

Widening Participation and the Role of Social Motivation in Students' Transitional Experiences in Higher Education:

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March 2009

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Marylynn Fyvie-Gauld for her help in supporting the research and facilitating contact with participants at University Centre, Hastings. Thank you also to Sallie White for her interest, advice, and support.

Many, many thanks are due to all the participants for giving up their time, and for their thoughtful contributions. Special thanks to the educational histories participants who found time to meet on several occasions and who engaged so positively with the research.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was commissioned by the School of Applied Social Science (SASS) Educational Development Research Group (EDRG) to build on work previously undertaken by the group on retention and student engagement.

The research was funded in the amount of £33,000 from the beginning of October 2007 to the end of September 2008.

The aims of the interview research were:

- To explore social motives that influence students' transitional experiences
- To gain further insight into the importance of social experiences in the transition to and through higher education in the context of widening access, in particular social relations, social spaces and students' use of time
- To explore the relevance of social imbalances in relation to social motives and experiences

The aims of the educational histories research were:

- To explore the educational histories of students and their relevance to their transitional experiences
- To gain further insight into the importance of social experiences in the transition to and through higher education in the context of widening access, in particular the social and relational aspects of educational environments
- To evaluate the use of a collaborative life history approach in terms of its methodological value in understanding transitions

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review drew on psychological and sociological sources. It was found that although social motivation has been theorised from psychological perspectives there is a gap in sociological theorising on this topic. Furthermore, definitions of social motivation, transitions, and widening participation and access require clarification. The majority of work on transition in education emphasises the adjustment of those entering an institution above the structure itself.

THE RESEARCH

The educational experiences of a small but extremely diverse sample of students were gained by two methods. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 25 current or former students. Of these, 12 were the first and 13 at least the second generation to experience higher education. Secondly, an exploratory form of life history research was undertaken with 3 students as co-researchers (or co-participants).

KEY FINDINGS

- The core social motives of belonging and trust were found to be crucial social elements in interactions between those accessing education and the educational environment. Opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and trust in the School related to contact time, living arrangements and the (lack of) physical spaces available on campus.

- Goals are important to motivation although multiple goals, e.g. academic and social, can lead to conflicting priorities which are influenced by students' diverse identities and life contexts. A shift was noted to a less instrumental (to get a better or better-paid job) approach to gaining a degree both as students progressed through their courses and with age.
- Students are faced with multiple transitions within and beyond the university, depending on their life circumstances. These included sexuality, partnerships, moving out of or away from home, and adjustment to a significantly less regulated pattern of study.
- The diverse 'university experience' of the students in this study was judged by them against traditional notions of youthful student life with free time, partying, academic debate and greater independence.
- Transitions are not simple, linear affairs, nor are they easy to define in clear and meaningful ways. For example, becoming a more independent learner is seen as an important transition although arguably the best independent learners make better use of social resources rather than becoming more separated or isolated.

CONCLUSION

Students vary considerably in their experiences of the transition to and through university. Developing confidence, enjoying their chosen course, benefiting from supportive staff-student relations, and making new friends characterised positive adjustment.

Notwithstanding, a shift from a highly regulated to a less regulated system, variation in living arrangements, a lack of social spaces on campus, and diversity in terms of students' ages, ethnicity and life experiences were all implicated in different transitional experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further development of initiatives already put in place is recommended. Broadly these are:

- More, and more various, social and academic activities suitable for a diverse body of students in terms of academic background, interests and life-styles
- Further opportunities for staff-student interaction so that all students feel valued and supported that can assist with scaffolding students, for example, more interactive sessions and fewer lectures in the first year of study
- Emphasis on academic support to match the existing high levels of pastoral support
- EDRG to initiate a research project seeking open dialogue with tutors to better understand how they understand and facilitate transition.
- Work within schools and colleges, particularly those in the Sussex Liaison and Progression Accord scheme, to prepare students for transition to higher education

INTRODUCTION

Widening participation policies in the UK higher education (HE) sector have led to more and, to some extent, more diverse students gaining places at university. Understanding how different individuals, with different demographic characteristics and life histories, experience university is important in the commitment to both quality and equity within HE. The purpose of the research was to further the work previously carried out by the Educational Development Research Group (EDRG) within the School of Applied Social Science (SASS) at the University of Brighton (UoB) that aimed, among other things, to investigate undergraduate student motivation in relation to widening access and retention. In particular, previous work by the group has critiqued existing literature on motivation for focusing too much on the individual and developed a new approach to the social context of student motivation (Winn et al. 2006). The group has pointed to the similarity between current notions of independent learning, which view the student as a lone scholar, and the concept of intrinsic motivation. The solution offered is to see motivation as social and relational and to emphasise student participation in learning.

This research takes a psychosocial approach in returning to a discussion of the theoretical dilemmas around the conceptualisation of 'social motivation' at the same time as an empirical investigation of social contexts in the transitional experiences of undergraduate students. Two methods were applied in this study: qualitative interviews and 'educational histories'. The empirical research was carried out by a Research Fellow appointed by the EDRG, Dr Hilary McQueen, under the guidance of the EDRG steering group (see Appendix 2).

DEFINING SOCIAL MOTIVATION

Social motivation can be defined and operationalised in different ways. A more psychological approach involves theories of how individuals understand and negotiate their paths to a goal within social structures and relations, whereas a sociological approach would focus more on the constructed nature of both goals and motives, the ways in which dominant discourses and institutional processes serve to facilitate or hinder individuals' paths in life. The idea of social motives is shared by both approaches, although their origin and consequence might be viewed differently. For the purposes of this research, social motivation is viewed as driving forces that derive from the social context of a person's life. It is also proposed that social motivation is a dynamic process occurring through transactions between a person and their lived experiences and environment rather than arising from structure or agency independently.

Theoretically, then, social motivation can be seen as constructed and constructing through interactions, which in turn are both constructed and constructing. In Archer's terms, "the 'parts' and the 'people' shape and re-shape one another through their reciprocal interaction over time" (1995, p.194). In the current research, social motivation is explored in psychosocial terms, that is, it considers both social structures and individual interpretations of, and relationship to, those structures in order to offer a more "holistic analysis" (Kettley 2007, p.344). The research aims to gain further insight into the importance of the social context of student experiences through a motivational lens and the implications of those experiences for policy and practice within and beyond SASS.

Aims of the study

The main aims of the study were as follows:

- To explore social motives that influence students' transitional experiences
- To gain further insight into the importance of social experiences in the transition to and through higher education in the context of widening access, in particular social relations, social spaces and students' use of time
- To explore the relevance of social imbalances in relation to social motives and experiences

The additional aims of the educational histories research were:

- To explore the educational histories of students and their relevance to their transitional experiences
- To gain further insight into the importance of social experiences in the transition to and through higher education in the context of widening access, in particular the social and relational aspects of educational environments
- To evaluate the use of a collaborative life history approach in terms of its methodological value in understanding transition

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review will begin with an overview of theory and research relating to widening participation or widening access, transitions, and social motivation that form the context for the research fellowship. This will include reference to work carried out by members of the EDRG. The review highlights the complexities in defining, and therefore establishing the meaning of, widening access, transition, and social motivation although a working definition of each will be offered.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS

“Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social justice and economic competitiveness.” (HEFCE 2008c)

“Widening access is an economic necessity because the economy needs more graduates but it is an important social development because we want a broader proportion of the population to gain from the benefits that a university education brings” (Department for Children School and Families 2008b)

One important policy change has been the government’s ‘commitment’ (Department for Education and Skills 2003, p.2) to Widening Participation in Higher Education. In the DfES document of that name, the “principal barriers to access” are proposed as relating to “attainment, aspiration and application”¹ (op. cit. p.5). The document acknowledges social determinants of attainment and a number of government initiatives and programmes are listed that are aimed at primary and secondary level education. In terms of aspiration, the document suggests that, in addition to government initiatives, “universities could do more” (op. cit. p.12), for example, “raise aspirations among students who come from backgrounds where studying at university is not part of the family or community tradition” (ibid.). Statistics indicate that motivation to continue is higher among those who do not necessarily meet these non-traditional criteria. For example, students with higher socio-economic status, certain ethnic groups (e.g. Chinese), full-time students, those with 3 A-levels, those with a declared disability and women have been found to be more likely to continue with their courses (NAO 2007). Widening participation policy includes the Aimhigher initiative, implemented in 2001, which targets under-represented groups in HE from disadvantaged backgrounds (Department for Children School and Families 2008a; HEFCE 2008a). UoB is one of the key partners in Aimhigher Sussex.

However, the terms ‘widening access’ and ‘widening participation’ tend to be used somewhat interchangeably although they are subtly different and can be open to different interpretations (HEFCE 2006). The following definitions will be used in this report. Widening access generally refers to making it more possible for people to get into university either by facilitating the gaining of suitable qualifications by those who would previously have been excluded or through flexible entry requirements. Widening participation refers to encouraging or facilitating a more diverse body of individuals to take part in higher education, which could be through widening access or by increasing the motivation to study in higher education or through affordability. However, work within schools to increase motivation is unlikely to tackle other influential social arenas because “decision-making by young people is context-related: it cannot be separated from the culture, life history and family background of the individual” (Thomas 2003, p.123).

¹ Application incidentally does not refer to the amount of effort students put into their studies but rather to universities encouraging applications from students.

It should be noted that UoB adopts the term widening participation above widening access in its policy documents and without clear distinction between the terms. If, for example, students without the traditional 3 A-level qualifications are admitted, then widening access is perhaps more appropriate, potentially leading to wider participation. In terms of diversity of entrants, the most recently available figures for UoB entrants indicate that the majority of undergraduate students in 2006-7 were full-time (75%), female (63%), and from the UK (90%) (HESA 2008). 29% of undergraduate entrants were from social classes 4 to 6, 10% from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN), and 34% were mature students (University of Brighton 2007). Overall, the performance indicators (PIs) show strengths in retention, employment and state school entrants but “place us less favourably on social class and LPN” (op. cit. p.2). However, as Boud (2004) says in terms of widening access, “making the gates wider is not necessarily going to change what goes on inside” (p.53) since “the discourse of widening access...focuses on access and entry [and] does not emphasise the quality of educational experience that is actually accessed by the entrant. Such a discourse does not emphasise how or whether particular needs of those who gain access are met” (op. cit., p.56).

Over the last 45 years, and even more so since the introduction of the Widening Participation (WP) agenda in 2003, there has been a considerable amount of research that links directly or indirectly to widening participation/access, suggested as sharing an underlying concern for social justice (Kettley 2007). One aspect has been the unequal distribution of students from previously under-represented groups, sometimes referred to as ‘non-traditional’, between and within institutions. For instance, there are fewer women on high-status courses or in high-status institutions (Brooks 2002). As Brooks points out, even if institutions embrace the notion of widening access, the choices that potential students make are “socially embedded...patterned by their gender, ethnicity and, in particular, their SES” (op. cit., p. 225). Similarly, Ball et al. (2000) refer to the way in which learner identities shape post-16 choices. Discourses about who might fit where in higher education can be more or less explicit but are nonetheless “socially prevalent” (Read et al. 2003, p.263) and might lead to a search for a university in which the applicant expects to feel comfortable and to “belong” (op. cit. p.264). Indeed, a sense of belonging has been found to make an important contribution to persistence on a course regardless of students’ backgrounds (Hausmann et al. 2007).

In their conclusion, Read et al. (2003), like Boud, refer to the importance of student experience once enrolled, and that staff profiles need consideration. It is unclear whether they are calling for a challenge to ‘traditional’ academic practice in all institutions or for more diverse staff within institutions, regardless of the latter’s perceived status. More directly, Haggis calls for a “reframing” (2006, p.530) of the notion of independent, responsible learners and a pedagogy that encourages “collective inquiry into the nature of specific disciplines” (op. cit., p.531). Seminars and workshops would presumably provide such an opportunity rather than traditional lectures based on transmission models. However, it is important to distinguish group work and encouragement to read topic-related set texts from tutor led discussion that assists understanding, and to consider the latter as an important, if not crucial, transitional strategy in adjusting to university practice. Court similarly promotes a shift away from transmission teaching and towards a review of how academic staff’s time is spent. “The need for more teacher input per student in the future – rather than less – is a likely outcome of the desire to widen student social class access and enable those from a ‘non-traditional’ background to have a successful experience of higher education” (2006, p.182). Such strategies are likely to blur the divide between academic and interpersonal, therefore social, elements, both identified as important for successful integration (Tinto 1975).

In addition to the quality of student experience, and related to widening participation/access policy, is the question of retention. The retention debate appears to hover between two aspects. One is institutional practice or initiatives e.g. specific characteristics of a particular department/discipline (Golde 2005); the effect of loans, (Dowd and Coury 2006). The other is student characteristics e.g. coping strategies (Bray et al. 1999) or social-cognitive predictors (Kahn and Nauta 2001). In addition, the interaction between the two has been considered e.g. negative experiences (Harrison 2006). Much research and many intervention strategies have developed from the interactional approach of Tinto and the importance of social integration (Tinto 1975; Tinto 1997; Tinto 1998). There has also been a “proliferation of...‘retention’ programs” (Tinto, 1998 p.167) including attention to induction and the use of mentors, tutors and enhanced communication to support students’ transitions that emphasise the social relational aspects of academic life (Campbell and Campbell 2007; Harley et al. 2007; Wilcox et al. 2005). Those that relate to social motivation will be discussed further in that section.

TRANSITIONS

“The role of social transition issues underscoring the success of academic transition cannot be underestimated.” (Kantanis 2000, p.8)

Educational transitions, like student experiences, have become of greater interest recently with an associated rise in research activity. The first year experience has been a particular focus of interest as a time when most adjustment is needed. For example, in the UK, the Higher Education Academy commissioned a report on students’ first year experiences (Yorke & Longden). In the United States, the interest has extended to the creation of a study centre and associated journal.² Educational policy in the UK has implemented a great deal of change so that institutions are also in various stages of transition. There is a tendency to assume that moving on will in some way be moving up. “Our present state is conditional, precarious and imperfect, fit only to be maintained as a temporary way station on the ever-upward path towards perfection, which is always brought nearer by the next reform” (Neave 2006, p.1). In the same way, moving successfully from one educational institution to another or from living at home to living independently or from school to work can be seen as normative and a sign of healthy personal development (psychologically) or facilitative social structures (sociologically).

The transition *to* university will inevitably be affected by where one is transiting *from*, the particular circumstances people find themselves in and the ability or willingness of all agents (individual or institutional) to adapt. Joining a university (either as a student or member of staff) will involve more or less adjustment to the dominant cultural norms of an institution, in spite of inevitable variation in acceptance of those norms by staff and students. “Because there are multiple agents, there is always the possibility of divergent views about the most desirable shape of collective passages” (Glaser and Strauss 1971, p.117), and this will be particularly true if there is greater diversity of agents. There are also multiple transitions that do take place, for example, moving away from home, living independently and adjusting to a new institutional regime (Fleischer et al. 2008). Some students might experience many transitions, some fewer.

Much educational transition research focuses on the impact of a new institutional structure on those who join it rather than questioning the structure itself (see e.g. Harley et al. 2007;

² In 1986 the University of South Carolina opened the National Center for the Study of the Freshman Year Experience, which in 1998 became the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, publisher of the Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.

Wintre and Yaffe 2000; Yorke and Longden 2008). The emphasis is on what it is about students that makes the adjustment easier or more difficult. One aspect could be a mismatch between ideas of what university might be like and what it turns out to be. For example, although based on a small sample from an élite Scottish university, Christie et al. (2006) found that new undergraduates were concerned about a reduction in support in a “more impersonal” environment (p.364) compared with their further educational (FE) experiences but they were also excited about new opportunities. Some hoped for “a more intellectually stimulating environment” (ibid.) compared with FE, suggested by the researchers as likely to be unrealistic because of time constraints. A second aspect could be the effect of student characteristics on their adjustment, for example students’ relationships with parents (Wintre and Yaffe 2000) or friends at home (Paul and Brier 2001). A third aspect is the amount of social support available to students, for instance, making friends is important and often related to living arrangements (Wilcox et al. 2005). Personal tutoring is another source of support, although increasingly strained by the pressures associated with mass higher education (Stephen et al. 2008)³. More specific strategies include texting to encourage engagement as well as keeping students informed (Harley et al. 2007).

There is also research that attempts to take a more holistic view, incorporating staff practice and students’ backgrounds. One example is Hultberg et al’s study (2008) that refers to the technique of ‘scaffolding’ in relation to transitions, although still based around a fixed structure. They report on the LearnAble project in a Swedish university, a combination of structured introductory sessions and a parallel course in pedagogy in HE for teachers. The meeting point for students’ approaches to learning and teaching practice is “scaffolded instruction” (op. cit. p.51). However, to be effective, a clear understanding of the level of knowledge and skills of the learner is required, something which can be difficult to achieve if teaching is largely impersonal, as is likely to be the case in large Schools and where support systems are separate from academic transmission. In addition, as Hultberg et al. point out, if such projects are an ‘add-on’ to courses, then they can become an additional burden for students and staff alike.

In spite of practical difficulties in scaffolding students as part of their transitional experiences, as Green (2006) suggests “unless the locus of students is clearly understood, targeted and effective, pedagogical thinking cannot take place, to the detriment of both lecturers (who will continue to be frustrated by what they perceive as deficits of skill and knowledge in their students) and the students themselves (who will struggle to realign their existing skills and knowledge within an imperfectly understood paradigm of subject and of study environment” (p.285). Whether serious attention to scaffolding is deemed necessary is a matter for debate. Although information might be passed on from previous institutions or work places, or whether students provide it, there is no requirement for this to happen. In addition, judgements about the relevance of information and experience could arise. In researching the transition from primary to secondary school, Comber and Galton noted that “in a number of cases, teachers went beyond a simple lack of knowledge of or interest in the pupil’s former educational experience, revealing a stereotyped view of the primary classroom...The implication behind this was that the teacher in question did know what they did in primary school and, what is more, disapproved of it” (2002, p.87). It seems reasonable to suppose that such a view is not restricted to primary-secondary transitions and to acknowledge that it could occur for more benign reasons.

Although interpersonal relations have been highlighted, they are only part of a broad canvas of experiences that help or hinder negotiating a new environment. Koizumi (2000) refers to three environmental aspects, the physical, interpersonal and socio-cultural, and talks about the importance of having an anchor point. An anchor point is “an element of a person-in-

³ For personal tutoring, incidentally, there is also a US journal, ‘Personal Tutoring in Higher Education’.

environment system which facilitates transaction between the person and the environment [and] can be information, knowledge, skills, family, friends, physical bases for activities, institutions, organizations, etc.” (2000, p.176). When entering a new environment, anchor points are likely to be sought that enable the person to find a link with the new environment. They may be internal (e.g. drawing on previous experiences of changing schools or starting a new job) or external (e.g. using the social networking site, Facebook), and may or may not be associated with the campus or the university, thus calling into the question the requirement to be socially and academically integrated into a university, particularly if students’ lives outside the university community are of equal or greater importance. Evidence suggests that widening access and introducing fees has had an impact on traditional notions of integration. A survey of 3262 students (age not specified) in the north west of England indicated that almost a quarter remained at home although the proportion was much higher in post- than pre-1992 higher education institutions in the area (29% compared with 18%) (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005). Statistically significant predictors other than type of university included having a caring role, father’s occupation and parental level of education. The researchers conclude that staying at home has the double benefit for students of reducing the risk of loss of identity and the amount of debt incurred.

The interpersonal and socio-cultural aspects of anchor points can also be viewed as a form of social capital, that is, resources available through connections with others (Putnam 1993; Smith 2007). The importance of social capital as part of a resource base for young people is highlighted by Furlong et al. (2003). They found that “at all stages in the transitional process the resources available to the individual such as qualifications and (particularly) family knowledge and connections were central to effective management of transitions” (p.i). However, they also argue that inextricably linked to resources are aspects of agency. “What we refer to as the mobilisation of capacities incorporates structural resources (such as economic, social and cultural capital) as well as capacities that tend to be regarded as signifying personal agency (such as motivation, persistence and determination)” (op. cit., p.5). In their view, a shortfall in one aspect may be compensated for by another.

Therefore, transitions may be more or less difficult depending on the individuals’ circumstances, prior experiences and consequential expectations in combination with the characteristics and resources of the new environment. Indeed, “lack of preparedness for higher education and incompatibility between the student and their chosen course and institution” (Wilcox et al. 2005, p.708) explain a significant proportion of decisions to withdraw. Preparedness and compatibility can refer to social and academic aspects, either separately or in an interrelated fashion. Transitions can be potentially troublesome and it may be that the experience, at least for some, “threatens to strike at some of the foundations of self” (Measor and Woods 1984, p.9).

“The degree of desirability of a status passage depends both on the degree to which a man [*sic*] is socially integrated into groups and on the social circumstances that provide such desirable passages [and] provides the motivational basis for actions that shape the passage.” (Glaser and Strauss 1971, p.89)

The increased numbers continuing in education depends on the motivation of individuals to participate. As Glaser and Strauss suggest the motivation to, in this case, attend university, relates to social structures, in turn influencing the transitional experience. However, that depends on characteristics of the individual students as well as the collective cohort, for example the balance of student ‘types’ (male/female, mature/younger and so on). There is a complex interplay between what is perceived as a desirable activity, why it is desirable, how accessible it is and how it is experienced. A motivational *system* is at work, any part of which is subject to change with more or less impact on other parts. In the following section, the social aspects of this motivational system will be explored.

SOCIAL MOTIVATION

“By highlighting broad socialization processes, that is, the influences of close friends, peer groups, and teachers on student academic adjustment, [we] have moved our field a step closer to a needed integration of the study of personal motivation and the study of social motivation in achievement settings.” (Graham 1996, p.348)

“Many sociologists have long contended that ascribing all human motivation to *interest*, the desire to achieve self-regarding ends, is too narrow a view. As humans, we are equally motivated by *sentiment*, the desire to achieve other-regarding ends revolving around our norms and social ties.” (Bell 2004, p.39)

Social motivation is a slippery construct for which “a clear and universally accepted definition of the term remains somewhat elusive” (Forgas et al. 2005. p.xvii). It could refer to the psychological consideration, and subsequent acting out, of social behaviour (Forgas et al. 2005) or to the effect of the presence of others either positively (social facilitation) or negatively (social loafing, social anxiety) (Geen 1991). Weiner distinguishes between social and personal motivation where the former but not the latter ‘requires the psychological presence of another’ (1994, p.557). For sociologists, motivation might be referred to in an implicit way rather than be studied in its own right (Turner 1987). The reasons why people make particular choices or act in a certain way are viewed as bound up with identities that are constructed in and shaped by social and cultural *milieux*. Furthermore, social lives can be an important source of motivation to the extent that they are ‘pivotal elements’ of identities (Ball et al. 2000, p.59). At the risk of over-simplification, for psychologists there is more emphasis on predictable effects in the form of patterned responses to particular situations whereas sociologists explore the impact of social norms and dominant discourses on people’s lives. This project takes a more psychosocial approach, drawing on both psychological and sociological literature, based on the view that the interaction and transaction between individuals and structures are fundamental to a more holistic understanding of what shapes people’s choices and experiences.

The majority of explicit work on motivation has been psychological. Seifert (2004) proposes four key theories in academic motivation; self-efficacy, attribution, self-worth and achievement goals. Put simply, these refer respectively to ‘I am able to...’, ‘the reason for my success or failure is...’, ‘I am a valuable person’ and ‘my aim is to be’. Although the origin of these ideas about self and identity is not offered, they are all candidates for social construction. In order to widen access, changes to secondary level assessment procedures and to the level of support have served to raise efficacy beliefs, more securely in some than others because of attributional and self-worth aspects. Kantanis points out that students coming from sixth form colleges are likely to have experienced “close scrutiny of work through the drafting process; immediate feedback couched in positive language; objective, criterion-referenced assessment and high grades” (2000, p.5). In these ways, the government’s widening participation objective of attainment can be met, as well as building confidence and esteem in line with the ‘Every Child Matters’ (DfES 2004) agenda (birth to age 19). There has been a shift perhaps towards more emphasis on a worth than a work ethic. It is suggested that the shift is an unintended consequence of efforts to raise achievement through emphasising qualification outcomes in conjunction with supportive strategies already indicated. (There is a link here with learning and performance goals outlined below). Of course not all students have had recent school or college experiences and are thus likely to have some similar and some different sources of motivational beliefs.

The term ‘social motivation’ implies the existence of social motives. Fiske (2004) refers to five core social motives: belonging, understanding, control, self-enhancement and trust. Of

these, belonging provides a basis for the other motives and is related to “subjective well-being” (op. cit., p.16). In other words, people feel better about themselves when they perceive themselves to be coping with and part of their social environment. Many would challenge the “inherently individualistic” (Winn et al. 2006, p.79) nature of such theorising and advocate an approach to student motivation that places greater emphasis on the effect of the social and cultural context. Two influential psychological theories in motivational research that have incorporated the idea of socially constructed motivational needs are Need for Achievement or nAch (McClelland 1961) and Need for Affiliation or nAff (McClelland 1987). McClelland proposes that nAch could be related to religious background, for example Protestantism, and to child-rearing practices that emphasise self-improvement and efficacy. The foundation for different levels of nAff is thought to be early parent-child relationships. Although Turner comments that “the concept of needs has a long and problematic history” (1987, p.23), he suggests that they reflect “domains of value” (ibid.), including “group inclusion... avoidance of anxiety, [and] confirmation of self” (ibid.). There is evidence that staying on post-16 is more dependent on peer influences for males (therefore group inclusion) and confidence in ability for females (perhaps linked to avoidance of anxiety) (Thomas and Webber 2001).

Discourses, aside from and as part of widening access/participation policies, promote the value of higher education, communicated formally or informally through families, friends, peers, schools, colleges, universities and employers. However, HE is likely to be demoted if not culturally valued. One study (Leathwood 2006a) found that cultural values and goals were important when making decisions about applying for university. For example, common sense was perceived as important but lacking in students or graduates, an attribute that could be threatened by attending university; females in particular perceived university as a way to improve themselves; some males saw university as “an unwelcome challenge to their masculine identities” (op. cit. p.21).

One goal that is promoted as personally and socially valuable is ‘getting a degree’, likely to be an important though not exclusive reason for applying to university. Watson and Church (2003) found that 90% of pupils in their national survey (N = 1018) believed that university would provide skills for a job. However, there are many other possible goals aside from getting a degree. Dweck and Leggett (1988) distinguish between learning and performance goals. Learning goals involve the overcoming of challenge whereas performance goals are associated with higher self-esteem when the outcome is favourable in relation to others or when little effort has been expended. Of the two, performance goals are more obviously socially motivated. Maehr (1983) outlines four goals: task goals (involving mastery and challenge), ego goals (social competition), social solidarity goals (with the purpose of pleasing others), and extrinsic rewards (e.g. money, kudos). The first of these is akin to learning goals, whereas the others are more related to performance. McCollum (2006) discusses social goals as part of motivation in education, for example, sharing and helping with academic or personal problems. Miller et al. (1996) refer to social goals of pleasing the teacher or pleasing parents, and suggest the latter is counter-productive to academic engagement. Since few if any of these goals are mutually exclusive beyond a snapshot of time, there is likely to be conflict within the individual. For example, an immediate goal of earning money could conflict with the long-term aim of completing a degree.

There are also likely to be socio-cultural differences in the value of goals. For example, one study indicated that pupils from LPNs in Scotland viewed higher education as more valuable for future financial gain than for personal development (Bartley 2004) compared with a survey of students (N = 1033) from Russell Group universities who rated social and life skills as the most important gain, although economic benefits were also valued (Furnham and McManus 2004). Whilst research indicates that there are trends in terms of social groupings, it is important to bear in mind the heterogeneity within larger social groups including “intra-

class difference" (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005, p.92) and friendship groups (Brooks 2003).

The 'nature' of a person in motivational terms can be hotly contested. An emphasis on structure could divert attention away from particular tendencies, such as laziness, or serve to highlight the ever present constructed nature of motivation. Even a temporal analysis does not resolve the issue. For instance, motivational issues in education might be seen as contemporary concerns arising from policy and practice. Consider the following: "Third of students waste college term"; "[a lecturer has] an entirely objective responsibility – a responsibility to learning, to his subject, and not a psychological or parental responsibility for his students"; "...the majority of undergraduates did the minimum of work required for a [pass] and then rushed out of their classes to devote their time and their enthusiasms to what they considered to be the important parts of their college education [such as] talking with their [fellow students]." The first is the New York Times headline almost exactly 100 years ago (04/06/1908). The second and third are from two editions of the Journal of Higher Education 1938 (Cowley 1938, p.473; Morrill 1938, p.237). The main difference seems to be what students are doing with their time. Aside from talking, the suggestion was that too much time was being spent on sport or other university-related activities of a social nature, such as drama. What has changed more than some aspects of student behaviour, it seems, is accountability of institutions, the financial consequences for institutions and students, and the type of activities students engage in, including employment and other on-or off-campus time-spending.

Television, mobile phones and computers now form an integral part of most students' lives. The use of the social networking site, Facebook, by students at Michigan State University has been investigated and one advantage is suggested as maintaining previous bonds as well as developing new ones as part of social capital (Ellison et al. 2007). Of course networking technology theoretically could facilitate transitions by providing informal support, or hinder them by serving as a reminder of the stronger bonds already formed in other communities. Nevertheless, the concept of social capital, as a resource of "trust and shared norms" (McGrath and Van Buskirk 1996, p.1) offers an instrumental view of an academic community that rests on the social motive of belonging as highlighted by integration models such as Tinto's (Tinto 1998).

This overview of theory and research highlights some key points that are important to include in a working definition of social motivation in relation to student transitions. Firstly, motives can be said to be social if the outcome relates to belonging. Belonging has been suggested as a core social motive (Fiske 2004), and as a human need (McClelland 1985; Turner and Stets 2006). Educational transition research that emphasises integration is based on the concept of belonging (e.g. Tinto 2002; Winn et al. 2006). Secondly, social motivation has been linked to identity and self. 'Self' can be defined as the experiencing, reflective person, the 'I', whereas, for some, 'identity' is the perception of enduring characteristics that form that person (Audi 1999). What people choose to do in education in the shorter or longer term has been proposed as strongly influenced by identities (Ball et al. 2000; McFadden and Munns 2002). The experience of living those choices can serve to reinforce or challenge identities, suggested as particularly poignant in transitional experiences. It is also likely that the multiple identities people have could provide both a source of conflict and an opportunity to engage with different people and circumstances. Thirdly, goals have been identified as important to motivation (Dweck and Leggett 1988; McCollum 2006; McCollum and Kahn 2006) although multiple goals, e.g. academic and social, can lead to conflicting priorities, likely to be influenced by a person's identity and life circumstances. Fourthly, social motivation refers to a complex system that involves exchanges between internal and external 'worlds'. As Weiner says, "the boundaries between the intrapersonal and interpersonal motivational systems are fuzzy" (2000, p.2) although it is

envisaged that students' experiences will reflect what occurs at the boundaries of self and other and will inevitably involve fuzziness.

For the purposes of this research, social motivation is broadly defined to include the following: decisions to do or not do something that (appear to) depend on the immediate or enduring social circumstances of a person, and that rely on socio-culturally constructed goals. It is also proposed that social motivation is a dynamic process occurring through transactions between a person and their environment rather than arising from structure or agency independently.

In order to capture these different aspects, transitional experiences were explored in relation to social contexts against a backdrop of the widening access and participation agenda. If academic motivation is viewed as a result of a transaction or reciprocal determination between individuals' constructions of what is possible or desirable and the broad social context that surrounds individual students' lives including lecturers, family, friends, employers and so on, then the social motives of making sense of and negotiating a way through the social environment are paramount. In addition to exploring decisions to come to university and to study particular subjects, three aspects were chosen for the first part of the research and these were:

- students' social and academic experiences
- students' relationship with the institution and physical environment
- students' management of time

The second part of the research consisted of exploring students' educational histories. Only one question was asked and that was 'How did you come to be a student at the University of Brighton doing what you are doing and in the way you are doing it?'

METHODOLOGY - interviews

Rationale

From an interpretive constructivist perspective, interviews offer the possibility of accessing the experiences of others and the meaning they have for that person (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Hearing the voices of individuals is important because it is they who live out the structures around them and who participate in the construction of those structures. However, taking such an approach is not just about describing how things 'are', although that can be a useful enterprise in itself. As Holstein and Gubrium say, "constructionism is about the recognition that things might be otherwise and that we could make them so" (2007 p.35). From the student perspective, particularly in the first few days and weeks, other students and the university staff of a department are likely to be viewed ontologically as a group with a particular social identity (Korte 2007), however diverse the individuals within it might be. Interviews allow for exploration of those views and the possibility of gaining insight into the structure of people's lives, including the university, and its impact on student integration and progress.

Sampling

25 semi-structured interviews were carried out. The self-selecting sampling method was chosen for ethical reasons. Ethically, there is less danger of participants feeling pressured to participate if specifically targeted, nor is there a need to access databases in order to select potential participants. A sample of 25 was chosen as an acceptable compromise between breadth and depth given the time frame.

A diverse sample of full-time students drawn from the population within the School of Applied Social Science (Brighton and University Centre Hastings) agreed to participate. They included first, second and third years, plus one graduate. Of the first years, two had left, one within two weeks, the other in May. The inclusion of students at various stages in their academic or other careers allowed for comparisons in terms of transitions and experiences.

The following table compares the sample with the population for the previous year (this year's data are not yet available) to give some indication of likely representativeness. It is evident that the sample is small in relation to the SASS population, and the amount of students under 21 and over 30 was particularly disproportionate⁴.

⁴ SASS statistical data source: Academic Health University of Brighton. (2008). *Academic Health Statistical Data 2006-7 (Student Profile)*. [Note, for comparison, whole UoB first year population 2006-7 female 63%, male 37%, under 25 66%, mature (over 25) 34% therefore SASS has proportionately more females and fewer mature students compared with the university]

Table 1 Comparison of number and percentage of SASS students in each year (2006-7) with the sample interviewed

All full-time students				
ALL SASS 2007-8			Sample 2007-8	
	Population (N)	% of total	N	% of 22 (still active) interviewed
1 st year	240	33	10	46
2 nd year	242	33	6	27
3 rd year	248	34	6	27
Total	730		22	
			Plus	
			2	Left during 1 st year
			1	Graduate

Table 2 Comparison of number and percentage of females and males in SASS per year (2006-7) with the percentage in the sample interviewed

		All SASS 2007-8				Sample 2007-8				
		Gender N per year		Gender % of each year		Gender N in sample		Gender % of sample (excludes graduate F)		
Year	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M		
1	292	80	78	22	8	4	67	33	(1xM 1xF had withdrawn)	
2	220	59	79	21	6	0	100	0		
3	193	63	75	25	2	4	33	67		

Table 3 Comparison of number and percentage of students by age-group in SASS (2006-7) with the percentage in the sample interviewed

	SASS All years full-time by age 2007-8		Sample 2007-8 (excluding graduate)	
	N	%	N	%
Under 21	561	77	9	38
21-24	93	13	5	21
25-29	35	5	2	8
30+	41	6	8	33

The interviewees⁵

The students are described in 4 groups: under 25 who were at least the 2nd generation to study at university; under 25 1st generation students; over 25 who were at least the 2nd

⁵ All names are pseudonyms in order to preserve anonymity

generation; over 25 1st generation students. All the students were studying in Brighton apart from Ellie and Julie who were based at University Centre Hastings.

Anna, Lee, Kara, Mia, Josh, Leanne, Megan and Sam all had at least one parent who had attended university, even if they did not graduate, and were or would have been under 21 when they joined apart from Sam who was 24. Mia was a second year, all the rest were first year students. Lee and Josh lived in the South East but over 50 miles from the university while Megan's home town is about 300 miles away. The rest lived locally or within commuting distance. Mia has dyslexia and Sam had been suffering from a chronic physical illness. Anna joined slightly late, after freshers' week and induction, having transferred from another university and withdrew in October of her first year. Sam withdrew in June of his first year and hoped to transfer to a different course at Brighton.

Nadia, Simon, Tom and Gemma were the 1st generation to attend university although siblings or cousins had been or were at university. Anita, an EU student, indicated that an aunt or uncle and sibling had been to university. Liz was the first in her family to go. Nadia and Liz were 1st years, Anita a 2nd year, Simon and Tom were 3rd year students. All would have been under 21 when they joined the university.

All the mature students lived locally. Their ages ranged from late 20s to early 40s. Beth and Carla were under 30, the rest over. Andy, Wendy, Ellie and Julie had at least one parent who graduated and other relatives. Andy's partner is also studying for a degree. Ellie, Julie and Andy were in their first year of study. Wendy had joined in the 3rd year having previously studied with the OU. Andy, Ellie and Julie had children.

Donna and Elaine had siblings, and Beth and Carla a partner, who had attended university. Beth was originally from a non-EU English speaking country. Beth, Donna and Elaine had children. Donna and Carla were in their first year of study, Beth her second, Luke, Elaine and Martin their third and final year.

Interview questions

A schedule was drawn up that related to three main areas (see Appendix 5). These were: positive or negative social experiences of university; where the interviewees like or liked to spend time and why those places; how they use or used their time. Additional probes included their expectations of university, financial matters and accommodation because these were raised by the first few interviewees. The first question was more general and aimed to settle the interviewer into the interview (Rubin and Rubin 2005). They were asked to talk about why they chose their particular social science course and why UoB. An additional question relating to motives was included and that was what being a university student meant to them. The term 'social motivation' was not used directly because of difficulties in adequately defining it. Rather it was expected that a broader approach to their experiences would be helpful in revealing the meaning and relevance of social motivation in transitions to and through university.

Procedure

A poster was displayed at Falmer and Hastings (see Appendix 6) asking for participants. In addition, an e-mail was sent through the university intranet system to all years with the same request. Hilary attended one first and one second year lecture to request participants and to give out information sheets for both the interviews and the educational histories. In addition, students were asked if they would like to participate during two first year research methods workshops. The graduate was approached by a member of staff who subsequently contacted Hilary. Further, students who had withdrawn from a social science course were

contacted by telephone and asked if they would be willing to participate. As a result, one telephone and one face to face interview were conducted with young people from this population. Interviews were carried out at the Falmer or Hastings sites between February and May 2008.

Ethical considerations

An ethical approach to the research was taken from the outset. In particular, the code of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2004) was incorporated into the design, as were the requirements of the Data Protection Act. The data were collected by Hilary McQueen, a member of BERA and the British Psychological Society, who was therefore beholden to respect both the BERA and BPS Code of Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2003). For the latter, the domains of responsibility consist of four principles: respect, competence, responsibility and integrity.

Respect: potential participants were given information about the research to allow them to give written informed consent. This included the aims of the research, their participation in a recorded interview and the use of findings. It was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Part of respect is assurance of privacy (BERA, 2004), in this case through use of pseudonyms and excluding any references to circumstances that would lead to identification of a participant.

Competence: in addition to awareness of the Code of Ethics, it was recognised that there was potential for participants to reveal personal, potentially sensitive information. It was important to remain sensitive to the participants' emotional state and to offer to stop the interview in the case of distress. The participants who were affected emotionally wished to continue with the interview and were assured that apologies were not necessary.

Responsibility: in addition to the measures taken above, participants were told before, and reminded during, that they were not obliged to answer any questions.

Integrity: personal boundaries were maintained, that is, no pressure was put on participants to take part, to continue to participate or to provide information.

The research methodology was agreed by the Faculty of Health and Social Science Research Ethics and Governance Committee (17/12/07). (See Appendix 1.1 for the Research Proposal submitted to the committee.) All participants were given an information sheet covering the ethical points of confidentiality, anonymity, right to withdraw and permission to record the interview. Before the interview proper, interviewees signed a consent form with a reminder of these points (Appendix 3.1) and completed a demographic information sheet (Appendix 4).

METHODOLOGY – educational histories

Reflections on the interview method

“The interview is amongst our most commonplace means for constructing individualized experience.” (Gubrium and Holstein 2001, p.29)

Herein is the dilemma for any type of interview research. Although it is a convenient means by which to gather together the voices of individuals (that represent individualised

constructions of a social world), there is the difficulty of eliciting meaningful responses that are not altered by the very same social motives that have been outlined in Part 1, for example, understanding, control and self-enhancement. An interview is a social act in itself and brings with it issues of intersubjectivity between interviewer and interviewee that impact on how the self is presented by subtle adjustments of content and linguistic devices, as Goffman has described (1990). Therefore the “*what* and *how* matters go hand in hand as two components of practical meaning-making action” (Holstein and Gubrium 2003, p.15).

It was quite evident in the interviews that apparently open revelations about experiences and activities were made with some level of awareness of their interviewer as a middle-aged female and, depending on the interviewee, knowledge of that person as a lecturer, parent or other social category. Examples include throwaway comments of self-judgement about needing to do more work or apologising for swearing that would not occur in other contexts.

Furthermore, the commonplaceness of the interview, for research or other purposes such as for college entry or in the workplace or as witnessed in the media, has created an interview society (Atkinson and Silverman 1997) in which there is knowledge of the process and outcome of interviews that alters those very factors. It is possible that the responses to the interviews were those that were thought to be more helpful or what was required and so on, not least because any interview will lead to a selective response that fits the presumed intention of a question. Asking ‘what does being a university student mean to you?’ was intentionally ambiguous (unlike ‘what does it mean for you to be a university student?’ or ‘what is the meaning of being a university student’) because it was assumed that the response would better reflect the social meaning of the question to that person. As a result, some participants questioned what type of answer was required when of course there was no preferred response.

Part of the structure of the interview is the time that it takes. On this occasion, interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. The amount of time reflects among other things the characteristics of the interviewees in terms of talkativeness, the relevance of questions to the interviewees or the amount they had to say about them, the alertness of the interviewer or the interviewee, and the practical issues of time available to participants and keeping the data to manageable proportions, providing the main questions were covered. Opportunity for deep reflection on the meaning of responses or their origin or detailed explorations of experiences was therefore limited. This is not to say that there was no reflection or probing, simply that there could only be so much in the given time. Of course there are also ethical considerations concerning the appropriateness of probing questions that could compromise the trusting relationship upon which agreement to participate and subsequent open responses rely.

Another area in which trust can be seen as important is that of finding participants. I was known in some capacity by four of the interviewees, another was a friend of one of these, and I had met three of them once in a workshop. One of the educational history participants had attended one of my workshops. Relative to the population, the number that had spoken to me directly or knew me to some degree was high. Having found participants, there was variation in how suspicious of me they appeared to be, which is not really surprising given the somewhat unnatural situation of two virtual strangers (for the majority of the sample) talking about one of the pair’s experiences. One participant challenged whether I really cared about students because I was a member of staff and her perception of staff was that they ‘did not care’. Another said jokingly after I thanked her for participating and commented that her responses would be very helpful that I was just ‘nosy’ or, as Goodson and Sikes phrase less pejoratively, ‘incurably curious’ (2001, p. 20). This raises the question of where interest stops and nosiness begins and led to a self interrogation of my own motives, which will not be explored here. It occurred to me that my self perception as open, friendly, honest and accepting, characteristics suggested as helping to build trust (Rubin and Rubin 2005), could

be construed as an interviewer persona, something akin to the falseness of a telephone manner. Of course, it might just be that I was not the kind of person that they wanted to talk to (Goodson and Sikes 2001) for which there is no obvious remedy.

In an attempt to address some of these issues, a quite different, more participatory, approach was taken that I refer to as educational histories. One advantage of this method above interviews was that the sessions took place on more than one occasion and the sessions were generally longer, which allowed deeper exploration of experiences and the possibility of building greater trust. For example, it was noticeable that there were more instances of laughter by the participants in the interviews and the initial educational history sessions that hinted at some unease. (Goodson and Walker (1991) note the use of humour in classrooms to make an awkward social situation more comfortable.) The known interview structure was removed, although of course some elements remained such as there being a researcher and a participant (even if intended to be co-researchers, or co-participants as Eyring (1998) refers to them) in a room talking about the experiences of one of the pair. Finally, rather than take the data away for analysis, each session was transcribed before the next for further discussion and available for the participant to read, and the final version of each person's educational history was constructed by them. It was made clear to the students who took part that the method was a novel departure for me as a researcher with all the procedural uncertainty that entailed.

Turning to the (auto)biographical

“A storied narrative is the linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts.” (Polkinghorne 1995, p.7)

There has been a methodological shift or turn in the social sciences towards biographical methods that explore “lived realities” (Chamberlayne et al. 2000, p.1). Biographical methods allow the meaning that people give to their experiences to be explored in more depth and considered in relation to the circumstances in which they have lived their lives. The emphasis on how the external world is experienced is important if one is to view people as more than “the sum of demographic factors” (Hollway and Jefferson 2000a. p.167) or indeed a self that is separated from its social context. Plummer refers to social scientific methods as processes of “amputation” (2001, p.40) where particular aspects are cut off for study purposes rather than taking a more holistic viewpoint.

The educational history method shared many aspects of a biographic narrative interpretive method (see e.g. Wengraf 2000; Wengraf 2006) in which one question is posed to the interviewee who provides a narrative in response. Additional information can be gained by exploratory questioning once the narrative has been produced. The format for the sessions was decided upon after a review of life-history literature but with three key differences: the wording of the question; the production of the initial response; a more autobiographical emphasis.

On the wording of the question, much thought went into how to phrase that one question on which the sessions would be based because its wording would have an effect on whatever was produced in response to it. The most obvious question ‘Tell me your educational story’ was resisted for two reasons. Firstly, asking for a story to be told is likely to lead to a particular structure, predicted to be a version which begins at the beginning and ends with their becoming a university student. Secondly, by using the words ‘educational story’ the content might be restricted to talk of school, exams and so on. The aim was to expand the research into social motivation and transitions by exploring what a particular student selected as an explanation for how they came to be a student. Therefore the question they

were given was 'How did you come to be a student at the University of Brighton doing what you are doing and in the way you are doing it?'

When producing a response for life history research, it is usual for a narrative to flow from being asked the question in a face-to-face session, and then exploring that narrative later in that session or in follow-up ones. It is not always the case that a narrative consists only of spoken words. For example personal documents and photographs might be included (Roberts 2002). The difference on this occasion was that the participants had one, brief, meeting during which a sheet was given to them outlining the expected process and with the question included. This was the first time that they had seen the question although all had received a general information sheet prior to this point. The reason for this was a hope that the researcher would reduce her influence on at least the earliest stages of the process. In addition, the participants were free to choose their own format for the initial response. They departed with the question, their own thoughts of how to provide a response, and an arrangement to meet again to talk about what they would produce in the meantime. The result was one handwritten narrative, one dictaphone response, and six pages in the form of photographic montages (five of photographs of people and places, and one of exam certificates). Unfortunately, the latter cannot be reproduced because of the ethical difficulty of preserving anonymity.

The concern to preserve the students' voices and to avoid imposing too greatly the researcher's own interpretation of their narratives (whether in spoken, written or visual form) led to a more autobiographical emphasis. Rather than viewing the end product as a recycling of their told story (Wengraf 2000), what emerged from the process was a "third story" (Altork 1998, p.124) that was created in the shared space of those sessions, and the possibility of comparing the initial response with that story as a reflection of what had occurred in between.

The educational history process

The research method (see Appendix 1.2 for the Research Proposal) was agreed by the Faculty of Health and Social Science Research Ethics & Governance Committee (27/11/07). To clarify what took place, a general information sheet seeking participation was circulated and advertised. In addition to the ethical considerations outlined in the interview method, it was important to refer to the greater commitment involved compared to an interview format so that those who took part knew as far as was possible what they were undertaking. Four students responded and agreed to participate although one later withdrew owing to family commitments.

A meeting was arranged to discuss what would be involved. It was important to emphasise the ethical implications of taking part in such research. Consent was as informed as it could be given that taking part in an in-depth exploration of their educational history could involve going over uncomfortable or unpleasant past experiences or even cause them to change in some unpredictable way. Anonymity was assured, and the degree of control they would have over what would be reported. It was made clear that there would be several sessions, so that they understood the level of commitment and could consider if they had time to take part. The right to withdraw from the research at any point was also emphasised because with the less obvious nature of the process in comparison with an interview a change of heart would be understandable. At this point they were asked to take the question away with them and produce a response in any format they liked. This freedom created both excitement at the possibilities and uncertainty about what to do. They each sought guidance on what they should do or how the researcher wanted them to respond but once reassured that it really was up to them they went away to consider how they would proceed. As outlined above, each chose a different medium (see Appendix 3.2 for consent form and Appendix 5 for sheet outlining question and process).

The researcher transcribed the Dictaphone recording ready for the first main session. The other written narrative and photographs were brought along by the participants. Using these responses as a starting point, the participants were simply asked to expand on what they had produced. The sessions were recorded and then transcribed by the researcher before the next meeting. The transcriptions were only for the purpose of reflecting on the previous session and were never to form part of later dissemination of findings. At the first main session, each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym to preserve anonymity, an idea borrowed from Smith (1998). The narratives are therefore those of Hannah, Valerie and Evie. The ethical points were reiterated before any discussion took place.

There were two further planned sessions at approximately two week intervals, although Valerie had one extra meeting because of difficulties in reducing her very detailed history into something that she was happy with. As Slim et al. (2006) suggest, gaps between the sessions are helpful, in this case because they gave time for the recordings of the previous session to be transcribed and, most importantly, for reflection on the content by both parties. Hannah's and Evie's final versions were constructed during the final session. Valerie's final version was created at home using the transcriptions from the sessions. Ideally, some of the photographs would have been included but the difficulty of preserving anonymity was insurmountable.

In the final face to face session, the co-participants were asked to reflect on some issues relating to the process. For example, the ethical implications of the actual process compared to what they had signed up to were explored, and their view of who I was and possible influences of that on their narratives.

INTERVIEW RESEARCH FINDINGS

The students' voices are prominent in the following analysis because it is their understanding of what has happened in their lives as they planned and then entered university that are viewed as important. There are a number of similar points made by different students that indicate the importance of social context on decisions relating to higher education and their subsequent experiences and these have been drawn out under during analysis and then coded under sub-headings that link to aspects of social motivation as defined in this research. The analysis began with the terms used in the research, added other aspects that were frequently referred to and went on to draw out implicit themes, such as gender, and those that emerged through comparison of interviews.

WIDENING ACCESS

As a preface to this section, it should be noted that relying on a self-selecting sample for practical and ethical reasons precluded a more systematic approach that might have included students who would meet other widening access criteria such as those from LPNs. In addition, based on mention of their parents' or own occupations, none of the students could clearly be identified in terms of socio-economic status. Parental education might, however, serve to indicate available cultural capital (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005).

The following table indicates the demographic diversity of the 25 interviewees, all full-time students.

Table 4 Characteristics of interviewees

	<i>1st generation to study at university</i>	<i>2nd gen+ to study at university</i>
Total sample	12	13
UK students under 25 - home distance		
<i>50+ miles</i>		3
<i>11-50 miles</i>	3	3
<i>Local</i>	2	3
All mature students were local		
BME	3	
LGBT	2	3
Under 25		
<i>Male</i>	2	3
<i>Female</i>	4	6
Over 25		
<i>Male</i>	2	1
<i>Female</i>	4	3

This breakdown suggests that the interviewees had benefited from the Social Science School's and university's policy of widening access to those from less traditional social groups, in particular mature students. The number of students who are the first generation to attend university implies success in terms of widening (or at least increasing) participation policy beyond the university. The table above also indicates that the majority of students can

be counted broadly as from this region. Students in the sample from furthest afield were not the 1st generation to study. All students over 25 lived locally to Brighton or Hastings, either because they were settled in the area or had family commitments. It has not been possible to gauge the proportion of students within the university or School whose home is within the region as the information is difficult to retrieve. It may well be that the tendency for younger students to attend a relatively local university has increased with the introduction of fees, and that post-1992 universities have a higher proportion of 'local' students with implications for transitional experiences (see e.g. Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005).

The majority of younger students and mature students had studied social sciences at Level 3⁶. More precisely, 2 had studied BTECs, 5 Access, 1 had no formal qualifications (although had studied at A-level when young and not completed), 1 had already studied with the OU, 1 had other qualifications including IELTSs, 1 had a law diploma, and 2 had gained A-levels as adults although one of these already had A-levels from school. The remaining students had A-level qualifications which, except for one of the students who later withdrew, included psychology and/or sociology. Although UoB requires a minimum of 2 A-levels for students under 21 and, usually, an Access qualification for mature students, accepting mature students without the traditional experience of A-levels in social science subjects has made university more accessible to some.

'I called up various universities that did [a course] and just applied to the ones that said you didn't need A-levels, they might consider you without A-levels.' Leanne

'I guess mature students were welcomed for their experience rather than just if you've got what it takes... They gave me a set of topics to write an essay on, that was how I got in which, you know, from talking to other people they're kind of what, how did you manage that, I had to do like an Access course or A-levels.' Andy

'I just had to write a personal statement, it was done purely on a personal statement' adding more cynically 'but I mean people can write anything they want to on their personal statement can't they, and they end up doing any course. It is quite interesting.' Donna

Two of the mature students were advised to apply to Brighton.

'My manager who I work with, he had experience of both Brighton and Sussex and he said because of my kind of like non-traditional route going into education, because I'm a bit older, he said you know Brighton used to be um, a polytechnic⁷, and said you know they're more, they've got maybe good policy for like you know welcoming people who haven't got traditional roots and so that was I suppose another reason I chose Brighton and also I didn't really know too much about Sussex. Brighton just seemed the place to go.' Carla

'I didn't actually apply to anywhere else, I only applied to Brighton. I can't remember why it was but that was what my tutor suggested.' Martin

Overall, in terms of widening access, interviewees in this study perceived the university to be more sympathetic to students with more diverse qualifications and backgrounds than other universities such as Sussex. Not surprisingly, given the proximity of the two universities, Sussex University was often mentioned. Two had been rejected by Sussex, three had been

⁶ Level 3 refers to the qualifications framework and not HE third level QCA. (2008). "The National Qualifications Framework". <http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-06-2298-nqf-web.pdf>. (23/09/08).

⁷ N.B. UoB became a university in 1992, 16 years ago

accepted but chose Brighton, three were accepted but did not get high enough grades, and one left to attend University Centre Hastings which was closer to home. Some expressed the view that Sussex could be considered more prestigious but had perceived Brighton to be more exciting, accepting, 'hippyish' (Sam) and supportive. Several interviewees denied any clear expectations of university although any subsequent feelings of pleasant surprise or disappointment indicate that, if nothing else, previous experiences set up a general sense of what will occur.

At this point, the emphasis, as Boud (2004) referred to is more on access and entry. The extent to which the needs of diverse students were perceived by them as being met varied considerably, with consequential effects on their experiences, and that will be dealt later on in the section on social motivation and transition.

SOCIAL MOTIVATION AND TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES

Belonging has been defined as a core social motive (Fiske 2004), linked to integration, and as a human need (McClelland 1985). The interview data indicate that the following aspects associate with belonging: making friends and the link with living arrangements, cultural similarity, and the desire for the 'university experience'. Fitting in or feeling part of the university were also affected by past experiences and changes in regulation (including contact time).

Making friends

The younger students had mostly made friends quite quickly. For many, living in halls offered an opportunity to meet other students and form friendships, although note Mia's experience below. Living at home was more likely to restrict making friends, particularly if the desire to forge new friendships above existing ones was weak. The decision not to move away or to move out was regretted.

'[I made] lots of new friendships which is brilliant, um living in halls was definitely a really good thing because I met lots of different people most of whom are lovely, lovely people.' Josh

'I'm really enjoying the social side of it, even though I'm not living here, I've got a load of friends I can stay with and stuff, to go out at night and stuff like that, and I'm enjoying it... I find it harder to juggle friends at home with friends at uni because I want to make the effort at uni to like be friends with people and make friends, whereas at home I don't have as much time for them anymore, which is a shame but we're all doing different things at the moment.' Nadia

'I think I've made really great friends here, but I think quite a few of the people I've made friends with, we don't live in halls, a lot of them are still living at home so we've been quite dotted about so I think that's made it a lot harder to um like make really good friendships because we've all got friends round here already.' Leanne

'I haven't got kind of a close circle of friends from university I mean I've got my friends from home but it's quite different, you know I mean I kind of have one social group whereas most people at university maybe have two, the people they live with and their old friends so I do regret not moving out.' Tom

Mia's transition was difficult to begin with but now, in her second year, things are going better.

'I live with four other girls and we get on like a house on fire and we have such a good time together and it was actually quite hard for me to, in the first year, to really gel in because I really hated halls...I didn't settle in quickly...because there was a lot of moving around and people sort of moved out of my little block and the people that kind of stayed were sort of hermits and just kind of stayed in their room but I think it was the sort of thing that after Christmas then I felt really settled because I found my own little group of friends'.

However, Mia commented herself on the possibility that it can be more difficult to be sociable when feeling uncertain.

'It's probably partly my thing that I didn't really throw myself into it as much as I should of [sic]'.

Anita, an EU student, similarly found socialising difficult to begin with and not as she had hoped, although she did find one person to talk to from her home country.

'I was like really quiet, I couldn't gel with the conversation and they didn't know how to approach me...I thought my social life would be incredible, I thought I would make a lot of friends who keep going out all the time and you know it didn't work that way. I didn't make much friends in the first year...when I lived in halls of residence I made one good friend...he was a caretaker.'

The more confident, like Josh, appeared to enjoy the novel social world, free of obvious cultural constraints.

'It was weird actually...how quickly you're all thrown together... you all kind of make up this friendship like you've been friends for a long time so you kind of all bond really, really quickly and then after a couple of weeks you go oh I haven't really got a lot in common with you but it all worked out anyway.'

In general, having 'something in common' was important for sustaining relationships, something which could be potentially problematic if widening access creates greater cultural diversity. Cultural differences are discussed below.

Social experiences for mature students were affected by their previous life experiences, family commitments, taking an adult role and a greater focus on study. It would perhaps be inappropriate to use the word 'friends' in relation to the socialising of the mature students at university compared with younger students, or rather it has a slightly different connotation.

'There's one lady who is older than me, she's in her fifties and um we've kind of like almost kind of like formed our own little like friendship group just probably because we have got like some more outside life experiences.' Carla

'I tend to be an everybody person. I don't, I'm quite aware of not sort of tying myself to particular people for fear of excluding other people, um, 'cos certainly earlier school that was my experience as a school child that you know you have these sort of groups of people and I, I guess I almost go out of my way to [include everyone].' Andy

I think one of the sort of nice things has been that um some of the younger students have – sort of come to me quite a bit for like guidance and that and, you know with assignments and stuff, um, and that's been really nice...but it's not only been on that level, you know, it's also been on a sort of having coffee, having a chat.' Elaine

'I have to say because I work and have children as well as doing this I tend to come in do what I have to do and then go again, I don't spend an awful lot of time with other people or in the university environment... social interaction with anybody is severely limited, but that's due to time constraints, I just don't have the time...I mix equally with my own age group and the younger ones as well so whilst I always talk to a mix with the younger ones and get along with them really well, when they say to me oh we're having a pirate party on Saturday, are you coming, it's nice to be invited but obviously I have to say no.' Donna

Luke lived 20 miles away initially.

'The first year I did feel quite, um, kind of socially isolated because I'd gone from working as part of quite a close-knit team at work, full-time you know 37 hours a week, you've always got someone there to chat to and joke with and everything, and then um went from that...to sort of people round you for a few hours a week. I would have days when I was studying at home...on my own, just nobody to talk to so that was quite a culture shock really...that's partly why the second year I decided I wanted to move down here, 'cos there wasn't a lot going on for me socially [at home] either so I felt I wasn't really part of [there], I wasn't really part of uni down here, so the second year I um rented a room from a friend ... during the week I was down here, um, and I had a much better social life in the second year but it wasn't, didn't necessarily revolve round the university, there was other things as well.'

Established friends outside the university were very helpful to Wendy.

'I've very much got a group of friends outside...my circle of friends have been really interested in what I'm doing and it's been really surprising how helpful they've been because I think probably out of all, I think there's probably only two friends who've ever been through higher education...in fact everyone's just been really helpful you know they've read things...[a friend] put me in touch with people who can maybe offer a different perspective on things so it's kind of bonded me with quite a few people in that respect.'

This contrasts with a younger student whose friends could be less accepting and supportive.

'I think I've kind of, not drifting apart from my friends at the moment but it's kind of causing a bit of tension because the ones who haven't gone to university...don't really appreciate the work I have to do so kind of get slightly annoyed when I say oh I can't come out because I've got work to do, they're like but you're working all day...I think possibly, this might sound quite a bad thing to say actually, obviously like my friends who have been to university I think they see it as a good thing but I think almost, I mean this is, I know it's really bad again to be saying, but I think that my friends that haven't been to university, not that they're jealous, but – when I kind of, when I tell my friends that have been at university about my course they're interested and they kind of ask me questions and probe me for more information but my friends that haven't been to university and carried on to full-time jobs they're kind of a bit more, um maybe a bit more blank when I talk to them about my course they're not probably quite as interested.' Tom

It was evident from the interviews that feeling connected with others was important although those others did not necessarily have to be students. Living arrangements continue to be important in facilitating friendships and collegiality (c.f. Wilcox et al. 2005; Winn et al. 2006). Although the word university is derived from the Latin for whole and implies a unified body, the relationship students have with the university appeared to be more fragmented because

of their accommodation and/or life experiences. Widening access therefore has implications for what has become known as the 'university experience'. The amount of time spent on campus and staff-student relationships were also relevant to a sense of integration. These aspects are discussed later. For the younger students, there were evidently some transitional implications for moving away or staying closer to home, a decision that Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) relate to differing amounts of cultural capital and different normative expectations. What emerged from the current study supported the implicit suggestion that there are conflicting social motives involved in students' decision, that is, of maintaining a local social identity and accessing the social and academic benefits of higher education. However, the recent introduction of fees and economic downturn is likely to increase the number of students who choose to stay at home, so that the 'traditional' university experience is likely to be restored to the privileged few.

Normative expectations and the students' experiences

Student union activities tended to involve alcohol, particularly during freshers' week. However, this reflects a traditional notion of the student cohort and promotes the drinking, partying culture as an important part of the university experience to the extent that people judge themselves in relation to it. Widening access to those who have had diverse life experiences requires attention to equally diverse social opportunities.

'I mean I have to say it probably has been a very different experience as a mature student than it would have been as a young student, and I haven't been out drinking a lot with my fellow students. I've been out a couple of times, it's mainly as far as my social experiences I guess really just going for coffee and lunch with mainly other mature students but a few younger ones as well.' Luke

'I'd rather spend the time with my girlfriend...All my friends want to do really is go out to the pubs and have a drink and get wasted basically. I've got no problem with that, if they want to do it, but I don't drink so there's really been kind of nothing good from that.' Simon

'I sometimes feel like I'm being too serious. They sometimes sound like, you know, kids to me, and to me you know a good time doesn't involve just drinking, getting absolutely wrecked.' Anita

'I suppose a lot of the activities are based around drinking and going out and stuff, a lot of like you know you've got Freshers' Week and it's all about going to bar crawls and stuff like that, and I don't drink anyway, I sound like a right straight-legged person but you know I don't drink...it just seemed a lot of the stuff was just all about like getting vouchers for pubs and stuff and so that didn't really apply to me...I didn't attend anything because I just thought I don't want to go out drinking and I did feel like oh I'm a bit older than everybody and maybe I could have gone out to make an effort but it just doesn't interest me and I don't do that in my social life anyway but if there had been a like, you know, just real chilled out coffee and cakes kind of thing I would have gone.' Carla

Other social activities geared at sub-cultural groups might need some attention, or preferably more activities that are not group specific. Students that are given separate consideration include those that are international and LGBT. Anita's comment on the international student event is included in the next section. Lee enjoyed the opportunities for the gay community but did not want to always be part of a separate group.

'I will go out on a Thursday and go out on a big gay night with my friends, straight and gay and love it and have a really good time but sometimes I think it's important

not to just be that, it does become your label and that's who you are and often here that'll happen like some of my friends will go religiously every week to the same places at the same times and drink the same drinks and talk to the same people on the same scene and sometimes it's easy to get trapped I think so it's important for me to do some things that are just ordinary and just average because if you just think of yourself as that...it's more like making a stereotype out of it. Although it's brilliant being able to be open and have clubs and things it kind of separates you again, separates the community.'

Perceptions of cultural similarity and difference

'I guess people are just inclined to people who are similar to them really, similar background, similar experiences, same sorts of personalities, sense of humour and things.' Lee

Perceptions of the difference, or perhaps unfamiliarity, of others' reactions were referred to.

'It could be a cultural thing as well because what I've noticed being here, British people are not very, they're very conservative and they don't like people coming into their spaces whereas [where] I'm from...you talk to everyone, and you're friendly with everyone. Being friendly with someone doesn't mean that you want something, and I've found that sort of makes me a little bit down because you know sometimes I see some of the lecturers and I just like to say hello how are you doing and it's like, what does she want.' Beth

The same point was made by a UK student.

'I think you notice when you come here on the train or when you're going home you notice at a certain point when people start getting more friendly!' Megan

The social event put on for international students did not quite work for Anita.

'I was thinking this is just a bunch of people with one thing in common, that we haven't got anything in common.'

However, with hindsight, there was one thing that she saw they shared potentially and that was

'the same perception of English people and [the] same difficulties with them'.

Now she has a friend from a different EU country.

'We are from similar families, you know the...last 50 years of our history we had a pretty similar, I didn't realise how much influence our parents, you know, similar stuff so we do think in similar ways and it does matter a lot...I really think this is why...we've clicked so easily.' Anita

Yet there is a tendency for those from different countries to perceive UK students as more similar and more bonded with each other than is necessarily the case.

'They just weren't people ...that I would have hung out with, unless I'd sort of had to really, because I just sort of met them in like the first freshers' week...so I just sort of went out with them but they weren't people I would have chosen to hang out with, generally...they weren't really into the same sort of music as me, they weren't, I don't

know they come from a different part of the country so just have a different way of looking at things.' Megan.

'I'm a totally different person compared to the people who were in my class... I just never had anything in common with anybody, like there was not one person that sort of made me think I'd like to be friends with them. I made no friends at uni, whatsoever...in my class they're either 35 or 18 so I was in the middle of everyone, couldn't really fit in one group.' Sam

Like Anita, having some kind of shared cultural experience affected Sam's socialising (although his reasons for leaving the course were more complex than lack of friends).

'I never really had anything to sort of talk to anyone about. I was never always stable in one place and I never could actually say oh I did this, do you remember when this happened.' Sam

Conversely, some perceived there to be more unity than might be the case.

'I think people are just mixed in together I guess but in the city obviously they'll all be into their little groups but here I don't really find that as much, even with racism, everyone seems to be hanging around with each other.' Simon

Another aspect was the familiarity of the environment. Indeed, similarity, familiarity and attraction have been found to be interdependent (Moreland and Zajonc 1982) therefore somebody or somewhere that is perceived as more similar or more familiar or more attractive can influence the other two factors. Smoother transitions are likely to occur when people and environments are perceived as more similar and familiar. This might be why Mia and Kara wanted to stay in the south of England. The same can be true of different institutions where "the two worlds both look, and in many respects actually are, the same. These worlds have many of the same points of cultural reference" (Evans 2008). Although she is referring to the similarity between public school and Oxbridge, there is no reason to suppose it is any different for particular colleges or school and a range of universities.

'The way it's laid out and the buildings and stuff are quite similar to my sixth form...so I liked that, the way it sort of looked quite similar, and it's quite spacious.' Megan

When asked about the physical environment, many could not easily describe why they liked the campus, or why they preferred it to other places although it seemed to relate to a perception of institutional identity and the degree of fit with personal or family identity that can be viewed as offering similarity and familiarity. Tom, a first generation student, tried to explain.

'[Sussex] was more kind of serious as in the buildings were a bit kind of older, and the people as well. Brighton just felt as if it had more life, that's the only way I can describe it really. I mean Sussex I know is a really good university but I just wasn't sure if it was me so much because – I'm not sure, it just didn't have, I mean walking round here, Brighton, it had a good vibe about it.' Tom

When pushed further, he went on to say,

'It's like a feeling that there's no words for. It's just kind of walking around it just didn't kind of um, I don't know, it just didn't have something that I was perhaps looking for. Maybe that's the best way to put it' and finally 'I came and looked round with my dad both times and...I think [!] kind of felt something off him, at Brighton he felt as though

- it was just kind, you know, he was full of compliments more for here than he was for Sussex. I mean I'm not sure if that maybe influenced me in some way.'

'It's almost a blessing in a way that I got rejected from Sussex and I've come here, it's just, I just feel so much more at home...I'm not being funny to people over at Sussex it's, I'm sure they're all very intelligent people and everything, but it just looks a bit, well it was built in the sixties wasn't it and um I don't know it just looks a bit dated...I don't know, I just don't think I'd really have enjoyed to be there.' Simon

On the other hand, Gemma wished with hindsight that she had chosen Sussex.

'I kick myself in a way for coming to Brighton, and living in Brighton, somewhere as outgoing as Brighton and then not going to Sussex Uni because there *is* a difference and I just didn't see it at the time because I just thought Brighton, Brighton University...And then when you see the lecturers over at Sussex and you think wow yeah. And it sounds really bad because of the stereotype, you know, men in their tweed outfits and things but there's something about that that makes you feel slightly more secure because it's, it is that teacher student role and I guess that's something I've always had in my previous education and it's something I expected from university, and this isn't.'

A more integrated student painted a different picture, admitting that such reflections may not be accurate.

'It's amazing how you, you know, I guess, even probably a year or two ago I might not have noticed it but now, as soon as you cross the road, you walk into Sussex, you notice a difference in the way people dress, you notice a difference in their posture, it's kind of weird...Here it's completely normal for sort of I guess you know pink hair and facial piercings and stuff like that. You don't see people like that over there. I'm sure there are but the general, you know, the general people that stand out when you, I guess maybe it's a preconception of what you're looking for but certainly that's my impression of the people over there.' Andy

Underlying these comments is an emotional response to the perceived identity of an institution overlaid with attempts at rationalisation. It is noteworthy that Tom, Simon and Gemma were first generation university students who did not have the social capital available to other students and therefore to be "virtuosos of university choice" (Reay et al. 2005, p.71). The point here is not about the virtues of a particular university or whether people make the 'right' choice. It is about constructed cultural values and their effect on impression formation, and the way in which individuals manage their responses to those impressions of people and places (specifically as indicators of who inhabits them). The core social motives of understanding and trust are implicated, too. This is because interviewees tend to refer to others' agreement on either positive or negative aspects which implies shared understanding. For example Donna says 'I know that students generally feel exactly the same thing' (about being able to approach lecturers). A sense of belonging is therefore bound up with assumptions of shared understanding with other students or family or staff, which can impact on trust. Gemma, for example, had lost her trust in assessment. 'I feel like there's nowhere I can go, so I need to sort that out really, I need to get my faith up, I need to get my confidence back again.'

Anchor points

As already noted, the younger women and some of the mature students referred to family members and partners as sources of support. Only four students' home towns were more than 50 miles. However, the one from furthest afield (Megan) had an aunt living locally and

Josh had a brother close by. A friend recommended Brighton to Gemma (the only one of the four to be the first generation to attend university), and Lee was drawn by its reputation as the 'gay capital' of the UK. The social motive of belonging is relevant here, as well as the importance of other people in choosing a university. Of course the local students already knew the area and had family and existing friends that they could turn to.

Mia's family, although not local, was important when she was finding the transition to university difficult.

'The first couple of months, I sort of, I eventually sort of rang my parents in tears and was just like I can't do this, this is too hard, I don't like it, and I just sort of spoke to them about it. I think it was a good thing that I really enjoyed the academic side of it otherwise I probably wouldn't be here. And I think that would have been a great shame because I'm loving it now.'

Her comment indicates, as Tinto (1975) suggested, that academic and social integration can be compensatory.

In addition to Mia's family, her local boyfriend provided support.

'I had a boyfriend last year who was actually very, very good, until I got a bit bored this year!'

Anita talks explicitly of making use of a boyfriend for support.

'I kept it going because this guy was in London and that means I can go back! And yeah someone to support me. I was with the guy for the wrong reasons but it felt like oh my God I'm going to be really on my own but at the same time he dragged me down quite a bit.'

Megan felt more able to make friends when her boyfriend joined her from home.

'After Christmas I moved in with my boyfriend and 'cos I was then happier I sort of made more of an effort to make friends on my course.'

Of course close relationships can be problematic, too.

'That second year would be probably the negative bit because I was consumed by my relationship and what was going on with it.' Becky

People as sources of support provide an anchor point (Koizumi 2000). The younger students referred more to friends and parents, the mature students to partners. In this sample, the women of any age referred more to the support of partners and, of the younger students, only the females were living with a partner, some as young as 18. Partners provided social and financial support in several instances. The importance of staff in supporting students is referred to below (see *The Social in the Academic*).

There was some indication that places can provide an anchor point in themselves, suggested as relating to familiarity and security. Several students went to the computer pool room if they were on their own for partly social purposes such as 'e-mailing, on Facebook, just passing time.' Liz

'I think we usually sit in the [café] just 'cos it's where we first sat, we've always stayed there.' Leanne.

'[Other students] often went off to their halls of residence where I didn't really have anyone to hang out with so I just sort of sat in my car, which is fine because it allowed me to have my own space.' Beth

Koizumi also refers to information as an anchor point. When entering university there is a great deal of new information to absorb and Student Central provided a good source of information. Nadia used it regularly, Lee found his housemates for next year there, Megan had posted a request for a house share and students regardless of age used the site to access lecture notes and grades. However, Lee also commented on the difficulty of diffused sources of information. His comment suggests that electronic sources of information are not always a substitute for a person.

'I think universities are quite strange, they're quite unusual, there's not someone you can just go and ask. You can't just ask someone you have to find out who you would ask and where that information...It's not like you can just go to a desk and say, oh, because they're there for a specific reason.'

A place for a learning community

With few social spaces available, the lack of a 'proper' student union was regularly referred to.

'I think this is the best [campus] just because...a lot of people live actually live on campus and have your lessons here and you can socialise here but I think the best thing the university could do would be to build a better, bigger student union place, with a bar.' Liz

Some remembered the old student union.

'It's such a shame that that old bar got knocked down because as grubby and horrible as it was, it was just the perfect place, it was right in the middle of the campus.' Natasha

The shortage of places to go either in groups or alone was quite apparent. One consequence is that many students do not spend much time on campus likely to impact on the academic community. Indeed, consideration of the built environment was highlighted by Tinto (2000) in relation to learning communities. It seemed that there might be concern about the tendency to desert the campus once lectures or seminars were over.

'I tend to get on quite well doing work at home so I tend to go home. I know we're supposed to stay on campus but if I work better at home. I was told by [a lecturer] to stay on campus... I heard he told one of my friends to be here every day of the week. I don't know how true that is but that's what I heard.' Nadia

The built environment is suggested as of great importance in contributing to a social and academic climate because it literally provides room for interaction and discussion.

'I've got one friend I've been friends with since the first year... we talk about postmodernism and stuff and we've gone outside to have a cigarette and then we'll start talking about like I don't know, different articles that we've read, or like different books that we've come across or different theorists, and it's actually quite good because that's what I thought university life would be like...but it hasn't turned out that way at all.' Simon

The point is not about provision for smokers but an unmet need for discussion beyond timetabled sessions for which cafés and the library are not necessarily ideal.

‘Maybe actually I think of it now I would make it more friendly inside. Sometimes it feels a bit you know like cold like downstairs these metal benches, it’s like in a row and you can’t really sit down with friends.’ Anita

Five students referred to how windy the site is and three to the coldness of the lecture theatres. The more disgruntled students spoke negatively of the wind and cold including its influence on low mood, while the more integrated tended to joke about it. It transpires that some students refer to the site as Narnia - because it appears to them that ‘it is always winter’.

Going off campus or back to halls of residence appeared to be the norm, likely to leave the mature or work-focused students without much company.

‘[The younger students will] be you know like we’ve done it now, we don’t need to do any more it’s like hang on how about we could discuss this or this and they’re like oh you know, oh you know, I’ve got to go, do you want to go to the library, do you want to do this and they’re like no I’d rather go out and stuff...I think we actually kind of got a bit blasé about it ourselves in the end. We were like actually there isn’t much point.’ Carla

If there is a desire to counter a tendency among some younger students to do the bare minimum and to develop the ethos of a learning community, the environment should be given serious consideration (see e.g. Edwards and Usher 2003).

The social in the academic

‘It almost feels like us and them, and I feel very strange because we’re all adults, we’re not kids.’ Beth

When Tinto wrote about the importance of learning communities (Tinto 1998), he made several suggestions for organisational reforms. His idea of “shared, connected learning” (op. cit. p.170) includes students and staff whose collaborative efforts lead to greater student involvement, that is academic and social, and consequently persistence. There are also implications for the quality of the student experience. The interviews revealed that students varied greatly in confidence, in their approach to learning, their understanding of the role of lecturers and how much help they received.

‘[The staff] were just fantastic and made it a pleasure to come in and want to be involved in more things and really want to be here.’ Becky

‘There’s one guy who like if you miss a seminar entirely he’s like oh you could do some next week or something, if you’ve got any doubts if you don’t understand anything give me a call or something...yeah they’re extremely helpful. I really think if you fail anything here it’s only because you really wanted to! You didn’t make any effort because they make it as easy as possible for you.’ Anita

‘I like the way that you get treated as you know like a peer on a similar plane to them, that’s really nice and that you kind of go oh you’re an adult now so you can sort yourself out and there’s no more worrying about getting in trouble for things being late ‘cos they just go well that’s your prerogative, you sort it out, I don’t really care, you can hand in this essay or you don’t hand it in, you know it doesn’t really make any difference to me. That’s a nice freedom, I enjoy that.’ Josh

'I have [approached staff] before, yeah, just quickly but never um, never in great detail because normally, so far I've been able to grasp things. And I mean quite a few of my friends are quite helpful at that as well, being able to chat, because if you both don't understand things sometimes it's easier to work it out between you.' Lee

'[The staff] put confidence in you to do well, they almost believe in you, that you can do it, and that's what's positive about it.' Simon

'There is that sort of implied responsibility...they say well we don't actually care if you pay attention...and it kind of works, it's, it's self-controlling. The people that want to pay attention come, come, the people that don't, don't.' Andy

'You get the feeling that [tutors] actually know you, and are interested in you.' Ellie

'My dissertation supervisor has been absolutely amazing and so supportive through the whole process and I don't think I would have, well I know I wouldn't have managed it so far without his input.' Wendy

While some enjoyed freedom from structure, felt confident to ask questions or did not need much help, and found staff supportive, others did not. For some there was considerable uncertainty about student and staff roles, issues of insecurity and a social 'fog'⁸ based on fragments of information or assumptions about people and institutions which shaped some students more negative experiences.

'In a lecture, it's just really brief because we've got such little time and I'll just be like what are they talking about and so I'll have to go home and do further reading and at A-level it was so useful to have that teacher just to ask questions all the time whereas at uni I don't think that's as, I know the lecturers say come and find me whenever, it's just not the same I don't think... I'd rather ask my friends which is really bad...it's just a bit scary to go up to someone I don't know, whereas if it was my teacher at A-level I wouldn't have a problem. I'm still quite a shy person anyway so that's probably got something to do with it...I don't think, none of them know my name. I just feel like a bit of a, just a number, just a person that comes in and I think I miss that about school, I miss having someone to talk to, to help me, that's why friends are so, I don't know what I'd do without my friends.' Nadia

'I don't know, sometimes maybe in your first year there could be less focus on learning groups and friendship groups and stuff, maybe actually a bit more intense tutoring and actually like getting to know the person how they're really getting on as opposed to like a token oh how're you doing kind of thing. From talking to some other people on my course they've had similar experiences and they're a bit like oh, what's the point in asking them things.' Carla

'She sat in her room and she said I don't care whether you turn up for lectures, seminars, she said I've got my degree so I'm not bothered whether you turn up or not so that to me is the kind of attitude across the board so you kind of feel isolated and that, you don't really know, er where you're going with your work. If you've got an issue with it you don't feel like you can go to the tutors or the lecturers or whatever and address it with them because they don't come across as that's their purpose here, their purpose is as lecturers and researchers and your actual education is very much a side issue... you've got to read it yourself and if you don't grasp the concept of it from a

⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1975) uses the term '*brouillée*' (foggy) when talking about phenomenology of the social world.

textbook then you feel like you can't go to a tutor to explain it to you, because that's not what they're there for, so you're left muddling along with it.' Donna

'I felt a lot of the time that I was stumbling around in the dark, that I didn't know what was required of me, um, you know a lot of the times I didn't know if I was doing it right or wrong or (*sighs*)...when we were on the Access course, a girl who had done it the year before us who went on to do a degree in Sussex, she came to give us a talk about the transition to university and she scared the life out of me because the impression she gave me was that um university was this big impersonal place, you know where all the tutors were very busy and you know they all have their work to do so you know it was basically down to you and I don't know if I read this the wrong way or not but I got the impression that you were sort of discouraged um from sort of asking questions or asking for help ...[in the second year] I had those two modules I found that I really needed, I needed, and you know on the one hand it was like well I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know whether this is right or wrong, I need to ask for help and then the other thing was that you're at university, you're a big girl now. You're supposed to be able to do it on your own so I struggled with that as well, um, and it was a really tough year.' Elaine

When Elaine later sought help with her work she found the staff to be helpful although her remark about being a big girl is telling, not least because she is in her 40s. It seems that simply being in an educational institution can create a sense of them and us, hierarchies and boundaries, and of unwritten rules about what is 'allowed'.

The diversity amongst a relatively small sample of students suggests that there will be a very wide range of motives and attitudes to study, and varying degrees of knowledge about institutional practice. Perhaps some staff are more accessible than others or do have differences in what they consider to be appropriate help. From the student perspective, more clarity in what can be offered, and indeed why, might offset some of the more extreme negative experiences. It is neither possible nor perhaps necessary to please all the people all the time. However, the interview data hint at a wide range in terms of student confidence and some inequity in meeting students' academic needs. 3 interviewees had not previously studied courses that included any or much psychology or sociology and this did cause some difficulty.

'The first sociology lecture went straight over my head, I'd no idea of so many of the words they were using I'd not heard of and actually the, there was just the developmental psychology and the learning psychology I had briefly touched on that in child care and I found because I felt I could do it, because I'd heard of it before, I did much better on those two weeks, I was more involved.' Leanne

'I personally hadn't done psychology or sociology really before so I was a bit baffled by what they were talk - like some of the words and stuff they were using, I was like I don't really understand what he's saying to me.' Kara

Leanne's experience indicates that familiarity of academic material is important and had an impact, as she says, on her involvement, taken to mean academic engagement. Now students have a much greater choice of A-level subjects or can elect to study a social scientific pathway in Access, there is likely to be greater division between the students who have a foundation in a subject and those who do not than in the past, particularly for subjects that depend on general academic skills more than particular knowledge (compared with the physical sciences, say). It is not clear how such differences can be addressed without overt discussion of existing knowledge. Here is an example where Green's (2006) emphasis on understanding a student's locus so that effective scaffolding can take place comes to the fore.

Kara found most staff willing to help her. However, it did create uncertainty and anxiety, even if not enough to cause her to leave the course.

'...when I was handing in the first essay and I got the first one back and I put so much effort into it and then I got like really poor, them little tick things like poor, poor, poor, poor, I was like maybe my brain isn't like a social, because I haven't done it before, I don't have a very, I've always done like science and stuff, biology and stuff, I was thinking maybe I've got more like a factual brain rather than creating an argument kind of brain so I did think then oh I don't know if I've chosen the right course, and I do sometimes still think that, like sometimes when I don't understand things so I'm a little bit anxious about that but I do the best I can.'

One interesting point here is that Kara's explanation for not doing well can be categorised as internal, uncontrollable and stable, with reference to Weiner's attribution theory (e.g.1985; 2000), predicted to lead to feelings of fear and the possibility of dropping out. In other words, the judgement as to why she did not do well rests on doubts about her ability in the subject whereas, in this case, creating an argument is surely a skill that develops over time, something which is unstable and, with practice and appropriate guidance such as carefully worded feedback, controllable. Judgements about self and others have social origins and social consequences. In that light, it is interesting to note a comment made in passing by one student that not being able to understand a particular lecturer was an indication of that latter's intellectual superiority.

The sense that many students have that they should be 'doing it on their own' can be inadvertently fed by staff and other students, and either create or contribute to a false image of what is meant by independent learning. Some saw themselves as inadequate students because they needed more help, which fits Leathwood's presumption about equating a need for support with being a 'bad' student (2006b p.615). The question arises as to whether widening access should apply to knowledge and skills or stop at the gates of entry and, if it should apply, how that access can be enhanced.

SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED 'OWN' GOALS

Becoming someone

The core social motive of self-enhancement (Fiske, 2002) and the theory of need for achievement (McClelland, 1961) both suggest that humans are motivated to 'be' something. The social possibilities of what one can or should become are constructed by social institutions including the family and schools, however personal and undetermined by other people they might appear. For Fiske, self-enhancement refers to the hope "that others will see you as socially worthy" (2002, p.241). The cultural capital that is attached to a degree gives it high value as a potential self-enhancer, even if Tom expressed some doubt as to its continuing value in a system of mass higher education.

'It's only this year that I actually realised how kind of important you know, you know the chance to kind of achieve a degree which is you know a real, I know it doesn't hold much substance now 'cos lots of people have them but for me personally it just kind of just sort of affirms to myself that I can, if I put the effort in I can achieve something.'

For some of the mature women, the possibility of feeling worthy and gaining confidence was very important and at times highly emotional. There was almost a sense of trying to put right past wrongs that emanated from cultural expectations of what a person (and female) should be.

'To me it's Educating Rita because it's an opportunity I didn't have when I was young... I thought no actually you're doing this for you now I wasn't doing it for anyone else I was purely doing it for myself...I think it was this kind of parental disappointment that I didn't academically achieve as much as I, as they wanted me to...Has it made me change? Yeah it has actually. I think it has and it's made me change for the better. It's given me much more confidence and I feel, I feel like I've achieved something.' Wendy

'I don't feel like I've really achieved anything...I'm just jealous of the friends that I know that went to uni and have moved away and travelled and done more. When I was working I was working at the school where I used to go, and my kids go to the school I used to go to and I live about 5 miles away from where I grew up and it's like all really small. I'd like to be a bit more, bigger life, more exciting and that's part of doing this because I think it would make, help me to do other things, a bigger life...I think having the education thing would give me confidence.' Ellie

'I'm slowly, very, very slowly beginning to see that I'm not as thick as shit as what I always presumed coming up through my school system and I'm quite surprising myself ...my academic confidence is very, very low...so every time I pass something it's like what! I really, I really get a lot out of that.' Julie

'It means a lot, um, I suppose it's a, for me, it's very much represented a second chance. Um, it's given me a great sense of achievement, um, you know I've met so many new and interesting people, um you know I've had my own sort of ideas and opinions challenged which I think is never a bad thing, um, it's just sort of given me different ways to think about things, um, it's given me a lot more confidence as well...in the community I was brought up in...you don't try and rise above your station sort of thing, and I was very much given the impression that only certain people could like be doctors or solicitors for example, you know people who were sort of well-respected and educated in the town, um, so not just any old, and certainly not me.' Elaine

'For me, getting through university would be the biggest achievement so far apart from my son and my marriage...The drive comes from the past, giving up, the need to make something of myself, to make my family proud, to make myself proud... the drive comes from the need to succeed really... I'm quite used to people saying oh she'd never do this, she's crap at this, so now I feel the need to prove them wrong.' Beth

The three mature males had some similar and some different reasons for getting a degree. One referred more directly to social status.

'I felt that um with a degree education [the work I do] would carry that certain status which I wouldn't have without qualifications' Martin

Luke, like Beth, compared himself with his partner's family who were educated to a higher level. A degree could be seen as a passport to a valued social world.

'A lot of my partner's family have been to university or some younger ones in the family and I did feel a sense of um that I had missed out a bit. I always felt that a bit more keenly when I was with my partner's family, sort of talking to them um - that I'd you know I'd missed out and wanted to kind of develop myself...they were able to kind of articulate things better, put forward arguments better and um, just more better

informed about social issues and things like that so I kind of hoped that it's going to give me that as well.'

One of the younger students expressed a similar view.

'I've never really been recognised at anything in my life before, apart from sport, but it just doesn't really, that doesn't matter to me, it's just sports are sports, whereas academia, I always see academics as those people that you want to aspire to be.' Simon

Andy, like Elaine, desired something more from life so that they began to question the person they had become.

'I came to the conclusion that it wasn't actually what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It was alright but it wasn't really stimulating. You know, I could do it with my eyes shut, and it paid well but I decided that wasn't enough any more.'

In Andy's case, and Julie's, death of a family member led to a change of life course, what Denzin refers to as a major epiphany (2001) resulting in Andy's case, and perhaps Julie's, in a rethinking of existential goals.

'I guess the overarching thing that made me sort of come to that decision was that with my dad, when he died, he ended up with just stuff.' Andy

'I gave up work...following the death of my parents...and thought no let's step away, time for the kids, and that's why I did Access.' Julie

The younger students were aware of the social pressure to get a degree and the structure that allowed for it. For many of them, university represented the next step in the educational system *en route* to a job.

'I remember teachers saying things like you know if you don't work hard now you'll pay for it in your future, you won't be able to get a job...you've got to do well in GCSEs, and you've got to do well in your AS-levels, and you've got to do well in your A-levels, then you've got to go and do your degree...if you're an A grade student you should be aiming for these universities, rather than these universities but if you're a B grade student you should be aiming for these and that's how I then ended up, d'you know what my whole experience for going for the scholarship at [another] University, I don't even remember being a part of it. I just remember a lot of my sixth form tutors getting very excited about it, my mum being involved and everybody discussing it around me.' Gemma

'It's like an integral part of your career, isn't it? Yeah, so going to university would obviously be like the next step.' Kara

'I mean when I was in college it didn't mean [much], going to university just seemed a natural progression from college so it didn't mean that much...a rat run.' Tom

'It appears like you can't really do anything significant with your life if you didn't have this bit of paper that says, you know, yeah you did three years of sitting in a library. [University] is an enjoyable experience, I don't want it to seem like it's drudgery but there's a lot of pressure at kind of sixth form level, right you're definitely going to go aren't you, it's quite important that you go.' Josh

'I don't know, to be totally honest I've no idea what I want to do with life, I've always enjoyed learning so I feel it's the next step. I've no idea what I'm going to do with it. I just want to learn more because I find it interesting.' Leanne

'I don't really know what I want to do so I thought I'd come to university, get a degree and then see what happens.' Nadia

Once at university, new information and experiences provided different perspectives. In transitional terms, there was a marked shift for many away from a somewhat instrumental approach to getting a degree. For some, academia proved to be an enjoyable experience, for others there was greater awareness of its limitations as some kind of automatic passport to employment.

'I think it's completely changed, my view. Um, having a degree is a fantastic start in life but by no means will it guarantee you any form of work, no matter what degree...[I have found out] from my peers, from my seminar tutors and lecturers, um, from people who I have like a part-time job with as well, it's all to do, I'm beginning to realise the value of work experience.' Liz

'So many people describe being a student as it's a complete doss and first year granted it was a little but no it's a lot of hard work and it's actually a lot of the uni work I really, really enjoy.' Mia

'When I first wanted to get a degree I thought the only reason [was] for the degree, it still is that but it's now more part of an experience, a life experience.' Nadia

'I mean, I know it sounds, no not like I've found Jesus or anything now I've found sociology but it's quite kind of, it just opened my eyes a bit further...I enjoy it. I really do.' Tom

Becoming someone independent – the social value of transitions

For many of the mature students the motive of stepping back to fulfil an earlier goal or stepping aside from their life course was noticeable. Some younger students referred to moving on as a motive for going to university. Moving away from home has already been referred to as part of that process, but expressed as a kind of measured transition.

'I didn't want to live at home anymore but I didn't want to be up north...I don't know what it is about, but I've always seen being independent as a good quality because it's, if you're too dependent on say your parents, you're waiting for them to, for you to do the, like do the rest of your life basically, and if you're dependent...you haven't got anything to hold which is actually yours, you can't turn round and say I earnt [*sic*] this, look at me, I'm amazing.' Mia

'It's not too far away from home, it's 3 hours away...It was a big liberation to be completely absorbed into a whole new place, um, you know just, to start again, it's a fresh start because I think you kind of get tired of who you are when you're, when everyone knows you and every little thing about you so it's a good opportunity to start again afresh and have lots of new people.' Josh

'... there's the social side, like leaving home and having independence and being able to run your own life and budget and things. It's like a stepping, a sort of

midway thing between living completely independently and then living with your parents.' Lee

The initial financial incentives for staying at home seemed to have less meaning once students were at university.

'For some reason I didn't want to move far away from home...the main reason really I suppose was to kind of save money because I lived quite close, um, you know I'm seeing horror stories of people coming out of university and having big debts and everything, I thought if I try and minimalise it as much as I can it would help but I do regret that I have to say, definitely regret not moving out.' Tom

Discourses about independence are bound up with the value of individuality, intrinsic to the ideal student experience. Transition is seen as necessary and involving a degree of discomfort. No pain, no gain as they say.

'I think I would have matured kind of thing, living away from home...as I am living at home all my kind of my washing's done for me, that is nice, I'm not saying it's not, it is nice. But I think it's a sheltered university experience...I'd rather've kind of been eating baked beans for a week if I didn't have any money kind of thing, that's a university experience for me.' Tom

'If I'd have moved out then I'd call it more of a university experience because it's about like living away from home, fending for yourself, 'cos it's a lot more different from living at home, going to school, where everything's done for you, so that's the experience, that's what I want next year.' Nadia

The students' reflections indicate that the 'university experience' has become reified as an important rite of passage and therefore a social motive in its own right. Whether moving towards a kind of splendid isolation should be valued more than living locally and maintaining existing ties is questionable. Anna, who started late and then withdrew early on in the course, described her ideal university.

'I'm probably alone in this but I loved school and I loved college so I'd like it to be a step on from there but not made to be this huge thing where you've got to go...somewhere far away from where you live, do you know what I mean? And you've got to meet loads of different friends and I love meeting new people but I like, like when I went to college I went with some friends but I met a whole load of new ones and university is so seen as something you've got to do on your own and got to do far away and I've got a very close boyfriend back home as well so I'd like it to just to be that a little step on from and I have quite an independent home life as well so I suppose I wasn't going for that but I'd just like it to be a step on really, like school, college, university.' Anna

The value of moving away from home and having a fresh start can be viewed as "masculine...western, white and middle class" (Leathwood 2006b, p.613). Widening access policy combined with concern over high levels of debt is likely to encourage more students to attend universities closer to their homes, particularly those who do not have as much capital to draw on, leading to a different type of experience. Encouraging students to go to university 'for the experience' should be undertaken with caution because it may well lead to disappointment or dissatisfaction. On the other hand, there is a danger that a new discourse will be created that questions the motives of those who can and do choose to move away. The problem is not whether a choice is better or worse but the continuation of inequity in what can be and is chosen.

TAKING TIME TO BE A STUDENT

Balancing social and academic motives were predicted to be potentially problematic. More freedom of structure compared with sixth form and normative expectations of partying were thought to be likely candidates for tipping the balance towards spending time socially rather than on study, particularly for younger students. There was evidence that this was the case and that the balance shifted over time.

'I expected to have more timetabled work, and sometimes it's a bit hard to motivate yourself to do the work yourself... I don't feel like I've learnt as much here [as at college]. I think, but first year's all about settling in and like a lot of it is social life and it's quite hard to get the balance sometimes.' Nadia (1st year)

'I think I have plenty of spare time in which to do my work, I think, I've got lots and lots of time but it's a motivation problem. I don't do it so I'm thinking of taking another day's work at the moment but I shouldn't take it when I've got so much work to do that I'm not doing but actually it's not a time issue, I think I've got plenty of time I could take another job and still do it, I just need to get motivated.' Leanne (1st year)

'I thought it would be a bit more, university isn't as structured as it is as school, it's quite like, I find, because you're only here three days a week, you have to do a lot of your own motivation and stuff, and I thought I'd be more motivated because I'd taken a year out and I'd be straight in and doing more work but I've actually found, because I'm not here as much, I feel like I'm losing motivation a little bit.' Kara (1st year)

'I'll go home and make a baked potato and I will do some reading but I guess I'm being sociable with my friends or doing a bit of shopping or something. I don't know, it's hard to know, I should probably designate five hours a day to doing university things, you know, like 10 o'clock to 3 o'clock, that'll be my university time but I won't. If there's no one there keeping an eye on you, you're more likely to kind of go and do something else.' Josh (1st year)

'I would like to think that I do more this year? It's getting there, yeah I think I spend more time in the library than I did last year doing bits and pieces. I spend more time reading, definitely because I didn't do a lot of it last year. Thank God I got a pass!' Mia (2nd year)

'I mean the socialising work balance would probably be about 75% socialising 25% work, it was really bad... I think the balance definitely shifted more in favour of doing the work the further my degree was going than socialising.' Tom (3rd year)

There were exceptions, however.

'Although I know the whole university experience is meant to be 50/50 social, you know you're meant to go out there and have fun, I'm just not interested in doing that... I just have always thought if you're in study, you shouldn't be giving your time to anything else.' Gemma (2nd year)

All the mature students were more conscientious about their academic work and some had experience of being in full-time work as a comparison or juggling work and family.

'In the first year I only worked [paid] during the sort of holidays and I probably had too much time on my hands in the first year really, um which probably didn't kind of help with feelings I had of feeling a bit isolated but if I'd had some regular work I probably wouldn't have felt quite so socially isolated but I was very conscious that I

wanted to sort of do my best and get the best out of it, I didn't want anything detracting from the experience but I definitely could have kind of fitted in a day a week's work and still done the study I needed to do.' Luke (3rd year)

The mothers in the sample worried about the conflict with other roles and there was a sense of having to justify spending time doing something for themselves.

'I sort of said to myself you know, yes I am doing this degree it's very stressful, but it's not everything...This year, I say no. For me I'm not going to get a first, I'm not working to get a first, because that means I won't be able to spend time with [my family]...sometimes I feel like I'm not achieving as much as I can with university, I know I can do better, I'd like to do better but the stress of it, it's not good for me, it's not good for my family'. Beth (2nd year)

'I have sort of spoken to my son and said look, you know, I do have a lot of work to do, I know this takes up a lot of my time and I know maybe sometimes you might feel upset about it or you feel that maybe I'm not giving you enough attention...you're incredibly important to me but my work is as well and it's not always easy to sort of manage your time...and I always try and make an effort...to sort of spend time with him and do things that he enjoys. So it's a constant balancing act I have to say, and it's not always easy.' Elaine (3rd year)

Although not a parent, Wendy expressed the importance of not affecting others by her choice to study.

'I've become a more I'm-doing-it-for-me person really, in the past 18 months, which I find, I said, I found quite self-indulgent in one respect but I don't feel guilty about it because nothing I've done has been detrimental to anyone else.'

It must be acknowledged that the interviews were conducted before the increased teaching contact time effected through the Periodic Review and introduced in September 2008. The extracts below indicate that this was necessary for many interviewees referred to a desire for more contact time, particularly seminar rather than lecture time, for integration, academic progress and motivation. A few are offered here by way of example.

'I think work wise I don't feel as motivated as I think I should be because, 'cos it's in so few hours I don't feel like uni is my main part of life so I can't really get into it sort of thing 'cos, I dunno, there's not enough 'in' time to be doing it and I'm not very good at getting motivated myself!' Leanne

'I think there might be needed more, personally, obviously you're probably meant to do it off your own back [*sic*], with extra help and stuff but...I think maybe a bit more time practising essays, personal development was meant to be that but I didn't find that very helpful at all'. Kara

'I don't think there's enough contact time. 7 hours is not enough for the amount of work that you have to do um and I think that they've piled on too much into each of the modules because you don't have time to grasp anything before you're moving onto the next subject and if you're going to do that 7 hours is definitely not long enough, the lecture time and seminar time is not long enough, but by the same token, if it was more than 7 hours, I wouldn't be able to get in for a lot of it, either, because of my position. Double-edged sword there...You're kind of taught at, so that's how it's done. You're taught by someone standing in front of you but it's not as interactive as it needs to be with the people who, 'cos it's alright tossing an idea with

a fellow student but they don't know the answer either, so you need the extra from the tutors because they're the ones with the knowledge.' Donna

A link was made between paying fees and contact time and some students clearly felt that they were not getting their money's worth. Donna went on to say,

'I think coming into the environment, it should have been made clearer to the students that, although they might give the impression they're not interested but that is to some degree what they're there for, go and use them, because a lot of students they just, from that initial when they've turned up they've been told no that's not what [the staff are] there for, you know, they're more interested in something else...I thought that paying for it they were at my disposal, but that's obviously not the case, because they make it very clear that they've got 101 other things to do and you are at the bottom of the list in their priorities.'

'Oh there ought to be more considering we're paying three grand a year, really...my friends at other universities have got sort of 12 hours a week, minimum and I think I've got 6 or 8 this year, something like that? I could easily spend Monday to Thursday in my house just doing, well just doing social stuff so going shopping and going out in the evening and then the next day um, just you know, I could just as easily kill time and not do anything to do with the university for those days.' Liz

'There's definitely not been enough. 'Cos although, 'cos I think no matter how many hours it's easy to miss them, it's really easy to miss them but if there were a few more, it just feels a bit like sort of say for this year, I'm paying three thousand and seventy I think this year it was? And I'm not sure I think the government pays more on that, so then it's sort of like how many thousands and thousands that is, and I get five hours a week and it went down to four sometimes'. Lee

Overall, the younger students and those who had completed an Access course in particular found the transition from a highly structured and supportive sixth form experience to having what might be considered free time and few pieces of written work difficult to manage. Indeed, the less regulatory environment has been theorised as a potentially de-motivating factor likely to lead to disappointment and possible withdrawal (McQueen 2008). There is an issue of readiness which could be tackled both during the first semester within the institution and through discussions with schools and colleges. In addition, the payment of fees has had the effect of increasing students' sense of themselves as service users, and therefore they have more expectations from the staff as service providers.

OUTCOME OF THE EDUCATIONAL HISTORIES

Outcome

The narratives are not produced in full here because of their length. Instead, extracts are included that highlight particular points. The research team apologises to the participants for further reducing the stories that are but a fraction of the work that went into them. The intention is to report more fully on the educational histories elsewhere. It must also be noted that a great deal of information was provided during the sessions but for ethical reasons no quotes from that information can be included. It was agreed that general reference could be made to the content of the sessions, outlined below. In order to preserve anonymity, information which might make identification possible has been removed with the unfortunate consequence of reducing some useful detail.

The outcome is divided into two sections. The first relates to how Hannah, Valerie and Evie have been pushed, pulled, coaxed and cajoled by others, and how they tried to negotiate their way through particular life experiences, to become students. The second refers to methodological outcomes and the extent to which the method was helpful in comparison with interviews in understanding students' experiences.

Negotiating the social

In answering the question posed to them, it was the way in which these three students absorbed or rejected or reacted to the individual circumstances into which they were born and through which they lived that better describes how they finally made the transition to university rather than the 'cleaner' version that emerged from the interviews. As with the interviews, there is only one side of the story to present. However, there is another side that is at least partially visible and that is the influence of each individual on the people and situations around them, intentional or otherwise, that in turn encourage responses that dampen down particular characteristics, hopes, plans, and ways of being. There were hints of this process in the interviews too, for example, being born a girl and the drawn out consequences of being raised in a family that holds more traditional views on gender roles. What emerged from the educational histories was more subtle, for example being a more or less feminine girl might elicit different outcomes.

It is possible to extract some common influential themes which were not discussed as points of comparison in the research process because that would have involved talking about the other participants of whom they knew nothing. The first theme is the difficult and sometimes unpleasant social experiences they encountered in their schools. Bullying or trying to find loyal friends or developing strategies for dealing with the more hostile side of school life and (so-called) friendships cropped up in the sessions including the gendered theme of bitchiness, apparently peaking in early adolescence. These seemingly unavoidable social aspects can be seen as running their course alongside various moves from school to school or to college, at times interweaving with family life, school work and (later on) paid work. However unpleasant or shaping of a person these elements might be, upon reflection their normality appears to reduce their enormity. Valerie puts it like this.

'I don't really tell people about my experience at school and stuff because to me that is standard. Loads of people always say "oh yeah my school was so bitchy and I was bullied at school" and it just seems that so many people have the same experience.'

The social motive of finding and making connections with other people, or deciding not to, was a consistent theme. Although Valerie stayed in one area, her experience of being sent to a selective school created some of the same difficulties that Evie and Hannah had in their diverse school experiences. All three were faced with assessing themselves in relation to others and trying to establish a way of being that fitted some inner sense of who they were or who they should be. Ball et al. (2000) talk of the constant shaping of identities as people develop that occurs in relation to 'social, domestic and economic arenas' (p.35) of which school is one and family another. Understanding and trust were also important *leitmotifs* as the young people tried to work out what was 'going on' in their social world, including friends, family, work-colleagues, peers and teachers, and why; in other words, attempts to judge the motives of others with whatever information or experiential knowledge they had acquired.

Parents loomed large, with more reference to mothers. For example, Hannah's mother was a 'massive force' in her desire for higher education. Valerie and Evie talked more of mother-daughter relationships and the difficulties associated with transforming a mutual dependence into, for the young people, desired independence. Educationally, Hannah's mother was a role model and source of support, if somewhat tangled with concerns over the cause of Hannah's dyslexia which will not be expanded upon for ethical reasons. A label such as

dyslexia, although contested (see e.g. Moorhead 2005 on Julian Elliott's contentious views), has the potentially negative social connotations of being seen as defective or not good enough, as well as having the positive potential for support if the condition is recognised or help sought. Socially motivated emotions of guilt, shame and pride were important 'drivers' in the families' lives.

Evie was raised with expectations of achievement although, by comparison with others around her including those with culturally diverse upbringings, she perceived there to be a lack of practical structuring to support those expectations, one example being no desk to work on at home. Once again the importance of strict regulation arose; this time the general lack of it in the UK educational system in terms of the amount of homework set, as well as relatively lower standards in academic expectations, and the commitment of families to supporting those standards. Valerie's parents appeared to lack understanding, or perhaps experience, of the subtle means by which educational outcomes can be manipulated so that she was pushed and coerced into school work rather than persuaded and encouraged, as well as receiving mixed messages about the value of education and the imperative of getting a job as soon as she left school.

Overt discussion of theory was included. Experiences were related that revealed the theoretical bases of their meaning, frequently drawing on familial understandings of the social and academic world, but overlain with some social scientific knowledge. It was noticeable that the interviewees referred in passing to concepts such as social identity or group theory or the hidden curriculum. The educational histories offered an opportunity to explore the meaning of theories to the participants in more detail. For example, for me, the difficulties that Valerie experienced at home hinted at her role as a scapegoat in the family dynamics (see e.g. Clark 2002) perhaps because her academic success in being the first to pass the 11-plus, although a source of pride to her parents, created feelings of inequity or a threat to their social position. Although Valerie could see that might be so, she perceived labelling theory to have the greater relevance to her life experiences, which she thought might have led to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby she became more like the label she had been given, as Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) famously investigated. In transactional terms, Valerie's parents' perception of some undesired characteristic was picked out and given a name which caused Valerie to respond differently and possibly culminated in a more rebellious attitude. It is not possible to say where this chain of events began and therefore it is not a question of fault or blame, more of the structured and structuring nature of being a particular person in a particular family (see e.g. Sameroff and Chandler 1975). Regrettably, untangling the strands further is beyond the scope of a project that focuses on one person in isolation although it is proposed as a useful model for both explaining and understanding differential outcomes. The point here is that there are consequences of taking a particular theoretical viewpoint as to why events or people are the way they are, whatever the source of those ideas and however apparently justifiable or grounded in 'proper' theory. All 'others' in our lives will also have about why things are the way they are and how to respond to them, or "mental models of the world" (Korte 2007, p.175) that form part of social and personal identities.

'Others' includes teachers, of course, although, interestingly, there was no reference to teachers in the initial responses of the education history participants, whatever their format. There was more emphasis on qualifications, family and (in the two textual responses) 'always' aspiring to higher education. Once further detail began to emerge, teachers were drawn into the picture. The more equal nature of the student-teacher relationship at college was important to Valerie, and their understanding of her and her 'situation' without any hint of judgment. Evie had been to several schools and in two different countries. She referred to two teachers in particular who inspired or gave her greater confidence. Hannah went to a number of schools of different types also in different countries. Assessment of her level of ability, and therefore the suitability of a particular university, was influenced by her teachers.

This assessment was combined with messages about her potential to achieve. Only one teacher stood out as inspiring confidence in her ability and the potential to apply it. The effect of these students on their teachers can only be surmised but would be a fascinating area of study. For example, those teachers who used the tactic of implying work would get a low mark apparently as an inspiration for the students to work harder might have associated a better outcome with this strategy, and therefore continued to use it. From the learners' perspective, the strategy was not that effective (at least the reason for doing well was not perceived as directly related to the strategy), left the young person feeling inadequate and did not foster good teacher-pupil relations. Implicit in the narratives are the different approaches that teachers take in a bid to do their job, meet targets, or get the best out of their charges. At any rate, Hannah's and Valerie's preference was for non-judgmental, positive and supportive teachers, while Evie appreciated higher and strictly enforced expectations.

One thing became apparent amongst the changing but structured landscape of the participants' lives and that was the importance of what Hannah and I ended up calling 'social chance' (perhaps akin to the 'chance happenings' Polkinghorne referred to). What we meant by that was the very unpredictable circumstances that can arise when particular teachers, peers, careers' advisers, work colleagues and so on are encountered, sometimes serendipitous, other times more destructive. For example, a particular neighbour of Hannah's inspired her career plans. Similarly, having a particular teacher who took an interest in them and their academic work was open to chance. Valerie ends her narrative with the happy circumstances of her living arrangements. Of course the less fortuitous side of that for Valerie and Evie included the presence of individual characters at school with a greater propensity for bullying as a means to a social end.

There is one other aspect that will be selected from the numerous issues raised and discussed during the lengthy process and that is the idea of 'free won't' in a structured world. Initially investigated neurologically (Libet et al. 1983), it is possible to see its relevance at a less reductionist level. The implication is that although the existing social world is instrumental in preparing the person for a particular outcome, there is still the possibility of reacting against it. Where this arose most clearly was in Valerie's rejection of the dominant social world in her area (for which we created what was deemed to be an apt pseudonym). 'I just don't want to end up like that. That is a Slagsford girl, you know, more interested in who she's sleeping with and how much she can drink than in her children and I just thought I don't want to end up like that sort of person.'

This section ends with parts of the final narratives of the co-researchers, Hannah, Evie and Valerie, under their choice of title. They are presented as their answer to that one question 'How did you come to be a student at the University of Brighton doing what you are doing and in the way you are doing it?' It should be evident even from these brief extracts that transitions in terms of sexuality or independence or confidence were running beside and through the educational histories presented that hint at the extraordinary complexity of relatively young students' lives.

EVIE

I don't really know where to start. I think the big thing is living [abroad] and the whole different schools thing. I suppose it's the transition from school to school, and the way my education went.

The transition and the habits I had in the different schools, I don't remember homework in primary school, I had trouble doing it in secondary school, when I was [abroad] I was better at it but I wasn't very organised; having to do it made me better at it but coming

back here and having my own time I just slipped back into the old habits of not doing any work. I think that's one aspect of it. English schools are not as disciplined.

Following on from the actual school work is the relationships I had with people at school, other students or teachers that have had an effect on things, like for languages the primary school teacher I had who made us speak different languages and the teacher I had [abroad] who was good, made me feel better, not so useless. And I suppose with other kids my age, just the bullying and stuff. I don't really have a lot of confidence in my own ability, which could affect not doing work because I get the impression I'm not going to do very well anyway.

The actual schools, then the people in them and the people at home are the three biggest factors in why I'm here and what I'm doing. I suppose they're all interrelated.

I came to university because it was expected by particularly my mum, I think my dad would have been impressed if I'd stopped at GCSEs, maybe not, but it was definitely my mum that pushed university.

Another big thing was the way I was brought up with the opinion towards work and school work, and stress. So I had to achieve but there was no space for me to work towards it. The physical space is the bigger thing, there was no push. I was pushed to get the work done but no system or routine where there was time for me to get the work done.

Hannah's version

Where do I start? I guess I will start with actually how I got here. I originally planned to go to a university in Scotland however something drew me to Brighton at a later stage in applying. I always wanted to go to a university, just wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I got there...I had always dreamed of going to [a particular] university after my mother went there however quickly realised from conversations with teachers that my ability wasn't high enough to get to that calibre of university. Why do people assume that a university is better because it's older? That is terrible.

My mum had always been a massive force in my 'want' to go to university due to the fact that she was the first girl in her family to go which meant I wanted to live up to that, which left me with no other option in my head as to not going to university, it was just how to get there. By the way I was brought up...to be successful it appeared to me you had to have a degree so in a subconscious way my mother left me with this almost guilt that if I didn't, after all the money that had been spent and the attention given, that I'd failed.

Looking back, however, even though it's sometimes felt like it was just me trying to get to this stage there are actually lots of people on the way who supported me more than I realised at the time, for example, from primary schools there have always been the teachers who, even if it wasn't in a nice way, tried to show me that I had the aptitude to do what I wanted, just weren't able to give me the confidence until of course there was Mrs. Smith, who was the first teacher in 18 years of my life who was able to show me that I had both the aptitude and the confidence to show it, and therefore almost single-handedly getting me to uni.

...going to 8 schools during my childhood affected not only my work but also my friendship groups because as a child, whenever you meet people, you become friends automatically without even thinking about it but the more you become uprooted almost subconsciously you think why I am bothering to become friends with people. I think that

this just strengthened the fact that, when I figured acting the fool made you popular, it made me want to do it more but with a probably negative effect on my schoolwork.

I think my feelings towards not giving up came from being diagnosed with dyslexia at 6 years old and the struggle just to be able to read from there just made me want to prove to everyone that I could be better than everyone thought I could be, in particular Mr. Dix who told me I would never get an F at GCSE English and then turning that around by challenging myself and coming out with an A.

Again, my mother's influence now I'm at university is still very strong even though I know I'm miles away from her. After panicking in the first term about my study skills and feeling as though I was letting myself down through my notes and my presentation it was her that gave me my new study strategy which is working surprisingly well.

I've now met a group of friends who I no longer feel I have to play the fool/clown which I think has helped my university work because getting good grades is no longer something you feel you have to be ashamed of, you're no longer a boffin and you can become excited about succeeding without feeling ashamed.

Another thing that almost stopped me coming to university was becoming depressed when I realised I was gay when I was 15 which led to a period of self-harm which lasted a good few years but not only was my self-destructive behaviour to myself but to my school work and I would regularly miss two or three days of school a week. Come to think of it, I'm not the angel I thought I was.

My dad, even though he was never overly vocal about wanting me to go to university he always made it obvious that he did hope I would but even without saying things like that he was the person who inadvertently enlightened me to my future career choice of the police by sneakily allowing me to watch The Bill when I was 5 years old. And my brother, even though I'm jealous of the fact that he is the intelligent, sporty almost reincarnation of my mother in a male form, is still my closest ally at home.

Even though the university is very supportive pastorally within itself, I think the amount I'm enjoying it was more accidental through where I live in Brighton.

Every Picture Tells a Story. This is Valerie's.

Exam certificates

I was like the first person to pass the 11 plus in my family...I ended up at a grammar school, which I absolutely hated... and I did get bullied a couple of times 'nd there were times when I got accused of bullying and it was just always arguing constantly. School was just bitchy 24/7.

I went to college and I didn't actually see it through, I did a year but my parents were constantly on at me from when I was about 15, "you need to get a part-time job" so I had a paper round when I was about 14, then when I was 16, 'n I'm studying for my GCSEs and my dad's like "you need to get a part time job, hurry up and go out and get a job"...I started realising that I didn't want to be at college...I just preferred working and I wanted to start going on holiday and saving up and I thought I can't do that with part-time wages, so you know I ended up working full-time.

Photos of places

This photo is in Florence... during that trip to Italy I decided...to go back to college and it was just because, I'd kind of been thinking about it for a couple of years and never actually got to doing it, and then we were in the hostel and my friend was chatting to

these girls who had been to uni and they were saying something and I said oh yeah you know like when I did this and she just turned round to me and said well you wouldn't understand, you've never been to uni. So I sat there... and I thought you know what, I am going to go to uni - when I get home, I'm enrolling at college.

I actually e-mailed somebody from this uni and they said would they accept me with AS-levels...during that summer as well I realised that I'm gay so I moved in with [my partner] so it was kind of a summer of revelations.

Granddad

He's always, always, always, he always pushed me, not pushed me, encouraged me to do well ...unfortunately he died before he found out my actual AS results? I kind of felt really guilty that he never got to see me go to uni and he never got to hear my full results. He was always the one that was proud of me.

I don't think he had really much of an education but he was very, very intelligent, he just used to read up on things and teach himself. He was so intelligent, you could ask him pretty much anything and he'd know.

Laura

This is Laura, my girlfriend and she is adamant that even if I hadn't met her I still would have gone to uni. I know I wouldn't have come if it wasn't for her because ... I just went kind of really...and she was just so good about it and I was just so shocked? Like nobody had ever been like that for me so yeah if it wasn't for her I know I wouldn't have come. Maybe a few years down the line but I definitely wouldn't have come when I did.

Parents

Probably they pushed me too much...I did do well in my GCSEs and everything but I could have done a lot better if I'd actually tried. If I said to my mum oh I got 95% on an exam she'd say "well what happened to the other 5?" but to me that is good 'cos for my mum to say that, that is her version of like somebody else saying "oh well done, that's really good", so I kind of just got used to their way, it was like their own language and their own code...I think it was just like one of those nightmare teenager mother relationships. If I did well I used to ring my granddad 'cos I knew he'd be proud of me.

Talk about teachers

Jodie and Shaun were just really close [college] teachers and I just used to go and have like social chats with them and everything so it was good...I said I wanted to do a practice exam the day before the exam, or two days before the exam, so Jodie gave me the paper and she took my number and said "OK what I'm going to do is if you e-mail me back the paper on the Saturday I'll ring you on the Sunday and we'll go through and mark it" and it's little things like that she used to do which I thought she's really going out of her way to help. That's actually the exam that I got 100% on. With Shaun he was just a really inspiring teacher and he was really enthusiastic and passionate about his work.

Schools and bullying

Yeah, it's the same wherever you go and I think probably whatever school I'd gone to I still would have been picked-on and still would have had all the same experiences because it's me that's causing them to do it. Not that they're not bullies to start with but there has to be something in me for them to find to bully... I was kind of quiet really to start with and it was only I think after I got bullied and everything it just made me become more loud because I thought I'm not just going to sit and be quiet any more, and it made me more loud which did make me more unpopular really.

Labelling

My parents labelled my brother as being thick and told him he was a dunce. As a result, he rebelled against anything academic. Following his apprenticeship, he's now a qualified plumber - obviously practical experience works better for him. I was rude and I was mouthy, according to my parents, but people said "she's so well behaved". But then I kind of started to get more rebellious and ended up being mouthy, perhaps as a result of my parents' labelling.

Status

It doesn't matter to me at all, I know it matters a lot to my parents, I suppose again it's the pride thing, perhaps they did brag my daughter's at a grammar school but no, it doesn't mean anything to me...I don't think it matters because I think it's the student themselves because I could have gone to a comprehensive and got exactly the same results, it doesn't matter...it made a difference socially but not so much educationally but as I say, again, it's my willingness to learn. If I don't want to learn then I won't learn.

Methodological outcomes

Interviews and educational histories as methods of investigation

The first question is what a more narrative approach offers in comparison with the interview method. The pages of transcription that were the product of each session are testament to the fact that a great deal more information was elicited, although some of that might be less obviously relevant to the question posed. The interviews were a great deal more confined to the matter in hand and to the outline structure of the interview schedule. Therefore, the question is whether more information is necessarily better information. It does seem that the greater length of time invested in exploring the participants' lives in relation to that one question allowed insight into more "latent levels of personal meaning" (Chamberlayne et al. 2000, p.9) that reveal much greater complexity and interweaving of structure with personal development. Although there were hints of this complexity in the interviews, neither time nor the more formal interview structure gave the opportunity to dig any deeper, and not forgetting the comment on nosiness. Given the greater amount of time in the educational histories it was possible to step much further back and allow the participants to explore their own narratives thereby redressing the imbalance of a curious researcher and obliging participant.

It is suggested that there is much to be gained from the method in terms of theoretical explanations because fewer assumptions have been made about why someone has responded in the way they have without referring back to the person in question. The exception here has been drawing together the narratives to seek common ground within their diversity. Time restrictions have prevented taking those points back to the (co)participants although that would have been desirable. The method has value in revealing more of the systemic interplay between those different social arenas that people find themselves or choose to be in.

From an application point of view, however, it becomes less obvious how to address some of the difficulties or inequalities that arise from the more complex revelations, at least within higher education in isolation. Of course this is partly because of the difference in what was asked compared with the interviews and the fact that there was more talk of transitions to than through. For example, although there was some reference to friends at university, they were not mentioned in either the initial or final responses. Two of the three participants were the first to attend university and references to family centred more around their relationships whereas the other student continued to draw on her mother's experiences in higher education to help her with study strategies. None referred to staff at the university. Adapting to or coping with school centred more on other people than the school work. Indeed, apart from Hannah's talk of dyslexia, Valerie and Evie's references to homework in relation to parents, and some mention of theory, there was no reference to what had happened educationally in the classroom or to acquisition of skills. The social difficulties encountered at school were not as relevant in higher education. Bitching and bullying were reduced or perhaps had shifted into a more subtle form of social expectations. For example, negative comments were made to one of the participants about their engagement and domestic plans for the future.

Combining the interview responses with the educational history narratives provides, from the interviews, a snapshot picture of current experiences and some sketchy background detail that point up broader issues in the education system with a more detailed depiction of the paths that lead a person to higher education. Academic motives appear to be inseparable from the social circumstances of people's lives. In terms of widening participation, the educational histories indicated that parental encouragement above a general push to do well and supported by a family structure that places learning not just as valuable but as part of

the family's everyday life make up some of the social and cultural capital that smoothes transitions to and through higher education (see e.g. Reay et al. 2005). Giving someone a desk to work on or prioritising homework above, say, domestic activity, are examples. A transition would therefore be required in the family's priorities and organisation, with somewhat imperialistic implications for widening participation projects. Having experienced two cultures, Evie could see the benefits of a strict emphasis on achievement. Without giving away the particular culture for reasons of anonymity, there are most definitely other stories to tell from that country of underachievement and excessive pressure leading to stress and a high drop-out rate post-16. Perhaps those who never reach higher education in either country would have a similar tale to tell.

Ethical implications

There was some uncertainty as to whether an approach that explored a person's life in more depth could be predicted to remain within the boundaries of the ethical fence that had been set up. Informed consent relies on knowing what will happen (Hollway and Jefferson 2000b) and it was made clear that there would be an element of the unknown. For example, it cannot be known what effect taking part might have on the participant or indeed the researcher (Slim et al. 2006). It can only be said that there did not appear to be any unpleasant consequences. Perhaps the boundaries were never crossed because of social understanding about what would be too uncomfortable (Josselson 1996) or because of the degree of control that the participants were given about what would eventually be included so that anything else could be talked about without fear of it being revealed. The final session included questions about what it had been like taking part and whether the process had been what they thought they were signing up to. There were expressions of enjoyment about the former and agreement to the latter.

Preserving anonymity becomes more difficult with greater amounts of detail therefore some details have been changed or removed in an attempt to avoid any accidental recognition of the participants. The photographs posed a particular challenge because we could not think of a way of presenting any pictures without the potential for recognition and yet this forced the final response to be converted into text. The imperative to avoid identifying detail necessitates the production of that "third story" (Altork 1998).

Person-centred research

The participants commented that the process was a bit like counselling, a phenomenon that Goodson and Sikes (2001) refer to. "Undoubtedly, there are some similarities between Rogerian counselling and life history interviewing, in that interviewers, like counsellors, listen, reflect back, ask questions which encourage further reflection, and are non-judgemental. Both are also often dealing with intimate aspects of life." To that list should be added "and involve a series of sessions that encourage deeper reflection". No doubt the researcher's own study of Carl Roger's work and methods combined with training in counselling skills (although not a trained counsellor) unintentionally contributed to the perception of a counselling-like environment. It is certain, in spite of the researcher's best intentions to do no more than provide a comfortable milieu in which to explore the participants' education histories, that she influenced the proceedings of the sessions. It is less easy to say in what way. All three participants claimed that they did not think the researcher was judging them at all (which as far as the researcher is aware is true) and that they had little idea or not considered who the researcher was as a person, her background and so on (as hoped). In the field notes the researcher had jotted down many connecting points between her own and the participants' lives in spite of some clear differences in age, region of upbringing, family background and structure, interests and so on. The activity was partly in response to the surprise she felt at how many experiences were shared in spite of

differences, although none of these were discussed at any time. Being female, living in a family, having siblings, going to school, doing homework and a plethora of other shared cultural experiences do much to remove many of the potential barriers to understanding, unspoken and unacknowledged though they may be.

Producing and reproducing stories

Both interviews and more narrative approaches encourage the production of remembered experiences that are brought to mind in relation to a question or topic, even if the precise form of that question or topic is novel. It is therefore no surprise that the interviewees referred to recent conversations with other students about a particular matter. Similarly, the participants in the educational histories said that they had thought about or talked before at some point in their lives and to some other person about all the content of their narratives, as might be expected (Kennedy 2006). However, some of what they referred to was told in a different way or presented as a novel combination of ideas. There was also the freedom to try out explanations or ideas that might have been upsetting to the people involved or potentially reported back in some way. Maintaining a trustful environment over time is likely to have made this more possible. There was also reference to some long-forgotten memories as the sessions progressed and even as the process was drawing to a close that would be unlikely to have been retrieved during one interview session. One example is the relevance of the uncle that only entered Hannah's final version as she produced it in the last session. The three final versions can be seen as new forms of previously memorised productions and reproductions, parts of which were not readily accessible.

Mirrored selves

Musing (to avoid 'reflecting') on the method of the educational histories, an image of mirror balls formed. Perceived initially as original, a similar idea has been put forward by Novaes although in relation to group identity. She says, "In the play of mirrors, every reflected image corresponds to a possibility for action" (1997, p.46). In relation to a method that explored individuals' lives in more detail, a whole range of characters that the researcher would be unlikely to ever meet were brought into the room, sometimes mimicked, other times briefly referred to. Those people represented the identities of and future possibilities for the participants, the point of the mirror ball being that the researcher was seeing the reflection of those people in the participant, frequently some aspect of their character or their importance in that person's life. In those reflections could be seen some of the complex social world accompanying historical periods including gender, social status and other structuring structures. There was a sense of those characters in turn consisting of mirrored selves where each person turns a particular facet to the other, never revealing the whole of the self. Thus, rather than a clear personal identity, there are always possibilities of identities, constructed and evaluated in relation to others allowing for a "more dynamic vision of identity" (ibid). the researcher cannot be certain how many facets were turned towards her in the educational history sessions; she is certain, however, that the answer would be more than in interviews.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the definition of social motivation applied in this research, it was evident that the decision to apply to university depended on a number of socially constructed goals. Firstly, the goal of a degree as a means to the end of a better job and income was referred to and promoted at school or college. However, the social side of university was also used as an inducement for young people to apply. Doing well at school created the context for what could, and should, be achieved. For the students who had not followed a linear path from school to college to university, the sense that higher education represented unfinished business remained.

For many of the interviewees, applying to this university was linked to its location, either for convenience, to save the cost of moving away from home or because of existing commitments, or because of its association with Brighton as a 'fun' and liberated city. In addition, some students referred to its reputation for accepting and being supportive of diversity.

Studying social science was a clearer choice for some than others, sometimes linked to ideas about future careers and sometimes as a natural progression from previous studies. Students who had not previously studied social scientific subjects appeared to be disadvantaged and suffered more from confusion and uncertainty, exacerbated by hesitation to seek help. However, many interviewees referred to lack of time to discuss information delivered in lectures, and some to not receiving clear responses when they did ask for help. The desire for an academic community was expressed as well as personal support, linked to a more regulated structure particularly in the first year of study.

The requirement to pay fees influenced the perception of university as a service provider and consequently led to an expectation of value for money. The students who were feeling more negative about their experience had less faith in staff commitment to supporting students' progress and more of a belief that their fees were for the good of the lecturers and their careers. The reduced trust in the institution added to feelings of alienation and a sense of the staff not caring about them.

Socially constructed notions of the ideal university experience as an experiential goal were expressed and used as a yardstick against which to assess the actual experience and by which to judge the self. Unfortunately, being studious or wanting to do more than the bare minimum was expressed as not socially valuable and appears to be an integral part of British culture. However, it is questionable whether the traditional notion of the university experience is relevant for many students, given the greater diversity of the student body, or indeed possible. There were calls for a range of social opportunities that do not depend on consumption of alcohol. One difficulty is the limited social space on the site so that there is a tendency to spend the majority of time off-campus.

The core social motives of belonging, understanding, control, self-enhancement and trust were relevant to students' transitions although not all students were dependent on the university to satisfy them. Compensatory mechanisms were evident between academic and social aspects, as well as between external and internal social networks. A sense of alienation from the institution associated with more confusion about, and lower levels of trust in, institutional practice and staff motives. Effective anchor points, which included social capital in the form of supportive family, friends and staff, the use of physical spaces, and sources of information (electronic or human) were important in assisting students to adjust.

Social motives and socially constructed motivation are important components of a people-in-environment system that has become complicated by massification of higher education and associated widening access policy. Having gained access, the analysis indicated there was

considerable diversity in the subsequent experience of the transition to higher education. Having fun, making friends, enjoying a subject and a sense of personal achievement were all referred to. For a number of the interviewees the transition was relatively smooth, for others difficulties were encountered and overcome. However, other students continue to experience tension and discomfort that impact both on motivation and on the quality of their experience. The experience of students can be revealing and indeed "...it may be suggested that individuals who are newcomers to organizations, or remain minorities in them, may have insights to the subtle organizational nuances, niches, frustrations, and facilitators that are less readily detected by their more fully assimilated colleagues" (Little 2000, p.104).

CONCLUSION

The first aim of the interview research was to explore social motives that influence students' transitional experiences. A sense of belonging and feelings of trust are important factors in student experiences and adjustment. The former includes comparison with previous institutional experiences, fit between personal and perceived institutional identity, and building friendships. Trust was greater in those students who believed staff were interested in them as students, and lesser if there was doubt about the university's academic status or being valued by others as learners above financial gain for the institution.

The second aim was to investigate social experiences, including use of physical space and time. Non-contact time can be equated to free time or time for paid work. The change from a more to a less regulated environment is problematic for many students and likely to set up a relaxed approach to study that requires further adjustment after the first year. There can be uncertainty about what should be done in 'free' time, for example the holidays, particularly among mature students. Lack of space to meet informally can lead to many students spending most time off-campus, with a deleterious effect on the academic community.

The third aim was to consider social imbalances in transitions. The tendency of the Student Union to offer student activities that fit normative expectations of a young student body, for example drinking alcohol, leaves some students with impoverished opportunities to meet other students and to foster a strong academic community. Mature students, non-drinkers, and international students are catered for less well. In addition, it appears that more students are choosing to attend local universities and to live at home, again altering normative expectations of 'the student experience'.

The educational histories research indicated that transitions are the outcome of the broader context of students' lives and developing identities. Transitions do not occur in series or in isolation. In relation to education, family, friends and teachers acted as key purveyors of socio-cultural capital. Of these, family and friends appear to be primary influencers who are likely to mediate widening participation strategies that aim to raise attainment, aspiration and application. Methodologically, the more tried and tested interview method that focuses on particular issues can provide more discrete, practical solutions to complex problems. Research that delves into students' lives encourages deeper individual reflection on a particular topic and hints at some of the social complexities involved in individual decisions and experiences. However, although the method yields much rich data, it is difficult to do justice to the participants owing to practical and ethical constraints. On the other hand, their greater involvement and control over the outcome reduces the possibility of misrepresentation or power imbalances.

In relation to the University of Brighton Corporate Plan (2007-12) Aim 1: Research, this project highlights the importance of involvement with student learning and the student experience, although if there is to be an emphasis on e-learning above face-to-face interaction, then that might increase the isolation felt by some students. However, if Aim 5 is met, then the physical environment will offer greater opportunities for building a stronger social and academic community. The research reported here contributes to the Learning and Teaching Strategy Aim 2a, derived from the Corporate Plan Aim 2, by offering the possibility of research informed teaching as well as empowering students as researchers. By continuing to engage in dialogues with students about their experiences, it should be possible to sustain or improve undergraduate retention rates, and to carry widening participation and access policy through to the learning experience.

Transitions in the economy or policy are systemically bound up with individual transitions. There is talk of delayed or "prolonged" (Côté and Bynner 2008, p.251) transitions as young people live at home for longer, postpone having children, stay in education for longer, put off

or cannot find full time work and so on, a phenomenon that has been explored in Canada using census data (Clark 2007). However, delayed or accelerated transitions imply that there is a 'right' or preferred time for a transition to take place whereas either can have associated advantages or difficulties (Mitchell 2005). The educational histories in particular indicate that a number of transitions take place over time and at different paces, and the interviews with adults indicated that transitions were not simple linear affairs. Nor are transitions easy to define in clear and meaningful ways. For example, becoming a more independent learner is heralded as an important transition to make although it could be argued that independent learners can or do make better use of social resources rather than working in a more separated or isolated way.

Rather than offering simple solutions to complex problems in the transition to and through higher education with regard to social motives and socially motivating circumstances, there are some important questions that arise. Some questions relate to much broader issues about life courses and the role of education within those. The more holistic approach taken by the educational history research provided a glimpse of the interplay between individuals' lives and the socially structured world within which they find themselves. Government policy has been a driver of promoting education for its potential financial benefits for a transition to a better economic world and a better standard of living. However, the transition to being some kind of 'better person' is also recognised. "While we clearly value the benefits of HE to wealth creation, we probably do not celebrate enough the civilising contribution that HE can make to a more complex social environment" (HEFCE 2008b, p.36). Acceptance of diversity is one example that is given. Yet however admirable HEFCE's plan is for higher education, it is unlikely to touch the social difficulties that students in this study experienced in primary and secondary education. Presumably their hope is for the next generation, although it is philosophically questionable whether the aim of creating wealth and living in a "peaceful and intellectually and culturally stimulating world" (ibid) are truly compatible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mind the Gap – building transitional bridges

The research indicates that there are more bridges to be built, metaphorically and even physically perhaps. The connections between the social and the academic could be strengthened. The gaps were noted between students including, but not exclusively, international students, between staff and students, and between previous learning experiences and the ones that were encountered in the university. Transitions might be necessarily uncomfortable at times but that does not imply they should be unpleasant.

The recommendations offered here include elements of the following five aspects identified as important in building bridges in educational transitions: administrative, social, curriculum, pedagogic and management of learning (Galton et al. 2003). Similarly, a STAR project report offers guidelines for supporting students with transitions in the following areas: pre-entry guidance and information, induction and beyond, curriculum development, and staff development (Cook et al. 2005). Based on the interview data, the specific areas for potential development are broadly social and linked to induction, curriculum and staff development.

It must be acknowledged that there are financial and practical constraints on what can be achieved and that transitions inevitably involve a certain amount of challenge or adjustment. However, there are areas of development that could be planned for even if they are not currently feasible. These include consideration of the built environment. Other suggestions are more immediately implementable and therefore tend to be at a more micro than macro level (van Stolk et al. 2007).

Firstly, a need for more and different types of social activities was identified to encourage development of social networks and facilitate academic discussion. Some progress has been made in this regard with the advent of the highly successful student-led Criminology and Psychology Societies last year which afford opportunities for students and staff to interact socially. However, further Student Union activities during freshers' week that cater for a diverse student body, some of whom do not drink alcohol or are past the clubbing stage regardless of age should be offered. It would be helpful to engage current students in planning and assisting in activities rather than relying on the Student Union alone to provide social events. A meeting for those interested in providing opportunities for new students supported by a member of staff should be held to gather ideas with a focus on activities that would be of interest to a range of individuals rather than target a particular group. Suggestions from the interviews included meeting up for coffee and going to films.

Secondly, the value of a member of staff knowing a student's name and expressing an interest in them was highlighted. The number of students makes this challenging but not insurmountable, if there is sufficient will to bring about change in this area. Staff development might include discussion of students' comments on this matter although there would need to be structural change to provide greater opportunities for staff to get to know students. Clearly, lectures will not provide them. The interviewees particularly valued seminars where discussion of their academic concerns could be aired. Through the new programme introduced in the recent Periodic Review, the School has gone far in meeting this by the addition of one extra contact hour per module throughout level 1; first year students now have three additional contact hours per week. It will be important to monitor the effectiveness of this additional time on students' experiences.

Although the School is generally well provided for in terms of pastoral support, some of the interviewees needed additional academic support. High levels of pastoral support might indicate that students' needs are being met when in fact direct academic help would be of equal, if not more, value. Students who have not studied social science before or not in any detail should be acknowledged and additional support offered in addition to pre-entry information about what they could find out for themselves. However, staff should bear in mind that reading information in a text book is not equivalent to having a clear understanding of a subject as a foundation for further study. Again, seminars provide the opportunity to discuss fundamental principles of, in this case, the social sciences and encourage peer support. A fundamental issue here is the value of teaching within the university in relation to other duties. For example, Cook et al. (2005) suggest "rewarding staff for initiatives in promoting smooth students transitions" (p.15). The university already offers annual Excellence in Teaching awards and School staff should be encouraged to put themselves forward for these.

Thirdly, and related to the second point, it is suggested that talk of 'independent' or 'dependent' learners is not helpful and can feed the existing insecurity of students making them less likely to seek help. There appeared to be considerable confusion and uncertainty about what staff members are able to provide and it would seem relatively easy to clear up these points by making explicit and consistent reference to them, pre- and post-entry. Implied discrepancies in how much support is available need to be looked into on equity grounds and to ensure that understanding and trust are maintained.

Fourthly, there could be greater involvement with pre-entry providers to assist with transitions to HE. Since the number of students from the region appears to be high, links with colleges, particularly those in the Sussex Liaison and Progression Accord scheme, could be made to improve students' preparation for university. Many colleges have developed tutorial programmes that aim to prepare students for higher education although these tend to place more emphasis on the application process and independent living than on the concerns raised by the interviewees. For example, a clearer idea of the change in

structure would prepare students for large amounts of 'free time', less assessed work and the type of feedback they are likely to get. Writing references appropriately would be a simple skill to encourage at A-level, as it is in Access courses. It is also suggested that schools and colleges consider the wisdom of promoting higher education as a great social opportunity and engage in debate with HE providers about the meaning of the 'university experience' in relation to widening access policy and delayed entry to university.

Micro level suggestions

In order to address some of the uncertainty and lack of preparedness, and at the same time to provide clarity in terms of structure and policy, it is suggested that a leaflet be prepared and made available in hard copy and on Student Central that covers a range of frequently raised issues. It could be offered to schools and colleges, as well as to prospective students, to inform and encourage discussion of what the transition to university might involve. A number of possible formats spring to mind, for example, blog or problem-page style. Staff and students could collaborate to produce the leaflet. Possible solutions to difficulties, including who to contact, could be included. This would build upon the helpful friendly newsletter emailed to all applicants introduced last year by the Programme Assistant responsible for admissions.

Staff development might include opportunities to discuss transitional experiences and the consequences for themselves and their students. Such discussion could include their understanding of the meaning of widening access and widening participation and reflections on the culture of the university and School. Statistical data might be collated to indicate the degree of diversity, including the number of students who are the first generation to attend university and the number of students who come from this area or from further afield. Strategies for dealing with diversity could be discussed. The Centre for Learning and Teaching already offers sessions relating to the topics raised here although these are not well attended given the number of staff in the university. Offering sessions at the different sites rather than in Mithras House might be helpful.

In order to encourage an academic community without over-burdening members of staff or transgressing the amount of help that is appropriate, student academic mentoring could be encouraged. Research has indicated the benefit of mentoring to assist transitions (e.g. Zalaquett and Lopez 2006) albeit requiring a careful approach to its implementation (Campbell and Campbell 2007). Postgraduate students or those in the second or third undergraduate years might be approached with a view to offering informal sessions to discuss students' concerns.

Macro level possibilities

It might be that the value of teaching within the university could be further promoted and counterbalanced against perceptions of students taking second place to other academic interests and expectations. Funding bodies might consider the value of research and initiatives that aim to foster student development. Serious consideration could also be given to the layout and use of sites, not least given the diffuse nature of the campus. If there is no immediate change possible in terms of the built environment, an investigation of who uses which resources or takes advantage of which activities might indicate a need to expand opportunities. In the longer term, a vision of Falmer as a 'place to be' through offering places to be is enticing and one that would offer students the opportunity to integrate socially and academically. For example, constructing bridges or other physical connections between buildings with more seating areas for informal discussion could transform an apparently wintry Narnia into a truly academic community.

FURTHER RESEARCH

There are a number of possibilities for further research. Firstly, 'the' university experience, rather than 'a' university experience, was referred to by a number of students and some insight gained into its meaning. It has become a social motive, and a socially promoted motive, in its own right and forms part of the decision to apply to university. Further exploration of its importance in relation to widening participation would be useful, including consideration of the more negative implications for a diverse student population and for the academic business of universities. Focus groups of students, or preferably staff and students together, both in further and higher education, are suggested methods for exploring the concept.

Secondly, including social class and distance from home as variables in the demographic statistics gathered from all students would allow further analysis of its relevance in retention work and its influence on adjustment to the university. It would also be interesting to compare this variable between institutions in the south of England, as has been done in the north-west, and to extend the research to include the views of parents, rather than to hear them third-hand via their offspring.

Thirdly, there is the possibility of action research that evaluates the outcome of any new initiatives that might develop. These might include peer mentoring or more diverse social activities or providing more information about what to expect prior to admission.

Finally, the voices of students have increasingly been heard in research particularly within SASS through the work of its Educational Development Research Group. It would be useful to add those of other members of the institution including lecturers and managers. A number of questions arose directly or indirectly from the current research and these are reproduced here as possible areas for discussion.

- If feeling supported and having someone take an interest in your work and progress is valued by students, is that something that Schools should respond to AND/OR should there be more explicit messages about the role of lecturers and tutors to help transitions away from that?
- Is independent learning a myth?
- If educational policy has led to a more instrumental approach to learning and fewer opportunities to read around subjects or take risks, what role do lecturers have in challenging that, if any, and should that include more explicit discussion of the value of what is expected, assuming that HE expectations are to be promoted?
- Should there be a clear, explicit outline of gradually reduced regulation over the first year?
- Might discourses and assumptions about what students are like (e.g. short of time and money) or want to be/are doing socially add to the normative expectations of low attendance or poor attitudes to work and should staff be proactive in challenging such discourses in previous institutions and HE?

SUMMARY CONCLUSION

The research provided rich data that give an insight into the very different experiences of a diverse sample of students, in spite of the relatively small number of participants. The students were diverse in terms of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, home region, living

arrangements, relationship and family commitments, educational background, amount of paid or voluntary work and lifestyle, thus adding to the complexity of the meaning of social and academic diversity. Such diversity also challenges traditional notions of 'the' student experience. The research will be helpful in informing the School's widening participation activities so that students can be better prepared for the transition to HE. However, it also highlights key aspects of the structure of the university where change and development might also take place.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Research proposals

1.1 Interview proposal

For the purposes of the research fellowship within the Education Research Development Group, a better understanding of the social context of students' transition experiences both to and through higher education is sought. The current study therefore aims to build on work already carried out by members of the EDRG. In particular, Harley et al. 'reconceptualize student motivation as social and relational' (Harley et al. 2007a, p.77), suggesting that academic difficulties are more likely to be overcome if staff have a better understanding of the different motivations that influence students. Other research has shown that support strategies have been effective in improving retention rates, for instance the use of texting to support transition (Harley et al. 2007b), and the importance of living arrangements and 'compatible friends' (Wilcox et al., 2005. p.707) in the first few weeks at university. Research in the field has tended to concentrate on social integration rather than social motives that contribute to and, at times, conflict with academic progress. Little research has been carried out on social differences in terms of social relations, social spaces and use of time, and their potential or actual impact on academic work.

The chosen research method is semi-structured interviews. The method allows exploration of a number of pre-determined areas (see below) in some depth, likely to lead to a clearer understanding of the issues affecting students than could be achieved through a survey method. By using a semi-structured approach, additional factors might come to light.

Interviews will be conducted with approximately 40 participants of varied social and demographic status, diversity being achieved by drawing from two different areas with known social and demographic differences. The participants will therefore be drawn from the population of students who are studying Social Science courses at Falmer and Hastings. The stated number of participants should provide a balance between methodological (external validity), practical (time constraints) and ethical (doing justice to the information provided by participants) issues.

Posters asking for voluntary participation will be displayed on both campuses (see separate document). Attention will be drawn to the posters by staff within the School of Applied Social Science. Those expressing an interest will be given an information sheet to help them decide whether to participate that includes my contact details. They will be given up to two weeks to decide whether or not to participate. I will also attend a number of different timetabled teaching sessions so that students can speak to me directly.

If they decide to take part then an interview at either Falmer or Hastings campus will be arranged at a time of their convenience. Please refer to the ethical safeguards for details of the ethical treatment of participants. Interviews will be conducted by Hilary McQueen and will last for about one hour. Permission to tape record the interviews will be sought, with detailed note taking as an alternative where permission is refused.

The interview schedule, demographics sheet and ethical safeguards are included as separate documents. The choice of questions for the demographic data has been informed by previous research that has identified differences in transition experiences between students with different demographic characteristics, although some areas such as sexual orientation have been under-researched. Similarly, the areas for discussion in the interview build on previous research or on under-researched topics, as required by the fellowship. The areas fall under four broad categories: motives for study, social experiences, physical locations and use of time.

1.2 Educational histories proposal

The current study aims to build on work already carried out by members of the EDRG, where the emphasis has been on strategies to aid the transition to university (e.g. Harley et al, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005), to include the relevance of students' educational histories in such transitional experiences. To gain a better understanding of the importance of past experiences in education there is a requirement to consider carefully the means by which it is gained. Increasingly, in both psychological and sociological approaches, there has been a move towards the use of life histories. "Life story is the interface between life as lived and the social times" (Josselson 1993, p.xiii) and 'the most significant truths about human beings inhere in the stories of their lives' (Bakan 1996, p.5).

As outlined above, the use of a life-history approach has been advocated as it provides an opportunity to understand individual experiences within a social and historical structure. There are different approaches to gaining narratives from people about their lives. Life-history is one form of narrative, although for the present research the term 'educational history' is used to emphasise the focus of the research. The emphasis of the method is on a democratised, collaborative approach where the researched can be researcher (Measor, 2006). To some extent, the approach addresses the power-imbalance inherent in interview methods. Thus the narrative approach has both methodological and ethical advantages.

A life-history method will be used for which participants will be asked to provide a 'story' in a format of their choosing (e.g. Dictaphone, typed) in response to one question (please refer to additional information sheet). The method requires participants to meet with the researcher on more than one occasion and to explore in detail the meaning of their response. In order to facilitate these meetings, the participants will be drawn from the population of students who are studying Applied Social Science courses at Falmer. Approximately 6 participants will be required, this number providing a balance between practical (time constraints of the project) and ethical (doing justice to the information provided by participants) issues. This number also allows for the possibility of voluntary withdrawal.

Owing to the time commitment and particular ethical considerations involved (see also separate ethical safeguards), the researcher will request participation by introducing herself at a convenient point in timetabled teaching sessions so that potential participants are aware who the researcher is. Those expressing an interest will be given an information sheet to help them decide whether to participate that includes my contact details. There is an additional information sheet that will be given to those who seek further information or to those who agree to participate. They will be given up to two weeks to decide whether or not to participate.

If they decide to take part then an initial meeting will be arranged at a time convenient to them to discuss the research process. Please refer to the ethical safeguards for details of the ethical treatment of participants. The research will be conducted solely by Hilary McQueen. The initial meeting is expected to last up to half an hour. Each subsequent meeting is expected to last up to two hours. Notes will be taken at each meeting when the narrative will be discussed and jointly analysed.

Appendix 2 Management of project

A steering group has been created within the Educational Development Research Group to guide the project and it will be managed by two senior academics within the group. Every stage of the project is carried out in consultation with the steering group and this will include, as far as possible, the analysis and conclusions drawn from the data, and dissemination of the findings.

Appendix 3 Informed consent forms

3.1 Interviews

Participant Consent Form

Social Motivation: the impact of students' social experiences on their transition to and through university

- ◆ I agree to take part in this research which is to understand better the social experiences of university students.
- ◆ The researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose of the study and the possible risks involved.
- ◆ I have had the principles and the procedure explained to me and I have also read the information sheet. I understand the principles and procedures fully.
- ◆ I am aware that I will be required to answer questions in an interview format.
- ◆ I understand that any confidential information will be seen only by the researcher and will not be revealed to anyone else, unless that information indicates that there is a risk of harm to self or others.
- ◆ I understand that my responses will be taped and that tapes and transcripts will be stored securely.
- ◆ I understand that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time without giving a reason and, if I do, that any information I have provided will be destroyed.
- ◆ I agree to anonymised quotes from my transcript being used in oral and written presentations and publications.
- ◆ I understand that I will be offered the opportunity to have a copy of the report.

Name (please print)

Signed

Date

3.2 Educational histories

Participant Consent Form

Educational histories: an exploration of social factors in transitions to and through learning environments

- ◆ I agree to take part in this research which is to understand better how the social aspects of education affect people's choices and experiences in education.
- ◆ The researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose of the study and the possible risks involved.
- ◆ I have had the principles and the procedure explained to me and I have also read the information sheet. I understand the principles and procedures fully.
- ◆ I am aware that I will be required to respond in some detail to one question about my educational history and that there will be a series of meetings to discuss my response.
- ◆ I understand that the transcripts of the analysis will only contain information that I have agreed can be included and that no identifying details will be included in the transcripts.
- ◆ I understand that the anonymous transcripts, once agreed by me, will only be seen by the researcher and the members of the Educational Development Research Group.
- ◆ I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and, if I do, that any information I have provided up to that point will be destroyed.
- ◆ I agree to anonymous quotes from the final transcript being used in oral and written presentations and publications, subject to my approval.
- ◆ I understand that I will be offered a copy of the final report.

Name (please print)

Signed

Date

Appendix 4 Demographic sheet for interviews

It is very helpful in understanding the needs and experiences of different students if I have some general information about you. Please tick the box or write in the information which you would say applies to you in each case. Remember that information will be anonymous and treated confidentially.

You are not obliged to answer all or any of the following questions if you do not wish to.

1. Course you are studying (please write):
2. Level of undergraduate study 1st 2nd 3rd
3. I am a part-time student I am a full-time student
4. Gender: Female Male Transgender
5. Sexuality: I am gay lesbian bisexual heterosexual
6. Age (please write):
7. I consider my ethnicity to be... (please write):
8. I have a physical disability. Yes No
9. I have a specific learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia) Yes No
10. I am a carer (e.g. for children, dependant relative) Yes No
11. The distance of the University of Brighton from my family home is
Under 10 miles 11-50 miles More than 50 miles
12. I would describe my upbringing as mostly
Rural/country Urban/city
13. I was brought up in a single-parent family Yes No
14. During term-time I live
at home in a hall of residence in privately rented accommodation
other (please write)
15. People who have studied/are studying in higher education apart from me:
Parent/s Grandparent/s Brother/sister Partner
Aunt/uncle Cousin/s Close friend/s

Appendix 5 Educational histories question sheet

My name is Hilary McQueen and I am part of the Educational Development Research Group here at the University of Brighton. The aim of my research is to find out about your educational experiences.

I have one question that I am asking. Here it is.

'How did you come to be a student at the University of Brighton doing what you are doing and in the way you are doing it?'

The content and format of your initial response is up to you: you can write it, draw it, dictate it (Dictaphone available), use a combination of these or choose a method of your own.

No names or identifying details will be included in the research. If you do not wish to continue participating then you can stop at any time without explaining why. No content will be included in the research that you have not agreed to.

The process will involve four meetings and you will also need time to produce a response to the question.

STAGES OF THE RESEARCH

- ❖ Meet with me so that I can outline the process and you can ask any questions you might have
- ❖ Have an agreed amount of time (up to four weeks) to answer the question
- ❖ Send or give me your response. If you have recorded your response, it will be transcribed.
- ❖ Meet with me to discuss your response and to analyse it together. You can add to your response, remove parts or change it. I will then write up what we have talked about.
- ❖ Meet to discuss what I have written and to continue the analysis together. You can add to the response, remove parts or change it. I will then write up what we have talked about.
- ❖ Final meeting to agree the final version of the analysis we have done together, and to review and close the process.

Remember, participation is entirely voluntary. I only ask that if you decide not to continue for any reason that you let me know of your decision.

Please get in touch with me if you would like to ask anything else about the research.

h.mcqueen@brighton.ac.uk
(01273) 643992

Appendix 6 Semi-structured interview schedule

Introductions, explain ethics (right to withdraw, consent etc.).

Ask for demographic information (see separate sheet)

Section 1 – being a student in higher education [motives]

Why are you studying degree/subject/at Brighton?

What does being a university student mean to you?

Section 2 – social experiences

Can you tell me about some positive social experiences?

Have there been any negative social experiences?

How do your social experiences here compare with previous educational experiences?

In what ways, if any, have your social experiences here been different from your expectations?

Section 3 – social spaces

Spaces liked, disliked, comparison with imagined ideal

Section 4 – use of time

What time spent on, views on that

Section 5 – other issues

Are there any other issues that have been important to you that we have not talked about?

Final opportunity to ask questions, add/remove information.

Final reminder of ethics, including consent to incorporate data in the study.

Inform participants of how to access the report of the research.

Thanks and end interview.

Appendix 7 Poster seeking participants

Are you a student in the school of social sciences?

Has the university experience been as expected?

What are your views on the social life here?
Are there things you would like to change?



Could you spare about an hour for an interview?

Participants needed for interviews about your experiences of the social aspects of university life

Find out more by collecting an information sheet from the hand-in area in Mayfield House or from me,

Hilary McQueen.

E-mail: h.mcqueen@brighton.ac.uk

Telephone: (01273) 643992