from home in a way that was not previously possible.

With all my friends at home we have a thread on Facebook and we write on it, which is pretty good. I'd say it's more important for seeing what people are doing than having to speak to them all the time. And you feel that closeness because you can see what they've been doing – like stalking!

Participant Focus Group 1

My best friend lives in LA and obviously with time differences and everything, we can't really keep in contact that often. We speak on Skype once a month. But it's amazing.

Participant Focus Group 4

Friends from home did not generally arise in the discussions. Overall, it was not so much that friends from home had become unimportant, it was more that (for most participants) they were outside the immediate environment of student life and therefore were not an influence in the same way that they had been previously.

your friends as well, from outside university.....it's maybe one of those things that gets neglected while you're at university, until you get back home, and then suddenly it's like, 'Oh, we all need to meet up again' and then spend summer with them completely and then everyone goes their own way.

Participant Focus Group 8

As I've gone through it, I've realised how important it is to keep in contact with our friends and family; like outside of university, to make a conscious effort to call them twice a week or whatever. I think in first year, I got a bit slack and you become so involved up here and then as you get older, you realise it's just as important to have your friends outside of uni.

Participant Focus Group 1

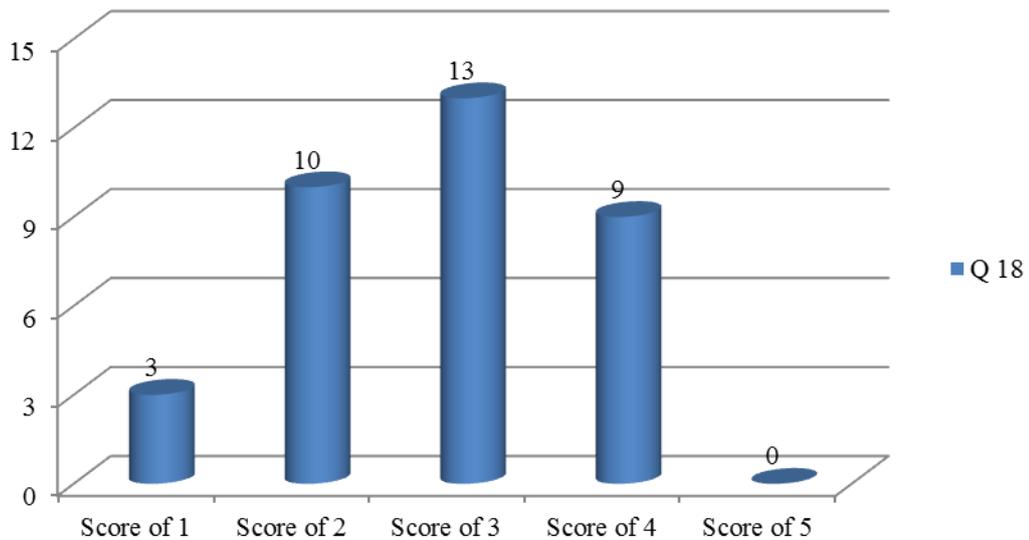
5.8 Popular Culture and the Media

5.8.1 Awareness but not Influence

In the literature there were a number of studies that examined the influence of popular culture and the media on students' perceptions. For example, Byrne and Willis (2005) and Cory *et al.*, (2007) examined the influences on perceptions of professional work. Rothwell *et al.*, (2008) and Schlee *et al.* (2007) examined the influences on perceptions relating to employability and Coomes (2004), Coomes and DeBard (2004) and DeBard (2004) examined the influences on students' views about wider aspects of society. I wanted to explore this issue during my study to the extent that it had an influence on the student experience. In particular, I wanted to understand whether there was any evidence that popular culture and the media influenced students' behaviour and the student experience more generally.

Question eighteen asked participants whether they thought that the impression of student life given by popular culture and the media created any pressures for them to behave in a certain way? On the 5 point scale, "1" rated as strongly disagree, "3" as neutral and "5" as strongly agree. The answers are summarised in Figure 5.7 below.

Question 18



Question Grouping: The influence of others: family, culture and the media.

Mean Average Score 2.8
Standard Deviation 0.9

Figure 5.7: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 18, do you think that the impression of student life given by popular culture and the media create any pressures for you to behave in a certain way?

Only 9 of 35 participants agreed with the proposition, no-one strongly agreed. 10 disagreed and 3 disagreed strongly. So based on the answers to the question there was a degree of scepticism as to the influence of the media on behaviour. This view was developed further during the discussion that followed.

If people want to think that we always sit around doing nothing and eating beans than that's fine, but I am not really pressured the other way really either, to be like, right I'm going to prove them wrong. I think personally my individual performance and what I choose to do and the way I behave at university is my choice and is up to me.

Participant Focus Group 6

5.8.2 *Use of Stereotypes*

The general theme that there was an awareness of the media image of student life but that it had little relevance or influence was developed further. Participants felt that the media tended to use stereotypes rather than to portray things in a balanced, accurate manner. This was felt to be both judgemental and unhelpful:

For me, I think it only portrays more of the bad side ... like recently, there was this issue about binge drinking, drinking games and stuff. You don't actually see the good stuff ... like I have some friends at Cambridge and, let's see, if I asked them, what do you do in your free time? I'll get answers like "oh, we will be discussing maths questions in the library" and stuff.

Participant Focus Group 3

I think they tend to portray more extremes; either people who get drunk every night, pass out on the street, do stuff to war memorials, or maybe the people that are on University Challenge. I would say the majority of people are in the middle somewhere, that's probably not portrayed as much.

Participant Focus Group 8

Participants observed that a recurrent theme in the media was that of excessive drinking and an alcohol culture amongst students:

The only thing I can think of is there's always something in the paper about binge drinking, students getting really drunk.

Participant Focus Group 1

I think in the newspapers and things, they're always banging on about the binge drinking culture

Participant Focus Group 2

Participants also spoke of the tendency of some parts of the media to demonise students who were caught doing irresponsible things. While it was acknowledged that behaviour could be irresponsible and thoughtless, it was also felt that a greater degree of proportionality was required if, for example, there was a single irresponsible action that was out of character. The incident discussed below was referred to several times:

I don't know if you saw in the paper about 8 or 9 months ago, there was a lad at Sheffield University and he'd been out on carnage – he'd

got drunk and gone for a wee on a memorial statue. Well, I know him from home and I felt really sorry for him because I think that could have happened to absolutely anybody. And yeah, it's not a nice thing to do and he shouldn't have done it but I think if it was a month later, if it wasn't anywhere near remembrance day, if there weren't poppies out, it would have just been seen as...I do understand the side effects of it but I think the media, they were absolutely horrific to him.

Participant Focus Group 2

This dislike and mistrust of generalisations could be viewed as a defensive response to criticisms of undergraduate students as a group. It is consistent with themes identified elsewhere in the study that participants were keen to emphasise that they made their own mind up about things, independent from the influence of others. However it contrasts with Schlee *et al.* (2007), who found evidence of stereotyping and bias by students in the development both of opinions of themselves and opinions of other students.

Interestingly, it does seem to confirm the desire of participants to be seen as respectful of and conforming to societal norms and expectations, a theme developed by Coomes and DeBard (2004) and DeBard (2004). Certainly participants showed no desire to shock in their discussion of behaviour or to challenge the status quo.

5.8.3 Other Aspects of Social Media

Some interesting viewpoints emerged in relation to social media. Given the importance attached to social interaction in the student experience, I expected that participants would appreciate the benefits that social media brought in terms of greater ease and convenience of communication. However participants also identified some negative factors brought about by the impact of social media on patterns of behaviour and culture.

One thing that really, really annoys me is when you're in the pub and someone gets their phone out and sits there and they'll be on Facebook for about 10 minutes, they won't say anything, just sit there. Just like, 'If you're sitting round the table with people, talk!' It can't be that important!

Participant Focus Group 5

It's at saturation point; it's just so much a part of your daily life that you don't even think about going on Facebook when you log on ... like if you go on the Internet, you'll go on Facebook.

Participant Focus Group 1

I think it is so bad, in the fact I can spend hours on it. It's just wasting my time. It makes you depressed because you think everyone is having a better time than you.

Participant Focus Group 3

There was also discussion about how Facebook accounts might look to employers or potential employers and of the uncertainties as to where the boundaries lay between social and professional life.

I was talking to a friend who's doing Law and he was told in an interview: have you got a Facebook? And he said yes. 'Delete all pictures that might be in any way...' like show you, I don't know, on a night out. Nothing bad or anything - it's just anything that's not formal, he was told "get rid of it"

It's strange; its biggest advantage actually is its biggest disadvantage. It can get too far, can't it?

Participants Focus Group 7

One of the senior managers at the place I worked tried to add me on Facebook, very recently. I had a bit of a dilemma on what you do - do you leave it and just ignore them completely or do you let them and they start seeing things that maybe you shouldn't have on there?

Participant Focus Group 8

5.9 Conclusion

During this chapter I have examined the influence of social and cultural influences; firstly, university based peer and friendship groups and secondly, parents, family, friends, popular culture and the media.

In relation to university peer and friendship groups, I found that four key themes emerged and these are summarised in figure 5.8 below.

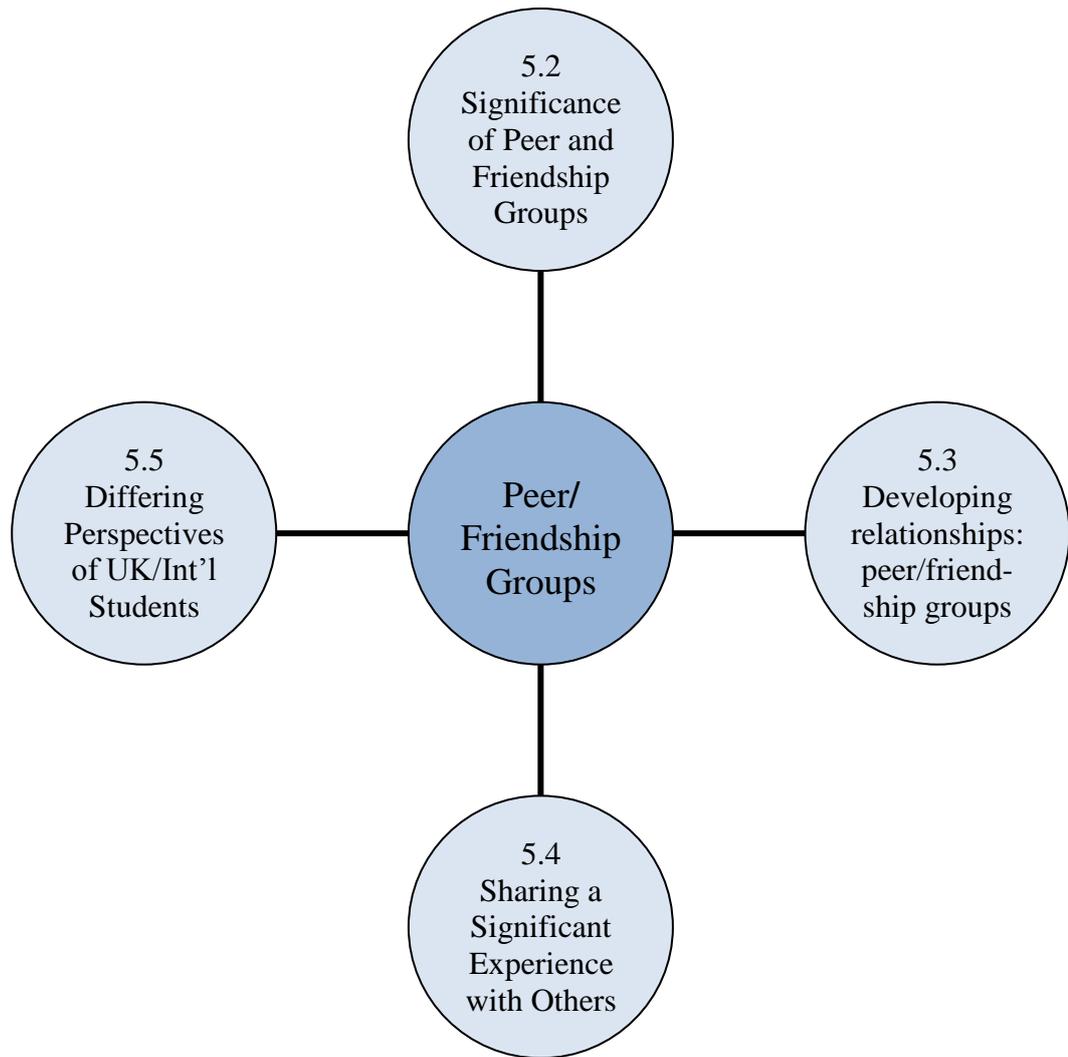


Figure 5.8: A Diagrammatic Representation of the Influence of University Peer and Friendship Groups.

In section 5.2 I discussed the significance of university peer and friendship groups. There was sufficient evidence from the focus groups to conclude that interaction with other students, particularly friendship groups, is a key microsystem in the student experience.

In section 5.3 I explored these relationships further. There was evidence that these relationships play a key support role (acting as a surrogate family to some) and are a source of considerable personal development, contributing to a growing sense of participants' independence and autonomy. Peer and friendship group networks contribute to the immediate student experience, but they are also seen a source of contacts for the future. Peers and friends also form a benchmark against which students

can judge themselves and develop their opinions. In contrast, university staff exist outside this world and have less influence.

Section 5.4 examined the effect that a sense of shared experience has on relationships. Going through similar experiences such as transition and placements had the potential to create a common bond and perspective amongst participants. The opportunity to meet a diverse group of other students of differing backgrounds and nationalities was seen as beneficial, although also potentially problematic. Next, Section 5.5 examined differences between UK and International students, in particular the influence of language and culture.

The second half of the chapter looked at three groups who influence the student experience but who are not geographically located within the student experience. These were parents and immediate family, friends from home and popular culture and the media.

Section 5.6 examined the influence of parents and family. Participants reported how they make extensive use of mobile and Internet based communication to keep in touch with family. Following on from this I discussed how the relationship with parents, in particular, was changing as a result of being at university. I then compared this relationship to the relationship with peer and friendship groups, which had been identified as a key influence on the student experience earlier in the chapter. While peers and friends were important and could fulfil a surrogate family role, parents still remained a key relationship, based around seemingly unconditional levels of trust and confidence for some participants. There were some interesting issues concerning whether or not the parental and family microsystem could be said to be drifting away from the mesosystem to be replaced by the university peer and friendship microsystem, and the extent to which the growing independence of participants contributed to a re-drafting of their relationship with parents and family.

Section 5.7 looked at the influence of friends from home. Improved communication technologies have made it easier for participants to keep in contact with this group, however it remains in the background in terms of the student experience. Finally, section 5.8 examined popular culture and the media. Participants were well aware of

the media image of student life but felt that it relied heavily on stereotypes and generalisations.

Chapter Six - The Degree Programme

6.1 Introduction

This section will examine the themes emerging from the data concerning participants' formal learning experience - the Degree Programme. The chapter is sub-divided into five main sections. Section 6.2 examines participants' perceptions of the curriculum, focusing particularly on the areas of credibility, coherence and relevance. Section 6.3 examines perceptions about delivery of participants' degree programmes before moving on to consider academic teaching staff in section 6.4. Section 6.5 considers assessment and feedback while section 6.6 takes an overview by examining the nature and extent of academic development over the duration of the degree programme.

6.2 The Curriculum

6.2.1 *Academic Credibility*

One of the significant themes emerging in the section on transition was the feelings students had about their success in obtaining a place at a Russell Group university. There was a clear sense of pride in their achievement based on their judgement that the University had academic credibility. Accordingly, focus group participants had an expectation that their chosen degree programme would live up to this reputation and that there would be high standards both in the design and the delivery of their programme. As a consequence, participants expected to have to work hard to do well and to find aspects of the curriculum and the assessment challenging.

So being on a hard degree is a good thing?

Yes. It means you haven't got a Mickey Mouse degree, what people say is a Mickey Mouse degree.

People do take their degree, what they do, quite seriously. It would feel awful if someone turned round to you and said, 'Oh, that's an easy degree.'

If someone turned round to me and said, 'Economics, it's easy', then I'd think well maybe for you but it's certainly not for me. It is quite important to you that you feel like you're doing an important degree and you're enjoying it and it's worthwhile.

Participants Focus Group 4

High standards have implications for students as they require them to stretch themselves to meet these high academic standards, however as Chickering and Gamson (1987) identify in their seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, high expectations frequently result in high(er) achievement. Participants declared themselves content with such a proposition, the following quotes being typical:

So a bit of challenge is fine?

I think challenge is good. xxx xxxxx (lecturer's name) certainly gives you so much challenge but it pulls you on so much.

He will challenge you a lot but at the same time you feel like you can go and speak to him and he'll get it out of you.

Have you had xxx xxxxx (lecturer's name), who's Economics?

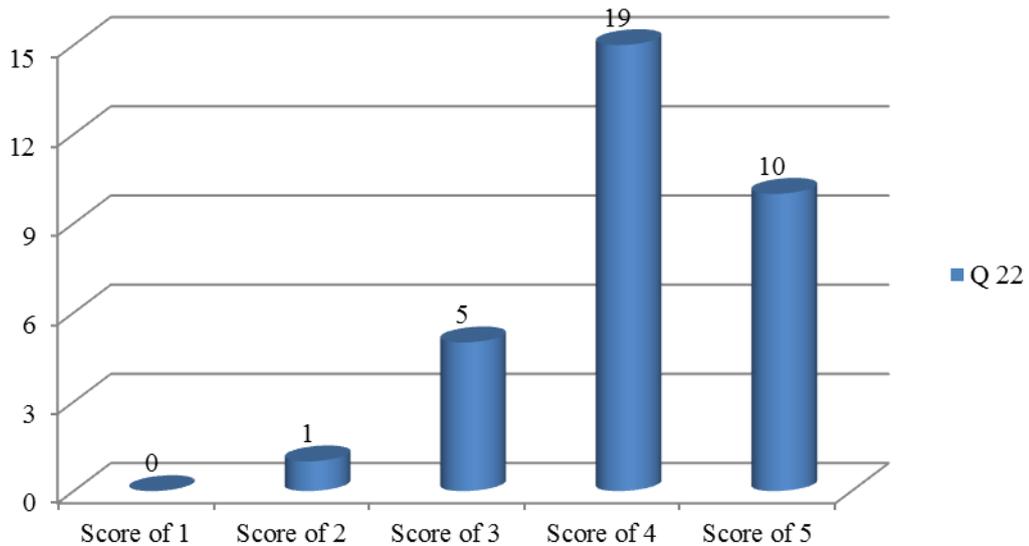
No, I haven't.

He puts you on the spot; it's a big lecture and he directs the question right at you. But you know, I think that's good because you're alert and you're going to make sure you know that. And sometimes you feel a bit intimidated but the problem is some of the lecturers ask a question and nobody answers. Five minutes later, nobody has answered. And if they just directed it, even by eye contact, then you'd feel like you have to answer more. So a lack of control in that area.

Participants Focus Group 4

Question 22 (see Figure 6.1 below) asked participants whether overall, their degree programme had stretched them intellectually and changed the way they think about things. Again a 5 point Likert scale was used with answers ranging from 1 being "strongly disagree" through 3 "neutral" to 5 "strongly disagree".

Question 22



Question Grouping: The influence of your degree programme.

Mean Average Score	4.1
Standard Deviation	0.7

Figure 6.1: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 22, overall, your degree programme has stretched you intellectually and changed the way you think about things.

While the distribution of answers was consistent with a general level of approval, the content and tone of many of the discussions gave the impression of a qualified level of agreement. There was a general consensus that the final year of all the programmes presented challenges.

I think so, I think especially this year it has stretched me intellectually.

Participant Focus Group 6

I think this year I've noticed more when I 'm doing work, or when I'm reading through an article, I feel that it's all integrated now - all of the work I put in in first and second year - I'm noticing things more. I've built up a body of knowledge

Participant Focus Group 7

However, there was also a sense of disappointment with participants feeling that there had been a missed opportunity. Where there had been intellectual development, for

some participants this had only come during the final year with too much of the first and second years being undemanding.

In first or second year, especially first year, I just felt that everything we were being taught - because I did Economics and Business - everything was the same and I was just bored. Even some of the essays I did were similar to my A Level and it just felt like the only reason I was in first year was to get used to university, not to actually learn anything.

Participant Focus Group 1

Modules that participants perceived to be lacking in challenge were generally referred to in critical terms. By contrast, more challenging modules (and learning experiences generally) were accorded respect. In order to understand this issue better, I asked some exploratory questions. The picture that emerged was that certain modules were seen as easy because the syllabus and assessment were viewed as undemanding. Students could succeed without having to learn or develop new knowledge or skills. Such modules were perceived to undermine both the incentive for a conscientious approach to study and, indeed, the value of the degree. When I pointed out that well prepared students can benefit from easy modules as well, because a well prepared student might be able to score very highly and thereby improve their overall stage average, the response was that I had missed the point. In effect, consistent incentives for conscientious study were required in order to maintain respect for, and the integrity of, the qualification.

There was also a sense that there was a lack of clarity, direction and structure about aspects of the curriculum that contributed to a sense of drift and a lack of challenge. This is significant as there is a consistent theme in the literature of the importance of a well-designed curriculum in motivating students (Astin, 1999; Kember, 2004; Vermeulen and Schmidt, 2008). Students found it difficult to fill this gap themselves with the result that the perceived lack of challenge also had the potential to contribute to a lack of urgency or drift, as illustrated below:

Slightly related question - should it stretch you more?

Yes; definitely first and second year, it was easy to slip into periods of not doing very much and periods where you don't have to give anything in. It's different in third year because you know that it is the main body of what your degree is going to be. I think maybe first and second year it should possibly stretch you because that would prepare you to work harder in your third year.

Participant Focus Group 1

Participants identified this issue as a risk and were willing to identify possible solutions to promote a more consistent work ethic:

I also think to have seminars where you have to do the work and registers are taken and that register will take into consideration for end of year exams. In those seminars if you knew you had to go every month and do a seminar I think that makes such a difference because you do things more consistently throughout the year rather than cram them in at the end.

Participant Focus Group 1

By contrast where participants felt that their degree programme had challenged them and that the content was consistent with their desire for academic and personal development, there was strong approval for their experience again in line with Astin, 1999; Kember, 2004; Vermeulen and Schmidt, 2008.

Everyone is interested in Business, otherwise they wouldn't be on the degree, but now with the dissertation and FA (financial analysis module) you can pick something really specific that you're interested in; something that you chose to do. So I found it quite interesting to be able to do that.

Participant Focus Group 8

I think I was quite lucky in the way in that with A Levels I could turn up and learn and then with a bit of revision, sit my exams. With this it is much more of a challenge. I spend a lot more time trying to learn things and trying to get your head round things than I would have done at A Level; it's definitely stretched me intellectually.

Participant Focus Group 8

However, the positive endorsements such as the ones above were in the minority. Overall considerable dissatisfaction was expressed by participants. The next few sections will examine the themes arising from my analysis. In order to provide perspective, I will intersperse these manifestations of disappointment with examples of instances where the degree programme did meet expectations and provide the sort of experience that participants desired.

6.2.2 *Coherence of the Curriculum*

Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the curriculum. While business-based programmes will often draw from a number of sub-disciplines, there was a feeling that not enough was done to package together the various strands to form a coherent programme. The value of a systematic approach to curriculum design is emphasised, amongst others, by Astin (1999), Knight and Yorke (2003) and Bryson and Hand (2007). In the absence of a clear articulation and development of the curriculum, participants found it difficult to make sense of what they were studying and why. For example, some of the participants in focus group 1 talked about the Marketing degree:

I did marketing, straight marketing; I thought the modules would be more about marketing, rather than general. The modules, you can't pick them and it sort of covers everything but it's not specific at all, so you could pretty much be doing any business course, I imagine.

Participant Focus Group 1

But it just didn't really seem to apply to what you would perceive a marketing course to actually teach you.

Participant Focus Group 1

However, the criticism was not solely confined to issues of academic coherence. There was also a view that programmes might ask questions without ever exploring what the answers to those questions might be. While such an approach might be consistent with higher levels of academic enquiry and, indeed, reflect some of the uncertainties inherent in professional life, such an approach wasn't consistent with students' desire to acquire knowledge and skills that would enable them to contribute in the workplace. This suggests that either this element of the curriculum was not being made clear or that it was absent. This point is considered further below:

So, I've not really learnt anything to do with - I'm doing Business Management - will I come out of this knowing how to manage somebody? No. Will I come out of this knowing there's a whole bunch of problems managing people? Yes. You know, that's about the extent that you can come out with this.

Participant Focus Group 3

6.2.3 Relevance of the Curriculum: Theory and Practice

There were also issues about the role of theory in the curriculum and the extent to which theory was linked to practice. Participants generally had an expectation of relevance, that Business is an applied subject rather than a pure academic subject and that this should be reflected in the curriculum.

First year was very 'A' level kind of repeated and I just haven't, the whole time, found it very creative ... the dissertation thing we have is still theoretical whereas the management one was actually based on a company. I thought it would have been a bit better if we'd both had the chance to do it on an actual company. We've done a lot of theory.

So you expected it to be more specialised and more applied?

Yes, like practical and how you'd do things in a company, rather than 'in theory'.

Yes, just lots of theory.

Participants Focus Group 1

Like with Marketing, the practical side of things, I think there needs to be more improvement on that for the degree programme because practically, I couldn't implement a lot of it.

Participant Focus Group 2

It wouldn't be fair to say that participants were dismissive of theory rather that they felt that the balance was wrong, because the exposition of theory was presented as an end in itself rather than as a way to illuminate the understanding of business in practice. As a consequence, for some participants the syllabus was seen as too remote from what they wanted to learn and what they felt would be beneficial to them in the future. In these circumstances, some participants expressed sentiments consistent with feelings of alienation rather than engagement:

You don't get necessary practical knowledge; you just get hard-to-get knowledge. And there's not one clear way to do something which is fine, I understand that. But you probably don't need 3 years of learning that. I would say, and one of my key things was that I thought it was going to teach me something - lots of skills useful in setting up a business - which basically it hasn't.

Participant Focus Group 3

I feel a lot of it is maybe like common sense. And sometimes - like I do learn - it's interesting, but I feel like it's not like being a doctor or medicine where you're learning really important knowledgeable stuff.

Participant Focus Group 7

A recurrent theme emerging in the discussions was that participants had an expectation that studying Business would contribute towards their employability. There was a belief amongst participants that they learn about business and become more proficient in business as a result of having studied a business-related discipline at university. Thus, while the study of Business might have a theoretical underpinning, much of the programme would involve the application of knowledge and theory to practice, thereby making the student's studies at university transferrable to employment and business practice. Taken from the participants' point of view such a perspective appears reasonable and rational. It is also consistent with accepted definitions of employability which emphasise the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills (Hillage and Pollard, 1998) as well as recognising the increasingly demanding requirements of graduate employers (Hesketh, 2000; Knight and Yorke 2003).

I basically chose the degree thinking it was going to be quite practical. Learning something that I feel that I could use when I get out, whether it's in the workplace or setting up a business, something like that. Whereas the degree is very literature-based and it's taught by people who are themselves academics rather than necessarily someone who's been there in the business world and done that.

Participant Focus Group 3

As would be expected given the comments above, participants saw a lot of value in having parts of the curriculum focused directly on the application of theory to practice.

With the business modules, it would be good to have someone that has a real business come in and talk to you about it. It would be really interesting to see in real life how what you're learning applies.

Participant Focus Group 1

Because we've got to do quite a lot of presentations and things, which means working in groups, which a lot of the time you don't get to pick the groups so it's interacting with people you would never usually interact with. And last year we had to do a presentation to a man that came in from industry and he marked it as though (we had to be smart) it was someone coming into his company and giving the presentation. I felt that was a really good idea because that is what, hopefully, the kind of thing I'll be doing when I graduate, in my job. And so it's more practical skills like that. Rather than being set an essay. So yeah, it has developed my essay skills a lot, because now I can write an academic essay, where before I couldn't. But it's like, 'Why would that be helpful in a job? When would I write an essay?'

I find that about contemporary marketing literature, I think, 'Yeah, it's brilliant, I can critique, but in the grand scheme of things, when am I going to have to critique literature again.' I'd much prefer to have a 10 credit module working with a website, like trying to build up their portfolio, something like that, rather than sitting at a desk; being more innovative.

Participants Focus Group 2

By contrast participants spoke in approving tones about instances where they had been challenged to apply what they had learnt during their programme to practice. Consistent with the findings of Weil *et al.* (2001) and van Eps *et al.* (2006), participants expressed feelings of satisfaction that in these situations their learning was effective and worthwhile and also that they had experienced some personal development:

I think it's really important - more important than whatever degree you get, that you get understanding.

Participant Focus Group 7

The last two years was more theory, stuff you wouldn't feel like you're ever going to use, whereas this year I've actually been studying things which is application to the real world. So it's making a lot more sense.

Participant Focus Group 4

A Levels and up until then it has all been about knowledge and going to learn a book in like a week and then regurgitate the book in an

exam. But here it is all about applying what you know to different scenarios, you need the knowledge but you also need to know how to apply it. And I think the skill of how to apply is something we've acquired and placement probably helped with that, as well. Like applying it in situations and you can then apply it back to your work.

Participant Focus Group 8

Passing the “is this worthwhile?” test seemed to be crucial in developing feelings of engagement and involvement. The role of these feelings and emotions should not be dismissed as trivial. They are important, with a number of studies linking emotions to levels of motivation to learn and levels of student achievement (Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005; Krathwohl *et al.*, 1964; Krause and Coates, 2008; Trigwell *et al.*, 2012).

6.3 Delivery of the Curriculum

This section will examine participants' views of how the curriculum was delivered. Again there was a range of opinion with some participants being positive and others critical. There was, however, a clear consensus that teaching staff set the tone for a module and therefore it was very important how they went about their work, a view supported in the literature (Astin, 1999; Bryson and Hand, 2007; Mann, 2001):

Like you go to lecturers who really get involved and you can tell they're really interested in what they're teaching you. And you want to go to those lectures because you think you're actually going to get something out of it. I think ones where you have a really low turn-out ... are likely to be the ones where the lecturers are just literally reading off a slide which they can probably do at home themselves.

Participant Focus Group 4

A recurring theme was the importance of how material was delivered. Participants differentiated between delivery that was positive and enthusiastic and that which was insipid and seemed to reflect a lack of effort or interest:

Certain lecturers that I have where you can see more of a real enthusiasm in their topics and expertise ... makes it more enjoyable because you can see they are enthusiastic and they want to teach about it.

Participant Focus Group 7

You go to a lecture and you'll sit there and the lecturer will read through all the slides, not add anything and you'll think well that was a complete waste of time, I could have sat at home and read that myself. Some people for the entire module would literally every single week read the notes from the slide, and you go to a lecture and you don't want to go because you won't learn anything and because it is so boring. You need to do something practical based and actually be taught it, or do an exercise with it in; not just be talked at.

Participant Focus Group 1

As a result participants and their peers were conscious that because of the lack of uniformity in standards, the member of staff involved could make a significant difference to their experience:

A couple of comments I heard when we were picking modules for this year was 'Who's teaching it?'

Participant Focus Group 7

There was also a consensus amongst participants that interactivity between teaching staff and students was important for the learning experience, Astin (1999), Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Vermeulen and Schmidt (2008). Where this existed it was remarked upon by participants and identified as a positive feature. It was also seen as an important way in which teaching staff could have an influence on students' behaviour inside and outside class:

They're the ones who are teaching you, it's quite interactive, they'll come round and you feel like you can ask questions which maybe doesn't happen as much in other degrees. So, in that way, I think they do have a really big impact on you.

Participant Focus Group 8

In situations where interactivity did not exist, either because of the size of the classes or the way in which they were delivered, participants reported feeling dissatisfied because they found it more difficult to engage with the material:

I felt business might be more about discussion, like ... discussing the best practice or something like that. But for us it's just reading the theory and you can't talk about it to anyone unless you go to the lecturer, like to a private meeting, because there are no seminars. And in the big lectures, because there are so many people, you can't - you

don't want to really raise your hand to discuss the situation or the topic. So, keep quiet, and then you might be struggling at the end of the year.

Participant Focus Group 3

I explored this theme further with focus group participants:

Right. So you had an expectation that more of your learning would involve discussing ideas in class with other students and the lecturer?

Basically, when I was applying for university, somewhere I read that the average size of the class is, I don't know, 15, 20 people. And then I came here and it's all about massive lectures of, I don't know, 200 people. And for the whole seminar part, I've altogether 5 seminars per semester which is not enough. It's more, I don't know, preparation for assignment. You can't call it a seminar.

And also you can kind of, like with 200 people, you can switch off and like go on your phone or whatever. You don't have to pay attention because it's not - you won't get noticed. So smaller groups, you have to pay attention because you wouldn't want to get caught.

You would have to do your own preparation for the seminar to do the discussion which would be really useful.

Participants Focus Group 3

I know there is a huge jump from A Level to university, you're not in a classroom anymore but I generally expected more seminars, more tutorials than lectures

Participant Focus Group 6

I really did think before university that there would be a lot more tutorials; people would be actively discussing stuff.

Participant Focus Group 6

However, it was not just a matter of having more seminars, as it was also important how the seminars were delivered:

I think there's a noticeable difference between a good seminar leader and a bad seminar leader. The good one does get a discussion going. And a bad one will ask all the rigid questions that are on a sheet and they don't really respond to what is being discussed.

Participant Focus Group 3

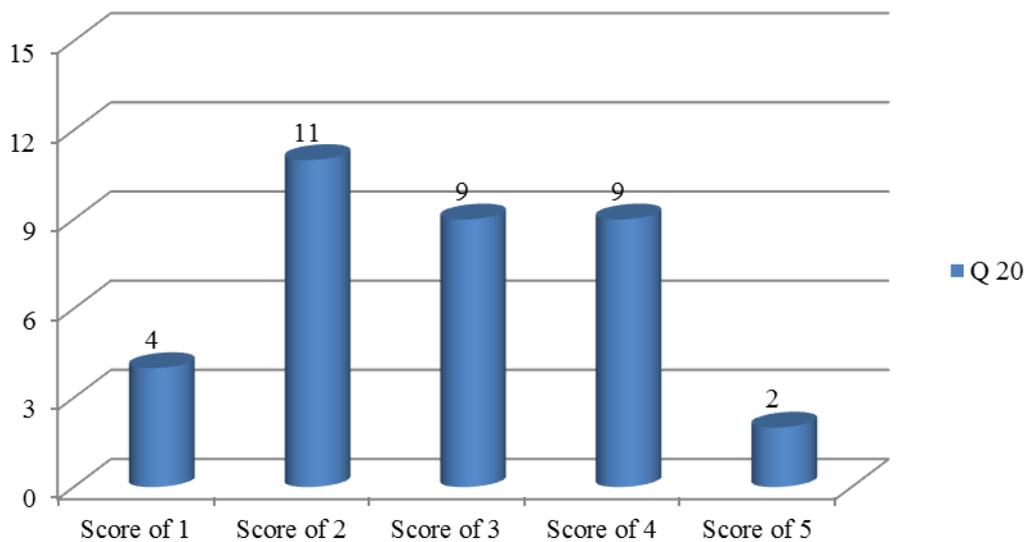
I expect more exercise or work from the seminars because in Hong Kong I have every week seminars for every subject. So every week we are having exercise and presentations which can help us to practise more in order to deal with the exam and also familiar with the questions. However, I know like in UK we will not have so much exercise and work to do because the teachers want you to...’ If you want to do it, you will do it yourself.

Participant Focus Group 5

6.4 Academic Staff

The role of academic staff in the student learning experience was discussed during the literature review in chapter two. Some elements of this topic were also identified in sections 6.2 and 6.3 above. This section will develop that discussion further. Question 20 asked participants whether contact with teaching staff had been a big influence on their studies, with participants asked to answer on five point scale where “1” was strongly disagree, “3” neutral and “5” strongly agree. The answers are summarised in Figure 6.2 below.

Question 20



Question Grouping: The influence of your degree programme

Mean Average Score	2.8
Standard Deviation	1.1

Figure 6.2: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 20, overall, your contact with teaching staff has been a big influence on your studies.

The mean average score of 2.8 was the joint lowest (with question 18) of any answer elicited during the main data collection phase. While a sizeable minority agreed with the statement, the majority were at best indifferent with close to half of all participants disagreeing. It is interesting and instructive to compare the answers to question 20 with the answers to questions 10, 11 and 13 (which were about the influence of university peer and friendship groups discussed in chapter five). The average scores for questions 10, 11 and 13 were 4.8, 4.4 and 4.6 respectively, suggesting that university peer and friendships groups were much more significant and provided more of a force for engagement with the student experience than did teaching staff.

I do not think that the participants viewed contact with teaching staff as unimportant. On the contrary, there was plenty of evidence that participants believed that it was important to have good working relationships with staff and that teaching staff could have a significant influence on their learning experience:

In the second and third year especially it is more classroom based, I think it has a massive impact on how well you do in your work.

Participant Focus Group 8

I think medics and the law school are very close knit but maybe it's because it is quite a close course. I think it's nice that they've got friends on the course and that they feel a sense of belonging to the degree programme but I don't feel that with the Business School because it is so big; you're in lectures with 300 people. That's one thing that I think is bad about the Business School, it would be good to get to know your lecturers more.

Participant Focus Group 2

I did statistics with xxx xxxxx (lecturer's name) because of his teaching style everyone turned up. A lot of it depends on the lecturer's ability to engage and how you perceive the lectures are going to be.

Participant Focus Group 2

Participants valued what they viewed as positive interactions with teaching staff, even when these appeared to be fairly inconsequential in nature such as being recognised or teaching staff saying "hello" as well as more the significant instances where teaching staff had helped them.

I think in Fresher's week, when you have that talk about your degree programme, because I remember what marketing did and we went off and had a chat with our personal tutor who talked us through the timetable which was brilliant because I didn't have a clue what to do with my timetable.

Participant Focus Group 2

As with the delivery of classes (discussed in section 6.3 above), participants noticed when teaching staff were able to empathise or support them and such instances were important in establishing a positive learning environment.

How important do you think it is that you have staff that are qualified accountants?

Really important.

It helps a lot, especially if you have technical questions about the subject, you can go to them and they will be able to tell you straight away what the problem is; it makes you feel confident that the teachers know the subject really well, which is good.

I suppose for like FA and FR, more so, especially; it is helpful.

They've done it before, so they know what you're going through. Even if it's a while ago, at least they've done it.

Participants Focus Group 8

Thus the issue was about how participants perceived teaching staff. It became apparent in the discussion that just as some teaching staff were a source of engagement, so for a significant number of the participants, other teaching staff were a source of alienation. The significance of teaching staff for overall levels of satisfaction is emphasised in the literature, for example Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) who identify the significance of regular and positive contacts between students and staff and Astin (1999) who goes as far as to state that:

Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. (p 525.)

Some of the participants had an expectation that they would get to know teaching staff and have sufficient interaction to establish a good working relationship. Accordingly, participants expressed dissatisfaction where this did not happen.

I've only got to know my personal tutor this year because I didn't have any reason to contact him.

Yeah, you feel bad getting in contact with them unless you've got a problem but at the start you should be building a relationship with them.

Yes, even if just to talk about work and what you're supposed to be doing. To have a contact with the uni. I felt very detached – more in first year,

Participants Focus Group 1

Whenever I have an assignment and I'm struggling with it I don't feel there is anyone I can turn to. Whenever you go to a module leader they can't give away anything because it's not fair to say anything to you that they haven't said to other students. That has been quite a negative aspect I have found.

Participant Focus Group 1

Participants contrasted their experiences at school or college (where teaching staff did make an effort to engage) with their experiences at university.

When I first started in Year 7, the Deputy Head challenged himself to remember every single person's name when he arrived. And he knew if you were related to that person. And there were 240 people in my year, which is a lot; but he knew everyone's name in the school. So he probably knew over 1,000 people's name and has a chat and asks them how they were. And a lot of the time I remember my personal tutor being like, 'So, have you come to see me before?' 'Yes, I have, actually.' And it's a bit embarrassing for me to be like, "Yes, I came to you about this."

Participant Focus Group 2

One of the factors contributing to this difference was large lectures where the student was just one in a sea of faces. However this in itself would not have been a problem if there had been contact outside class.

I know at A Level we get a lot of support but I think it's only been in my final year where I have actually got to know lecturers and they know my name. I knew it would be in a big lecture hall and stuff but I thought you would have more one-on-one time with your personal tutor. They've always been there to go and see but it almost seems to me like a last resort; you'd speak to friends, then family and then speak to your personal tutor.

Participant Focus Group 2

However it would not be appropriate to identify this as a sector or university-wide difference as participants were also able to refer to other parts of the university where there was good engagement with staff.

When I talk to my house mates that are on medical science and things like that and you hear that they're on really good terms with their tutors and things like that; that makes me think well why aren't I on really good terms with mine? Why aren't I having meetings with

them and so on? I suppose it does influence on how I feel about my degree programme.

Participant Focus Group 2

Participants also discussed how they felt that the general attitude and manner of some academic staff in how they dealt with students could be both off-hand and disrespectful:

I find with some of them, the response you get is really quite off putting; as if you're just a nuisance. And some experiences that I've had, I have felt that I'm at school again and I think that I'm an adult and should be spoken to as an adult.

I think it's a lot more distant because when you're at university you'll contact lecturer by email most of the time whereas at college you would be there in a smaller place so it was easier to go in and see someone and have a face-to-face chat, whereas now you're more likely to just email them.

Participants Focus Group 1

I've had some lecturers that are kind of obnoxious and rude and won't help you. And what's the point of them being there? I can read the slides in my own time. I don't need them saying them and then when I ask a question, you're not going to help me. So, what's the point in their role?

Participant Focus Group 3

There was some evidence that some participants had reached a tipping point where they were no longer willing to give staff the benefit of the doubt. As a result instances were expressed in negative tones when a more sympathetic interpretation of events might result in a more positive assessment. An example of this can be found in the exchange between participants quoted below:

Yeah. Like, I'd have no qualms in emailing them but a lot of tutors ... I don't really tend to email them but some people that I know, if they email querying about the exam or something, a lot of the time, they'll just email back saying, 'Look in the module handbook.' Or, 'I told you this already, you should know.'

How does that make you feel?

Annoyed really.

They must get so many emails...

Yes, I can understand why they do it but...

It takes 10 seconds to reply, if they're going to reply like that.

Yes, if they're going to reply...

They know the answer anyway! So instead of saying, 'See blackboard', say, 'Well, it's this.' And then it's done.

If you've been to all the lectures and maybe you just misunderstood something, you just wanted it to be clarified, and they say something like that, it's just, 'Well, cheers, thanks for nothing.'

Just say, 'You can see the text book.'

Participants Focus Group 2

The tone is critical because the expectation seems to be that there is a direct and simple answer which the academic could provide by e-mail. The inference seems to be that by directing the participants to a source the academic is withholding that answer and therefore being less helpful than they might be. A different interpretation might be that the academic is in fact trying to be helpful by referring the student to the original source where the full detail can be found which answers the query in full. In this case trying to paraphrase a longer passage in an e-mail might be misleading. In a similar way the passage below seems to accentuate the negative when in fact it also acknowledges the positives of some staff being available to see students at a moment's notice.

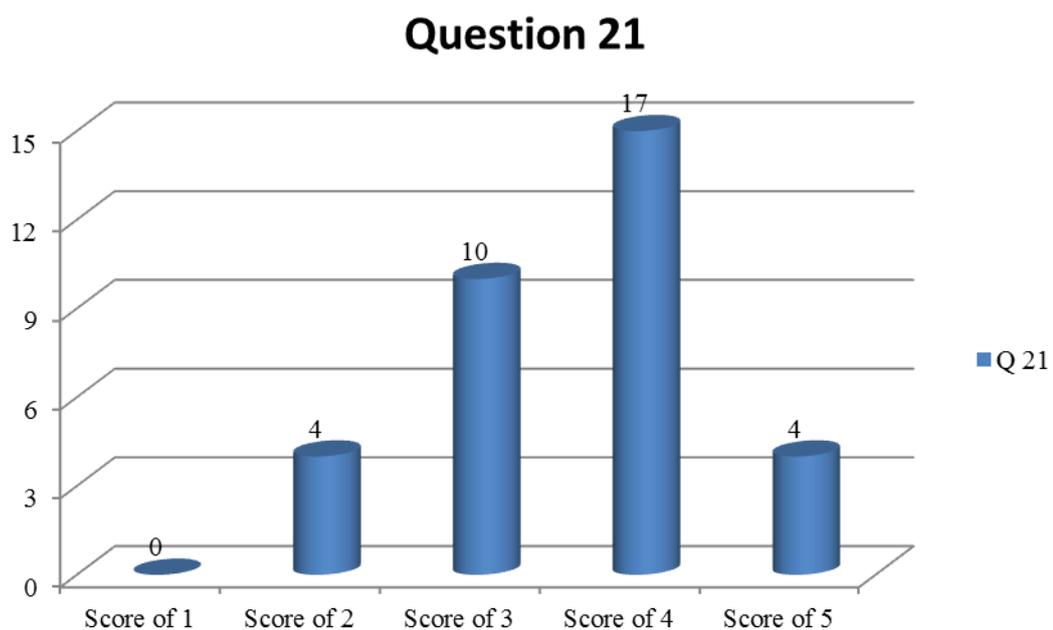
When the teaching staff have been available to help when I did need the help, it has released the pressure and also, when they haven't been available, it has increased negative feelings towards a particular module, so I think it has really influenced how I felt about my studies throughout the course.

Participant Focus Group 7

Overall, the more negative sentiments were more prevalent in some focus groups than others. However, the strength of feeling expressed meant that there was a tendency for the negative to overshadow the positive even where positive comments about some individuals or groups of teaching staff were made. The result was that overall some participants showed signs of having lost trust and respect for a significant proportion of teaching staff. For some participants, this was sufficiently widespread that teaching staff were as likely to be seen as factors contributing to feelings of alienation as they were contributing to feelings of engagement. This is significant because overall

participants' expectations were that academic staff would fulfil an important, influential role in their studies, in a similar way in which teachers had fulfilled an important influential role at school or college. The extent to which teaching staff had fulfilled this role was important. There was no suggestion from any participant that this did not matter.

Question 21 aimed to broaden the discussion beyond teaching staff to include support staff by asking whether overall, contact with university staff had contributed positively to participants' experiences as a student. Again "1" was strongly disagree, "3" neutral and "5" strongly agree. The results are summarised in Figure 6.3 below.



Question Grouping: The influence of your degree programme.

Mean Average Score	3.6
Standard Deviation	0.8

Figure 6.3: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 21, overall, your contact with university staff has contributed positively to your experiences as a student.

While the answers were more positive than for question 20, there were still some significant issues. It is clear that while academic staff had the potential to be significant and influential in contributing to a good student experience, this was not perceived to be

happening in a significant number of instances. However, support staff were generally referred to in more positive terms:

Because the university has many facilities, like Careers and 'Into English' and student union and other staff, they can give you help when you need it. They really help you and give you opinions and advice and how you may solve your problems, which I think is a good experience.

Participant Focus Group 5

If you go to the Careers Office, I think that's whenever I've been there I've got nothing but positive helpful advice.

Participant Focus Group 7

6.5 Assessment and Feedback

In line with the sentiments expressed in section 6.2.1 on academic credibility, participants were content with the prospect that their degree programme and the accompanying assessment should be challenging:

I think a lot of students forget they chose to come here, they chose to do a degree, and if they don't want to work then that's their choice, but don't then whinge about it. I don't think university can offer any more carrots than the good quality and the standard of giving good feedback, good teaching, because at the end of the day it is up to the individual student.

Participant Focus Group 6

Similarly in relation to feedback, participants were open to the notion that there might be circumstances where they needed to address issues to improve.

It's motivating. It's like, 'Oh look, I'm clearly not in line with everyone else, so I need to do more work ...'

Participant Focus Group 8

In this context, there was considerable disquiet in the discussion arising from participants' experiences of assessment and feedback during their degree programme.

The importance to student learning of equitable marking of assessment and meaningful feedback are discussed by Bryson and Hand (2007), Chickering and Gamson (1987), Krause and Coates (2008) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006).

In general terms, participants expressed the view that they were fulfilling their side of the bargain in terms of preparation for, and the effort devoted to, assessment but they felt that some teaching staff were not willing to do the same when it came to marking and giving feedback on that assessment. While participants did not go as far as to suggest processes were arbitrary and unfair, there were a number of specific criticisms of how things worked in practice. For example:

I do like the lecturer to give some feedback if we hand in some work to them. But I don't know they may not have enough time to do this extra job, so ... it just really isn't up to expectations here.

Participant Focus Group 5

You'll have one lecturer that marks in one way and then another that marks completely differently. In second year you might have been taught to do it one way, and then do it in third year the way that you've been taught and it's not good enough or is wrong.

Participant Focus Group 6

I just want to bring it up because I think the School has provided the past paper on the website but they didn't actually get the marking scheme or the answers posted on the website at all. But, I mean, what's the point of posting that past paper on, without the answers.

Participant Focus Group 5

Where participants had sought specific feedback about a disappointing mark, there was some dissatisfaction with the responses received:

I'm not saying that I do no work and at the end of it I demand a 2:1 or something. I'm saying now I am sitting on a lower grade than I thought I would be, despite my hard work and I've really tried, and it is just disheartening to get snotty answers back from people who appear to not give a crap. If something goes wrong, for whatever reason, you just need to know why.

Participant Focus Group 6

I failed an exam in December, and I didn't really do a good job in the December exam. But I think I know how to do this exam but I didn't

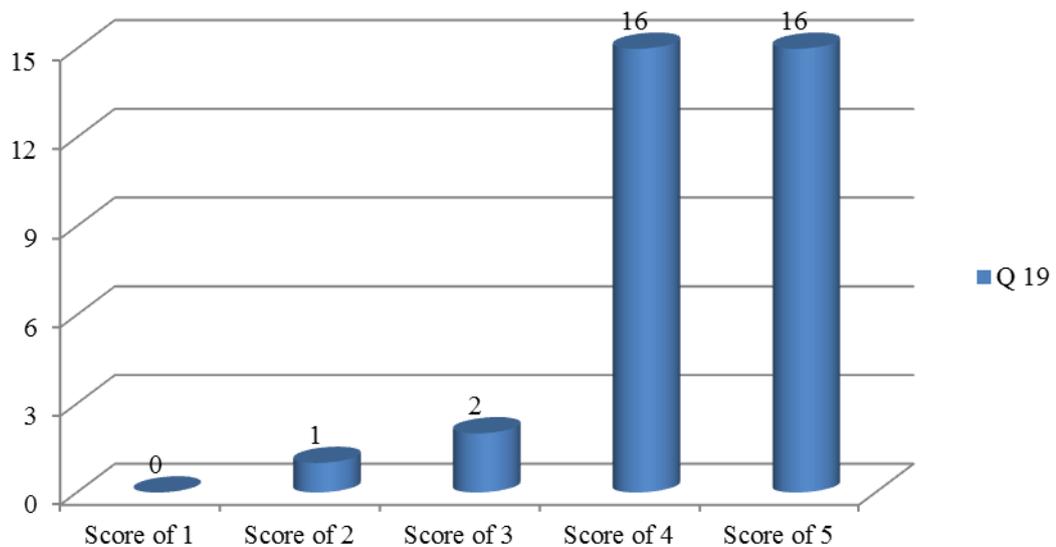
get a good result so I feel strange about it. So I would like to have some feedback from my lecturer but they said that they can't give individual feedback because of university policy, something like that? But I think that this policy is not really sensible because we study and we want to ... the exam is a chance for you to prove what you have learnt and if you don't do good in your exam, you want to know why you didn't do well in your exam, what's the reason?

Participant Focus Group 5

6.6 Academic Development

The previous sections of this chapter paint a decidedly mixed picture about the participants' degree programme. In this section, I will step back from the specifics discussed thus far to give an overview of participants' perceptions of their academic development over the course of their degree programme. Question 19 asked participants to assess whether overall, their knowledge, skills and abilities have developed significantly over the course of their degree programme. Again a 5 point Likert scale was used with answers ranging from 1 being "strongly disagree" through 3 "neutral" to 5 "strongly disagree, with the results summarised in Figure 6.4 below.

Question 19



Question Grouping: The influence of your degree programme.

Mean Average Score	4.3
Standard Deviation	0.7

Figure 6.4: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 19, overall, your knowledge, skills and abilities have developed significantly over the course of your degree programme.

Given some of the criticisms expressed in the preceding sections, it was almost a surprise that the distribution of answers and the average score for this question was so high. Whatever their reservations about the teaching and learning experience, participants felt that overall they had progressed and developed new skills and abilities over the course of their time at university:

I agree because I do think gradually over the past 3 years I've learned new skills, I've learned how to speak more confidently to people, presentation skills, writing down notes, listening, all those kind of skills I have developed. But then sometimes when it comes to actual information, sometimes I think well, have I really in 3 years have I really learned that much?

Participant Focus Group 7

I have a bit of a bench mark because at the beginning when I was thinking of coming to university, I wanted to do the Business, Accounting & Finance degree but I had no prior business study experience so one of the questions they asked me was, if you were to

manage any business, what would it be and what would you change about it? And I thought of Woolworths but then my - what I thought my understanding of business was, like in hindsight, and the answer I gave - it showed very minimal understanding of what business is. And I think now if I was to be asked the same question, I feel I have gained enough knowledge and understanding of business and of finance to be able to respond differently so, in that sense, I feel I have developed a lot of knowledge and skills.

Participant Focus Group 7

Participants also identified that their learning had become more rounded, with greater appreciation of subtleties, uncertainties and ambiguities of knowledge and understanding:

When you're in school, it's like, 'That's the answer, that's the answer, if you write that in your exam, you'll be fine.' Whereas now, that's just...'Well, this is one idea, go and find some ideas for yourself and you can figure out whether you agree with that.'

Participant Focus Group 5

In my home country, Hong Kong, we got every answers very clearly; for example, this answer, it's 'Yes' and that will be 'Yes', You cannot answer the other way round. But when I came here, I can probe out every idea in my own mind and the lecturer will just think in their own way to see whether my answer makes sense. And if my answer makes sense, they will still give some marks for me. But if I answer that way in my home country, I would definitely get a zero, for that.

Participant Focus Group 5

As would be expected, given the views expressed in previous sections, participants were most enthusiastic about examples of where they had developed skills and abilities that would be transferable into the work place. For example, greater insight into how business works in practice:

I can actually picture what all this theory actually means in practical sectors within the real world. And that's something that's really, I've really improved and enjoyed and developed to be honest with you.

Participant Focus Group 7

Alternatively, it might include the greater insight into how to work as part of a group, gained by completing a group project.

You can see why the consultant project is so good because you're going planning, organisations, working in a team, and when you may have to do a presentation you know you're improving your public speaking and you're making a conscious effort.

Participant Focus Group 1

It's useful for us to develop our team working skills because in the future you also need to work with other people you don't know and you have to open your mind to different people in different cultures.

Participant Focus Group 2

Or, include the development of skills and abilities through a work placement:

I feel like I have grown up, in terms of skills especially; like my communication skills, a lot of that probably is to do with placement I think.

Participant Focus Group 6

It wasn't until my placement that I grew up properly.

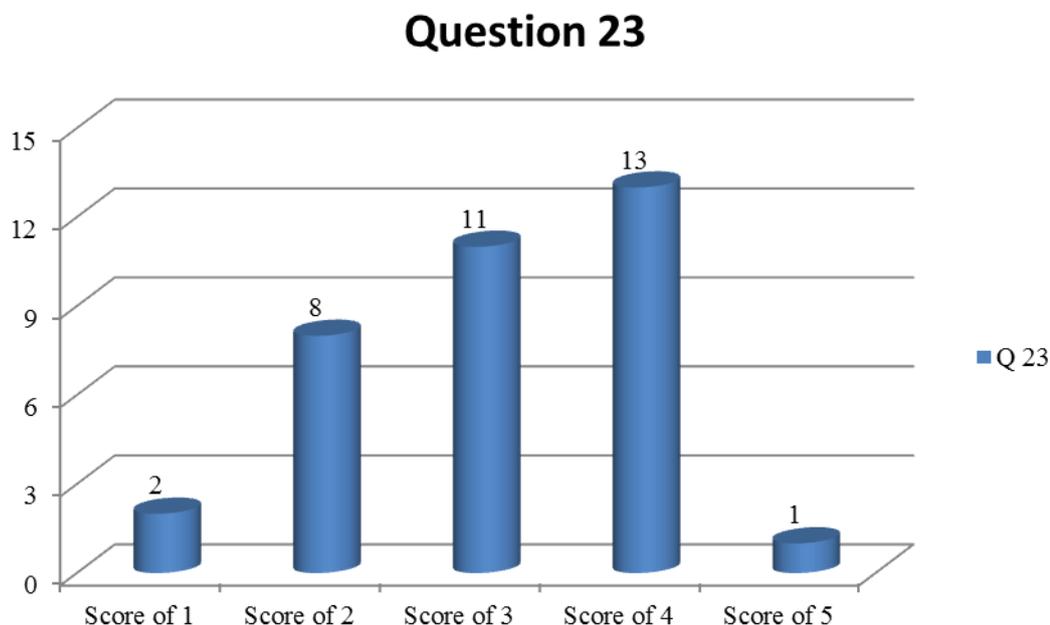
Participant Focus Group 6

I think based on placement you go back three times and you see how much you've advanced over that period when you're using stuff you've learned at university. It gives you an example of how it has helped in a business context.

Participant Focus Group 8

In order to understand further participants' views about the learning process, I asked them whether overall, what matters is the class of degree obtained, not whether the student actually learns anything during the degree. The sub-text to this question is the significance of graduating with a first or upper second class honours degree as a pre-selection requirement for many graduate level jobs and for entry to post-graduate study. Graduate employers tend to screen out applicants who do not graduate with a first or upper second and many leading universities set their entry requirements for post-graduate study at that level. Given that one of the underlying factors for studying business was employability and success in the labour market, obtaining at least an upper

second assumes even greater significance, especially for UK students who generally expect to move straight into the labour market on graduation. The answers to Question 23 are summarised in Figure 6.5 below.



Question Grouping: The influence of your degree programme.

Mean Average Score	3.1
Standard Deviation	1.0

Figure 6.5: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 23, overall, what matters is the class of degree you obtain, not whether you actually learn anything during your degree.

The mean average was 3.1, with a small majority agreeing rather than disagreeing and a number giving the question a neutral answer of 3. During the discussion it was apparent that participants were well aware of the significance of the class of degree obtained. However, they were not of the view that “learning” was secondary. The general view of the participants was that both were very important. The weighting placed on degree classification was not something that participants could do anything about, just as the use of A level grades to determine entry to university was not something they could do anything about. It was an externally placed benchmark which induced pragmatic behaviour.

Thus in spite of short-term pressures to respond to the requirements of the graduate labour market, participants still recognised the value of an undergraduate degree as an environment for personal development:

I think university is the most convenient vehicle to do it in because you're spoon fed the environment in which you can grow, whether it's knowledge, skills or personally. I don't think there is an equivalent,

Participant Focus Group 6

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the degree programme – the formal learning experience. The chapter was structured around the key areas identified during the focus groups. Section 6.2 examined the curriculum. Participants emphasised that it was important for the curriculum to carry academic credibility in line with their expectations of a Russell Group university, such as Newcastle. Overall there was some evidence that this expectation had been met, especially during the final year and where the curriculum had provided opportunities to apply learning to business scenarios or to develop career-related knowledge or skills. However, there were also areas where expectations had not been met. There were perceptions that some modules were too easy, especially in the first and second years.

These concerns were developed further in the discussions on the coherence and relevance of the curriculum. Some participants felt that they had studied a collection of modules rather than a coherent programme. There were also concerns that theory was taught too often as an end in itself rather than as a framework through which to understand or evaluate practice. There was also a concern that the curriculum did not contribute enough in terms of the skills and abilities required for graduate employment. This was not a universal concern, as some participants pointed to good practice on their programme. However, the concerns were expressed by a significant number of participants.

Section 6.3 examined delivery of the curriculum. Again there were mixed opinions. Staff who were enthusiastic and who adopted an interactive style were appreciated and respected. However, participants also identified instances where the curriculum was delivered in large lectures by disinterested staff who showed little effort to interact with

students. There were also comments about the absence of seminars and, where there were seminars, the variations in quality of how they were delivered.

Some of these themes were developed further in section 6.4, where instances of good practice were contrasted with multiple examples of what was considered to be poor practice. For some participants there was a real distance and lack of engagement between them and some of their teaching staff. In some cases this had undermined the trust and confidence that participants had in teaching staff. This view was also apparent in section 6.5 in relation to assessment and feedback.

Finally, section 6.6 considered the theme of overall academic development. Here participants reflected on the extent to which they had developed over the course of their degree programme. Given the comments in sections 6.2 to 6.5, the answers were perhaps more positive than might have been expected. However, this only underlined the extent to which some participants felt that their development was solely the result of their own efforts (achieved without the input or support of teaching staff). On the positive side, participants reported development in a range of areas including knowledge, understanding, communication and inter-personal skills, as well as a greater awareness of working life.

Chapter Seven – Preparing for Life after Graduation

7.1 Introduction

An undergraduate business degree in the UK is a fixed term programme of three or four years. Having undergone a period of transition when first arriving at university, students spend a relatively short period of time settled in university life before they need to start addressing a new transition into life after graduation. The theme that student life is a stepping stone into independent adult life came through strongly in the analysis of the focus group data. Participants noted that their time at university was relatively short and that it provided an opportunity for them to prepare for the future.

Participants reflected on how they had changed since arriving at university, but they also looked forward, discussing, and trying to make sense of, what they needed to be once they had graduated. There was a sense that higher education provided an opportunity for greater independence and significant personal development, although such progress was not guaranteed, requiring input from themselves and those around them (including from the university). This chapter identifies and discusses these themes.

7.2 Developing Independence and Autonomy

7.2.1 *Making Decisions about Day-to-Day Life*

The development of independence and autonomy were seen as key elements in growing up as illustrated in the quotes below:

The freedoms and the things that go with that, is that a very important part of your experience?

Yes, I think definitely. I think that's possibly as important as the degree you're getting because it's something you've never done before. I don't know - that's kind of how you grow as a person, isn't it? Living away from your family and spreading your wings.

Yeah, I think going to uni, part of it is learning to grow as a person and learning how to live on your own and dealing with issues that you wouldn't normally deal with if you still lived at home.

And learning to motivate yourself as well, to do uni work.

Yeah. It's like at college, you've got teachers on your back all the time whereas it's a lot more up to you, isn't it? You get out what you want to put in.

Participants Focus Group 1

The exchange above is particularly interesting as it develops further some of the issues discussed in chapter four – Becoming a Student. In that section, one of the themes emerging was adjustment to the additional freedoms associated with being at university and the challenges of adjustment in terms of participants making mature choices and developing their own structure. The exchange above explores how these participants viewed this as a learning and development process, which placed greater responsibilities onto their shoulders but also helped them to grow up. It reflects the view that whatever the Business School and/or the university might do; the student him/herself must take that step themselves:

I was just wasting myself. And so my lasting impression of that is that I really hate that feeling. I'd go to bed and kind of feel like "Wow! What have I really done today except chill out and see my mates?" So it's my personal thing is that it gives me a lot of determination to not go to bed and feel like that.

Participant Focus Group 3

The structure of a three or four year undergraduate degree programme provides sufficient time for students to get used to the environment and make the adjustments required in order to get value from their time at university. First year students can draw security from the additional structure and the sense of shared experience generated by being together with others in a similar situation in university accommodation:

I think living in Castle Leazes, where we got all our meals cooked for us, made that transition a bit smoother, just because it gave you that structure. Whereas I was at Manchester for a term and a half before and it was self-catered and I found that a lot harder, because you were completely on your own.

Participant Focus Group 1

However whilst that transition is eased by being with others, it is in essence a personal experience.

You can feel a bit like depressed almost with the lack of structure. I think in first year, I was probably - I had a good group of friends and stuff like that but that wasn't the issue. You had too much time, you're like, "Wo! How is this helping me in any way?"

Participant Focus Group 3

By the final year, many participants had seen the value of learning to exercise self-discipline and decision making outside of the structure of the family home and wanted to make the most of this experience:

Obviously, third year, it's the year you have to really work and there is so much more work to do. But at the same time, at the back of my head, this is also the last year so I need to do all the fun things I really want to do and go out and have fun. So third year is, I think, work hard, play hard because you need to do both; because you'll regret it if you don't do one or the other.

Participant Focus Group 4

I think coming to university gives you the time to grow up and realise where you want to be. I didn't really have a clue; I didn't know what I wanted to do, or what job I wanted to have. You're learning how to live and all these other things that you build on.

Participant Focus Group 1

7.2.2 *Establishing Independence and Autonomy in the Relationship with Parents*

The changing nature of the relationship between participants and their parents is explored in chapter five. However, I have also referred to it in this chapter because of its relevance to the process of developing independence and autonomy. As participants became used to making their own decisions about day-to-day life, this had an effect on the nature of their relationship with their parents. Participants realised that they no longer needed to seek the explicit approval of their parents, allowing them to exercise greater choice and influence on that relationship.

And I guess in this case, you don't have to tell them, you opt to tell them and discuss it, on your terms, rather than on the parents' terms.

Yes. And I think it's leaving home as well that makes you appreciate them so much more. That you can have that discussion with them. Whereas if you were living with them every day, you'd just get irritated.

Participant Focus Group 1

Mine's in comparison to when I go home. As much as it's home, I'm past that stage now. Whereas it's a break to go home, my home is actually up here. I get irritable and I really realise how much I need my independence when I go home and I realise I have that up here.

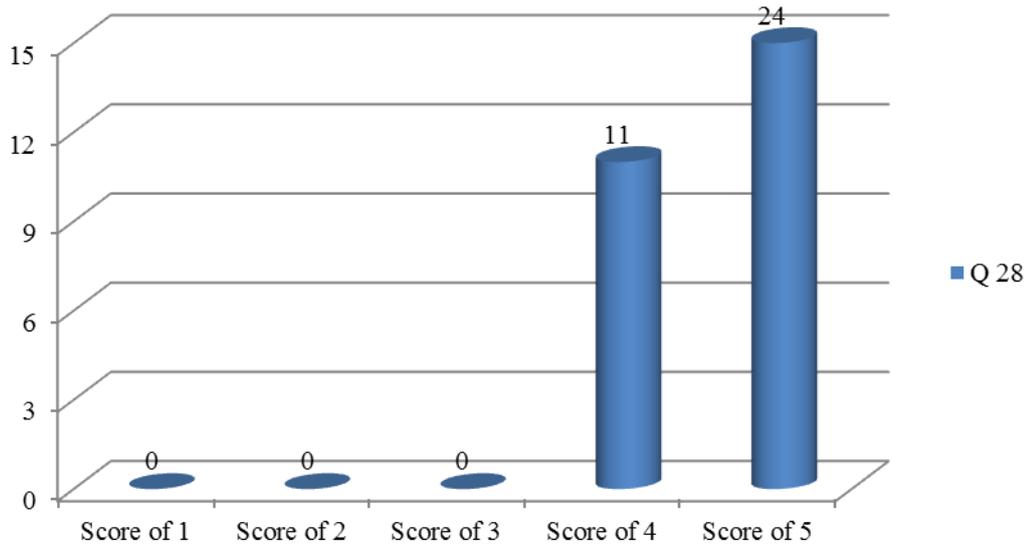
Participant Focus Group 1

Many of the participants spoke in warm and positive terms about the relationship with their parents, expressing satisfaction that the nature of the relationship had changed into one that was strong and appropriate for independent adult life. Contrary to Taub's (2008) concern about the role of "helicopter parents", participants appeared to be ones making the decisions about their own lives, looking to their parents for advice and support but not looking to their parents to solve their problems for them.

7.3 Developing the Capabilities to be an Independent, Autonomous Adult

The themes discussed in section 7.2 are underlined by the responses to question 28, which was directed towards broader aspects of what university should be about. The answers are summarised in Figure 7.1 below.

Question 28



Question Grouping: The influence of what happens after graduation: employability/further study.

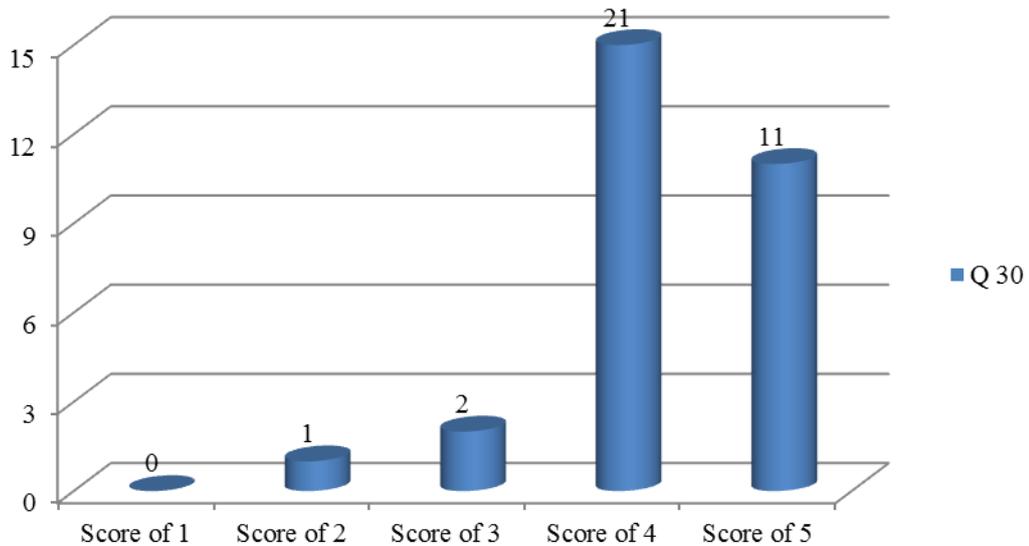
Mean Average Score 4.7
Standard Deviation 0.5

Figure 7.1: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 28, coming to university involves making an investment. Your learning and personal development while at university helps to make you more rounded as a person and more employable.

As can be seen, all of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the assertion that coming to university involved making an investment, whereby the learning and personal development contributed to being more rounded and more employable. The mean average from the responses at 4.7 was the second highest of all the responses, second only to question 10 (it's important to have a network of friends while at university). The average score was also very similar irrespective of whether the respondent was male or female, a UK or an International student.

There were similar, corroborating responses to question 30 (see Figure 7.2 below):

Question 30



Question Grouping: The influence of what happens after graduation: employability/further study.

Mean Average Score 4.2
Standard Deviation 0.7

Figure 7.2: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 30, your desire to improve your skills and abilities has influenced your behaviour at university.

Again the scores given to this question reflect the theme of personal development. Furthermore the use of the questionnaire gives additional confidence that this view was widely held by focus group participants and did not just reflect a few pithy comments made by more vocal focus group members. Clearly, timing may have some impact as the participants were all final year students who were soon to graduate and most were intending to enter the graduate labour market.

The answers to questions 28 and 30 provide evidence that many undergraduate business students are career orientated and that they choose to study Business with one eye on their employability post-graduation. This is significant as the motivations of someone studying Business because of their interest in the subject and the motivations of someone studying Business with an eye on their future career prospects could differ significantly. Clearly this is an important issue in understanding the motivations of Business undergraduates and their aims and objectives. Studies by Kavanagh and Drennan (2008), Tomlinson (2007) and Wilton (2008) all confirm that the proportion of

Business students who chose the subject because of their future career aspirations is high, and higher than for most other social science subjects.

Evidence of the importance of employability came through in the discussion of participants' degree programmes and the wider student experience:

It has enhanced my understanding of the business careers but so has having interviews for part time jobs.

I think things like guest lecturers and stuff; someone came in a few weeks ago and did a chat and when you see people from industry come in. The placement is the best thing to clarify and enhance your understanding.

Participants Focus Group 6

And, for example, for our degree programme, we have done the group project, with different people from different aspects, and they will probably ask you, 'Have you encountered any difficulties to deal with them?' And I do think that it's a learning experience to put that in your interview. And that's what I was asked when I was getting my part time job.

Participant Focus Group 5

However, the balance of contributions underlined that there was more to it than just getting a job on graduation. There was evidence of a desire for personal development generally as part of a process of preparing for life after graduation. Thus participants were able to reflect on the development of skills and abilities such as written communication and team working:

And writing skills. And I think slowly – you don't even realise it's happening until you write something in third year that's so different – you think outside the box.

Participant Focus Group 4

And do you know why it's important? Because it makes you overcome things. Like I say, I was really struggling with a couple of members who were being really awkward and it's making me a better leader because I'm overcoming that and I'm having to, so I'll talk about that.

Participant Focus Group 4

They were also able to identify progress in less tangible areas of personal development such as personal confidence and resilience:

I'd mostly say as a person I wasn't that confident before I came to uni; even sitting in this situation, I wouldn't have said very much. So my skills in that way have developed a lot and also I just feel more capable and I'll get my head down and I'll feel like I can do it. I've become a lot more positively minded than I ever used to be.

Participant Focus Group 4

I think on this course you need to grit your teeth sometimes and go, 'I need to get to this point in time.' There's no point in getting negative or giving up. I'm on this course for a reason.

There is good and bad about having to grit your teeth, is there more good than bad?

Yes because in the end you're going to get to where you want to go. It means that you're not necessarily doing something at that point in time that you love the idea of, and maybe you have a module that you're not very good at or a piece of work that needs to be in that you don't particularly enjoy, but you can't not do it just because you don't enjoy it. So it's that point you grit your teeth and say, 'Got to get this in so that I can get to where I want to be.'

Participant Focus Group 8

Participants also talked about developing drive and self-motivation, as well as the value of experiencing new things and becoming more rounded as an individual.

I'd always wanted to play netball at uni and I'd gone to the trials in first year and obviously I'm not competitive, I'm not good enough, so it didn't happen ... and it wasn't till third year that I thought, 'Do something about it. Go find a netball team and play for them.' So I've kind of kicked myself into gear to do stuff now.

Participant Focus Group 3

Yeah. I put agree, rather than strongly agree, because part of me came to university just really to get away, experience - a new city, different cultures from around the world, social life and rather than academic. Academic most importantly but then there's also that aspect of socialising, getting out, doing your own thing. Growing, yeah. Personal development.

Participant Focus Group 7

Such viewpoints are consistent with much of the literature on employability, confirming that the concept of employability extends beyond initial success in the labour market to possessing and developing the skills necessary to cope with change as the requirements of roles and employers change over time (Glazier, 2001; Harvey, 2001; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Tomlinson, 2007).

Furthermore, this perspective doesn't appear to correspond with the view of the student as a consumer as discussed, for example, by Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009). Participants recognised that in order to benefit from their time at university they needed to make an investment of time and effort. Furthermore, they recognised that a bigger commitment in terms of time and effort was likely to result in a bigger return in terms of personal development and academic success, thereby helping them to realise their ambitions for career success.

This perspective places the student as an active participant rather than as a rational consumer of a service. The "student as consumer" perspective suggests the student will seek to maximise their enjoyment of the service relative to its financial cost. However the perspective of the "student as an active participant" suggests that such a view is too limited as it does not reflect the complexities of the relationship between student and university and neither does it represent the wants and needs of the student. The student as an active participant seeks out learning and development opportunities because of the beneficial effect they have on wider personal development. This is a point that I will return to in chapter eight.

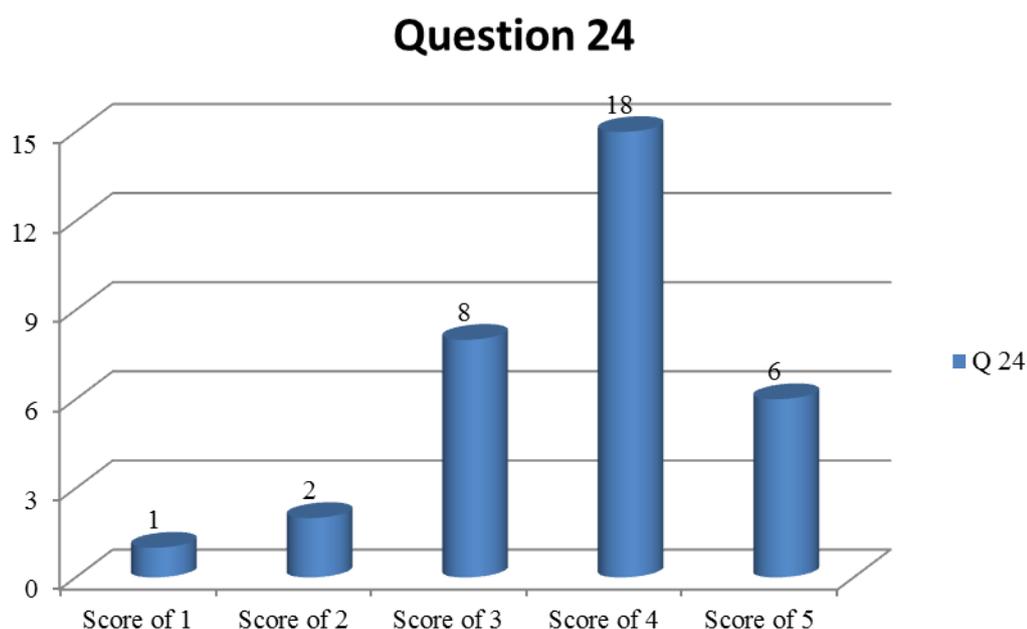
This issue is difficult because the aims and objectives of students in deciding to come to university can be unclear. In chapter four, the picture emerged of participants who had not researched or evaluated their decision to come to university in any great depth. Instead, they had relied heavily on the recommendations of family, their school and peers, that coming to university was the next thing to do in their lives. I do not intend to be critical of this. After all, relying on the advice of a person's inner circle, those who that person trusts, is entirely understandable. However, the lack of clear aims and objectives in doing something can result in period of uncertainty and inaction while that person figures out what they are supposed to be doing. In these circumstances it is easy to see why a student might look to the Business School and the university for guidance.

7.4 Extra-Curricular Activity

This section considers extra-curricular activity. In line with my student experience model, extra-curricular activity can be identified as a microsystem with the potential to influence the development of the individual within the wider student experience. It could be argued that it falls within the wider set of preparing for life after graduation, and for that reason I have included it within this chapter. However, because of its scope and potential influence, I have included it as a separate microsystem within the overall model.

7.4.1 Level of and Type of Extra-Curricular Participation

To start this topic I sought evidence from participants about the level of and the type of extra-curricular activity they participated in. The responses to Question 24 are summarised in Figure 7.3 below.



Question Grouping: The influence of extra-curricular activity.

Mean Average Score	3.7
Standard Deviation	0.9

Figure 7.3: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 24, you have been actively involved in a range of extra-curricular activities outside your degree programme.

24 out of 35 either agreed or strongly agreed, suggesting that the majority of the focus group participants were actively involved in extra-curricular activities. The following discussion from the first focus group was typical:

Question 24, this is about extra-curricular activity, extra-curricular activity is defined quite widely; it can be part time work, sports, and hobbies. You've been actively involved in a range of extra-curricular activities outside your degree programme. The majority of you are saying a fair amount. How might you describe that?

I put little, because bar going to the gym I don't, I'm not part of any societies.

In regards to societies I don't but I like play football twice a week with just friends; we just go and play 5-a-side at the Astro turf; I don't play for the university football team.

I've got a part time job and work at *Costa*.

I've got a part time job and I am President of the Management Society, and I go to the gym.

I do travelling a lot; I used to go and stay in different cities with my friend.

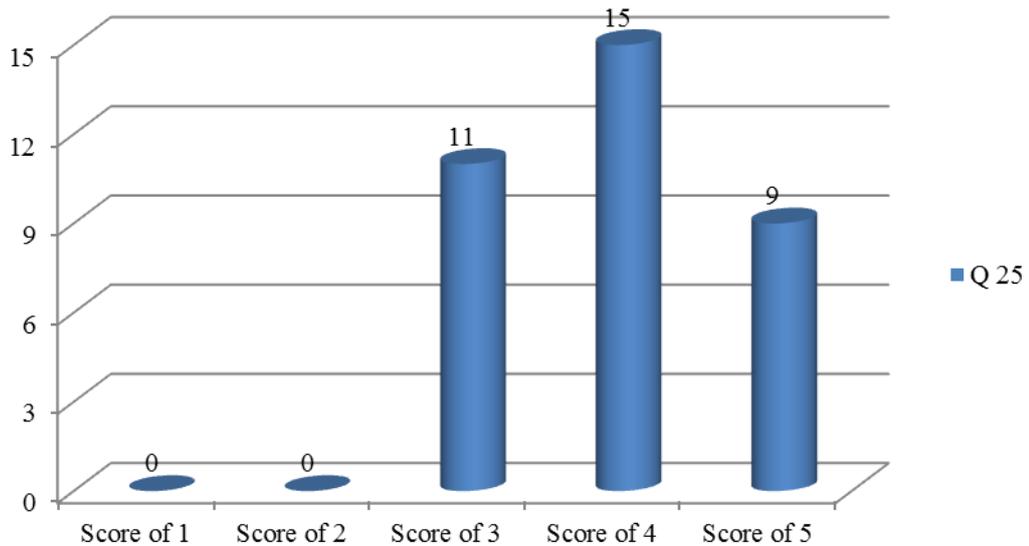
I play tennis and have been working part time.

Participants Focus Group 1

7.4.2 How extra-curricular activity contributes to the student experience

Question 24 and the accompanying discussion confirmed the significance of extra-curricular activity as a microsystem. In this section I will look at how extra-curricular activity contributed to the experience of participants. During the focus groups I used two questions in particular to gauge the opinion of participants and to stimulate discussion, Question 25 (Figure 7.4) and Question 26 (Figure 7.5).

Question 25



Question Grouping: The influence of extra-curricular activity.

Mean Average Score	3.9
Standard Deviation	0.8

Figure 7.4: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 25, involvement in these activities outside your degree has given you a greater sense of purpose.

Generally this assertion was accepted by most of the participants, with the following exchange being typical:

Involvement in these activities has given you a greater sense of purpose. You pretty much agree about that. Why does it give you a greater sense of purpose?

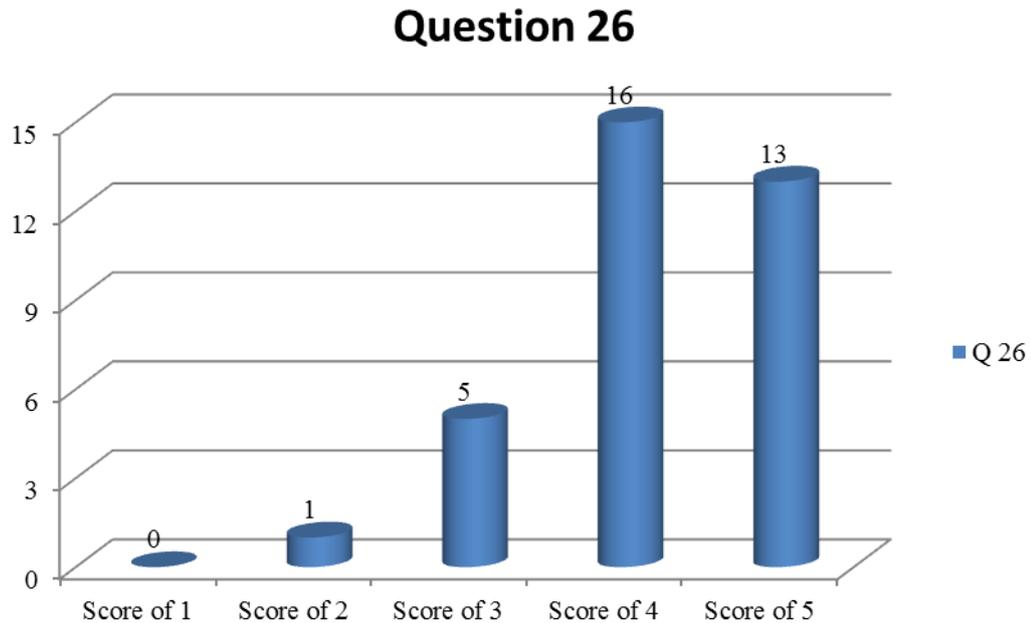
It gives you something to do with your day other than just going to lectures.

It would get a bit insufferable to just have your degree. I feel like that would be a waste of what you're doing here.

I like going to work. You make extra money, you meet new people there, and it's like a different group of people to meet. Most of them are students but people you won't have come across on your degree or even know through anyone. Just a completely new set of people.

Participants Focus Group 1

Similar, albeit slightly stronger, views were expressed in relation to question 26, which asked about how extra-curricular involvement had contributed to the development of new skills and abilities.



Question Grouping: The influence of extra-curricular activity.

Mean Average Score	4.2
Standard Deviation	0.8

Figure 7.5: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 26, involvement in these activities outside your degree has helped you to develop new skills and abilities which have contributed to your personal development.

In both cases the distribution of scores showed that participants felt that these issues were significant and influential on their experience. Further discussion amongst the focus group participants identified a number of themes. On a simple level, extra-curricular activity gave participants something to do. It provided a balance to, and contrast with, studying as well as being a way to give greater structure to student life, thereby addressing some of the concerns previously discussed in chapter four, about the lack of structure to student life and about not being busy enough:

Yeah. Most of my stuff during the year is doing and makes the year more interesting because you don't focus just on your studies, but you do stuff outside as well for fun and you do meet new people - it's part of the fun as well.

Participant Focus Group 3

I think this kind of activity is part of my degree, so my degree is not only study but also do something other else. For me, I also have volunteering in the Student Uni, so it's part of my degree.

Participant Focus Group 2

These comments underline the views of Kuh (1995), who emphasises the benefits to the student of engaging in extra-curricular activity, particularly where that activity is aligned with their programme of study and their wider personal goals and ambitions. There was also awareness amongst participants of the competitive nature of the graduate employment market and the need to be able to market oneself through a strong CV when it came time to apply for employment post-graduation, a point emphasised by Hesketh (2000) and Tomlinson (2007):

I think more people definitely need to get more involved because it is a good thing to talk about when you're writing on the CV.

Participant Focus Group 1

I think when doing your CV you notice how extra-curricular activities are the things you actually write about. It's everything that you're doing outside of university that shows more about who you are. I wish I realised that earlier on.

Participant Focus Group 1

Extra-curricular activity also provided a way of gaining experience of the work place, something that participants could reflect upon when making choices in the future and experience that they could draw from when entering full-time employment:

If you work full time then you get an insight or idea into the sector you want to work in or what you don't want to do. It's all influential.

Participant Focus Group 6

For example, I work in Oxfam, and this just gave me an insight into office life here, so I can compare the Oxfam work here with the

internship I experienced before in China; it's totally different, office style life.

Participant Focus Group 5

Such experience could also lead to the development of personal and professional skills which participants could draw from in future employment.

When I do my part time job, I have been actually moved from one place or another. I was usually in one position and after the probation period, I was moved to another department there. So it has helped me to develop the skills to going around with different people and help you to establish your relationship with them. And it really helps me to communicate with different people and I do think that is really important for me to develop because it's always like that in the future career.

Participant Focus Group 5

People say, 'what's the benefits to university?' and I say, 'because it gives you that self-motivation, that social skill, that personal development.'

I think there's so much more to university than just the degree, completely. So much more.

Participants Focus Group 4

However there was also recognition of its value as a learning experience in itself; a way to experience and try out different activities, potentially leading to a greater level of self-awareness and understanding:

It probably is a bit of a cliché but you do find yourself at uni, a bit. You try different things, you realise...I thought I knew myself before I came here but now I actually know what makes me happy, what makes me feel as if I'm being fulfilled and what I like to do with my time.

Participant Focus Group 5

It's added to my happiness and stuff like that, with purpose it's like the self- worth thing as well, like I've got a purpose in life. I think that's why I had a more neutral thing. If you said does this add to your life or happiness?

'Has it helped me develop as a person', maybe?

Yes definitely. Then it would be 'strongly agree.'

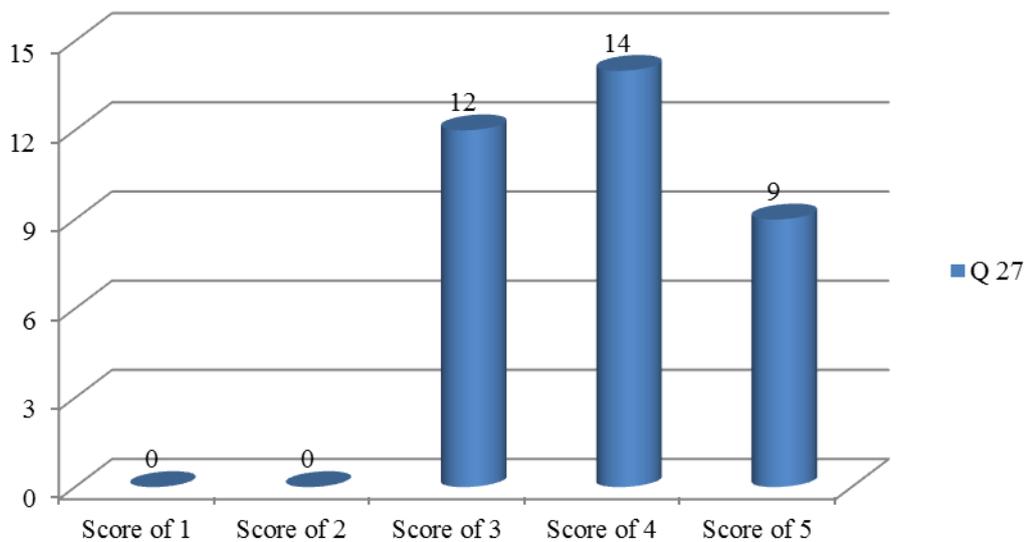
Participant Focus Group 6

The potential of these experiences to contribute to a student's employability is widely acknowledged in the literature for example by Atkins (1999), Blackwell *et al.* (2001) and Tomlinson (2007). While the potential for off-campus activities such as part-time work to weaken the link between the student and the institution is identified (Tinto, 1975) if those activities are aligned with the student's wider aims and objectives then such activities can re-inforce the student's commitment to their degree programme (Atkins, 1999; Kuh, 1995).

7.4.3 *What determines the extent to which extra-curricular activity contributes to the student experience?*

Unlike some of the other elements of the student experience, there is no explicit requirement to engage in extracurricular activity. While there might be some parental and/or peer pressure, it is perhaps less pronounced than with other elements of student experience. Ultimately, the student has a choice about which activities to engage with and indeed whether or not to do it at all, albeit that the student's financial circumstances may play a part in that choice. Question 27 asked participants whether involvement in activities outside their degree had been a big influence on them. The answers are summarised in Figure 7.6 below.

Question 27



Question Grouping: The influence of extra-curricular activity.

Mean Average Score	3.9
Standard Deviation	0.8

Figure 7.6: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 27, involvement in these activities outside your degree has been a big influence on you.

Generally, the focus group participants were reasonably well engaged in extra-curricular activity and, as a result, such activity was a significant influence on them. However, while participants demonstrated an awareness of the value of engagement with extra-curricular activity, their level of drive and motivation to actually participate was not always correspondingly high. A suitable analogy might be with healthy eating and its associated benefits. Just because eating a healthy diet is “good” for you doesn't always mean that an individual has the necessary drive and motivation to do it. The following exchange from the first focus group illustrates an interesting perspective. Voluntary participation could always be deferred, however the discipline of paid employment created a pressure to engage and participate which could overcome feelings of reticence and lack of confidence:

I wish I got more involved; in first year there was a push to join societies but the opportunity never really arose to join them later on.

I think having a job helped me, working in teams and meeting new people and managing your time.

Participants Focus Group 1

Similarly, the discipline created by the pressure of assessed university work pushed participants to engage and, in doing so, added to participants' capabilities. This in turn contributed to a greater level of confidence to take on new challenges:

Yeah. There is the socialising aspect but team work has been absolutely essential, which is inevitably going to be a huge part of any job you're going to. And again, coming back to personal confidence, well, it's taking part and to have the confidence to be there; interact, take a lead when necessary in whatever you're doing. I think those are 3 fundamental skills that I'll come across in my life.

Participant Focus Group 7

These comments concur with the views of Kuh (1995) and Jones and Hill (2003) that institutional policy and practice has a significant influence on the level and extent of extra-curricular involvement amongst the student body. It is also interesting to speculate as to what extent developing maturity and confidence over the course of the degree programme contributes to a greater level of willingness to take the opportunities available. However, there was also evidence that as graduation and the need to find a job was approaching, a sense of urgency had developed which was pushing participants to overcome this reticence:

Like we were saying earlier, most of this starts to come in third year; in fact all of it, pretty much. I mean, I've done the Board of Students this year, I've started netball this year, I've got two part time jobs this year; everything has happened in my last year. Which is why I'm just constantly doing things now, I never sit down. Whereas the first two years, I sat on the sofa most of the time.

It's good to put on your CV.

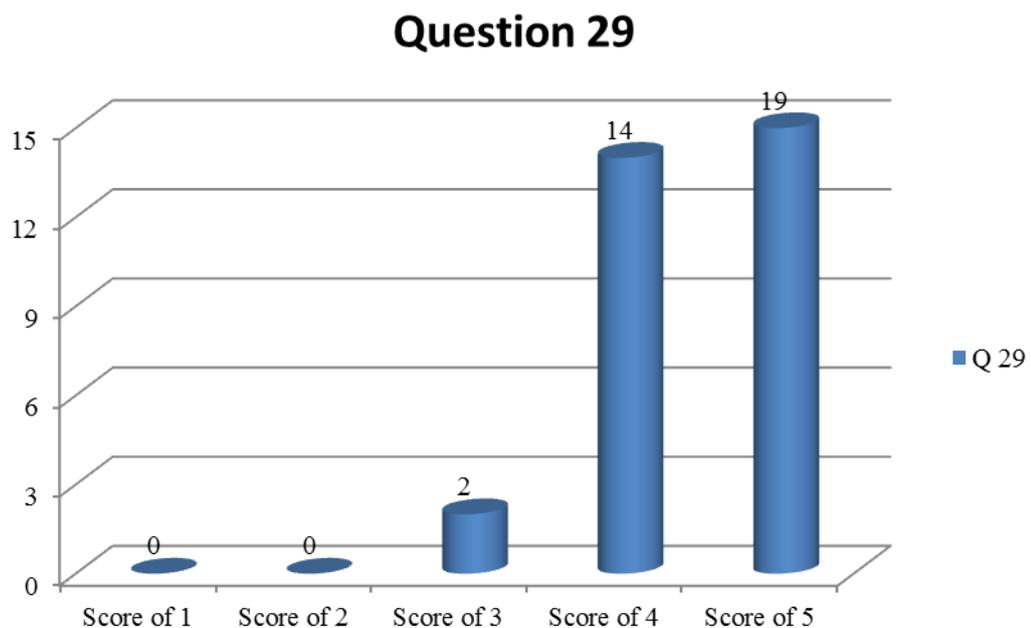
It's partly to do with that but it's also I need to do something now; I can't sit around and waste my time anymore. I've grown up.

Participants Focus Group 4

These themes are developed further in the next section, which examines influential experiences and disappointments.

7.5 Influential Experiences and Disappointments

This section considers how participants reported on what had been influential experiences and disappointments. In keeping with the overall theme of this chapter, it does so within the context of preparing for life after graduation. A good place to start is to return to the subject of why this group of students came to university in the first place. I started this theme in section 7.3 and aim to round off that discussion in this section. I will start this by considering the answers to question 29, summarised in Figure 7.7 below.



Question Grouping: The influence of what happens after graduation: employability/further study

Mean Average Score	4.5
Standard Deviation	0.6

Figure 7.7: Summary of Focus Groups' Answers to Question 29, one of the main reasons you came to university was to enhance your career prospects/prospects for post-graduate study.

There was strong support for this assertion. The question was carefully worded as “*one of* the main reasons you came to university” rather than “*the* main reason” as it was apparent to me from the pilot study that there were other very important reasons. 33 out of 35 participants agreed with this assertion, resulting in an average score of 4.5.

The strength of opinion in the answer to this question, along with the answers to similar questions and the views expressed during the focus groups, for example as reported in chapter six, collectively show that this is a very important element of what participants want from their student experience. As a result, it is difficult to see how participants would be satisfied with their experience if at the end of their degree programme they did not feel that their prospects had been enhanced. Further, it was apparent from the contributions made during the focus groups, that while prospects for post-graduate study might be important for some International students, for UK students it was career prospects that mattered:

I think for me the main reason for coming to university was to get the experience. A degree or just so I could get a better job at the end. It was a lot to do with going to a different country as well. Don't think I'd enjoy studying at home doing university. Wouldn't think that I can get as much out of it, so I came here. And learning the language and experiencing a different culture. The experience, that's important for me.

Participant Focus Group 3

I think probably with any degree though, the student experience is really good but you wouldn't pay £3,000 a year just to have a good time. You obviously go because you want to get a good job.

Participant Focus Group 8

Accordingly, experiences that were seen by participants as aligning with the aim of enhanced career prospects were seen as influential and significant:

***What does the time on placement contribute to your student time?
What do you bring back with you?***

You've been able to put into context stuff that you've learnt, so maybe stuff like audit and FR modules. When I came back and sitting the exams I could remember when such and such happened and 'I did this' and I could apply it, so I think it definitely helped with work.

Participant Focus Group 8

Such applied and integrated work experience contributes to what Blackwell *et al.* (2001) describes as a “purposeful” experience, where all stakeholders are aware of the underlying intentions, a factor that they describe as a key characteristic of good practice. Gault *et al.* (2000) also point to a number of benefits post-graduation for undergraduates with similar experiences. However, positive experiences could also arise indirectly as a result of the participant’s degree programme:

I’ve got involved with the Management Society, which has improved my skills and abilities, and I think a big reason behind it is for employability and to put on my CV and stuff. But I think it’s got me actively searching for different things. Like, we’re sponsored by Deloitte, so I look at Deloitte in a different way so it’s definitely changed my behaviour. I’m glad I’ve done it because I think it makes me more employable because I’ve got those certain aspects on my CV.

Participant Focus Group 2

Kuh (1995) notes that many different extra-curricular experiences have the capacity to contribute to worthwhile learning experiences. Similar sentiments were expressed by focus group participants who expressed a desire for personal development generally, recognising that learning experiences from a variety of sources could be valuable, influential and long-lasting. Such experiences were not so much about acquiring specific knowledge; they were more about taking the opportunities available at university to develop more broadly:

What does matter is that you learn or gain the experience and confidence

Participant Focus Group 3

Yeah. I think it's more about adding value to my degree. Like the stuff I do now at university it's - this is the only time I'll do it at university. Like I'm sure when I'm working outside, I'll not be doing this sort of stuff and I'll not have the chance to do it.

Participant Focus Group 3

This perspective underlines the view that personal development can take place as readily outside the classroom as in it (Atkins, 1999; Cranmer, 2006; Kuh, 1995). While there was a consensus about the potential of personal development, participants also reported on their views of the realities of the labour market. In particular, there was

discussion about the requirements of the selection processes operated by employers and the need to be able to respond to these both in terms of entry qualifications and personal qualities:

A lot of people, and myself slightly included, are coming because they want to get a good job and for that, it's not what you learn, it's that they can see that you've got the first or the 2:1, that gets you through the door. It implies you've learnt things.

Participant Focus Group 3

Actually, I really do think that if you really want to improve your skills and abilities, then it will actually affect how you're going to engage in the life here. If you have the heart to get yourself stretched, then you will try your hands on everything here. Like joining the societies and trying out everything; that's why I do think there is a correlation there.

Participant Focus Group 5

Not all participants agreed with this perspective, some viewed the whole process of doing things just because of their contribution to the CV as distasteful:

They know that they've got to have the charity work, have the job experience and do stuff like that. Which, by the way, is horrible. The whole system is horrible. I've got to do charity work so that I look good on a CV - OH MY GOD! It's so ...

Well, I don't think you have to do charity work.

No, but you know what I mean. For your CV. It makes you look better.

Yeah. Exactly. It's horrible. It's the same thing to get into university. I'd better been on such a team to get in or whatever. It's like WO! Basically, people will do stuff to look like they're a certain person.

Participants Focus Group 3

However, in general, there was pragmatism about how things were rather than how participants might like them to be. In line with Glover *et al.* (2002) and Tomlinson (2007), participants were acutely aware that there were rules to the game as to how to gain entry into the graduate labour market, just as there had been about entry to university. Accordingly, if they were to realise their ambitions they needed to conform to these rules even though they may not agree with them.

I think university should probably be about coming to learn something specific. But the way the system is, isn't like that. If you want to get a decent job, then you've got to have yourself a degree. So, I think I disagree with the system at whole. So I understand why university has turned into this. But I don't think that everyone should come to university. I think that a lot of people are pushed in because they feel they need it to get a good job, but shouldn't probably be here.

Participant Focus Group 3

The fact that you've got the degree just differentiates you from the people who don't.

Participant Focus Group 3

In relation to disappointments, there were two main themes identified by participants. The first of these relate to the delivery of their degree programme. This is considered in more depth in chapter six but is also relevant here because it has an impact on preparing for life post-graduation. It refers to an over-reliance on passive, large-group lectures with insufficient number of interactive small-group sessions where participants could discuss and develop their ideas and understanding:

I would sacrifice lecture hours to have twelve or twenty people having a discussion about something and actually learning something; I think it is far more productive.

Participant Focus Group 6

I really did think before university that there would be a lot more tutorials; people would be actively discussing stuff.

Participant Focus Group 6

I had really small groups in sixth form so they were always doing that. I think you would have a lot more 1st class students if there was that more interaction.

Participant Focus Group 6

While the quotes above all originate from one focus group, this view was also expressed by other groups and it is consistent with the discussion and analysis in chapter six. The view was that large lectures could work if the speaker was particularly dynamic and engaging, but many Business School lecturers were not.

Furthermore, a passive experience of just listening was sterile and did not encourage students to think about and engage with the material. The development of thinking, understanding and ideas was much more likely where there was inter-action and feedback both between staff and students and also between students (Astin, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Kolb and Kolb 2005). There was a feeling that university should encourage and develop participants' intellectual curiosity, and thereby contribute to their overall intellectual development. The sense that it had not done this left some participants feeling unfulfilled.

However, this perspective was not confined to experiences at university. One participant reported how they had encountered it as part of a compulsory placement:

Yes, it can be a bit frustrating if you ask someone more senior why something has been done and they sort of dismiss it as, 'It's not important, don't worry about it. Just do it because you need to do it.' Whereas you want to get an understanding, just so you know why it's been done.

Participant Focus Group 8

The comments in this section are also pertinent to the linked concepts of engagement and alienation (Dean and Jolly, 2012; Kahu, 2013; Mann 2001) and the potential of actions to contribute feelings of one or the other depending on the context. Only the student can decide whether or not to engage with student life. Student life holds many opportunities, but they require the student to be pro-active and show initiative, a new challenge for many and one which requires confidence. Students who are able to seize these opportunities will engage with a variety of learning experiences and benefit from the personal development that results. However, if the student does not engage they will not accumulate the experiences and the accompanying lack of stimuli is likely to lead to a sense of boredom and dis-satisfaction, consistent with feelings of alienation.

Most of the participants expressed some disappointment that academic staff had not shown more leadership to them about the importance of engagement with wider aspects of the student experience. Generally, even where participants had engaged widely they attributed this to their own efforts rather than being something that had been achieved with the support and encouragement of the staff. Clearly, this raises some interesting

questions about the perceived balance of responsibilities between participants and the Business School's academic staff.

Participants generally recognised their own personal responsibility to be pro-active and engage.

I think for me, prior to coming to university I had an understanding that university is the place where you grow and in my head I had it that that is something that comes from the lectures, from discussions you have at university and that kind of thing. Whereas you come to university and I realise that you have to make your own conscious effort to make university help you to grow, in the sense that you have to make a conscious effort to build up on different skills. It's not that things will just come while you are at university.

Participant Focus Group 7

That independent development which you may not find exclusively through meeting friends and being with friends ... play an important part of the student experience for me

Participant Focus Group 7

However, participants identified they lacked the tacit knowledge of what to do specifically to get involved and also that they needed some support and confidence building. It was felt that Business School staff could and should give a greater lead to encourage students to do this, especially given participants' motivation to study at university in the first place. Kuh (1995) and Jones and Hill (2003) both emphasise the importance of institutional policy and practice in encouraging and facilitating students' extra-curricular involvement, asserting that if the institution is willing to develop a co-ordinated approach to leading in this area many students will follow. Participants identified the first year as being particularly important in this process as in the first year students might be less aware of the need to do it but would have plenty of opportunity to:

I think there possibly needs to be more emphasis on getting first years involved in stuff. Because from my experience and a lot of my friends, people tend to get themselves involved in third year because they feel like they have to or because they feel like they've wasted two years not doing anything.

Participant Focus Group 4

Given some of the discussion in chapter four where participants identified that new students were more likely to refer to peers, friends and family for advice during the transition process, I asked participants whether this message would be better coming from other students than staff as they were likely to have more influence:

And you feel that you would be an effective advocate to the first years about the value of doing this?

Yes. I think it should be stated a lot more how important these things are. Whether they'll believe you is a different thing.

My experience is you look up to third year and you see what they're doing. But as well, you've got different objectives of the year. Third year, we're very focused and we're getting a job next year. First year, it's much more about going out.

And meeting people...

And meeting people and settling in.

Whereas now it's not about meeting people so much because you feel you've done that; it's about getting a job or getting the right things for a job.

Again, as I think we've said so many times, it applies most to me to third year. You realise why you're here and what you're doing, so it starts to influence your behaviour a lot more. You want to get more involved, you want to do more stuff.

Participants Focus Group 4

This exchange from one of the focus groups indicated that some participants did feel that this would be a good way forward and would have a beneficial effect. This is in keeping with the acknowledged potential of peers to contribute to the formal and informal learning process as evidenced by Allen *et al.* (1999), Jackling and MacDowell (2008), Miller and Packham (1999), Packham and Miller (2000), and Peat *et al.* (2001).

In reflecting on their overall experience, the disappointments had a significant weighting. Accordingly, when there was discussion about being ready to move on from university, and the extent to which participants felt that their student experience had prepared them to move, there was only one focus group where participants were willing to endorse their experience strongly. This focus group was comprised of students from

the same programme. Their programme is characterised by strong links to a profession, with integrated placements and progress towards a professional qualification:

I feel I have a brilliant balance between what I've got from university and what I've got out of Business, Accountancy and Finance;

Participant Focus Group 8

I do think university is an important experience to have before you start work, I think it makes you more well-rounded and more used to situations and meeting different people.

Participant Focus Group 8

When I look at myself as a sixth form student, I would never in a million years imagine myself working for such a huge firm like PwC, like performing an audit of their accounts that are going to go out to the markets and stuff.

Participant Focus Group 8

It is noticeable that these endorsements are based mainly around the progress made in terms of employability and readiness to start a career. On one hand, this might be expected given their choice of programme. However, it was noticeable that participants from the other focus groups were much less enthusiastic and much less willing to endorse their own experience:

I think if you're like a medic, you're actually learning on the job and it does really matter what you learn for your career. But because we're all doing Business degrees, you could go into anything.

Participant Focus Group 2

I don't think that the Business School per se or my degree have helped me ... I feel it's far more my own doing that that's happened because I've had the time to do it and the drive to do it.

Participant Focus Group 3

I do think gradually over the past 3 years I've learned new skills, I've learned how to speak more confidently to people, presentation skills, writing down notes, listening, all those kind of skills I have developed. But then sometimes when it comes to actual information, sometimes I think well, have I really in 3 years, have I really learned that much?

Participant Focus Group 3

The implication here is that if the experience is fulfilling and satisfying (involving a significant amount of personal development which helps the student realise their ambitions) then the student will feel ready to move on, ready for the next step. However, if the student does not see this personal development or if it does not contribute to their future goals, then the student will be less confident about moving on and will view their time as a missed opportunity, and they are much more likely to feel dissatisfied.

7.6 Differing Perspectives – the View of International Students

International student participants were acutely aware (perhaps more so than UK students) of the investment being made both by themselves and their families by studying in the UK:

Do you think of it consciously in those terms, as an investment?

It is an investment, a big investment; especially for international students!

Participant Focus Group 5

For my family it as an investment, after graduation students have a certain level of advantages.

You could have gone to university in China. What does spending your time here have that you wouldn't have in China?

In the university in China they spend a lot of time having fun. My parents don't want me to waste my time in China.

Participant Focus Group 1

Consequently, they were conscious of how the benefits of studying in the UK might contribute to the costs. The following exchange sums this up well. While it does involve a lengthy quote, it also underlines the value of the focus group approach to generate answers to my research questions. It illustrates how I, as the moderator, was able to reflect on the points being made and facilitate further development of those points by asking supplementary, open questions. This results in a more rounded picture as to why this group of International student participants value the critical approach to university education in the UK and the opportunity to experience a different culture.

For you guys who are not from the UK, do you think how you are as a student here is much different from how you would be a student at home?

Oh definitely! A great difference. Because when we are at home, if we are students in our own home there, we won't be like too engaged or too enthusiastic about everything in that university because we have grown up there and we have already incorporated every culture and every stuff in our own home. But when we came here in the UK, we are totally fresh or new to everything here and that's why I've been trying very hard to incorporate myself into the local culture here. And I really like to talk to people from British and also from different countries because I can always get a different point of view or different opinion from them. But I have to say they've got very different minds to us and what they think is so much different. It maybe because they were brought up in different education system here...

Could you give me an indication of how it's different?

I'm studying in Hong Kong for my college and also primary and we were taught everything the teachers told us, we don't really need to read through books at all because we have got a very detailed notes prepared for us; so we would just do revision on the notes. And the test will be based on the notes and that's already enough for you to get very high marks. But when you came here, when you talk to local students, they all have to get their own notes and they have to read a lot, from the library; that's why they've got different views, different perspectives because they are reading different books. And that's why they've got a very critical mind about everything and they've got different views just because they are reading different things.

From your point of view, is that a good thing or a bad thing?

A good thing. Because they can look at the same issues as us but with a different view. But I have to say, for me, if I look at it, that issue – the same time as the local students, they were like...I would just have a very single view on that and sometimes it's a really traditional one and it didn't stand out a lot. But for the local students, they will actually think of that issue in a very different way.

Participants Focus Group 5

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter considered how participants were preparing for life after graduation. Section 7.2 examined participants' sense of developing independence and autonomy. Whereas participants had found the freedoms associated with student life both intoxicating and scary in their first year, by their final year they had become accustomed

to making their own decisions and determining their own priorities. Similarly their relationships with parents had developed and matured to reflect their status as independent adult rather than dependent child.

Section 7.3 developed the theme of growing independence further by examining participants' developing capabilities. Participants saw university as an investment where they had the opportunity to develop themselves as preparation for independent adult life. The development of employment related skills was seen as important, although wider aspects of personal development and character formation such as confidence and resilience were as important along with capabilities in what are more commonly thought of as skills, such as communication and teamwork.

Section 7.4 examined the role of extra-curricular activity in the student experience. Participants were generally engaged in extra-curricular activity and could see tangible benefits arising from their involvement. Organisational and contextual factors were important in building feelings of confidence and motivation to get involved. The potential for the Business School to provide greater leadership in this area was identified.

Section 7.5 considered participants reflections on what had been influential in their student experience, both the positives and the disappointments. For UK students, one of the main reasons for coming to university was to enhance career prospects and participants expressed satisfaction where either directly or indirectly their programme of study contributed to this overall aim. Some participants were also very satisfied with their learning and teaching experience.

However, for many there were feelings of disappointment about a sterile learning experience based around large lectures with little opportunity for interaction. There were some criticisms of the curriculum in terms of interest, academic development and relevance. Some participants also felt that much more could be done to encourage Business School undergraduates to engage and participate more widely, given the potential for enhanced personal development from doing so.

Finally section 7.6 considered the differing perspectives of UK and International students.

These factors are summarised in Figure 7.8 below.

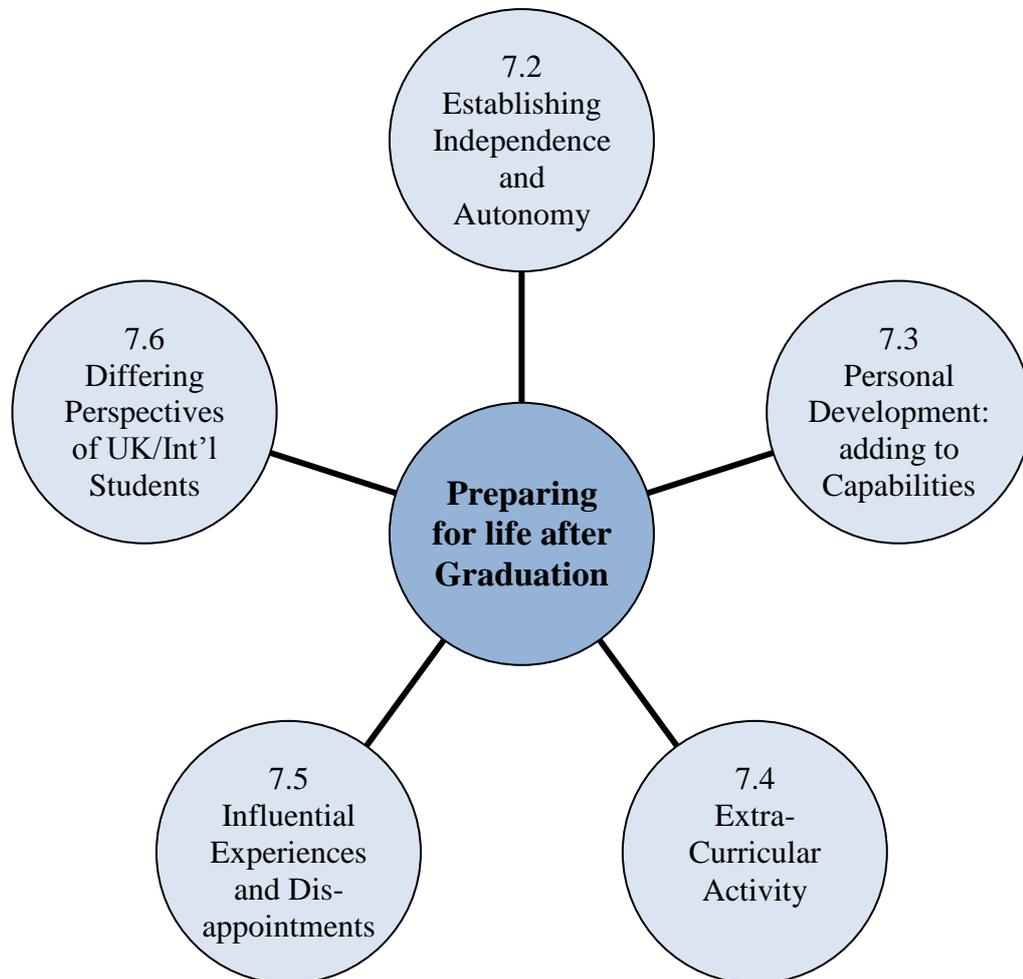


Figure 7.8: A Diagrammatic Representation of the Elements of Preparing for Life after Graduation.

This chapter completes the set of four chapters which analysed and discussed the data generated by the focus groups. Accordingly, in the next chapter, I will proceed to my conclusions, discussing the implications of the data analysis for my conceptual framework of the student experience and identifying the implications of my study for the provision of undergraduate business education at Newcastle University Business School.

Chapter Eight – Conclusion to the Study

8.1 Introduction

This chapter forms the conclusion to my study, and has four sections. The first two sections address my findings in relation to the two overarching research questions that I identified in chapter one. Firstly, what defines the student experience for undergraduate business students at Newcastle University Business School? Secondly, what are the implications for the Business School for the design and delivery of its undergraduate business education?

Section 8.2 addresses the first question of what defines the student experience, by summarising the findings from the focus group data discussed in chapters four to seven, and then using these findings to develop further the conceptual framework for the student experience I introduced in the second half of chapter two.

In section 8.3, I apply the findings from the focus group data and the conceptual framework to address the second research question by identifying the implications for the design and delivery of undergraduate business education at Newcastle.

Section 8.4 discusses the contribution that this study makes to pedagogic research and also identifies its limitations. Finally, section 8.5 discusses the implications for further study.

8.2 What defines the student experience for undergraduate Business students at Newcastle University Business School? The Development of a Conceptual Framework

8.2.1 *Overall Summary of Findings*

Chapter three discussed the research design and approach for my study. During the chapter, I identified why focus groups were the most suitable approach for the collection of data and I also reported on the pilot study where I refined my use of this research approach. The focus group discussions were structured so as to facilitate open discussion of the seven categories identified in chapter two and the pilot study gave me additional evidence where the framework could and should be explored further in the main data collection stage. My detailed findings were discussed in chapters four to

seven. I have set out below the main findings arising from the data analysis as it is this evidence that forms the basis of my overall conclusions.

Chapter four considered the process of becoming a student. For most UK focus group participants there was an expectation that they would go to university. It was seen as the next stage in their personal development, something that they and their peer group expected to do, rather than a conscious reasoned decision arrived at by weighing up the alternatives. Focus group participants did not have well developed expectations about what student life would be like (Brooks, 2002; Hockings *et al.*, 2007; Low and Cooke, 2003).

Parents and older siblings were influential in the decision to go to university, as were schools which appeared to measure success by the proportion of their students who earned a place at university and, particularly in the case of UK students, Russell Group universities. This underlines the strength of the influence of family, friends and schools in the pre-university phase, effectively encouraging participants to step up to the expectation of coming to university as the logical next step in transition to adult life (Brooks, 2002; Elkins *et al.*, 2000).

The second part of the process of becoming a student was the period of time between a student first arriving at university and the point when they felt properly settled into student life. I used the phrase “transition” to describe this process. Focus group participants highlighted that this transition is a complex process. Key themes arising included coping with the greater freedoms of student life; experiences of communal living in university accommodation; differences in studying at university compared with school and participants’ feelings about securing a place at Newcastle University (Brooks, 2007; DeBard, 2004; Christie *et al.*, 2008; Palmer *et al.*, 2009; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005).

The data highlighted that this was a significant and influential time. The latter stages of transition involved crossing the threshold of becoming a student, something that contributed to a sense of achievement and growing up, and building confidence to move onto the next stage of student life. Focus group participants described their experiences in dealing with difficult situations in vivid terms. Overcoming those situations were often seen as turning points and gave participants the confidence to move forward.

However participants also reported how those experiences had the capacity to alienate as well as engage (Mann, 2001; Dean and Jolly, 2012; Palmer *et al*, 2009).

Chapter five examined the influence of social and cultural influences, particularly of popular culture. The data highlighted that interaction with peer and friendship groups is a key microsystem in the student experience. There was evidence that friends can play a key support role (acting as a surrogate family to some) and are a source of considerable enjoyment and personal development, contributing to a growing sense of participants' independence and autonomy. The sense of going through a shared, common experience can engender powerful, positive feelings which brought students together. Peers and friends also form a benchmark against which students can judge themselves and develop their opinions. In contrast, university staff exist outside this world (Bank *et al.*, 1990; Brooks, 2007; Kember *et al.*, 2001; Thomas, 2000; Wilcox *et al.*, 2005).

Chapter five also examined the influence of parents and family. For most participants the move away from home to come to university and the increasing importance of relationships with peers and friends had an impact on the relationship with family. Even so, parents continued to be a key relationship, based around seemingly unconditional levels of trust and confidence for some participants. There was some evidence that the parental and family microsystem was becoming less influential, as the university peer and friendship microsystem grew in influence. There was also a sense that the growing independence of participants was contributing to a re-drafting of their relationship with parents and family. Participants discussed how the relationship with their parents was re-framed on a more equal footing, reflecting the students' greater autonomy and maturity and their parents' recognition of this. Thus the development of the relationships with university peers and friends complemented the development of the relationship with parents and family (Elkins *et al*, 2000; Brooks and Waters, 2010; Coomes and De Bard, 2004; Davis-Kean, 2005).

The extensive use of mobile and Internet based communication also made it much easier for participants to keep in regular contact with family as these changes took place. Improved communication technologies have also made it easier for participants to keep in contact with non-university friends; however such friends remain peripheral to the university student experience. Participants were well aware of the image of student life

portrayed in popular culture but felt that it relied heavily on stereotypes and generalisations and therefore had little influence on them.

Chapter six examined focus group participants' degree programmes. It was emphasised during the focus group discussions that the curriculum needed to carry academic credibility in line with participants' expectations of a Russell Group university like Newcastle. However it was not clear that this expectation was being met. There were perceptions that some modules were too easy, especially in the first and second years, although participants were more positive where the curriculum had provided opportunities to apply learning to business scenarios or to develop career related knowledge or skills. The final year was also felt to provide challenge.

These concerns were developed further in the discussions on the coherence and relevance of the curriculum. Some participants felt that they had studied a collection of modules rather than a coherent programme. There was also a concern that the curriculum did not contribute enough in terms of the skills and abilities required for graduate employment. Staff who were enthusiastic and who adopted an interactive style were appreciated and respected. However, participants also identified instances where the curriculum was delivered in large lectures by disinterested staff that made little effort to interact with students. There were also comments about the absence of seminars and, where there were seminars, the variations in quality of how they were delivered. These findings underline the importance of these fundamental aspects of teaching and learning, consistent with a range of previous studies Astin, 1999; Kember, 2004; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Mann, 2001; Vermeulen and Schmidt, 2008.

Stepping back from the detail for a moment, it is worth considering the fundamental question of why this group of students chose to study Business at Newcastle. In doing so the picture emerges of a group of students who are mostly career minded, although not necessary drawn to, or driven by, a vocation. Their decision to study Business has less to do with a passion for all things Business and more to do with studying a subject at university that will prove useful or beneficial to them when they seek to enter the labour market. Thus, for many students, there is an element of compromise in their decision to study Business; it is a pragmatic decision born out of keeping one eye on the future rather than from an innate love of the subject. That is not to say that the student lacks intellectual curiosity but that intellectual curiosity and "love of the subject" is not

as strong a factor motivating their choice of degree programme as it might be for a typical English Literature undergraduate (Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Tomlinson, 2007; Wilton, 2008).

This is significant because it means that the student arrives with a particular expectation that by studying Business they will be more employable and their entry into the labour market more straight-forward than for students studying more academic subjects which are perceived as not having a vocational link. In effect they are seeking a return on an investment, part of which involves forgoing the luxury of studying a more esoteric subject in order to gain knowledge and skills that will contribute to greater success in the labour market, both initially in securing graduate employment and thereafter in making their way during the early years of their career.

One of the causes of participants' dissatisfaction was that their perception that some academics in the Business School did not appreciate or acknowledge this perspective. Their view being that such academics teach and conceive of business in academic rather than applied terms. Furthermore, many of these academics lack the business and/or professional experience and perspective to meet the demand from their students for an applied business education. This is not solely an issue at an individual level; it is also an institutional issue, as the incentives and opportunities for career development and progression in a research led institution frequently do not require academics to adopt this perspective. Hence, there is a disconnection between what the students want and need and what many academics are equipped to deliver.

These circumstances contributed to strong opinions amongst focus group participants. For the majority, expectations in this regard were not being met and there were strong feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation. There was also an expectation that academic staff would be a bigger influence than had proved to be the case. Participants discussed how they had got to know teachers at school or college and had had some expectation that a similar sort of relationship would develop with their lecturers. Although there were cases where this had happened, for the majority it had not. The degree programme microsystem was clearly a significant influence on the overall student experience. It figured prominently in the discussions, with focus group participants frequently expressing their opinions with feeling and conviction.

Chapter seven considered how participants were preparing for life after graduation. Whereas participants had found the freedoms associated with student life both intoxicating and scary in their first year, by their final year they had become accustomed to making their own decisions and determining their own priorities. Similarly their relationships with parents had developed and matured to reflect their status as an independent adult rather than a dependent child.

The theme of participants' desire for independence and personal development emerged throughout the discussions. Focus group participants saw this as being crucial to their emergence as successful independent adults. Put simply, participants recognised the need to do things and learn things in order to have a sense of making progress and to develop confidence, self-worth and self-esteem. Where participants perceived that this was happening, their levels of satisfaction were high. Where it was not happening, participants reported a sense of listlessness and frustration, a sense that time was being wasted and an opportunity lost. These themes are consistent with the findings of Blackwell *et al.* (2001); Erikson, (1988) and Kuh, (1995).

Thus while the development of employment related skills was seen as important, so were wider aspects of personal development and character formation such as confidence and resilience. Focus group participants saw university as an investment where they had the opportunity to develop themselves as preparation for independent adult life. One way in which students could do this was through participation in extra-curricular activity. Participants reported seeing tangible benefits arising from such participation (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001; Kuh, 1995; Tomlinson, 2007).

However, there were issues in building up the confidence and motivation necessary to get involved in these activities. Participants discussed how the independence afforded to them by (in most cases) moving away from home to come to university gave them the power to make choices that would define who they are or who they want to be. This was an exciting time where students could embrace new interests and influences. However, it was also a potentially 'scary' time with new challenges and uncertainties, something that took a while to get used to. It was felt that there was potential for the Business School to help participants navigate their way through these changes by setting clearer expectations and thereby providing greater leadership (Jones and Hill, 2003; Kuh 1995).

Finally, chapter seven reported on participants' reflections on what had been influential in their student experience, both the positives and the disappointments. For UK students, the enhancement of career prospects was one of the main reasons for coming to university and participants expressed satisfaction where, either directly or indirectly, their programme of study had contributed to this overall aim. Some participants were also very satisfied with their learning and teaching experience. These students had made active progress with their personal and academic development and towards realising their ambitions after graduation. However, other focus group participants reported feelings of disappointment in a lost opportunity where an uninspiring learning experience based around large lectures with little opportunity for interaction had not provided the hoped for environment for personal development (Astin, 1999; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Kolb and Kolb 2005). There were some criticisms of the curriculum in terms of interest, academic development and relevance.

Overall, I found considerable evidence that the seven microsystems identified were highly influential in shaping the student experience of undergraduate business students at Newcastle. The focus group data enabled me to develop and refine my understanding of the microsystems. Further, there were no other major influences emerging in the discussions. Thus it is reasonable for me to conclude that these are the defining factors shaping the student experience of undergraduate business students at Newcastle. Furthermore, I also found evidence to support my conception of the student experience as a collection of microsystems, having the potential (both individually and collectively) to exert influence over the student. Accordingly, in the next section I use these findings to develop my conceptual framework further.

8.2.2 Development of the Working Hypothesis for the Conceptual Framework

Following the review of the literature, towards the end of chapter two, I set out a working hypothesis for the conceptual framework of the undergraduate business student at Newcastle. In this section, I will develop the framework further by incorporating my findings from my research that were reported on in chapters three to seven.

My working hypothesis at the end of chapter two was that the student experience can be conceived as a collection of microsystems which are overlaid on a psycho-social topography, where the personal development of the individual undergraduate student

takes place. I identified seven microsystems which I proposed would be the most significant for the majority of undergraduate business students at Newcastle. These were summarised in figure 2.1 and are reproduced below.

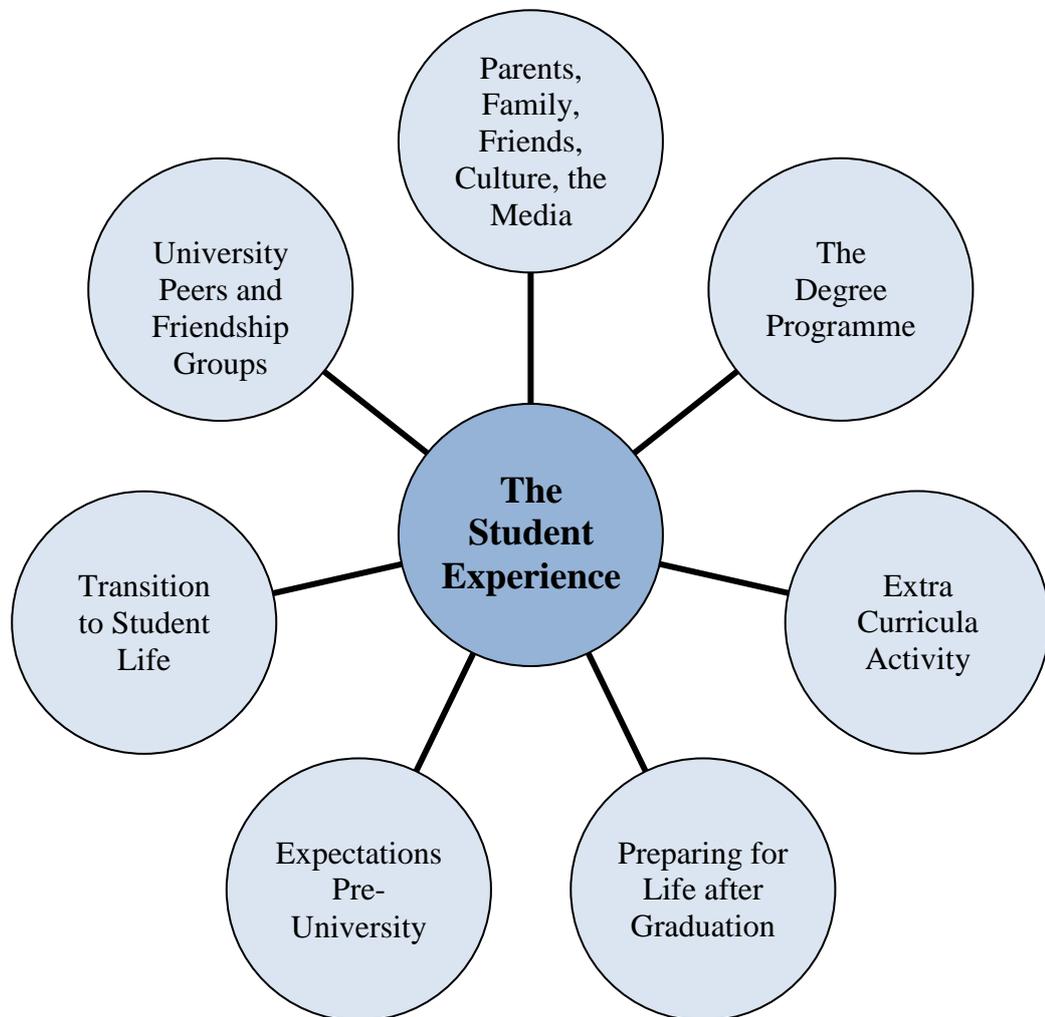


Figure 8.1 – Re-visiting Figure 2.1: Factors Shaping the Student Experience.

I also proposed that, in line with Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999), the microsystems can operate independently of each other but they can also interact, overlap or exert influence over each other depending on the circumstances, reflecting the fact that they act as components of, rather than the whole of, student life. Further, where an individual engages with a microsystem for a period of time in an increasingly meaningful and complex way, then that microsystem develops the capacity to shape the individual. There is a strong body of evidence in the data from my study that supports Bronfenbrenner’s proposition that, for a microsystem to exert influence, interaction

between the individual and the microsystem must take place on a regular basis over a period of time, becoming increasingly complex and involve reciprocal interaction rather than transmission of information to a passive recipient. Focus group participants reported examples of when they were actively engaged in an activity (i.e. it was present in the mesosystem) it influenced them and their personal development as they became progressively more and more involved, leading to a greater element of initiation and feedback between them and the activity.

8.2.3 *Conceptualising the Process whereby a Microsystem Exerts Influence*

As was discussed in section 2.4.2, in understanding how a microsystem exerts influence, the concepts of engagement and alienation are key because of their relevance to the circumstances of a university undergraduate. For example, the exploration of the degree programme microsystem, during chapter six, illustrated how these forces can operate in practice. Some focus group participants reported that their degree programme had provided a very satisfying experience. The curriculum was coherent and relevant, providing challenge and contributing to their personal development. Relationships with staff were good, and there was mutual respect. Participants were satisfied because they could sense their own personal development and could identify the significant progress they had made towards realising their ambitions to become successful independent adults. There was a palpable sense of engagement and satisfaction with their student experience.

For some other focus group participants, the opposite was the case. There was a sense that they had wasted time following an overly theoretical curriculum that bore little resemblance to their discipline in practice. Staff were seen as remote and uncaring and participants articulated feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction. There was a sense of frustration and of time being wasted as their degree programme was not bringing the desired personal development and was not contributing to realising their ambitions to be successful, independent adults. Participants had to work to complete the degree, but the prevailing sense was of disappointment and dissatisfaction with their experience.

Thus, in the first instance, focus group participants had positive feelings about their degree programme which encouraged them to interact often with it, contributing to their personal development. The feelings of engagement provided an environment conducive to sustained, progressively more complex interaction where the student both initiated

activity and received feedback on it; in other words, an environment where the conditions for personal development required in Bronfenbrenner's model were present. In contrast, in the second instance, focus group participants had negative feelings about their degree programme and thus felt alienated from it. In such circumstances they tended to limit their interaction with it to the minimum required to meet their need to obtain a certain class of honours degree. Thus, for them, the model is one of compliance rather than active engagement with the degree. As a consequence, interaction with the degree programme was more likely to be periodic (e.g. in the lead up to assessments) rather than sustained, increasingly more complex (at least during the final year) but lacking in initiation of activity and feedback. In other words, an environment where the conditions for personal development required in Bronfenbrenner's model were not necessarily present.

Chapter five provided a further perspective on this process. The greater freedoms of student life, the need to build new social networks and the opportunities to get to know other students (provided by communal living) were all strong contributory forces for engagement with university peer and friendship groups. However, focus group participants generally reported that the development of these influential new relationships were in addition to, rather than a replacement for, their pre-existing strong relationships with parents and family. There was no sense that the new relationships contributed to a sense of alienation from parents and family. Thus, while engagement with university peer and friendship groups was a powerful force, drawing this microsystem quickly towards the centre of the student's experience, there was not a corresponding force of alienation pushing the parent and family relationship outwards. Instead a sense of engagement remained.

The result of this was that the relationship with parents and family changed. Although there was less day-to-day contact, the on-going engagement between participants and their parents and family meant that the relationship continued to develop and mature, towards one based on a more equal footing, reflecting participants' greater autonomy and independence. Participants generally reported feelings of satisfaction that this change had taken place and that strong feelings of affection and respect in the relationships had been maintained. This process appears to bring together two powerful perspectives in the literature. Firstly, students' drive for developing identity as discussed by Erikson (1998), and secondly, the personal development that comes from

continued participation in progressively more complex interactions between the individual and a microsystem as discussed by Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999).

In chapter two, I suggested that it seemed unduly restrictive and, indeed, unrealistic to think of the forces of engagement and alienation as working on a straight line forwards and backwards, owing to the potential for sideways movement, especially as this would allow microsystems to intersect. The interplay of the peer and friendship microsystem with the parents and family microsystem provides an illustration of this. However, it would be misleading to suggest that engagement and alienation are the only forces determining the influence of a microsystem. The data suggests that circumstances and timing are also significant influences in determining whether a microsystem appears towards the centre of the student experience, i.e. the mesosystem, or at the periphery, i.e. the exosystem.

For example, the circumstances of undergraduate study mean that one would expect the degree programme microsystem to be significant for almost the entire duration of the student's time at university. However the influence of timing means that some microsystems will wax and wane in significance. Transition to student life, for example, happens predominantly during the first year. During that year it is a very significant factor, but thereafter that episode in the student experience has been completed. Similarly, preparing for life after graduation is not a concern in the first year but, by the final year, it has become a significant influence. Thus, although the forces of engagement or alienation are significant, one also has to consider the starting point from which these forces exert influence. Circumstance and timing do much to determine that initial starting point. Thereafter, the forces of engagement and/or alienation would determine the extent of the influence exerted and contribute to the level of satisfaction or dis-satisfaction.

Thus, the forces pushing and pulling the microsystems can be better thought of as multi-directional and the proximity to the mesosystem a function of circumstance and timing as well as engagement and alienation. This is shown in figure 8.2 below, where the broad location of the microsystem (represented by the shaded oval) is determined by circumstance and timing, while within that broad location changes in the level of influence of the microsystem are determined by the forces of engagement and alienation.

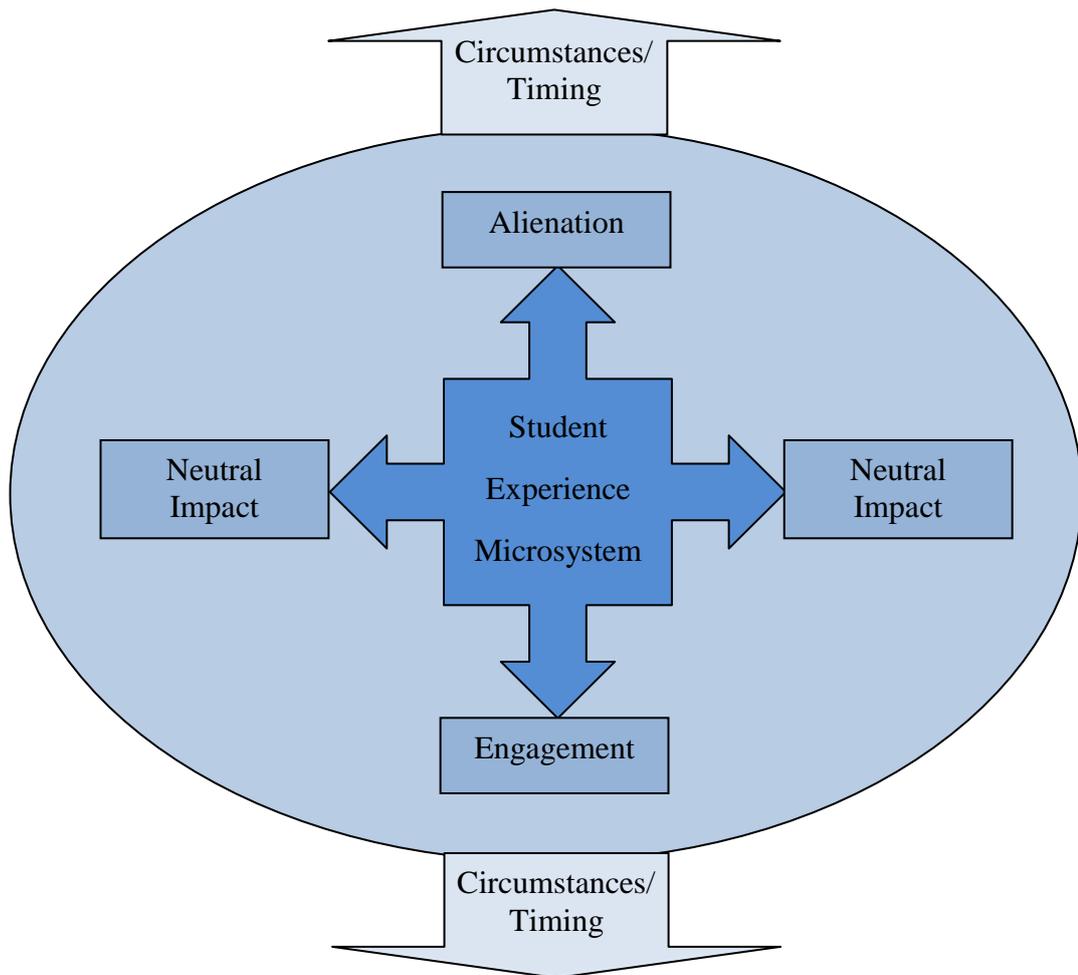


Figure 8.2 – Representing movement and influence in student experience microsystems.

8.2.4 Engagement with New Microsystems

As discussed in the previous section, circumstances or timing can place a microsystem right at the centre of a student’s life. However, in other situations, circumstances or timing may result in a microsystem being placed at the periphery. An example of this could be extra-curricula activity, which was discussed in chapter seven. Students usually have free choice about participation in extra-curricula activity and therefore it is interesting to consider what it is that attracts a student to a new activity, thereby moving that activity from the periphery to a position of greater influence in the student’s life.

In the literature, models exploring the process of personal development (e.g. Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl *et al.*, 1964; Lave, 1991) are based around a hierarchy (or pyramid) whereby an individual starts with (lower level) passive awareness of an activity

gradually progressing to (higher level) active participation as the individual's interest and competence in that activity develops over time. These models are based on a premise that each successively higher level of involvement develops from a preceding level that provides a foundation for progression to the next level.

The evidence from the focus groups was that the initial spark for involvement in a new activity could be as little as a single event, such as listening to a talk, reading about an event or watching something on television. However, once the initial spark had taken hold then involvement became more developed and sophisticated as the individual engaged progressively with the activity over time. Thus what might start with limited, and often passive, activity might quickly broaden out to become more active and interactive involvement as the individual became more committed.

During section 7.4 I reported on the focus group data about extra-curricula activity. Participants talked about instances where they had developed new interests or activities, including sports, societies, travel and work. They also talked about how their participation had developed and become more sophisticated as their involvement grew, with the result that an initial interest in (say) part-time work, could lead to an individual working for an employer over a period of time, progressing to a more trusted supervisory position. In this context, extra-curriculum involvement can be seen as both a developmental activity, in line with Bronfenbrenner's models (1994, 1999), and as a vehicle for situated learning, in line with Lave's (1991) model of communities of practice.

In the context of the student experience, this shows the value raising students' awareness of opportunities via a variety of stimuli that provide these initial sparks to catch the students' interest. Once they have become interested, the student can then engage progressively with the activity to develop beyond mere attendance to more active participation. With the greater participation, comes the development of higher level capabilities, such as leadership, along with the confidence to take on new challenges. This is illustrated in the diagram below, which represents the process of active engagement as an inverted pyramid rather than a traditional pyramid shape, reflecting the fact that the spark that ignites the initial interest can be quite insignificant but thereafter the involvement creates an increasingly broad base for further participation.

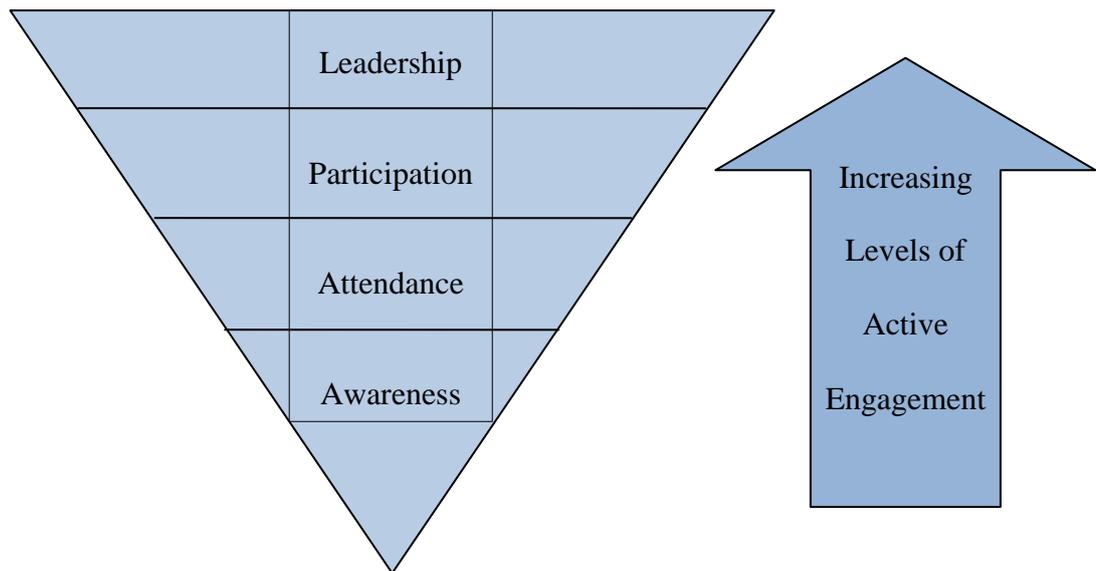


Figure 8.3 – The Inverted Pyramid of Active Engagement

8.2.5 Providing a Satisfying Student Experience

The final element in the development of the conceptual framework is to move one stage further, to identify the characteristics of a satisfying student experience. My proposition is that in order to be satisfied the student needs to have participated in a process of personal development. Further, that for the undergraduate business students in my study, the personal development needs to have been sufficient to ensure that the student graduates as a more rounded, independent and employable individual. Finally, in order for that personal development to have taken place, the student needs to have actively engaged with multiple microsystems. In line with Bronfenbrenner (1999), for engagement to result in personal development it needs to take place on a regular basis over a period of time, becoming increasingly complex and involve reciprocal interaction rather than transmission of information to a passive recipient.

In the context of Business undergraduates this means that if the individual's interaction with student life is limited solely to that between the student and his/her degree programme, then the student's personal development is unlikely to be sufficiently well developed and broadly based for that individual to have participated in a satisfying student experience.

Thus, the student who grasps the opportunities to effect transition into student life, engages actively with their university peer and friendship groups, maintains relations with family or school friends, engages with their degree programme and participates actively in extra-curricula activity (thereby developing their employability), will have had a full, rounded experience and will have benefitted from these multiple opportunities for personal development. This widespread involvement is also likely to promote feelings of belonging and recognition. Such an individual is also likely to be aware that he/she has developed, possibly as a result of feedback from those around them, and is more likely to feel satisfied by the variety and depth of their experience. A rounded individual is also more likely to develop confidence and resilience in tackling new and unfamiliar situations.

A good example of how interaction with multiple microsystems can contribute to personal development can be seen in the relationships with university peer and friendship groups and parents and family. The evidence from the focus groups was that student life contributed significantly to the development of the relationships between focus group participants and university peers and friends. However, this was in addition to, rather than a substitute for, the relationship with parents and family. There was evidence that both sets of relationships stayed within the mesosystem with the result that both sets of relationships developed and grew. This contributed to the development of a more rounded and socially aware individual student.

By contrast, an undergraduate who is content to drift through university, possibly achieving only a moderate degree and having participated in very few other activities will not have developed at the same rate and is more likely to experience feelings of an opportunity wasted. Such an individual is also likely to feel less prepared for the challenges of independent adult life.

This conceptual framework is represented in diagrammatic form in Figure 8.4 below.

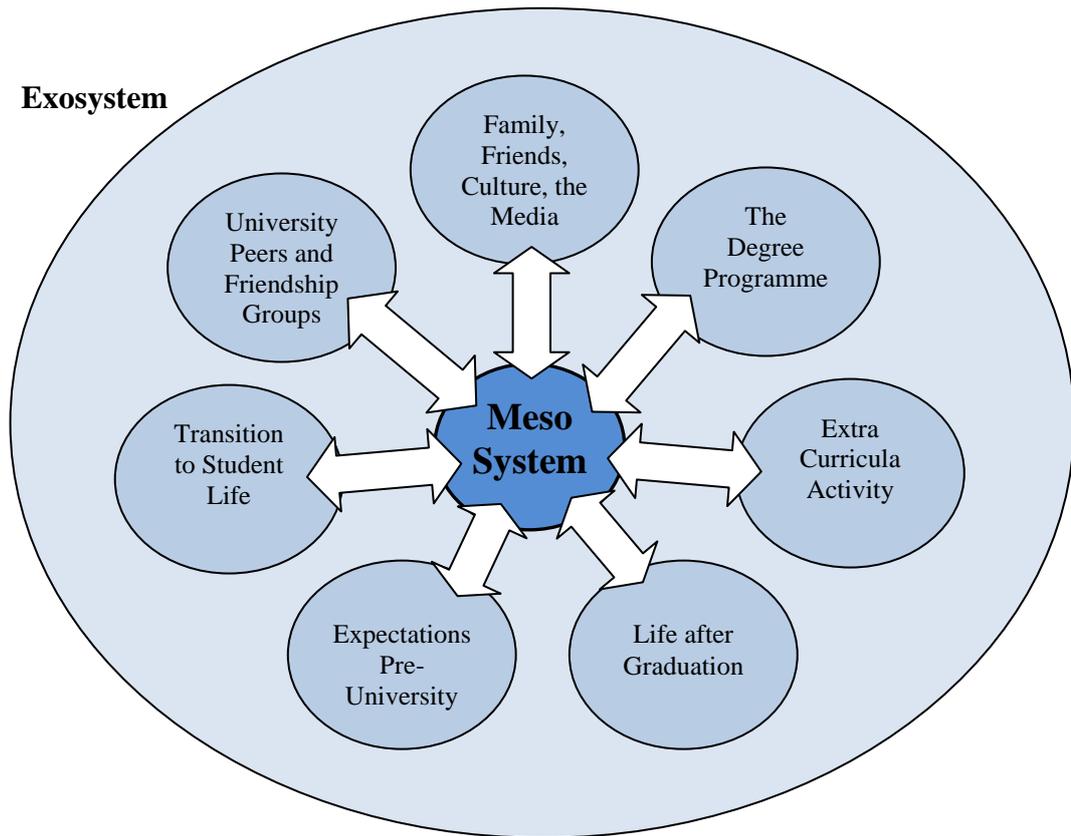


Figure 8.4 – Representation of The Student Experience.

In the diagram above, the arrows represent the movement of the microsystems. As discussed previously, and illustrated in figure 8.2, this movement is a function of timing and circumstance as well as engagement and alienation. In order to participate in a satisfying student experience, an individual needs to have engaged in a meaningful way with multiple microsystems.

8.2.6 Maintaining a Balance within the Student Experience Ecosystem

There is also a further important conclusion to draw from the focus group data. It is that, while participants considered individual components in evaluating their experience, it was their evaluation of the whole of their experience that determined their overall feelings of satisfaction. Coming to an overall judgement is arrived at by making trade-offs between different factors and by recognising that that the student experience is a joined up entity where individual factors are inter-dependent and inter-related. This suggests that there is a need to go beyond identifying individual issues and then discussing how initiatives might be introduced to address each one in turn, as this fails

to appreciate the true nature of the student experience. The recognition that it is the whole that matters is crucial to identifying the implications for practice (which are discussed in the next section to this chapter) as a change in one area can have unintended consequences for others.

This line of thinking can perhaps best be explained through metaphor. If one thinks of a car engine, the engine runs well when the components parts are in balance. It is possible for one or more of the component elements to be running at a sub-optimal levels and yet for the engine to still run smoothly. This is because there are levels of tolerance built into the system that can cope with imperfections. However, the failure of just one crucial part can lead to the whole engine not working. Thus the engine is about the whole as well as the component parts.

The impression I formed during my study was that the student experience operates in a similar way; the student experience is about the whole, as well as component parts. Individual component parts may be operating at a sub-optimal level but if the components are working well and are largely in balance then the student experience is a good one. However, there is always the risk that if one key element fails or, to return to the car engine metaphor, if it does not fit with the rest of the engine, then there is a risk that the whole engine will stop working. Thus my conceptual framework is based on a conception of the whole, and the implications for practice involve addressing the whole, comprising a mix of individual component factors which need to work in balance for the experience to be a good one.

8.3 Implications for the Design and Delivery of Undergraduate Business Education at Newcastle University Business School

This section will consider the implications for practice.

8.3.1 *The Degree Programme is part of a wider Student Experience*

In my conceptual framework, the student experience is a collection of microsystems, where the degree programme is but one of several microsystems competing for the time and attention of the student. I also argued that in order for the student to have a satisfying and fulfilling experience, the student needs to engage with a number of

microsystems over the course of their degree programme and thereby become more rounded as a result of the reciprocal interaction with those microsystems.

The implication of this for practice is that the Business School needs to take account of this more broadly based perspective to develop an integrated, multi-dimensional approach, in which the student experience is considered as a whole and the various component microsystems are taken into account in the design and delivery of the programme. The aim would be to engender a student culture of activity where students are constantly encouraged, challenged and persuaded to engage meaningfully with a variety of microsystems contributing to their overall personal development.

This approach takes into account the motivations of many students in choosing to study an undergraduate Business degree. It also recognises that they need a rounded programme of personal development that gives them the confidence and experience to graduate as employable, independent adults. Thus, a diet of education that concentrates solely on academic development is not nutritious enough to fuel the wider personal development that the Business School's students need and desire.

8.3.2 *Accountability: Responding to the Needs of Students*

If the School is to provide an excellent student experience, its staff need to recognise and behave in a way that shows that they are accountable to the student body and that they understand why the student wants to study business. This recognises the desire of our students to understand the practice of business and their desire to develop into rounded, able and employable graduates. However, the evidence from my study is that a sense of accountability is missing amongst some staff.

During chapter six I identified that many of the focus group participants believed that a significant proportion of the academic staff they encountered neither understood nor empathised with their motivations. This disconnection between staff and students contributed to a sense of alienation and feelings of profound dissatisfaction. Focus group participants reported their perception that some staff do not think or behave as though there is any obligation to provide something of value to the students, even though it is student fees that are the primary source of income for the Business School, meaning that it is students fees that are used to pay the salaries of those academics.

Irrespective of any judgement as to whether this is an acceptable state of affairs for the School, it is reasonable to conclude that such circumstances will have a negative effect on the perceived quality and reputation of the School and its capacity to recruit high calibre students. However, it is difficult to quantify what that effect will be.

8.3.3 Enhancing the Relevance and Professionalism of Teaching and Learning

An overall theme emerging in the focus groups was that participants were willing to accept that problems might occur with their teaching and learning experience. However, in order to earn respect and professional credibility, the Business School has to get the basics right and offer a reliable learning experience. Unfortunately, the evidence suggested that this was not happening often enough for a significant proportion of the focus group participants, leading to issues of dissatisfaction and a lack of professional credibility.

This view was not shared by every focus group participant. Some participants were very satisfied with their degree programme. However, a significant number were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Factors that were identified as contributing to these negative opinions included the coherence and academic credibility of the curriculum, the relevance of the curriculum to the business world, the attitude of academic staff towards teaching and towards students, the over-reliance on large lectures and the absence of effective seminars, assessment and marking practices and above all, the sense that the degree programme was not contributing to the student's personal development in a way that would prepare them for a successful, independent adult life.

I shall consider, in turn, the two issues of relevance and professionalism identified in the title of this section in turn. Starting with relevance, the issue here is the extent to which students valued their degree programme because they perceived that it had equipped them with knowledge and skills that had contributed to their personal development and prepared them for adult life. For Business students, the concept of employability is especially relevant. For example, one of the themes arising from the focus groups was the comment that for some participants the curriculum was overly theoretical. While there was respect for the value of learning about theory, there was also the perspective that theory is only part of the story and that theory needs to be applied to illuminate practice in order to give the full picture, especially given the significance of employability

This issue is not one that can be addressed easily as many of the School's academics do not have business and/or professional experience or contacts outside academic life. This restricts their capacity to respond to the demand from their students for an applied business education. However, progress could be made by adjusting recruitment practices to bring in a greater proportion of new staff with this perspective and also by the involvement of part-time staff possessing these skills and abilities. Furthermore, existing staff could put some existing material into context more clearly by articulating the link between theory and practice.

Secondly, there is the issue of professionalism. The nature of the issues raised in the focus groups suggests that quality control issues are widespread across the Business School and that existing systems and practices are failing to ensure that a consistent basic quality of experience is being delivered. Making progress with this issue requires a change in culture and priorities. My judgement is that this is not an issue of a lack of capability (although better training and personal development would help); it is more about the Business School's leadership making this a priority so that there is a strong culture of delivering teaching and learning to a high standard. Progress in this area would also contribute to progress with the issue of relevance.

8.3.4 *Building a Greater Sense of Local Engagement and Belonging*

In chapter four, I discussed how focus group participants generally reported positive feelings about Newcastle University. There was a sense of pride and achievement in securing a place at Newcastle University and on-going feelings of engagement with and belonging to the University. Very few participants reported similar feelings about the Business School, although some were more engaged at the local level of their degree programme.

While feelings of engagement and belonging are not the only factors linked to feelings of student satisfaction, they are positive sentiments that can contribute to feelings of satisfaction, as identified in the literature (Bennett, 2003; Kember *et al.*, 2001; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Accordingly there would seem to be an opportunity to build a greater sense of local engagement and belonging amongst undergraduate Business students at Newcastle.

One way to do this would be by trying to build cohort programme identity during the first year. This could involve structuring the curriculum to provide opportunities for students to work together in groups on defined tasks leading to an output. Focus group participants reported the value of working together on a task as a way to get to know other students and to build cohort identity. There would also be potential to involve other students (perhaps from the second and final years) to facilitate some peer-related learning, whereby tacit aspects of the student experience could be passed on from one intake to the next.

A carefully designed programme could help students to develop programme-based social networks, helping to facilitate greater connection with their programme and thereby build on the positive impressions and pride that students reported about securing a place to study at the University. This would also contribute to collective, cohort engagement with the degree programme, drawing the degree programme microsystem closer to the centre of the student's mesosystem. Such an approach, based around active learning, would also address the criticisms from focus group participants that their learning experience was too passive and sterile.

This would also respond to the issues raised by International students in chapter four, specifically that developing confidence in the use of English, greater awareness of culture and the differences in practices of the UK higher education system could be overcome through interaction with others and the sharing of tacit knowledge and understanding.

8.3.5 Encouraging Students to Engage in the Student Experience more widely

The focus group discussions reported in chapter seven highlighted how students saw the potential for personal development from getting involved in new activities once they had started at university. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, circumstances and timing could contribute to extra-curricula activity being placed at the periphery rather than at the centre of the student experience, a point underlined in the focus groups where participants reported issues in building up the confidence and motivation necessary to get involved. Starting university was an exciting time where they could embrace new interests and influences. However, it could also be a 'scary' time with new challenges and uncertainties and they looked to the Business School for guidance and leadership.

Clearly, students have responsibilities to show maturity and to self-manage but it is also true that students need exposure to new sparks or stimuli to introduce them to new activities. Thereafter, that initial interest needs to be nurtured to enable the student to develop higher levels of involvement and confidence. This initial phase of interest and mobilisation is needed if the individual is to go on to engage with the activities to a higher level. Thus the implication is that the School needs to promote a strong culture of getting involved whereby there are lots of instances where the spark for initial interest is provided and where consistent encouragement and the setting of expectations is used to mobilise students through the initial phase.

As was discussed in chapter four, this is particularly true for first year students who sometimes struggle to establish a sense of structure and purpose as they adapt to the greater freedoms of student life. Unless they are able to establish this sense of structure and purpose, they run the risk of failing to engage in a sufficient number of developmental activities throughout their time at university, graduating feeling dissatisfied and unprepared for independent adult life. For such students a greater degree of encouragement and setting of expectations is likely to be welcomed as it helps them to get involved more actively in student life.

Furthermore, once first year students had been introduced into this culture, they would be more likely to have expectations of continued involvement in the second and third years. These students could also be asked to encourage incoming first year students to be involved through peer learning and support arrangements, as discussed in chapter eight. Such an approach would also resonate with students' desire to enhance their employability, as well as promoting a culture of active involvement of students.

In order to develop a coherent approach, a portfolio of development activities would need to be established taking place both inside and outside of the formal curriculum with resources being channelled into those activities that contributed most to encouraging students to engage meaningfully with the various microsystems.

It is worth noting that the programme that comes closest to this model through an orientation towards professional practice, through integrated professional work placements, through collaboration with an employer and a professional body and

through a high level of challenge is the Business Accounting and Finance degree programme. Focus group participants from this programme reported high levels of satisfaction and it is this programme that has consistently performed well in the National Student Survey. These students also valued placements that were closely integrated with their programme of study and where the desire for practical application of classroom knowledge was satisfied.

8.3.6 *The Relationship between the School and its Students*

Throughout the focus group data, a central theme emerging was that the undergraduate student experience is a time of great change, with universities needing to balance the provision of support with the need to challenge their students to realise their potential and benefit from a satisfying student experience. The potential for learning and personal development over the course of an undergraduate degree is considerable and, in my view, the Business School needs to place the realisation of this potential at the heart of its student experience.

To explain how this might be done I would like to use the analogy of a sports club. The success of a sports club is measured by many things, including its membership and the success of its sports teams in competition. In order for the club to be successful, members have to invest time, by helping behind the scenes, by training, by playing in matches etc., and also build resources by paying subscriptions. The success of the team is determined by the collective endeavour of its membership who invest the time and resources but who benefit from its success, including the experience of playing the sport. In a successful club, players are not customers of the club's facilities; they are active participants who contribute to the collective endeavour. In this way the club develops the talents of its members to deliver the best outcomes on and off the pitch.

In my view, there are significant elements of this model that are relevant to undergraduate education. Undergraduates need to make investments of time and resources and through active participation they can develop as individuals. Accordingly, it is my proposition that the most appropriate model for the Business School is to regard its students not as customers but as fee paying members of an academic community. The payment of tuition fees does entitle students to have expectations about their learning experience and the level of support that the university provides. However, membership of the academic community also places responsibilities upon students to

respond to challenges in order to develop into independent, autonomous adults. In this way, feelings of entitlement both amongst staff and students are tempered by corresponding responsibilities, achieving a sense of balance and equilibrium.

This perspective is also consistent with key aspects of the literature as it emphasises the importance of student involvement (Astin, 1999), the developmental benefits of progressively greater participation in an activity (Bronfenbrenner 1994, 1999), the potential for active endeavour consistent with the age group of Newcastle undergraduates (Erikson, 1998) and the process of situated learning that develops through a community of practice (Lave, 1991).

8.3.7 Clarity of Communication to Students and Staff

Based on the evidence of the focus groups, there is a reasonable awareness amongst Newcastle Business undergraduates of issues connected with personal development and employability. However, if the Business School was to commit itself to delivering a strong package of personal development activities in line with the student experience model then it would be essential to communicate this consistently and effectively to both students and staff. My experience suggests that this would involve taking a different approach for these two groups.

Communication to students could promote a strong ‘get involved’ culture where engagement with a broad range of developmental activities became the norm. Winning over the student body might not be easy, as engagement with these activities involves commitment and challenge from our students and requires them to step outside their comfort zone. However, the student body stands to be a direct beneficiary as participation builds the skills development required to be successful both in adult life and in the labour market. To signal the importance of these activities, inclusion in the curriculum, including in second and third year honours level modules would need to take place.

Communication to academic staff would need to be more consultative in tone, seeking staff buy-in and looking for detailed involvement in the design and delivery of the activities. This would need to be supported by recognition and reward for contribution.

8.4 Contribution and Limitations

In this section I will summarise the contribution of my study to theory and practice, before recognising its limitations.

At the start of chapter two, I discussed my motivation to understand the student experience from a holistic perspective and noted that, while the term was widely used in higher education, there were remarkably few studies that attempted to explore its meaning. The concentration in the academic literature on the component parts of the student experience, rather than conceptualising the whole, was also noted by authors such as Haggis (2009), Malcolm and Zukas (2001), Mann (2001) and Ainley (2008).

Thus my study makes a contribution by adding to the literature that attempts to conceptualise the student experience from a broader perspective, such as Astin (1999), Kahu (2013) and Tinto (1975). Furthermore my study is the only one (of which I am aware) that has attempted to define what the student experience means in context for a group of students. Thus it adds to a body of work that argues that learning needs to be placed in context by defining what that context means for a group of students.

My approach has also enabled me to gather sufficient, relevant evidence to answer my two main research questions of what defines the student experience for Business undergraduates at Newcastle and what the implications are for the design and delivery of that education, thereby realising the aims and objectives of my study.

The main limitation of my study is that it explores, gathers evidence from and then draws conclusions about a specific context. Given that my study is deliberately context specific, this issue does not present a problem for me in drawing my conclusions. However it does raise questions as to the generalizability of my conceptual framework. Accordingly, the study's contribution would be greater if I had more evidence from a number of Business Schools to support its potential for wider generalizability.

8.5 Implications for Further Study

Given that this study proposes a conceptual framework based around a specific context, there is potential to explore the generalizability of the framework in other contexts and to explore the microsystems and elements of the framework in more depth. For

example, does it have relevance in Business Schools in other Russell Group institutions or in Business Schools in UK universities, generally? It would also be interesting to consider the extent to which it applied to postgraduate as well as undergraduate students. During this chapter I have discussed how Newcastle's undergraduate business students had particular motivations to study business and the influence on their student experience. However, it would be interesting to know whether the model is sufficiently robust to be relevant to students of other disciplines both in the UK and internationally.

Similarly, while the study involved consideration of the component microsystems in turn, it would be interesting to explore these in greater depth, for example the role of and interplay between university peer and friendship groups and parents and family. Likewise while the study involved consideration of the mechanisms whereby a microsystem moved closer to or further away from the student's mesosystem, this is a complex process and the level of understanding could be improved through further research.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

This study was about the student experience of undergraduates at Newcastle University Business School, and the implications for the design and delivery of undergraduate Business education. I noted that while the term 'student experience' is used widely in practice, it is remarkably under-developed as a construct in the academic literature. By identifying themes within the literature, I developed working hypothesis for a conceptual framework of the student experience of Newcastle Business undergraduates.

Using semi-structured focus groups of Newcastle Business undergraduates as my primary research method, I then tested and refined my working hypothesis during the pilot project and main data collection and analysis phases. The focus groups generated a rich set of data which allowed me to explore the themes and nuances of what defines the student experience.

In the final chapter I presented my conceptual framework that the Newcastle Business undergraduate's student experience is defined as a broad, multi-faceted, psycho-social construct and where the student develops and matures as a result of meaningful interactions with seven defining microsystems, representing the most significant

influences on student life. I also proposed that in order to have a satisfying student experience, the extent of those interactions needs to be sufficient for the individual to experience a significant degree of broadly-based individual personal development.

This model implies that a broadly based conception of undergraduate business education is required, stretching beyond the degree programme, to facilitate interaction with the seven key microsystems. I also argued that Business Schools should think of their students as active fee-paying members of an academic community rather than as passive consumers. Such a perspective balances both the rights and responsibilities of students and staff.

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