

For my Mum and Dad, Graham and Linda Hoskins.

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**THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNDERGRADUATES' APPROACHES TO
STUDYING AND ESSAY WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION.**

by

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Higher education has undergone a massive expansion, particularly over the last twenty years. However, the value of this expansion is difficult to ascertain. Despite a growing field of research into adult learning in higher education little is known about the type of learning developed in this system.

Biggs (1996) expressed concern that university learning is represented by increased knowledge and assessment requiring students to reproduce content, not demonstrate critical thinking. He claimed that this type of learning exists even in course-work essay writing. These concerns formed the theoretical framework for the current research, which explored the development of approaches to studying (using the ASI) and course-work essay writing in higher education. Students were not examined as homogeneous but as traditional and non-traditional entrants with different experiences of learning.

Students' approaches to essay writing were measured using the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire (EWPQ) and the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (EWOQ). The development of these tools was informed by a Grounded Theory of course-work essay writing, developed in the current research using focus group data.

Results revealed that the meaning orientation of the ASI and understanding orientation of the EWOQ increased systematically across all age groups. Deadline motivation in essay writing and a generic reproducing orientation decreased across all age groups. This indicates that traditional aged students' previous experience of learning may have predisposed them to less sophisticated learning styles.

Few changes were observed in students' writing processes across the years of a degree. Approaches to studying and essay writing orientations did not become less sophisticated with exposure to higher education but neither did sophistication increase. Higher education did not compensate for traditional students' previous experience. Their learning styles remain the same across the three years of a degree.

These findings fail to support Biggs' concerns that surface type approaches increase with exposure to university. However, neither do they indicate that higher education, specifically essay writing, encourage critical thinking and understanding. Rather university maintains the level of deep and surface approaches to studying and essay writing with which students enter university.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University Award.

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A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included a Postgraduate Diploma in Psychological Research Methods. This Diploma project was entitled Factors Affecting The Relationship Between Entry Age and Degree Outcome. Work from this project was subsequently published:

Hoskins, S. L., Newstead, S. E., & Dennis I. (1997) Degree Performance as a function of age, sex, prior qualifications and discipline studied. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 22, Number 3 (Sept).

Newstead, S. E., Hoskins S. L., Franklyn-Stokes A., & Dennis I. Older but Wiser? (1997) Mature students in higher education, in P. Sutherland (Ed.) *Adult Learning: A reader*. London: Kogan Page

Relevant scientific seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented. Chapter 2 of the thesis was presented at The British Psychological Society Postgraduate Affairs Group Annual Conference, July 1997.

Signed.....
Date.....

Chapter 1.

Introduction.

1.1 The Story Of British Higher Education

The story of British higher education began in Oxford (c.1185). Oxford, along with the universities in Paris and Bologna, was created as a centre for travelling students where the ideals of humanism and the Renaissance were disseminated. The purpose of these institutions evolved and the emerging nation states became progressively more linked with the universities until eventually their purpose was the education of civil servants, such as priests and lawyers (Bertilsson, 1992). Universities became the means of providing the need of modern societies: an educated work force. Unlike today, universities in Britain were not concerned with the practice of research, but instead were preoccupied with the teachings of Christianity (Bertilsson, 1992); empirical research did not become the focus of higher education until the 18th century. However, the idea of enlightenment through investigation originated not in the universities of Oxford or Cambridge (c.1230) but later from Edinburgh University (c.1583) (Bertilsson, 1992).

Since then British higher education has continued to evolve. In 1836 the University of Durham became the third University in England, shortly followed by the University of London (Hume, 1989). 1873 saw the initiation by James Stuart of the University Extension Movement which attempted to open access to higher education by making it accessible to a wider geographical audience (Hume, 1989). In practice this involved Cambridge University setting up lecture centres in Derby, Leicester and Nottingham. Oxford and London University followed suit. It was these centres that became (in the mid 1900s) the regional universities of today (Hume, 1989).

The twentieth century saw many more changes in the British system of higher education. In the early 1900s women were admitted to universities and many institutions had been given a charter, confirming their university status (Hume, 1989). This charter was obtained following a trial period spent under the auspices of a university as a university college. The newly chartered institutions were known as the 'red brick' universities and included the Universities of Liverpool (c.1903), Sheffield (c.1905), Bristol (c.1909) and Reading (c.1926).

From the 1930s, regional colleges of technology and colleges of advanced technology (CATS) were providing degree courses. These courses were examined by the established universities. In the 1950s the Government gave CATS university status, a move which permitted them to examine their own degree courses. The regional colleges of technology became polytechnics, a new style of academic institution, which aimed to teach vocational degrees. However, these degrees were still awarded by established universities.

The next major development was the founding of new universities in the 1960s. Most of these adopted a collegiate structure in line with traditional universities such as Oxford. Some of these universities brought innovations to the system of higher education. For example, Keele University (c.1962) introduced a 4 year degree and York University (c.1963) pioneered concepts of continual assessment. Generally though the 'new universities' reflected the style of their predecessors.

In the 1970s, significant reforms occurred with the formation of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). This body aimed to oversee the quality of polytechnic degrees by evaluating teaching and learning. This meant that polytechnics could now award degrees accredited by the CNAA as opposed to other universities. As part of this process lecturers

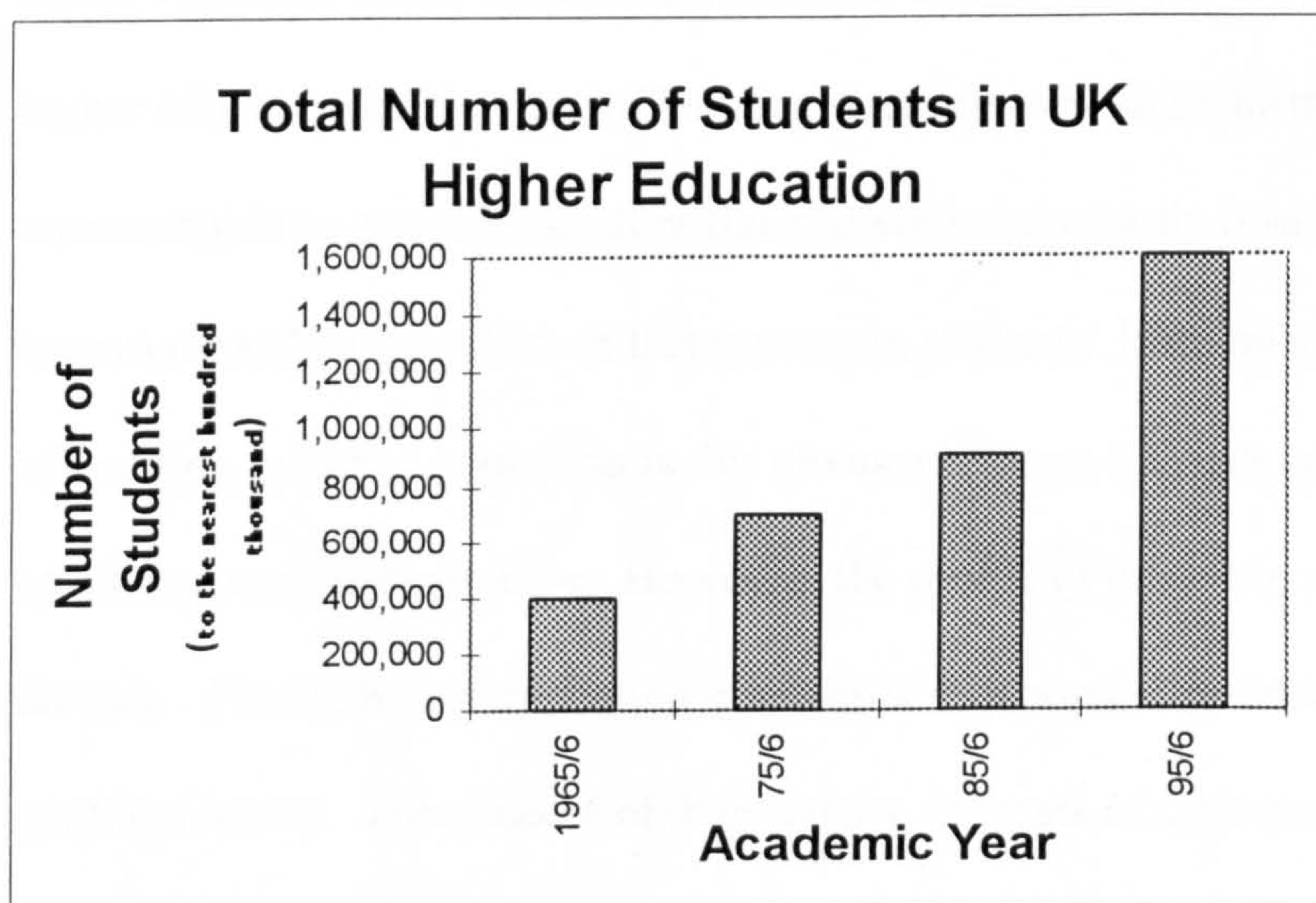
wrote manuals which included details of the aims and content of their courses in order to aid their assessment. It has been said that this process led polytechnics to 'teach degrees' rather than encouraging undergraduates to 'read' for them (e.g. Scott, 1993).

Further change came partly as a result of the percentage of people in higher education in the UK in 1986-1987 being the lowest of all the European member states. In response the Government published a white paper, Higher Education: A New Framework, (May 1991). It committed Britain to a 1 in 3 eighteen year old participation rate in higher education in order that the UK could compete economically with the rest of Europe. This paper granted polytechnics the means to gain university status in order to achieve this participation rate. By incorporating polytechnics into the university system, higher education could be enlarged, enabling it to accommodate more potential students leaving further education.

However, estimates of demographic change predicted a serious decrease of 18 year olds in the 1990s. This projection led higher education institutions to look elsewhere for applicants. Both Government and industry had already (in the 1980s) made clear their support of 'non-conventional' students in higher education (see Parry and Wake, 1990). In 1992 they once again promoted widening access, as a response to this demographic projection, through the PCFC Information Document, Widening Participation in Higher Education. Essentially this paper discussed how increased participation could still be achieved by encouraging non-traditional entrants to universities. In fact, the actual decline of 18 year olds did not include those from the traditional social groups that constituted the intake of universities. Despite this fact universities and newly transformed polytechnics continued to encourage prospective mature undergraduates without traditional entry qualifications (Wakeford, 1993).

Indeed changes to higher education have facilitated an expansion in participation. In the academic year 1995/6 there were over 1,600,000 students in UK higher education compared to 400,000 in the academic year 1965/6 (HESA 1965/96). In just 30 years the number of participants in higher education has increased to four times its original number. The biggest increase in participation in higher education was in the last decade -- between 1985 and 1995, see Figure 1.1. A third of young people participated in full-time higher education in 1997 with an anticipated 44% participation rate in the year 2004 (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997).

Figure 1.1



However, part of this increase occurred due to the successful recruitment of non-traditional students. The number of students admitted to undergraduate courses aged 21 or over has increased by 55% between 1981 and 1989 (Griffin, 1992). Gallagher, Richards and Locke (1993) reported that the number of students of 21 or over entering further and higher education to obtain degrees in Britain had increased by 77% during the period 1980-1990. More recently the Department for Education Statistical Bulletins (1988-1992) indicate that

the intake of mature students taking their first degree in higher education has doubled, an increase of 24,300 to 49,300 in England and Wales.

To summarise, the growth of higher education in the UK has been largely due to the need for a highly educated work force to compete within Europe (Bertilsson, 1992). The manner in which the expansion has been achieved, opening access to entrants previously not eligible and incorporating polytechnics, has drastically changed the system of higher education since its conception. Not only does it now contain a population of mature and less traditionally qualified students, working alongside conventional entrants, but it incorporates the polytechnics with their alleged philosophy of teaching degrees in contrast to reading for them. Hence, it is not unreasonable to raise concerns regarding the impact of the growth of higher education on the type of learning occurring within its institutions. Neither is it unreasonable to question whether this growth is necessarily positive given that little is known regarding the effect of this system on students' learning styles. Therefore the quality of learning in higher education is, for obvious reasons, an issue of great importance to educators and students alike. However, the profile of this issue is raised further by two factors. Firstly, higher education now contains a population of mature, non-traditionally qualified adults. The success of these adults, in terms of their academic achievement, has encouraged an enthusiasm from employers for education programmes aimed at their employees. However, we do not yet know if higher education, which is only assumed to engender critical reflection for traditional entrants, does so for its newly acquired population. Secondly, since students are now required to pay their own tuition fees they may be more inclined to question and pursue information regarding the type of learning promoted in higher education.

1.2 The Growth of Higher Education and the Quality of Learning

In fact concerns regarding the quality of learning in higher education were being expressed as early as the mid nineteenth century (e.g. Newman, 1852; Pattison, 1876; Whitehead, 1932). These commentators concerns focused largely on the quality of learning in terms of the approach required to succeed. Quality, in these cases was described as that which focuses on understanding, interpretation and critical thinking as opposed to the memorisation and regurgitation of facts. Cardinal Newman for example, stated that people who were not exposed to university were more likely to be philosophical and intellectually enlarged than university students who have had the need to memorise information for examinations (Newman, 1852). Similar concerns persisted throughout the development of higher education, for instance Pattison (1876) stated, with regard to the assessment procedures at Oxford, that memory is the main factor called into play. Whitehead (1932) went as far as to describe an 'evil path' in education along which the use of easy texts meant that success could be obtained in examinations by memorising and reproducing facts. Facts which Whitehead (1932) felt were taught repeatedly, without enthusiasm or inspiration.

More recently Biggs (1996), expressed concern that universities have grown according to a quantitative tradition, highlighted by a preoccupation with accountability and performance indicators. Biggs stated that in the quantitative tradition learning is represented by increased knowledge of content. "To be a good learner is to know more." and measurements of this knowledge require students "to reproduce previously learned content quickly and accurately." (Biggs, 1996). This type of assessment may be appropriate where learning requires accurate retention of knowledge (e.g. learning a foreign language) but would not engender critical reflection. However, Biggs (1996) expressed fears that this type of learning is generalised to universities, not just in assessments such as multiple choice examinations, but in course-work essay writing, since the most common procedure in

marking open ended responses is to award a mark for each relevant point made and calculate the ratio of actual marks to possible marks. The final grade is thus arrived at quantitatively -- these marks are deemed to reliably indicate students' learning.

Other researchers share Biggs' view that assessment procedures are important when considering the quality of students' learning (e.g. Ramsden, 1988). Ramsden sums up the influence of assessment procedures on learning by describing students' approach to learning as a reaction to their perception of the learning environment, more specifically their perception of teachers' requirements.

Biggs' worrying description of the assessment procedures in higher education and their effect on learning styles is reinforced by recent research which found that the majority of lecturers in Chemistry and Physics in two Australian universities held conceptions of learning and teaching which emphasised transmission of knowledge rather than students' search for meaning (Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor, 1994). In addition, Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968) stated that where assessment exists, students are faced with an opportunity to learn and simultaneously obtain grades. In this situation students felt the pressure to focus on the grade. A quote from one of their participants exemplifies this position:

"There are a lot of courses where you can learn what's necessary to get the grade and when you come out of the class you don't know anything at all. You haven't learnt a thing, really. In fact, if you try to really learn something, it would handicap you as far as getting a grade goes." p59.

Such a statement suggests that learning and gaining grades are in conflict in higher education. Snyder's (1973) observation that to satisfy teachers, students use their knowledge of the overt curriculum -- but to pass examinations they need to utilise their knowledge of the hidden curriculum suggests that teachers overtly reinforce one set of behaviours, but covertly, via assessment procedures, reinforce opposing behaviours. These

concerns, particularly those expressed by Biggs, form the theoretical framework of the current research.

In the context of a growing field of research into adult learning, researchers have begun to systematically investigate the effect of prolonged exposure to higher education on learning. This has been achieved using longitudinal and cross sectional methodologies. Such research has been greatly facilitated by the existence of quantitative tools designed to measure students' learning styles and approaches to studying, such as the Lancaster Approaches to Studying Inventory (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). These tools do provide an opportunity to examine the concerns regarding the quality of learning discussed above since their constructs often discriminate between the critical interpretation of material and the tendency to rely on memorising. However, not much is known about students' learning styles in the later years of a degree or how these styles and approaches change during students' time at university (Busato, Prins, Elshout and Hamaker, 1998). Few studies have investigated this issue. Those that have provide inconsistent results and hence there is still no clear picture of the changes that occur, if any, in students' learning when they are exposed to higher education. The results of some longitudinal and cross sectional studies show increases in learning sophistication over a period of time (e.g. Beaty and Morgan, 1992; Busato et al., 1998 - longitudinal part of study; Norton and Dickins, 1995; Pinto & Geiger, 1991a and b; Volet, 1991; Watkins and Hattie, 1981), others show decreases over time (e.g. Biggs, 1985, 1987; Busato et al., 1998 - cross sectional part of study; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Kember and Gow, 1991; Watkins and Hattie, 1983, 1985). However, this previous research has focused on changes in students' generic approaches to studying. No research to the author's knowledge has identified the development of approaches to specific tasks in higher education. The current research aims, not only to identify the impact of higher

education on students' generic and specific approaches to essay writing, but to locate possible reasons for the lack of consistency in the findings in the research literature.

Before these aims are elaborated the rationale for selecting course-work essay writing for investigation is outlined. Course-work essay writing was thought to be an appropriate task for investigation, since it is a traditional method of learning which has undergone many changes as the system of higher education has evolved. The essay was defined by Stalnaker (1951) as "a test which requires a response composed by the examinee. . . of any nature that no single response or pattern of responses can be listed as correct, and the accuracy and quality of which can be judged subjectively only by one skilled in the subject." p496. This definition highlights the essay as a flexible tool in which the student can develop their own approach to writing. However, this definition focuses on the ability of the essay to act as a medium for assessment and as Henderson (1980) suggested, it is also a learning tool. In the last twenty years its role has evolved as it has become a tool for continuous assessment and not simply examination assessment. It is therefore the case that when writing course-work essays the undergraduate must deal with them as an opportunity to learn *and* simultaneously gain the grades they desire. If it *is* the case that a conflict between learning and obtaining a 'good' grade exists in higher education, the assessed course-work essay presents the ideal opportunity to identify factors influencing students' decisions regarding which approach to take. In addition it offers the opportunity to examine Biggs' concerns at their extreme. Course-work essay writing is perhaps one of the most qualitative forms of assessment in higher education, but one which Biggs (1996) stated has fallen foul to the 'quantitative tradition' of higher education.

Furthermore, a detailed examination of approaches to essay writing and their development will provide the information to unravel another theoretical issue, this time a dichotomy

which exists in the literature regarding the impact of environment on student learning. Much research has highlighted the importance of contextual factors on learning (see Beckwith, 1991; Crooks, 1988; Gibbs, Morgan and Taylor, 1984; Ramsden, 1979; Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981; Watkins and Hattie, 1981). However, the dichotomy relates to the degree of impact that certain factors in this environment have. It is exemplified by the contrasting perspectives of Gibbs and Biggs. Biggs (1989, 1996) regards higher education as a system in which many contextual factors impact on students' learning. Any changes aimed at improving students' learning must be holistic in that they account for the whole system. However, Gibbs (e.g. Gibbs 1990a, b, 1995) concentrates on the impact teaching has on undergraduate learning. His research makes recommendations for improving students' learning by changing the quality of teaching. The question of whether teachers are a fundamental factor in influencing student learning, facilitating significant improvements without the 'whole' system of higher education being overhauled, does indeed require clarification. The current investigation of students' experience of course-work essay writing will have implications for this question, in that it is likely to provide detailed information regarding the role of teachers, and the degree of impact that their behaviour has on students' experience of one academic task.

The current research will also attempt to identify why the existing literature presents inconsistent findings with regard to the development of learning approaches in higher education. One possibility that is investigated here lies in the construct validity of 'generic' measures of students' approaches to learning. The particular tool that will be examined here, the Lancaster Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI), is widely used in this research field. The ASI has been developed and evaluated, in terms of its psychometric properties, to such an extent that some feel it is ready to be used in educational settings to evaluate students' learning (Beckwith, 1991; Sheppard and Gilbert, 1991). However, to the author's

knowledge little has been done to examine whether generic approaches to studying actually exist as opposed to students' approaches being task specific. In order for this concern to be explained fully it is necessary to return to the origins of the ASI and examine its development.

1.3 The Development of The Lancaster Approaches to Studying Inventory

In order to set the scene in which the appropriateness of the ASI for use in higher education can be assessed, one must begin with the Gothenburg Experiments of the 1960s (see Marton, 1976 for detailed description). It was from these landmark investigations that the description of learning in terms of 'approaches to studying' originated and that the story of the ASI's development begins. The experiments used a methodology which examined participants' conceptions of reality, largely in experiments on reading academic articles. These experiments showed that students had reached qualitatively different levels of understanding described as a tendency to reproduce parts of the text, or to interpret concepts within the text aimed at understanding their meaning.

It was these remarkable findings and the distinctive methodology which set in train much of the subsequent research into student learning. The research which developed in the UK showed the same interest in students' experiences of everyday studying. The work of researchers such as Entwistle, Hounsell and Ramsden at Lancaster University, Hodgson, Laurillard and Taylor at Surrey University and Gibbs and Morgan at the Open University provided the catalyst for adult learning research in the UK. Each of these research groups developed their own perspective: The Open University concentrated on reinterpreting the Gothenburg findings in relation to distance learning and part time mature students; in the meantime, research at Surrey used learning experiments, observations and interviews to examine learning in relation to students' experience of lectures and courses; and it was from

Lancaster that the notion of 'study approach' originated, implying that approach to studying was to some extent a stable characteristic of the undergraduate across a variety of study tasks. Some students were more likely to adopt a surface approach characterised by learning the text itself while others adopted a deep approach, where concentration was directed toward comprehending.

Other researchers reported two qualitatively distinct approaches of learning in undergraduates which paralleled those found in the Lancaster studies (e.g. Biggs, 1970, 1973, 1976a; Goldman, 1972; Goldman and Warren, 1973; Pask, 1976a, b). The fact that researchers, regardless of their independence from each other, describe a distinction between memorising and comprehending, provides further support for the existence of these two distinct approaches.

Perhaps the most notable contribution of the Lancaster research to this field was the further development of these concepts into a tool which enabled the quantitative measurement of students' approaches to studying. The development of this inventory was based on work carried out by Marton (1976), who instead of anticipating the dimensions of study processes from experimental work as other researchers had (e.g. Schmeck, Ribich and Ramanaiah, 1977) found it possible to derive descriptive concepts and categories from qualitative analysis of students' reports of their own study processes. The resultant categories, unlike Schmeck et al's, included the learners' intentions. Intention and process combined were regarded by Marton (1976) as the approach (Speth and Brown, 1988). Process is sometimes referred to as style or strategy (see Svensson, 1977). A deep approach is the intention to understand, and the employment of distinct processes to achieve this aim, whereas a surface approach reflects an intention to reproduce information and the use of memorisation tactics to do so (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1981).

A third approach was introduced by Ramsden (see Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) who described a strategic approach in which students seek to maximise their grades by managing their intellectual resources in line with the perceived criteria required to obtain grades. Items regarding the strategic approach were mainly derived from interview comments. The most distinctive items were selected for development. Additional items based on Marton's (1976) descriptions of 'deep' and 'surface' processing were written and added to the pool of items. In addition, the ideas of Miller and Partlett (1974) on 'cue-consciousness' were modified by Ramsden (1979) into general dimensions of strategic approach and used to create more items. Eventually, a pool of 120 items was used in the first pilot inventory. Alpha factor analysis with rotation to oblique simple structure (see Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner and Bent, 1975 for discussion of this method) was used to identify factors. Deep approach to studying and organised study methods were the main factors found in this pilot study. A third factor brought together surface processing with fear of failure and syllabus boundness.

These factors were discussed with John Biggs during his development of the Study Behaviour Questionnaire (Biggs, 1976a) in Australia. Biggs (1979) indicated that his work suggested the existence of three main factors: utilising, internalising and achieving, each of which contained a cognitive and motivational element as shown in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1.
Main factors from Biggs' (1979) study process questionnaire with indications of cognitive and motivational elements.

Factor	Cognitive	Motivational
Utilising.	Fact-rote learning.	Extrinsic, fear of failure.
Internalising.	Meaning assimilation.	Intrinsic.
Achieving.	Study skills and organisation.	Need for achievement.

Biggs' questionnaire contained 10 sub-scales: academic aspiration; academic interest; academic neuroticism; study skills and organisation; fact-rote strategy; dependence; meaning assimilation; test anxiety and openness. Comparisons showed that Biggs' questionnaire was remarkably similar to the Lancaster Inventory. The decision was made to bring the two scales closer together by introducing items to the Lancaster inventory from sub-scales in Biggs' Study Behaviour Questionnaire which were not already represented. Hence, the second pilot of the Lancaster inventory also contained items relating to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, internality and openness.

The second pilot of the Lancaster inventory contained 82 items from the first pilot and 24 items re-written from The Study Behaviour Questionnaire. This second pilot was given to 767 first year (second term) students from nine departments in two universities. Their responses were examined using principal components factor analysis with rotation to oblique simple structure. Four factors were found to have eigenvalues above unity and these explained 56% of the overall variance in the correlation matrix. After disregarding some components of these factors, for theoretical rather than statistical reasons, the 64 item Approaches to Studying Inventory remained (Entwistle, Hanley and Hounsell, 1979; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). This version of the ASI consisted of 16 sub-scales which in turn loaded onto four main orientations (see Table 1.2).

At this point in the story of the ASI's development it is important to revisit the question posed earlier in this chapter -- is the ASI an appropriate tool to evaluate students' learning in higher education? One way to address this issue is to examine the psychometric properties of the ASI. Indeed, many researchers have carried out psychometric evaluations of the 64 item inventory. In terms of test-retest scores, the ASI has been found to be fairly reliable, with correlation coefficients typically in excess of 0.5 (Clarke, 1986; Richardson,

1990). The consistency of the four factors and sixteen sub-scales described by Entwistle and Ramsden (1981) has also been widely investigated. Watkins (1982) used the ASI with 540 first year university students at the Australian National University. He suggested that his results cast doubt on Entwistle and Ramsden's factor analysis interpretations. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) supported this finding when they carried out factor analysis on the 64 item inventory and decided that this "produced few identifiable groupings of items." and concluded that the separation of 64 items into 16 separate sub-scales "could not be justified on the basis of empirical relationships".

Table 1.2

Sub-scales contained in the original (64 item) approaches to studying inventory, taken from Richardson (1990).

Sub-scale	Meaning
Meaning orientation Deep approach Inter-relating ideas Use of evidence Intrinsic motivation	Active questioning in learning. Relating to other parts of the course. Relating evidence to conclusions. Interest in learning for learning's sake.
Reproducing orientation Surface approach Syllabus-boundness Fear of failure Extrinsic motivation	Preoccupation with memorising. Relying on staff to define learning tasks. Pessimism and anxiety about academic outcomes. Interest in course for the qualifications they offer.
Achieving orientation Strategic approach Disorganised study methods Negative attitudes to studying Achievement motivation	Awareness of implications of academic demands. Unable to work regularly and effectively. Lack of interest and application. Competitive and competent.
Styles and Pathologies Comprehension learning Globetrotting Operation learning Improvidence	Readiness to map out subject area and think divergently. Over-ready to jump to conclusions. Emphasis on facts and logical analysis. Over-cautious reliance on details.

Generally though, the research supports the consistent occurrence of the two distinct factors, meaning and reproducing orientation, with the remaining two factors showing more variability (Clarke, 1986; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Harper and Kember, 1986, 1989; Meyer and Parsons, 1989; Morgan, Gibbs and Taylor, 1980; Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981; Watkins, 1982; Watkin, 1983; Watkins and Hattie, 1985). Overall it seems that meaning orientation as measured by the ASI is reliable and consistent. Reproducing orientation also shows moderate reliability and consistency. However, there appears to be some variation in its occurrence according to academic context. This variation, researchers believe, represents students' attempts to cope with academic practices that are inappropriate to the goals of higher education (Richardson, 1994). For example, over-reliance on multiple choice examinations and setting essays with insufficient time to complete them. The remaining factors in the 64 item inventory developed by the Lancaster research group offer more cause for concern regarding their failure to consistently recur. Therefore, shorter versions of this tool, which focus on the meaning and reproducing dimension may be more psychometrically useful.

Indeed, many researchers including those at Lancaster have developed the ASI further, in an attempt to improve the tool's usability in terms of psychometric characteristics and its length. This has resulted in the development and use of many different versions of the ASI. Such versions have included a 30 item inventory developed by Entwistle and Ramsden (1981) and the 32 item version adapted by Richardson (1992). The latest version is the 38 item inventory ASSIST (Tait and Entwistle, 1996) which has been developed in order to identify undergraduates most in need of training in approaches to studying.

However, perhaps the most appealing to researchers and practitioners and the version proposed for use in the current research, due to the practical advantages of its small number

of items, is the 18 item version of the Approaches to Studying Inventory. This version of the ASI was adapted by Gibbs (1990b) at Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brooks University). This inventory is a direct descendant of its predecessor, the 64 item inventory, in that it contains 6 items from each of the three out of the four original factors: meaning orientation, reproducing orientation and achieving orientation.

Richardson (1992), in a critical evaluation of ASI (18 item) criticises Gibbs' recommendation of this tool. He applied the ASI (18 item) to two cohorts of social science students. A factor analysis of the students' responses found that the scales measured relatively specific aspects of study behaviour rather than more global study orientations. The first factor loaded on 'intrinsic motivation' but not on 'deep approach' while the second factor loaded on 'surface approach' but not on 'extrinsic motivation'. The third loaded on 'organised study methods' but not on 'achieving motivation'. However, Richardson's results demonstrated satisfactory levels of both internal consistency (roughly 0.5 on all 3 factors) and test-retest reliability (approximately 0.8 on all 3 factors, and greater than 0.5 on each item) making the 18 item version superior to the 30 item version devised by Entwistle and Ramsden (1981) in terms of reliability. However, the internal consistency of the 3 scales is inferior to that of the 64 item inventory.

Newstead's (1992) study of two "quick-and-easy" methods of assessing individual differences in learning also examined the psychometric characteristics of the ASI (18 item). This revealed a reliability of 0.50, 0.44 and 0.61 for achieving, reproducing and meaning orientation respectively; all dimensions, therefore, show fair reliability. In order to check the robustness of the factor structure underlying the ASI the results were subjected to a factor analysis where, since Gibbs et al. (1988) predicted only three factors, a three factor solution was imposed using a principal components analysis with varimax rotation. All

items that should have loaded on achieving orientation did so with correlation coefficients of 0.3 or above with only one exception. All predicted items loaded on meaning orientation, although two unexpected items had high loadings on this factor. Items predicted to load on reproducing orientation did so, except for one. Generally it appears that the 18 item version of the ASI has good reliability and moderate consistency.

However, before this, or any version of the ASI, is used to determine the type of learning in higher education, a further issue regarding the tool's appropriateness for use must be addressed: its predictive validity.

In terms of predictive validity the ASI does not perform consistently. The findings of studies which investigate the predictive validity of various versions of the ASI fall into two main categories: those which report no systematic difference in the achievement of students with deep or surface approaches to studying (Clarke, 1986; Leiden, Crosby and Follmer, 1990; Newstead, 1992) and those which find that surface approaches are predictive of low achievement, where deep approaches lead to success (Arnold and Fleighny, 1995; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). The lack of consistency in these results may in fact provide clues as to the impact of higher education on approaches to studying. They may actually represent a situation in higher education in which some assessment procedures are not consistently rewarding deep approaches to studying, but are instead rewarding surface approaches, involving memorising information. This would support the fears expressed by educationalists throughout the development of higher education, including Biggs.

However, the inconsistency of the tool's predictive validity and the findings regarding the development of approaches (discussed above) may also represent a failing of the tool not related to psychometric reliability but to construct validity.

Measuring approaches to studying as generic phenomenon with tools such as the ASI assumes that generic approaches to studying relate to approaches used in specific tasks in higher education. Having established approaches to studying, what evidence do we have for their stability between specific types of assessment? Do the dimensions relate to important characteristics of a student's educational reality in specific tasks? Biggs' (1993) investigation of what inventories of students' learning processes really measure suggested that constructs derived from questionnaires typically asked students what they usually did, or what they were predisposed to do, not what they actually do when engaging in a given academic task. One cannot assume from the existing research that a generic approach exists and is applied by students to each task they are presented with in higher education. Until research has clarified whether or not approaches to studying, as measured by the ASI, relate to educational reality in terms of how students approach specific academic tasks, it is unwise to use it as a tool with which to evaluate the type of learning occurring in universities. Therefore examining students' approaches to course-work essay writing not only provides the opportunity to identify the development of specific approaches to learning across the years of a degree but also offers the chance to examine the ASI's construct validity. Scores of the ASI will be compared to students' approaches to essay writing in order to ascertain the ability of the ASI to relate to approaches to this specific task.

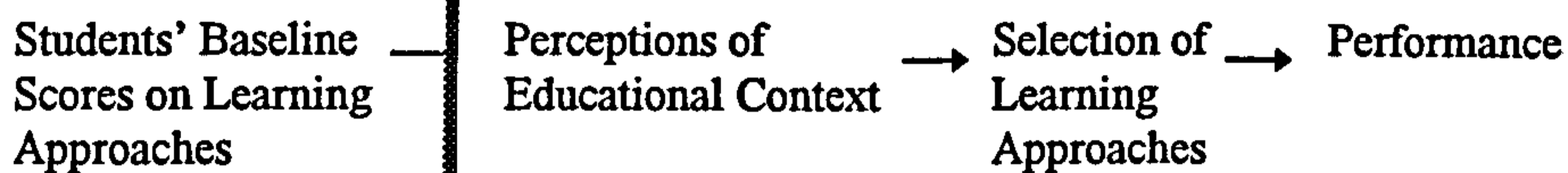
1.4 The Homogeneity of Undergraduates

Another possible answer for the lack of consistency in the findings of research into the development of approaches to studying, which will be explored in the current thesis, becomes clear when the issue of students' homogeneity is explored. The concern that treating students as homogenous caused distortions in the picture of student learning stems from recent research by Arnold and Fleighny (1995). They proposed a model describing how approaches to learning relate to performance (see Figure 1.2). This was based on

results from an investigation of medical students throughout their six year degree course. The model incorporates students' initial scores on learning approaches as a factor that influences their perception of the educational context. Their perception of the context dictates their selection of a learning approach.

Figure 1.2

Approaches to Learning and Performance taken from Arnold and Fleighny (1995).



Hence, students' learning experience prior to higher education will inform how they perceive and react to that context. Indeed, Wilson (1981) argued that first year students' notion of learning is likely to be based on their school experiences. Harper and Kember (1986) actually suggest that younger students who have entered higher education straight from conventional further education have been directed towards a surface approach in their studying to such an extent that, even after they have entered higher education, rote learning remains their predominant learning style. However, the opening of access in contemporary education in the 1980s has meant that many undergraduates do not have recent school or conventional further education experiences prior to beginning a degree.

Indeed those who do not are more likely to have had exposure to 'life' which enables them to assess evidence and relate ideas through family and work experiences and raises levels of self reliance and maturity to the extent that it could influence study behaviour (Biggs, 1985; Harper and Kember, 1986). Some researchers have already begun to contemplate how mature students differ in terms of their approaches to studying as measured by the ASI. These investigations generally reveal that mature students possess lower scores on the ASI's reproducing orientation and higher scores on meaning orientation (e.g. Harper and Kember, 1986; Richardson, 1994, 1997; Watkins, 1982).

However, these investigations shed no light on the development of non-traditional students' approaches across the years of a degree, neither do they account for the salient fact that a mature population is more likely to have entered with non-traditional qualifications. It may be the failure of research into the development of students' learning to measure these differences in the student population which has led to inconsistent results. Hence the current research will include students' traditional and non-traditional status as a factor. However, it will measure not only age, but also students' entry qualifications, whether they have taken time out of higher education and the timing of this. As Richardson (1997) notes, most research investigating this issue focuses on students' age. Little is known about the influence of entry qualifications on approaches to learning.

1.5 Methodology

The first task of the current investigation was to decide how undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing should be assessed and measured. It is important to state here that the term 'essay writing' refers to all aspects of the construction of an essay, from the moment the task is set to the finished article intended for submission as course-work. This includes acts of 'non-writing' such as thinking, drawing and putting notes into piles.

Traditionally there has been a methodological distinction between two main theoretical positions in the field of student learning: information processing and student approaches to learning. Much of the early research into this area came from the information processing perspective. Information processing researchers who used this application from cognitive psychology may have focused too narrowly on the study processes of students, without accounting for the social world in which studying takes place (e.g. di Vesta and Moreno, 1993). This is a fatal flaw since many researchers have shown how the learning environment has a profound effect on studying (e.g. Entwistle and Waterson, 1988). The

student approaches to learning tradition challenges the information processing methodology and demands that student learning should be described in terms of realistic content and everyday tasks as experienced by students, not interpreted from the preconceived theoretical frameworks of researchers.

The student approaches to learning research broke the dominant methodological tradition of the information processing theorists in several important ways. Firstly it provided a rigorous qualitative methodology which allowed students' experiences of learning to be studied more systematically and demonstrated the importance of analysing those experiences in terms of the specific content of the learning task. Over time this methodology has developed and is now known by the term used by Marton (1981): phenomenography. Many researchers such as Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and Biggs (1987) have adopted the student approaches to learning position and methodology in order to avoid impoverished accounts of studying, which fail to reflect the social context.

A second failing of the information processing tradition stems from its top down nature. Any researcher designing a program of research which aims to examine student learning has many potential variables to choose from. The information processing researchers would choose the variables to be examined on the basis of previous research. It is such top down processing which some believe has impeded education research for too long (e.g. Biggs, 1976b; Snow, 1974). It is a practice which sets the agenda of the research according to the world known only to the researcher as opposed to that of the actors they are attempting to investigate. The first problem with this method concerns perpetuating limits in knowledge. The second problem stems from the type of research context to which this leads. Condor (1997) describes this situation as a question and answer sequence in which the researcher has the power to set up and maintain a particular topic. Participants are presented with

questions to which they have to respond. The choice of changing the subject is not given and responses are restricted. The main concern with this research paradigm is that there is no indication that all of the important questions are being asked. To progress with a solely quantitative methodology would be to restrict consideration to a set of inventory items determined by the researcher. This may force the students to report a general approach to learning as such inventories lead to students over-emphasising the consistency of their study behaviour (Watkins and Hattie, 1981).

Since the aim of the present research is to describe student learning in the context of course-work essay writing, it is important to identify students' perspectives with regard to this task. Therefore the qualitative, bottom up methodology, adopted in the Student Approaches to Learning (SAL) tradition will be adopted here. This qualitative methodology will enable undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing to be explored in a relatively unconstrained manner and provide original information and intricate details which might be difficult to gain quantitatively. This approach is also more likely to provide a conceptually rich and accurate description of student learning (Watkins and Hattie, 1981).

Notwithstanding the above, Miles (1979) stated that qualitative data can be an attractive nuisance. He expressed concern that without the use of guidelines when analysing qualitative data there is no protection against self-delusion. Indeed in his own words "How can we be sure that an earthy, undeniable, serendipitous finding is not in fact, wrong?" p590. One could argue that findings of qualitative research do not have the advantage of quantitative data of being empirically verifiable and providing quantitative estimates of the strength of relationships.

A hybrid of quantitative and qualitative methodology would seem to be a possible solution and one which is appropriate for this complex area. As Marton and Svensson (1979) state, these approaches are essentially complementary in nature. Therefore, the current research will begin with qualitative research, but since there is always some doubt as to the validity and generalisability of such research it will continue quantitatively. At this stage the findings of the qualitative investigation will inform the initial development of a tool to describe students' experience of course-work essay writing.

1.6 Summary of Aims

To summarise, this thesis aims to address the concerns raised by many researchers regarding the type of learning promoted in higher education. The type of learning adopted by students both generically and for course-work essay writing will be examined. This will be achieved in part by examining the development of students' generic approaches to studying using the 18 item version of the ASI. This version will be used due to pragmatic limitations.

Students' approaches to essay writing will be measured using newly developed quantitative tools, the development of which will be informed by a qualitative theory of course-work essay writing developed from students' own perspectives of course-work essay writing. Measurement of this development will use a cross sectional methodology, again due to pragmatic limitations.

Since students' approaches to learning are reactions to prolonged exposure to educational contexts (Saljo, 1984), the results should provide an indication of the learning style induced by the system of higher education. These findings will not only have important practical implications, examining Biggs' (1996) concerns that higher education, particularly assessment procedures, induce surface approaches to studying.

In order for this research to identify and to avoid distortions, which existing literature may have incurred, it will first determine whether the ASI offers a realistic reflection of students' approaches to a specific task in higher education, in this case course-work essay writing. Secondly, students will not be examined as a homogeneous group but as traditional and non-traditional entrants bringing different experiences of education to university which may impact upon the development of their approaches to studying. However, students' entry age is not the only factor considered, their entry qualifications and whether or not they have taken time out of formal education before embarking upon their degree course is also considered.

If Biggs' concerns are justified one would expect non-traditional entrants to exhibit lower scores on surface type approaches than traditional entrants in their first year of study, but for these to increase across the years of a degree until they are similar to the traditional students. In addition findings regarding students' experiences of course-work essay writing will indicate whether improvements in students' learning require holistic changes in the system of higher education (see Biggs, 1989; 1996) or are influenced largely by the quality of teaching (see Gibbs, 1983a, b; 1992; 1995).

1.7 Thesis Summary

In order to achieve the aims outlined above the initial stages of this thesis (Studies 1 and 2) identified students' experiences of course-work essay writing, using data from a series of focus groups. These experiences are outlined in Chapter 2 in the form of a model of undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing, which was developed using grounded theory. This qualitative theory identified components of students' essay writing process consistent with findings in the existing literature. In addition the qualitative theory shed light on the motivational dynamics of writing and the relationship between these

dynamics and the writing process. Chapters 3 and 4 were informed by this theory in that they explored the key components of the processes of writing (Study 3) and the motivational dynamics (Studies 4 and 5). These chapters describe the development of two quantitative tools to measure these components, the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire (EWPQ) and the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (EWOQ). The tools developed in Chapters 3 and 4 are then used, along with the 18 item version of the ASI in Study 6. This study investigates the type of learning students adopt in their essay writing (using the EWPQ and the EWOQ) and across tasks (using the ASI). The findings of this study are reported in Chapter 5 and throw light on the ability of the ASI to describe students' experiences of essay writing in addition to the development of learning across the years of a degree. These findings are also outlined in Chapter 5. The overall findings are then discussed in Chapter 6, with reference to their theoretical and practical implications and the aims of this thesis.

Chapter 2.

The Grounded Theory of Course-Work Essay Writing.

2.1 Introduction

To reiterate, the current thesis aims to identify the type of learning that develops across the years of a degree, generically, using the Lancaster Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) and course-work essay writing. The measurement of approaches to course-work essay writing will be carried out quantitatively using tools developed in this thesis. However, in order to develop these tools a qualitative bottom up methodology was adopted, enabling undergraduates' experience of essay writing to inform this development. The current chapter outlines the qualitative stage of research in which a rich and unconstrained description of course-work essay writing from the students' perspective was obtained.

2.2 Background

During this century the range of methodological techniques available to researchers in the field of essay writing has grown. This has in part caused a shift in the focus of writing research. Hartley (1992) commented that the focus of research in the 1920s was handwriting skills, changing in the 1950s, to grammatical quality. When in the 1960s the process of writing was examined, conclusions were made by examining measurable aspects of the product (e.g. Rohman and O'Wlecke, 1964). This trend, to concentrate on measurable aspects of the essay itself, continued into the early 1970s, but as Bizzel (1986) noted later in the 1970s the focus of research shifted from the product, to the examination of the writer at work.

The research focusing on writing process falls into three main categories: investigations which identify and quantify students' use of components of the writing process; research

which investigates specific components of writing in depth, such as planning; and finally studies which develop models reflecting how components of writing occur in relation to each other.

Much of the research which describes the numerous components of essay writing takes a 'list like' form, describing the percentages of students who carry out each component in a particular way. In many cases these studies do not even identify the existence of these components of essay writing but simply assume their existence from previous research, asking students questions pertaining to them. For example, Lowenthal and Wason (1977) gave a questionnaire to academic staff asking them questions such as: 'How many drafts do you normally write before you submit a paper for publication?' Such research is limited in that it will fail to discover any previously overlooked components of writing.

However, such research is useful in providing an in-depth description of the components of writing and students' use of those components. This has enabled the components to be related to achievement (Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Lowenthal and Wason, 1977; Mahalski, 1992; Norton, 1990), enjoyment (Norton, 1990), conception of the essay (Hounsell, 1984), thinking (Langer and Applebee 1987; Wason, 1970, 1980) and the use of technology (Oliver and Kerr, 1993; Peacock and Breese, 1990). Other research investigates how components of essay writing cluster together to form strategies of essay writing which are then related to achievement (Hartley and Branthwaite 1989; Torrance, Thomas and Robinson 1994).

Research investigating specific components of essay writing in depth, such as revision (Sommers, 1980), planning (Hounsell, 1984 a and b) and writing drafts (Faigley and Witte, 1981; Kellogg, 1987) provide rich descriptions of students' approaches to specific aspects of the writing process. However, what this research can tell us about the relationship

between essay writing components, and therefore the whole experience of writing, is limited.

Research which develops models of the essay writing process provides a more coherent and comprehensive description of undergraduates' experience of this process. Within this research there are three types of model: those which describe essay writing as a linear or stage process; those which present writing as recursive; and finally those recursive models which incorporate the social context of writing.

The early research which developed models of the writing process includes that carried out in schools by Britton, Burgess, Martin, Mclead and Rosen (1975). This work, which examined essays written by British school children aged between eleven and eighteen, led to a model describing writing as a series of hierarchical stages: conception; incubation and production. Britton et al's model followed the linear tradition originating from models of speech which involved "the motive which engenders a thought to the shaping of the thought, first in inner speech, then in meanings of words, and finally in words." (Britton et al 1975, p40). Linear descriptions separate the writing process into discrete stages in which revision is understood as occurring at the end of the process, distinct from the pre-writing stages (Sommers, 1980).

Despite the fact that linear models have advanced the research into writing composition greatly, by moving the focus from product to process, continuing with this conception would greatly limit the contemporary research and is regarded as inappropriate for research purposes (Humes, 1983). The most common criticism of linear models is that the description of the writing process as a series of discrete stages is too simplistic and legitimises the notion that 'thinking' is preliminary to immediate paper production, without

adequate justification (Flower and Hayes, 1980b). What stage models fail to explain is the recursive nature of writing in which thought can be shaped by the writing process (see Flower and Hayes, 1980a; Sommers, 1980).

Sommers (1980) draws our attention to the fact that writing and speech cannot be based on the same linear model since writing is reversible and therefore allows for the possibility of revision in a way that speech does not. The idea that writing occurs as discrete stages limits revision to a 'tidying up' activity of checking spelling mistakes and grammar (Faigley and Witte, 1981).

Since the linear models there has been a revival in research into essay writing (Hartley and Knapper, 1984), with many of these researchers supporting the idea that essay writing is recursive rather than linear (e.g. Flower and Hayes, 1981; Matsuhashi, 1987; Nold, 1981).

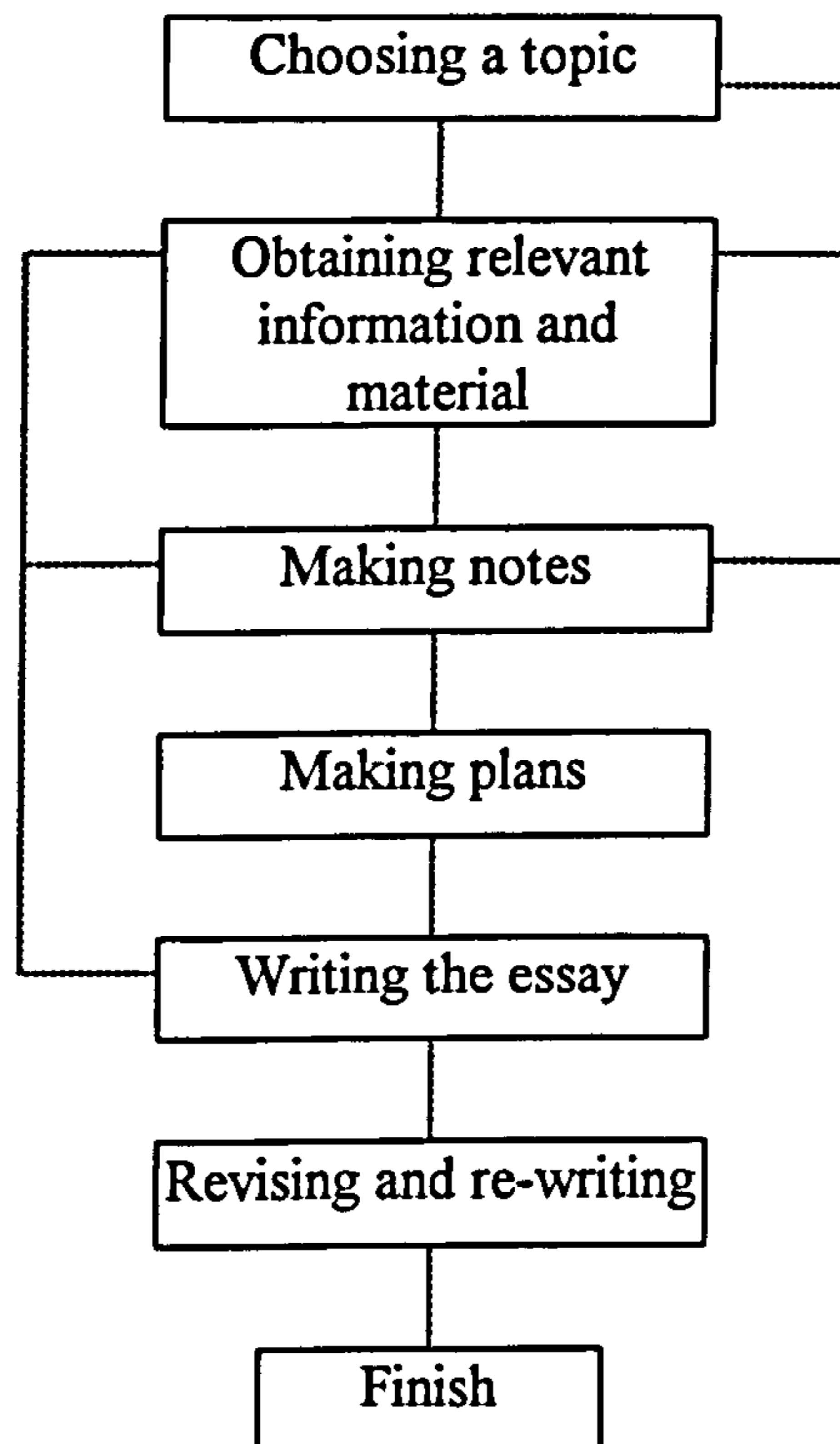
A more detailed example is provided in Hartley (1984) in which questionnaires and interviews were used by Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (unpublished) to develop a model of social science students' essay writing activities (see Figure 2.1). The model is organised vertically to suggest that some activities have logical priority, but this does not imply that essay writing involves a fixed sequence of steps (Hartley, 1984). Branthwaite et al (unpublished) found that writing essays involved some or all of the activities shown in Figure 2.1, many of them being carried out several times. Furthermore, the strategies involved in each activity vary between students.

Generally, students chose topics that interested them but other strategies included choosing on the basis of the amount of information available for that topic, or how easy the topic would be. 'Obtaining Information and Material' was conducted using books, with lecture material being used much less. About two thirds of students reported 'Making Plans'; some students did this by arranging their notes into some logical order, others pre-determined the

plan by points they felt should be raised. There were no systematic strategies for 'Writing the Essay'.

Figure 2.1

The Process of Essay Writing, Branthwaite et al (unpublished) in Hartley (1984)

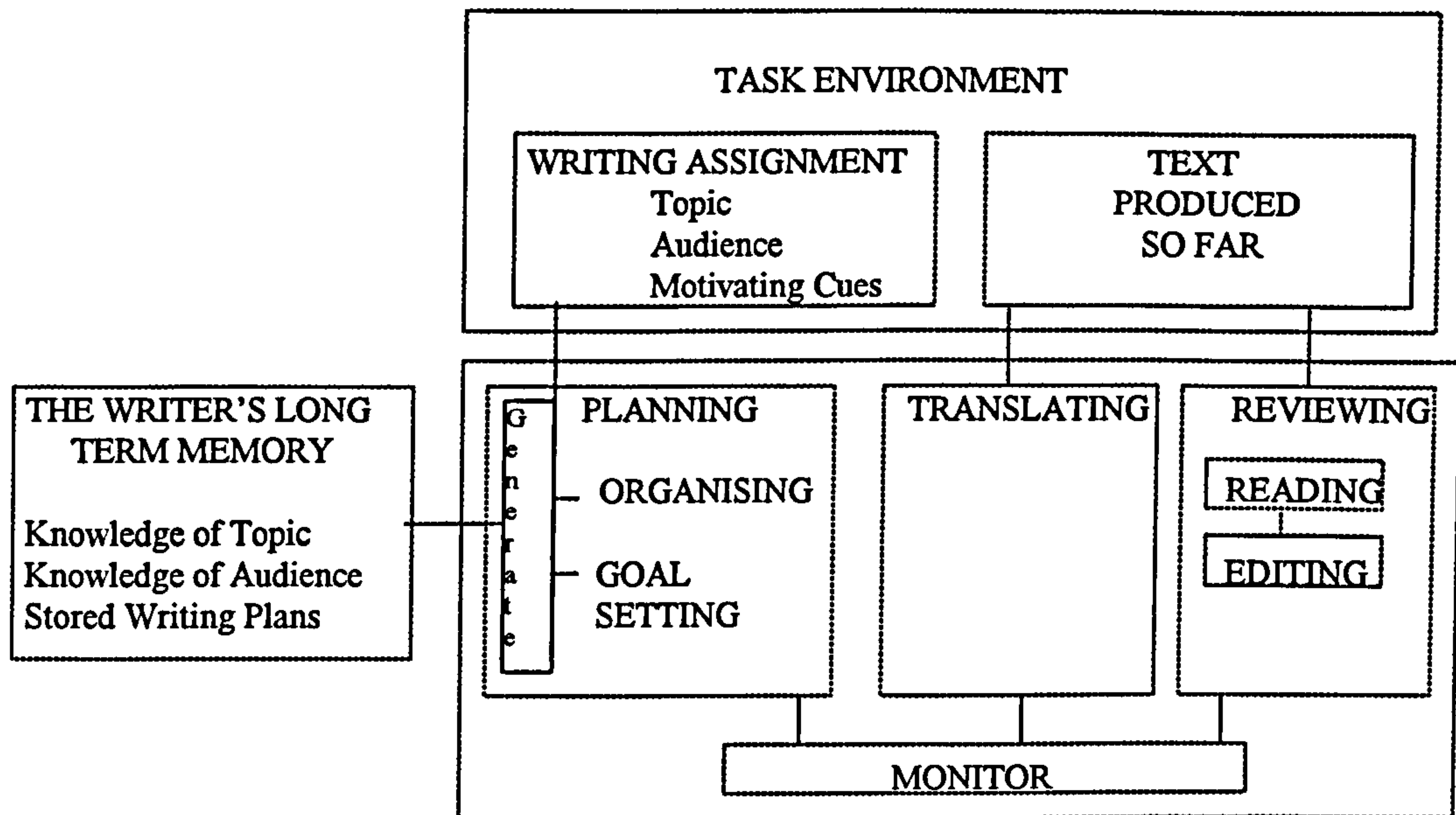


This model, although recursive, does not reflect the complexity of essay writing since it deals with the process as if it exists in a social vacuum. It clarifies nothing regarding individual differences or contextual factors in writing. This criticism of writing research was largely what led the focus of essay writing research to shift once more, to one which acknowledges the social context of writing (Nystrand, 1989).

Perhaps the most prominent model of essay writing which includes individual differences and contextual factors is Hayes and Flower's (1980a) model of composition (see Figure 2.2). This model was devised from the information obtained in many 'think aloud protocols', and was verified using the protocol analysis of just one participant. The

participant's ability to make clear comments during these protocols was used to justify this approach.

Figure 2.2
Hayes and Flower's (1980) Model of Composition



'Task Environment' conveniently includes everything outside of the writer's skin that influences the performance of the task. This encompasses factors such as the essay topic, intended audience and lecturer's attitude. Once writing has commenced this factor will also account for the interaction with the text already written. 'The Writer's Long Term Memory' is an important inclusion since it highlights students' existing knowledge of both the topic in question and essay writing in general.

The writing process itself consists of three major parts: 'Planning'; 'Translating'; and 'Reviewing'. The function of 'Planning', which consists of 'Generating' (retrieving relevant information from long term memory) and 'Organising' (selecting the most useful material retrieved), is to take information from the task environment and from long term

memory in order to set goals and to establish a writing plan to guide the production of a text that will meet these goals. The 'Goal Setting' process identifies and stores criteria such as considering the audience for later use in editing. The 'Plan' may be structured either temporally (e.g. first I will define the terminology then I will provide background details), or hierarchically (e.g. under topic 1 I should discuss a, b and c), or both. The plan informs the 'Translating' process in which undergraduates produce written language.

The function of the 'Reviewing' process (reading and editing) is to improve the quality of the text produced at the 'Translating' stage. This is done through the detection and correction of weaknesses in the text regarding language conventions, accuracy of meaning and evaluation of the text's accomplishment of the goals. The 'Editing' process examines any material that the writer puts into words, whether by reading, writing or speaking. Its purpose is to correct violations in writing conventions, inaccuracies of meaning and to evaluate the material in accordance with set goals. These evaluations may be reflected in questions such as "will this argument be convincing?" and "have I covered all parts of the plan?" (Hayes and Flower, 1980). All aspects of writing are 'Monitored'. This includes the interruption of other processes by 'Editing' and 'Generating', and the control of writing processes by individual differences in goal setting and individual differences in writing style.

It has been said that anything less than a carefully detailed theory in writing research will not suffice (Collins and Gentner, 1980), and the Hayes and Flowers model is certainly detailed.

A second advantage of the theory is the possibility of embedding it in computer technology (Collins and Gentner, 1980). Although the Hayes and Flower (1980a) model of essay writing is a useful starting point for comprehensive theories of students' experience with essay writing, it leaves its components largely unexplained. For example, the model includes the task environment and states that it may relate to student motivation, but in the model these relationships exist within an unexplained black box.

Although long term memory is emphasised, there is little emphasis on short term memory as a factor in essay writing. The assumption seems to be that the student is well prepared and has knowledge regarding the essay in their long term memory, while underestimating the use of materials to gain information while actually writing the essay. This under-emphasis may lead researchers to exclude the possibility of acts such as plagiarism in the composition process.

The methodology leading to this model must also be examined. Protocol analysis does provide a complex account of a writer's conscious activities during composition (see Newell and Simon, 1972 for discussion of methodology) but Hayes and Flower themselves admit that protocols often do not contain enough information to build a complete picture. They go on to state that incomplete information, together with knowledge of the task enabled them to "infer from these a model of the underlying psychological processes." (Hayes and Flower, 1980a). Clearly more than inference is required if empirical conclusions are to be reached.

A revised model of composition does indeed make improvements on the model described above (see Hayes, 1996; Hayes and Nash, 1996). The task environment is separated into the social and physical, with the physical environment including the text so far and the composing medium (an important inclusion given the possible effect of computer use in this process). The social environment specifies the components of this context as the audience and collaborators. Motivational cues are also elaborated. These are separated into four components: goals; predispositions; beliefs and attitudes; and cost/benefit estimates. This is indeed an improvement. Cost benefit analysis provides an indication of the kind of motivational dynamics that may be occurring, but still the essence is that these factors have an influence not what their influence is or how it works.

In addition, writing situations that require participants to compose aloud for an audience also have the problem of being unnatural, despite reassurance by one professional writer that the composer quickly becomes at ease (Murray, 1982). These requirements place additional demands on the writing process since it is a hybrid of writing and speaking and may affect cognitions, particularly because it takes writing into the realms of a conscious process, which it may not be in reality.

The procedure for carrying out protocol analysis could also be regarded as dubious. Hayes and Flower implement a selection procedure on the basis of subjects' ability to provide oral reports while composing. This may have provided distorted results as the population used to clarify the model is not random and hence not generalisable. A related concern is that the researchers, rather than the writers, select the writing task, hence writers are dealing with a situation beyond their normal writing experience (Newkirk, 1982).

Although this model acts as a foundation for future models, in essence we are told context and individual difference are important factors, but the emphasis is 'work out the rest for yourself'. It does not identify specific individual differences such as ethnicity and age (see Gentry, 1980) or outline the effect they will have on the writing process. Motivational aspects of the process also remain unidentified. Although he finds this model 'admirable' Wason (1980) noted its failure to 'capture obscure motivational dynamics'. Clearly a model has yet to be developed which identifies what it is in the writing context that influences individual differences in motivation and writing strategies and how. Even Hayes (1996) admitted that few doubt that motivation is important in writing, but that it does not have a comfortable place in current social-cognitive models. He stated that "much more needs to be understood about motivation and affect." (Hayes, 1996, p9). He outlined four areas of

special importance for writing research: the nature of motivation; interaction among goals; choice among methods; and affective responses in reading and writing.

However, research has progressed greatly since the 1920's, and even since the work of Emig (1971) and Britton et al (1975), researchers have broadened their horizons (Faigley, 1986). Researchers have considered the relationship between process, text, achievement and the social context of composing (Faigley, 1986). Much of this wide ranging research was facilitated by the myriad methodologies to choose from since the 1980s (Hartley and Knapper, 1984). Methodologies used include protocol analysis, questionnaires, introspective reports, notebooks, correspondence and diaries, and recorded interviews with writers. Researchers have even acted as participant observers and video recorded student writing (Hartley and Knapper, 1984). The variety of methodologies with which to investigate the composing process is clearly highlighted in Table 2.1 from Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). The table shows how research, according to the questions being asked, poses different kinds of questions, and utilises different methodologies.

For the purpose of the current research, to identify students' experience of writing in order discover if it is reflected by the ASI (18 item), it is necessary for this investigation to explore questions at level 1 and 4. These levels of enquiry, according to the table, can be addressed using, amongst other techniques, retrospective reports, interviews and discussion.

Table 2.1

Six levels of enquiry on writing, as outlined by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), table taken from Hartley (1992).

Level	Characteristic Questions	Typical Methods
1 Reflective enquiry.	What is the nature of this phenomenon? What are the problems? What do the data mean?	Informal observation. Introspection. Discussion and argument. Private reflection.
2 Empirical variable testing.	Is this assumption correct ? What is the relationship between x and y?	Factorial analysis. Correlational analysis. Surveys. Coding of compositions.
3 Text analysis.	What makes this text seem the way it does? What rules could the writer be following?	Error analysis. Story grammar analysis. Thematic analysis.
4 Process description.	What is the writer thinking? What pattern or system is revealed in the writer's thoughts while composing?	Think aloud protocols. Clinical-experimental interviews. Retrospective reports. Inference.
5 Theory embedded experimentation	What is the nature of the cognitive system responsible for these observations? Which process model is right?	Experimental procedures tailored to questions. Chronometry. Inference.
6 Simulation.	How does the cognitive mechanism work? What range of natural variations can the model account for? What remains to be accounted for?	Computer simulation. Simulation by intervention.

Over the last decade or so a new approach to these methodologies has developed which could facilitate the current research in answering such questions. It is a 'second order' perspective in which the experience of learning from the view point of students is the focus (Marton, 1981). This approach, termed phenomenography or ethnomethodology and used largely in the SAL tradition (as discussed in Chapter 1), has only recently been used to explore the processes of essay writing (e.g. Hounsell, 1984, 1987; Prosser and Webb, 1994). However, this methodology has its limitations. For example, Prosser and Webb

(1994) used semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the students' experience of essay writing; below are some of the questions they asked:

What were you trying to achieve in writing the essay?

What do you think your tutor is looking for?

What do you think distinguishes this essay from other essays you have written?

How did you choose the topic?

What did you do after choosing the topic?

What did you do when reading?

Asking structured questions constrains the ethnographic approach since findings are limited to the participants' responses to issues imposed by the researcher. Condor (1997) describes this research paradigm as providing no indication that all of the important questions are being asked. To progress with a set of questions regarding essay writing would restrict the findings to a set of pre-determined factors. The participant is not provided with the freedom to provide their own detailed account of essay writing, but only to confirm or refute the experience supposed by the researcher. Not only can it be said that this situation limits knowledge to describing further previously identified phenomena, but begs the question of whether such research is truly phenomenographic.

Here a methodology will be used which enables the researcher to proceed without setting the agenda, other than the topic of assessed course-work essay writing. There are several methodologies which would enable qualitative, unconstrained data to be collected regarding student essay writing: participant observation; unstructured individual interviews and focus groups. Focus groups are basically group interviews with the researcher typically taking the role of a moderator.

In focus groups, unlike interviews, it is possible to construct a self managed situation in which the facilitator can remain detached. Hence there is less likelihood that the interviewer pre-constructs the data. They also enable the research to begin with a wide focus but allow

the researcher to focus in and gain more detailed information on salient issues as they arise, such as where, who, what, why, how, temporal questions and frequency rates. More importantly participants are able, due to the lack of an imposing framework, to tell the researcher what they think is important. Questions are not pre-determined, hence neither is participants' input in the research. To open up discussion all that is required is a word, phrase or sentence. Focus groups also enable the researchers to define the terms they use and in return ask participants to define and qualify any terms they use. Focus groups allow the research design to emerge, determined by the outcome of the focus groups, a paradigm which is favourable to setting a conceptual framework for research (Wolcott, 1982). They also enable a researcher to gain a range of views and large amounts of information in relatively short periods of time (Fern, 1982, 1983). However, they are carried out in fundamentally unnatural social settings and do exert more control over the participants relative to participant observation. However, since the final decision was based on pragmatic as well as methodological considerations, focus groups were deemed the best option for the current research as they combine the need to obtain unconstrained data with the limited resources available. Therefore, data collection progressed with retrospective discussion, regarding assessed course-work essay writing, by groups of participants.

Since data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship, a method of analysing that would not constrain the focus group data and permit a theory to emerge was required if the current research was to continue to progress phenomenographically.

However, Eizenberg (1986) felt that researchers who follow in the phenomenographic tradition of qualitative data collection and analysis were prepared to include 'chats at the foot of the stairs' or 'over a beer'. Informal discussions lead to research with little structure, open to contamination by 'unrecorded' aspects of the researcher's behaviour which may have prompted the participants to confirm the researcher's expectations

(Eizenberg, 1986). Given these issues grounded theory appeared to be the most appropriate method of data analysis for the current research, since it provides a way of systematically developing theory, using rich qualitative data, based on systematic method rather than speculation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Another important factor in the decision to use grounded theory is its multivariate nature, which will enable integrative diagrams to be made from qualitative data, a possibility which will be of great use in presenting the theory of essay writing developed to others.

Grounded theory, originally developed by two sociologists Glaser and Strauss, is a methodology for the analysis of qualitative data in which specific themes are gleaned solely from the respondents' narrative. According to this approach it makes no sense to start with 'received' theories or variables as these impede the development of new theoretical formulations (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). When looking at data using grounded theory, the first task is to carry out open coding. This consists of identifying categories through a system of comparing and contrasting similar concepts and then distinguishing dimensions and sub-dimensions within these categories. The latter can be generated from questions about the former. The next stage is known as co-axial coding in which relationships between the categories and sub-dimensions are identified (see Henwood and Pidgeon, 1995).

Grounded theory challenges the traditional empirical, hypothetico-deductive model of research in which research must have hypotheses, generated or deduced from general theories, which must not change with experiences in the field. The hypothetico-deductive tradition is alleged to place too much emphasis on verification of existing theories and too little on development of new theories which are grounded in the specific field (see Altrichter and Posch, 1989). For a theory to be grounded, the researcher has to enter the field in an

unprejudiced state of mind, without any pre-conceived theory. Accordingly, it is necessary for the researcher to be unaware of the research literature until the grounded theory is complete. This was possible to an extent in the current research: However, some reading of the literature had been carried out prior to the qualitative stage of research, due to the time constraints of the PhD.

2.3 Study 1

2.3.1 Participants

24 undergraduates, mainly from a psychology degree course volunteered as participants. These participants consisted of twelve first year, six second year and six third year students. Each participant was allocated to one of six focus groups.

2.3.2 Procedure

The number of focus groups required was not determined from the outset of this study. Instead, in line with the reflexive ideology of this method, focus groups ceased when the facilitator could clearly predict, based on preceding focus groups, their content (see Calder, 1977). It is assumed that this prediction indicates that the topic of conversation has been exhausted. Therefore, participants were invited to take part in 'discussion groups' by means of a sign up sheet, placed on a student notice board, as and when focus groups were required.

Initially ten first year undergraduates signed up. Since data from a trial focus group lacked depth due to a large number of participants (n=10), these participants were randomly allocated to one of two focus groups, with five students in each. The second focus group provided new information, therefore, another focus group was organised. The third focus group contained the three second year and three third years students who had volunteered.

The content of this discussion indicated that further participants were required. In this case four students signed up to take part (two second year and two third year undergraduates). Once again this focus group highlighted novel issues. The fifth focus group contained three undergraduates (all first year students) who discussed only a few issues not previously raised. The content of the subsequent focus group, containing two students (a second and third year), was predictable. Therefore this focus group was the last. NB: The transcripts of some third year students may read as if these students have finished their degree. This is due to the timing of some focus groups which took place just after students' final year examinations.

In each of the focus groups students were asked to talk about producing a course-work essay, from the moment it was set, to handing it in. They were asked to talk about anything they felt was relevant. Each participant was also given the opportunity to discuss their experience of essay writing. The reason for this was the discovery in the trial focus group that 'social loafing' was occurring. Further questions, aimed at encouraging students to elaborate on points they had raised, were asked.

Participants were recorded with their permission. Recordings were transcribed (see Appendix A) and analysed using grounded theory. This analysis occurred in five distinct stages which are described below. The first stage identified undergraduates' process of course-work essay writing; the second stage identified individual differences in that process; The third stage investigated the validity of the findings regarding that process; The fourth stage highlighted the factors affecting the essay writing process; and finally verification of these influences is described in the fifth stage.

2.4 Stage One

Identifying The Undergraduate Process of Course-Work Essay Writing

2.4.1 Open Coding

1. The focus group transcripts were reduced in length by eliminating repetitions and hesitations, leaving the issues raised by the participants in a concise and manageable form.
2. The transcripts were read and re-read in order that differences and similarities in the main themes of the data could be identified.
3. Categories (groups of utterances which relate to the same issue) were identified and labelled in order to increase their conceptual power. For example the following utterances, from different participants, relate to deciding which information is relevant to their essay:

“I start reading all the references and highlight or underline all the points I think are really good...”

“I’ll read it through and skim it very briefly, then I’ll try and find anything useful...”

These types of utterances were identified as a category and labelled ‘selecting relevant information’ (SRI)

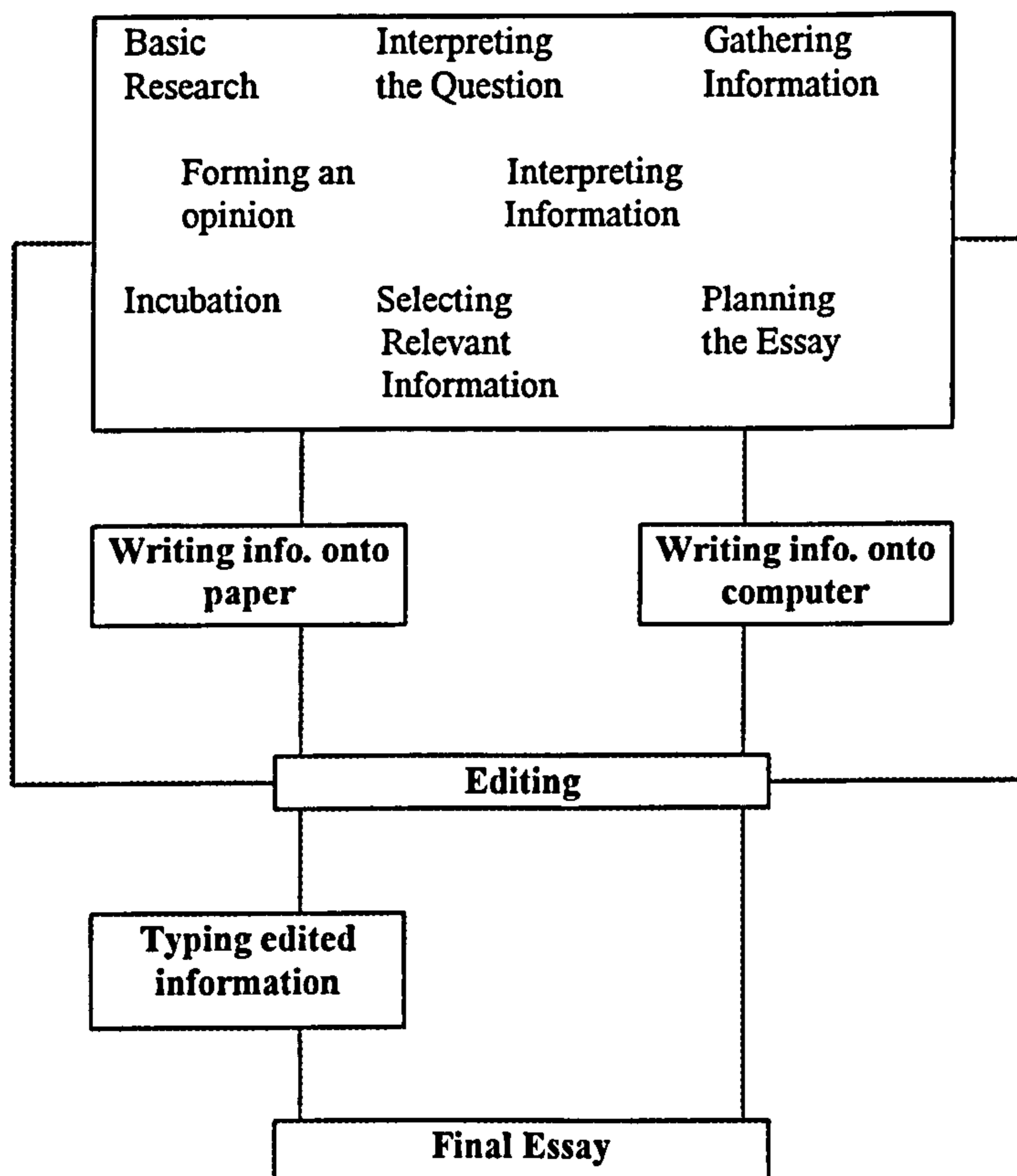
4. Sub-categories within these categories were identified. This entailed identifying and labelling the different components of each category. For example four different components, methods of ‘selecting relevant information’, were identified and given appropriate labels: remembering; highlighting; listing; and note taking.

2.4.2 Co-Axial Coding

5. Co-axial coding was used to identify relationships between the categories and sub-categories of the essay writing process. This entailed the researcher, once again, immersing

herself in the data. In this case the newly labelled categories and sub-categories were examined and various questions considered such as: what other categories or sub-categories exist together in each participant, which categories seem to be mutually exclusive, and do any categories or sub-categories always follow or precede another? Once the researcher felt they had exhausted their search, i.e. they had located all the obvious and convincing relationships they attempted to represent these relationships in a diagram. The diagram aims to capture the relationship in a way that conveys them simply and clearly. Eventually, after much consideration and 'trial and error' a diagram was arrived at which presented an accurate picture of these relationships. This diagram is therefore regarded as the model of undergraduates' process of writing and is illustrated in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3
The Undergraduates' Process of Course-Work Essay Writing



This model consists of the ten categories of phenomena (components) of students' process of essay writing: Interpreting The Question; Basic Research; Gathering Information; Forming an Opinion; Interpreting Information; Incubation; Selecting Relevant Information; Planning; Writing; and Editing. These components and their sub-components are described below.

1. Interpreting The Question

Interpreting the question consisted of a variety of possible phenomena such as picking out key words in the essay title, forming an opinion regarding the title's meaning, or transforming the title into plain English, by defining terms such as 'discuss' and 'evaluate':

"I think about the question and my own stance on the question, how I am going to answer it." (participant 1)

2. Basic Research

'Basic research' consisted of a number of possible sub-categories: collaborating with peers; reading lecture notes or introductory texts; and retrieving information from memory regarding an essay. Undergraduates collaborated with their peers at different stages in the essay writing process:

"I talk to my friends see what they think, what they would do with their essays . . . and then I'll go back to the books and the notes reading those, underline what I think are good points and then try and write it out and normally speak to my friends again . . ." (participant 16)

Students' collaboration entailed offering information, receiving information or both.

Collaborative discussions focused on the essay topic, the essay question, its meaning and how to write essays. However, information obtained during peer discussion was not necessarily used. One reason for it being sought was to gain reassurance, but for some it inspired anxiety:

"I don't like talking about it -- the more I talk the more I worry." (participant 17)

Often students described using lecture notes to gain information pertaining to a specific essay topic although, this was not a strategy all students expressed using:

“ . . . if we have done the topic in a lecture, then we tend to go back to the lecture notes.” (participant 18)

Recalling information from memory consisted of students remembering knowledge that they felt was relevant for their essays:

“ . . . then think of the areas, like from basic knowledge, of what I am going to put in the essay.” (participant 5)

Many students discussed using general texts to help them uncover the key researchers in a specific field or to find out how the research arguments are structured:

“ . . . get a review book out and read a general introduction of the text on the subject, read a chapter on the section of your subject to get an idea of what’s going on.” (participant 11).

3. Gathering Information

There were two possible sources of information for students to use in their essays (apart from the introductory texts which have already been discussed): books (specific to the essay topic) and journal articles:

“ . . . I go to the library and look books up . . . ” (participant 6)

“ I’ll go to a journal and see who the prominent name or names are.” (participant 9)

However, it appeared that while all participants in the focus groups used books they varied in their use of journal articles.

4. Forming an Opinion

This component described a situation in which students formed an opinion regarding the issues discussed in the material they gathered:

“ . . . and even if you do have an opinion at the beginning I think that might change as you go through the information.” (participant 2)

Once the student had obtained information regarding the essay question some interpreted this information, for example translating it into their own words in order to understand the meaning of the question.

5. Interpreting Information

Interpreting information took many forms, for example highlighting the key themes in the material, or relating it to other supporting or contradictory information, rather than simply transposing it into an essay:

“. . . then normally I read through the area . . . try to get a general understanding of it. . .”
(participant 24)

6. Incubation

Incubation involved considering aspects of the essay while not actually working on it:

“I wake up in the morning and think I could open with this line. Frequently- in fact I may wake up with different ways of saying it until I think YES- I'm going to write it down . . .”
(participant 17).

7. Selecting Relevant Information

Selecting relevant information refers to students choosing the material that they wish go into their essays. It was done using one or more of a number of processes: taking notes while reading; highlighting the text; writing a list of references; or memorising relevant information. Taking notes while reading seemed to one of the most common strategies and entailed making notes from the text that were perceived to be relevant to an essay:

“I get a whole load of books out, find out what is relevant, read through them and write too many notes.” (participant 4)

However, this method of selecting relevant information seemed to be the most at risk of abuse (whether intentional or not) in terms of students plagiarising, rather than writing notes from the text in their own words.

Highlighting relevant text in books, journal articles or photocopies of them was another common strategy:

“. . . I'll try and find anything useful, I might try and highlight a few key phrases if its a photocopy . . .” (participant 7)

Writing a list of references to indicate where useful information is located was also used to select relevant information. This process helped students relocate information:

“Every time I mention someone's name I put it in the reference section straight away, and then you are not left with the laborious task of remembering where you got them from . . .” (participant 6)

Some students discussed memorising information when they came across it and retrieving it from memory when they wrote their essay draft or plan:

“. . . I tend to sort of read more and remember what I have read . . .” (participant 25)

8. Planning

Planning was a flexible process which changed as other writing processes such as writing, gathering information and basic research occurred:

“The reading and the plan making are done together at the same time.” (participant 25)

Some students discussed writing long, expansive plans, whereas others wrote a brief list of topics:

“I just do the names, headings and the arguments, really brief.” (participant 17)

Plans consisted of information organised hierarchically according to which topics will go where in the essay (planning order) and/or in groups of topics (planning groupings) where topics and issues are grouped together, often with headings. Plans came in many guises; some students had a structure in their mind, but this was not written down:

“I think I know in my mind what I want to put in, points and specific areas how I want to structure it but I don't actually make a written plan.” (participant 4)

Other students physically organised information:

“I tend to just photocopy loads of journals and snip out all the relevant bits, go through those bits with the highlighter, then cut out the relevant bits and I have them scattered all around my room, then I make little piles of them so that all the relevant ones are together—then sort piles into introduction, middle bit, conclusion . . .” (participant 18)

Even when plans were written down some came in the form of diagrams:

“. . . I try then to draw a mind map on paper . . .” (participant 11)

9. Writing

Many students reported writing information onto paper, editing this into a hand written draft, then typing or writing the final draft into a neat copy. However, in some cases technology played a more integral role in writing. Some students typed the information they wanted to go into their essays onto a computer where they edited it into a final version:

“ I just have all the books there . . . and just tap the notes straight in - then you can just add bits in that you find. You don't have to keep re-writing it.” (participant 20)

Other students wrote the notes of relevant information onto paper first, subsequently copying them into a computer, indicating different levels of computer use in the writing process:

“I make my hand written notes and then type it up and change it.” (participant 16).

10. Editing

There appeared to be two levels of behaviour in editing. The first consisted of basic editing such as correcting language conventions (spelling and grammar) and reaching the word limit:

“A 1000 word essay is not long and its hard to compact it all.” (participant 20).

“. . . and then I’ll spend the last few weeks refining it, making the grammar right. . . (participant 9)

The second level of editing was a more complex refinement, where the student returned to planning, selecting relevant information, basic research, interpreting the question and gathering information in order to change the information in the essay, by adding or taking material out and generally modifying the structure.

“I spend ages just changing it that's why I always type it Its so much easier to add information you get later.” (participant 20)

Generally the impact of the use of technology on this editing process was viewed by the students as a positive one, facilitating editing procedures and enabling the management of large amounts of material:

“I did the project on the computer though as it was just too big to mess around with.” (participant 25)

“It makes a big difference, you automatically become fussier, because you can see things, whereas, if you are handwriting it there is a limited number of times that you will re-write something.” (participant 21)

The first eight components of the essay writing process occurred dynamically, in that students continuously moved from one to the other, in no prescribed order. The only hierarchy that existed is that ‘Interpreting information’ and ‘Forming an opinion’ can only occur as a reaction to ‘Gathering information’ or ‘Basic research’. The existence of these components in the model is not intended to suggest that all students will carry out all of the actions, but that these are the main components of the essay writing process which a student

may or may not carry out. However, all students carried out either 'Gathering Information' or 'Basic Research'.

2.4.3 Discussion

Many of the components identified in the process of undergraduate essay writing have been identified in the existing literature. Indeed, the finding that essay writing is broken up into components or smaller parts is not unusual (see also Bereiter, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Hartley, 1984).

'Incubation' was described by Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (1980) who discovered that half of the students in their investigation left time for reflection. Furthermore, Mahalski's (1992) findings revealed 71% of students thought about the essay question as part of their writing process.

Collaboration with peers has also been described in previous research, for example Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (1980) reported that different kinds of collaboration occurred at different stages in the writing process. One quarter of their sample discussed their essay plans with someone else. Approximately 10% gave the essay to someone else to read before handing it in, and 61% of students discussed the essay question with friends.

The use of lecture notes in the production of an essay is also reported consistently (see Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Mahalski, 1992; Norton, 1990). The action of recalling information from memory is alluded to by Hayes and Flower (1980) who discuss the importance of long term memory in the construction of an essay.

Findings regarding the use of books and journal articles in the current research also parallel those of the previous research. Norton (1990) found that the majority of participants in her investigation used books to gain information whereas only 11% used journal articles.

The existence of 'Selecting Relevant Information' supports a finding by Mahalski (1992). In this study of 28 geography students this component was not only identified but 43% of the participants cited the selection of relevant information as one of the most difficult aspects of producing an essay.

The diversity of plans is reported to be vast in both the current research and the existing literature. Norton (1990) identified different types of plan: basic; mental; and extended. The basic and extended plans can be compared to the brief and detailed plans highlighted in the current research. The fact that plans can be flexible or rigid is also supported by Norton (1990) who found that 65% of the population in her questionnaire study made plans that were subsequently altered as the essay progressed. Hayes and Flowers' (1980a) model of composition also suggested that planning could be sub-dimensionalised into many phenomena. Planning in Hayes and Flowers' research consisted of goal setting. This can exist in the form of a temporal plan stating the order of information (described in the current model as 'planning order') or a hierarchical plan in which topics are grouped under headings (equivalent to 'planning groupings' in the current model).

The description in the current research of editing, or revising, as a recursive process is consistent with the findings of other research (e.g. Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Sommers, 1980). Sommers' research found that revising could be a re-wording activity or one in which semantics are adjusted. This distinction was not identified in the current research, possibly because all of the writers involved were what Sommers might

regard as inexperienced, i.e. who tend only to use revision as a re-wording exercise.

However, the current research did identify the same re-wording activities as Sommers: deletion; addition; substitution and re-arrangement.

The current findings regarding the impact of technology on the process of essay writing reflect those of a study by Hartley (1992) who found that writers may change their revision strategies if they are assisted by computer technologies. However, Fitzgerald (1987) is not optimistic. She reports that it is not yet obvious whether using a word processor affects the amount or the quality of the revision carried out. Notwithstanding this, the current research indicates that the use of a computer in the production of an essay increases the amount of revision a student can carry out and the amount of material they can deal with.

The model of a student's writing process describing the relationship between the components identified also supports much of the current research. It is consistent with current thinking in that the essay writing process is recursive, with the writer going through several plan-draft-revise cycles, as well as diverging into planning and revision whilst drafting is taking place (e.g. de Beaugrande, 1984; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Matsushashi, 1987). However, the current research also identified some hierarchical elements in the process, in that certain actions cannot be carried out until other actions have occurred. This is not a contentious issue since a student cannot form an opinion with regard to the information or interpret that information until it has been gathered in some way. The current findings suggest that this material may be gathered in numerous ways: lecture notes; from peers; general texts; specific texts or journals and, although the authors of the most predominant model of essay writing, Hayes and Flowers (1980), agree that the student selects which material is most useful to them, it does not provide information regarding the specific activities involved in this process.

2.5 Stage Two

Individual Differences in the Writing Process.

Since the final aim of this research is to discover how approaches to studying, as measured by the ASI, relate to students' experiences of essay writing, the individual differences in students' processes of writing were also explored. In order to identify the individual differences in students' use of the components of essay writing, as illustrated in Figure 2.3 above, the original focus group data were re-examined and the following procedure was carried out:

1. The data were broken down participant by participant (participant 23 could not be used due to late arrival to a focus group, leading to incomplete information). This provided a description of the components of course-work essay writing that each participant used.
2. The accounts of students' writing processes were examined for differences and similarities in order to identify patterns or common writing strategies. It became clear at this stage that there were no patterns in the order in which components were carried out, probably due to the recursive nature of the process -- meaning a vast number of sequences were possible. It also became evident that there were no distinct patterns in participants' use of all components. For example, a strategy emerged in which students gathered information, carried out basic research, selected relevant information and planned. However, this strategy (extensive processing) became diluted when forming an opinion, interpreting information and incubation were included since one or more of these components occurred for some extensive processors but not for others.

The lack of pattern in the use of these components may have been due to the incomplete nature of students' descriptions of their process of writing in the focus groups. Indeed

these components all relate to mental processes that would require students to be aware of their own cognitive processes. As suggested by Biggs (1988) the process of composing an essay is a 'mysterious business' with regard to all but the most obvious processes. Certainly Entwistle (1995) found that students had difficulty reporting quasi-sensory experiences leading to form, structure and understanding. Therefore, the decision was taken to compare the participants' essay writing process again, with the absence of these components. It is not intended to suggest that these components are not important aspects of the writing process but that the current data do not supply a complete picture of their use.

3. The data were examined again without the presence of the above components of essay writing and strategies of writing emerged.

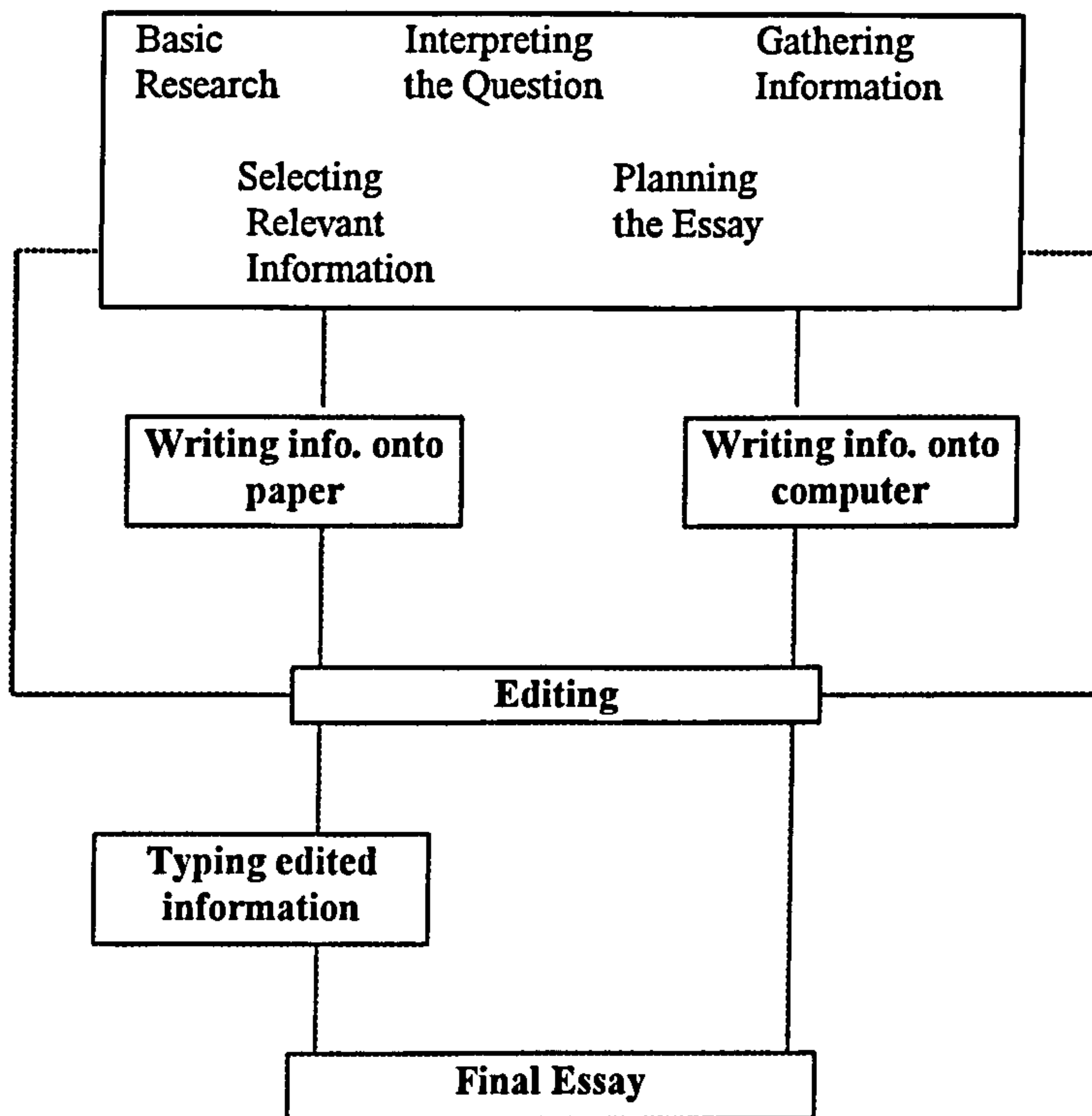
4. Where more than three participants used the same combination of components this was considered to be an essay writing strategy. Four main essay writing strategies emerged which were termed: extensive processors; editors; reliant researchers and limited processors. These will be described in turn.

2.5.1 Extensive Processors

Eight participants were identified as using this strategy of writing, which included the use of all of the possible components of essay writing: 'gathering information'; 'basic research'; 'selecting relevant information' and 'planning' (see Figure 2.4):

"I go back to basics first, to the text books to cover the real ground work. I tend to just photocopy loads of journals and snip out all the relevant bits, go through those bits with the highlighter, then cut out the relevant bits and I have them scattered all around my room. Then I make little piles of them so that all the relevant ones are together- then sort piles into introduction, middle bit, conclusion and just write through. I have to plan it because otherwise I would put in all the irrelevant stuff . . ." (participant 18)

Figure 2.4
The Extensive Processors



The following strategies of writing appeared to be variations of the extensive processing strategy.

2.5.2 Editors

This process describes participants (n=6) who did not carry out ‘planning’, but instead ‘edit’ their products into the version to be submitted:

“... I would go to a review book, I would read the review book, I would read key words by people stated in the book and will read abstracts of literature search items, and then after making notes on these as I’m reading them, I would then sit down and bash some relevant points into it (computer). Then I’ll come back every day or every other day and spend between 10 and 30 minutes, work on it and develop it and fill it out in the main body and then I’ll come and do the introduction and the conclusion after I feel I’ve got some sort of flow in it, and then I’ll spend the last few weeks refining it, making the grammar right . . .” (participant 9)

This strategy seemed to develop due to the use of a computer to produce an essay or is facilitated by the use of a computer.

2.5.3 Reliant Researchers

Seven participants used this strategy which included all the components of the extensive process except 'basic research'. These students appeared to be more interested in obtaining specific material, in journal articles and books, rather than gaining preliminary information from other sources like lecture notes or introductory texts and friends. This strategy appears to represent a tendency not to explore the question with 'basic research' and indicated an over reliance on the set references:

"Where they have been given for a particular essay, I tend to look at the references because it would appear to me that they want us to look at the references and compare and contrast what is in the references." (participant 25).

2.5.4 Limited Processors

Three participants of the focus groups carried out this strategy. It entailed most of the elements from the extensive process except 'selecting relevant information' and 'gathering information'. Students using this process talked about using all of the material they found for their essay in order to reach the word limit, since none of this came from specific books or journal articles:

"I very rarely go in the library and look in books, if I haven't got it in notes someone else probably will and then the main text book to try and browse around and just pick loads of different points from each one, don't put them in any particular order, its like a brainstorm. I don't usually listen to other peoples views of what they are going to put in. I mean usually I just try to start straight from scratch and just write the whole thing without a draft . . ." (participant 12)

2.5.5 Discussion

Although the difference between these four strategies is minimal, they do reflect findings in the existing literature. In Hounsell's (1984) investigation of the essay writing techniques of 16 psychology and 17 history students, using semi-structured interviews, five planning strategies were identified, one of which was no plan at all (editors in the current research). Torrance, Thomas and Robinson (1994) used a 34 item questionnaire concerning writing

habits, experiences and productivity which was sent to 228 full time social science research students. This enabled the researchers to identify three distinct categories of writer. One group, 'revisers', are particularly relevant to the current findings. According to Torrance et al's research 'revisers' developed the content and structure of written text through extensive revision, much like the 'editors' in this research, whereas an alternative group 'planners' planned extensively and made few revisions. The remaining process identified by these researchers was the 'mixed' strategy where 'planning' and 'revising' were extensive. This could be compared to the extensive processors described in the current research. This distinction between 'planners' and 'revisers' was also identified by Elbow, 1973, 1981 and Wason, 1970, 1985. In addition previous research (see Elbow, 1973, 1981; Hounsell, 1994b; Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, 1994; Wason 1970, 1985) found that components similar to 'editing', in the current research, were facilitated by computer use. However, it must be considered that differences in the four strategies are not pronounced and may therefore be due to participants' failure to provide a complete picture of their essay writing process.

2.6 Stage Three

Validity of the Description of the Process of Undergraduate Essay Writing

According to Parlett and Hamilton (1977) a valid grounded theory should provide a recognisable reality to members of the population carrying out the act to which the theory pertains. Study 2 was carried out in order to test the validity of the grounded theory as developed so far, i.e. the process of undergraduates' essay writing, in terms of its validity. Hence the study was carried out using undergraduates from a course in which course-work essay writing was used as a method of assessment.

2.6.1 Study 2

2.6.1.1 Participants

Eight participants studying for a psychology degree from a range of years at the University of Plymouth volunteered to take part in the interviews via a sign up sheet posted on a student notice board.

2.6.1.2 Procedure

Four interviews were carried out with 2 participants in each. Interviews were recorded and transcripts made of these recordings (see Appendix B). Participants were shown the strategies of essay writing (extensive processors, editors, research reliant and limited processors) (see Appendix C) and asked if they recognised them from their own experience of writing. They were invited to be completely honest, even if this meant disagreeing with anything they were presented with. Specific questions were also asked regarding the consistency of their approach in essay writing and the recursive nature of the process.

Only three of the interviews could be analysed due to the third interview tape being damaged, which rendered it inaccessible

2.6.2 Results

The components of essay writing and the strategies 'rang true' to the students in this study, since they were able to identify themselves as using them: participants 1 and 2 categorised themselves as being Research Reliant; participants 3, 4 and 5 recognised themselves as Extensive Processors; participant 6 was an Editor.

It seemed from these interviews that students are consistent in their approach to essay writing using the same strategy for most of their course-work:

“I suppose the format I use has pretty much stayed the same, my attitude behind it might change according to the subject matter and how good my knowledge is.” (participant 5)

“for the last 3 years it’s been exactly the same process, no change.” (participant 6)

Any change that occurs is gradual, rather than changing from essay to essay. These gradual changes seem to be due to growth - or learning to use new technology:

“I think mine changed a lot from when I was at school to when I did my access, totally different, but I never had a computer before and that made a big difference.” (participant 3)

The only change in strategy mentioned, other than gradual development, related to being forced to change strategy in particular essays due to environmental factors:

“ . . . it will change if you haven’t got much time to do it . . . ” (participant 2)

However, it was uncertain from these data whether the ‘research reliant’ strategy existed as a separate strategy or a variation of the ‘extensive processors’. This uncertainty originated from an account of a participant using the full process who stated that the presence of ‘basic research’ in this strategy “ . . . depends on the level of question, on how open the question is perhaps. . . ” (participant 3). Also the participant who identified herself as being research reliant stated, with reference to basic research “ . . . sometimes I will do, it depends on what the essay was on.” (participant 1).

These interviews also indicated that ‘Interpreting the question’ should not be integral to the strategies, because it is not consistent within a strategy but instead dependent on a particular essay. When asked whether they interpreted the question participant 1 stated that, “ . . . it depends on the question . . . ” and participant 4 stated “ . . . the interpreting of the question, it depends how well I know my subject . . . ”.

The participants of Study 2 confirmed the previous findings that the order in which the components of essay writing were carried out was recursive, occurring in no set order and recurring at many stages during writing:

“I agree with the editing in different places, I do that bit regularly...” (participant 1)

“... I keep going back to interpreting the question ... I think it’s a much more dynamic process of going over and over the first steps.” (participant 5)

2.6.3 Discussion

Students did not indicate that their use of a strategy was sporadic, but rather, any change would develop over time unless circumstances forced a temporary change in their use of strategy (see pages 275 - 277 for examples). Computer use was also described as a factor which caused the strategy of writing adopted to change. There was also the suggestion that the Reliant Researcher and Extensive Processing strategy are one strategy with the use of basic research depending on the essay title in question and how much the student knew about that topic. This needs further investigation because it also appeared that ‘interpreting the question’ (the component discriminating between these two strategies) was integral to writing some essays but not others. ‘Interpreting the question’ will therefore not be included in development of a quantitative tool to measure students’ processes of writing, presented in the next chapter. The next chapter, which reports the components of writing used by a larger group of students, will also shed light on whether the Reliant Research and Extensive Processing strategies exist as distinct strategies of essay writing. Overall it appeared that the essay writing strategies were recognised and therefore qualitatively confirmed by a sample of the population which carry out essay writing.

2.7 Stage Four

Factors Affecting the Undergraduate Course-Work Essay Writing Process.

By this stage of the analysis the focus group data had provided much information regarding students' processes of writing. However, during stages one and two it became clear that the essay writing process was not the only important aspect of students' experiences of course-work essay writing. In order to avoid a sole preoccupation with the essay writing process at the risk of overlooking other important factors the original focus group data, obtained in Study 1, were returned to. These data were analysed in order that themes relating to aspects course-work essay writing other than process could be identified systematically using open coding (see stage one for a description of the procedure). Co-axial coding (see stage one) was carried out in order to identify the relationship between these emerging themes and the essay writing process.

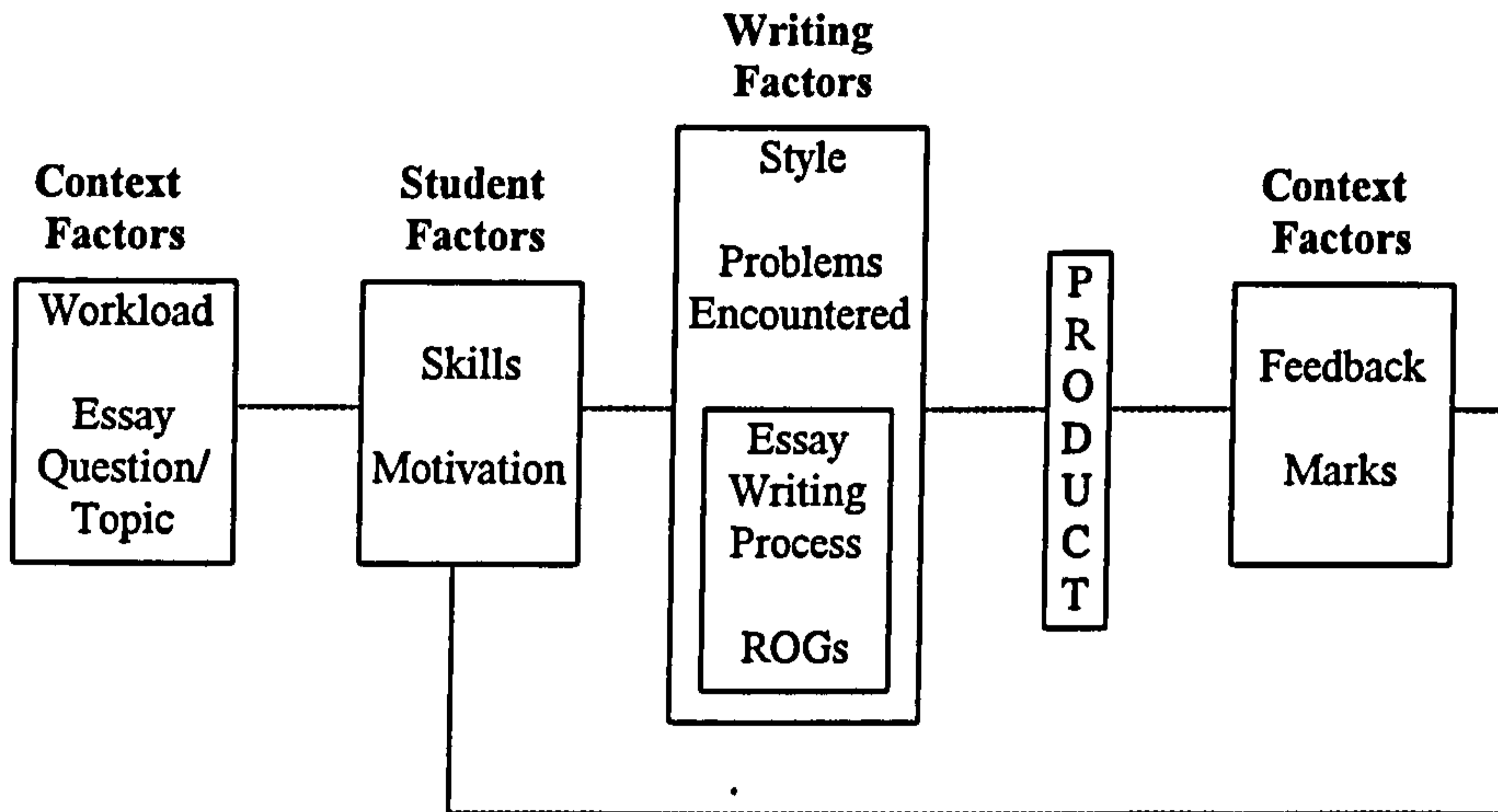
2.7.1 Results

The themes that emerged fell into three wide categories: context; student and writing factors. The context factors included essay question/topic, workload, instruction, feedback and marks. Student factors included their writing skills and motivation. Writing factors consisted of students' style of essay writing (whether or not they develop an argument), the problems they encounter when writing and their use of 'rules of the game' (ROGs) (see Norton, 1996). The qualitative data provided enough information for the relationships between these categories and students' writing process to be identified. Using this information a model of 'The Undergraduate Experience of Essay Writing: A grounded theory (see Figure 2.5) was developed. Although this framework is a somewhat simplified version of the focus group data, it does accurately represent participants' experience of course-work essay writing according to their discourse. Before a detailed description of

this model is given it is necessary to explain two of the more complicated concepts in the model, motivation and ‘rules of the game’ (ROGs).

Figure 2.5

The Undergraduate Experience of Course-work Essay Writing: A Grounded theory



Motivation

Three types of motivation, which represent students’ aims when writing course-work essays, were identified: achievement motivation; understanding motivation; and disenchantment. These motivations encompassed students’ perceptions of course-work essay writing and their enjoyment of it. A further factor was identified which related to students’ reasons for beginning their essay, ‘deadline motivation’.

Achievement motivation, as one might expect, refers to the intention to achieve high marks, to “do well” on their course. This related to students’ desire to improve or maintain their own performance:

“... I've got to get the marks to do well. I just didn't do well on that essay. I got to really try hard on my others.” (participant 5)

This motivation was also manifested in the desire to attain greater marks than fellow students. In some cases competition was actively sought, to add interest to the essay writing process:

“It’s competition, if someone says to me well I’m going to beat you on this and I say right OK its a helpful motivation.” (participant 12).

Understanding Motivation was reflected by a focus on the learning role of the course-work essay and a perception of the essay as useful in facilitating understanding:

“It makes you understand it because you have to understand it in order to be able to write an essay.” (participant 20).

Understanding motivation was exemplified by the intention to understand the issues and material related to an essay. This motivation was also detected in students’ enjoyment of the essay writing experience:

“I don’t particularly want to be the top of the class, I just want to be good at what I do and get enjoyment out of what I do . . .” (participant 4)

Disenchantment was represented in students who perceived the essay as useless as a learning or assessment tool. Disenchanted students’ only intention when writing an essay was “To get it done as painlessly as possible” (participant 12). Students with this motivation showed no concern for the mark (provided they passed the course) or for their understanding of the material:

“ . . . see if I’ve done really well in the other things in the module and I only have to get 20%, then I just scribble . . .” (participant 12)

This motivation was accompanied by no enjoyment of the essay writing experience, where the students viewed the essay only as a chore which offered them no interest:

“Essays are always really boring I never want to read about it.” (participant 15)

Deadline motivation related to whether or not a student began their essays due to self motivation or necessity, due to an impending deadline:

“I have to be under pressure to write it.” (participant 6)

Where students were motivated by the impending deadline it was possible for them to possess an intention to gain a high mark or understanding but not necessarily fulfil that intention. In many instances it appeared that students who exhibited this form of motivation began with good intentions and regretted their rushed efforts since they limited the fulfilment of other goals of essay writing, such as understanding:

“... I'm just delaying until I have to do it and when it's time to do it I find I can't have the time to do it properly anyway, but it's because I want to do it properly that I delay it.”
(participant 14)

The opposite to deadline motivation was indicated by the need to write essays in plenty of time before the deadline in order to avoid stress and handing in a rushed piece of work:

“I have to start mine weeks before it has to be in or else I get too stressed.”
(participant 10)

Rules of the Game

'Rules of the game' (ROGs) are a group of phenomena first described by Norton (1996) in her research into undergraduate course-work essay writing. She identified a student folklore concerning students' belief that higher essay marks could be obtained by adhering to certain rules. Norton found that this folklore was informed by implicit messages from lecturers, or the hidden curriculum. Students' awareness and use of ROGs is supported by the current research in which they talked about essays being "...a game" (participant 24), and discussed the use of specific ROGs originally identified by Norton (1996). The rules identified in both the current research and Norton's (1996) investigation are outlined below:

1. Reflect tutor's opinion in the essay.
2. Write a lot/ big/made the essay look longer.
3. Refer to material produced by the marker.
4. Avoided criticising your marker's research/interest in the essay.
5. Chose a difficult title to get extra credit.
6. Include information not covered in the lectures/original references.
7. Put your greatest effort into getting a high mark for the first submitted essay in a course.
8. Ensure handwriting is legible or typed.
9. Use material/research another essay or course.
10. Chose the easiest title.
11. Copy/paraphrase from textbooks.
12. Copy/paraphrase other students' essays.
13. Choose the title set by the easiest marker, or a tutor you get on with.
14. Put your essay into a plastic folder.
15. Portion time and/or effort according to how many marks each individual essay is worth.
16. Keep a tally of marks to aid calculation of marks needed in each essay to module/course goal
17. Falsify an impressive bibliography/references.
18. Used lots of references in essay.

However, the current research does not indicate whether students learned these strategies implicitly or explicitly. In addition a further three strategies not identified by Norton were reported:

1. Avoid a topic/research the lecturer is interested in.
2. Criticise lecturer's view.
3. Copy structure of an argument from a textbook.

Norton did highlight that students believe agreeing with the lecturer's point of view may gain them higher marks. However, the current research found that some students were extremely aware of their audience when writing and eager to gain their attention. One method of doing this was to criticise the lecturer's view to impress them. Students were careful only to do this with certain types of lecturer:

"main point is to find out which side of the fence the lecturer sits on and then depending on their personality, you will argue for their point or you will argue against their point of view." (participant 25).

Some students generally felt that avoiding the topic the lecturer is interested in is a good strategy to avoid heavy criticism of their essay, since they felt that lecturers were more critical of essays if they covered a topic they were a specialist in:

". . . as far as I'm concerned he would be automatically more critical on the subject because he knows so much about it." (participant 21).

Norton did highlight plagiarism in her research, indeed this strategy was demonstrated to an alarming rate in the current research, over half of the participants discussed using plagiarism or paraphrasing. However, in the current research another type of plagiarism was reported. Some students discussed, not using books for the wording of an essay, but copying the structure of the argument surrounding the topic of an essay instead of developing their own argument:

“. . . see how the articles structure their arguments for and against and I make that the basis for my essay.” (participant 17)

Returning to the general discussion of the grounded theory of the undergraduate experience of essay writing it is important to note that the essay writing experience was cyclical. A student's motivation was both a product of their essay writing experiences and a cause of their behaviour in subsequent essays. Workload and the essay question/topic informed students' motivation for essay writing and the combined effect of students' skills and motivation influenced the essay writing factors. These writing factors determined the problems students encountered when writing. As one might expect writing factors influence the product. The essay itself will influence the student's mark and feedback. The details of this relationship could not be contained in this research since it is out of students' control, but their perception of their mark and feedback are, perhaps, more interesting, since they have a profound effect on the student's motivation in course-work essay writing.

One might say that it is fair to use course-work essay writing as both a learning and assessment tool since students can use the essay to demonstrate their learning. The essay which demonstrates this learning and understanding effectively can be rewarded with high marks. However, the data from Study 1 suggested that understanding motivation and achievement motivation could not co-exist in an environment lacking effective instruction

and feedback, or at least one where the student does not enter with already highly developed writing skills.

Students who approached essay writing with understanding motivation, often represented by enjoyment of the process or intrinsic interest in the essay, tended to read extensively.

However this extensive reading left them with a lot of material, mostly in the form of notes, to manage and organise into a coherent essay structure:

“... the areas I am interested in have been more difficult in a way, but because I am interested in them I tend to sort of read more and remember what I have read and then it's almost like it has fudged the issue and complicated it because there is all this mass of information.” (participant 25)

This situation often seemed to cause the essay to suffer in terms of structure, focus, and adherence to the word limit:

“... as it was interesting, I had the problem of condensing this into 1200 words.” (participant 21)

Feedback and guidance were also found to be important factors in helping students develop a sophisticated writing style. There were two distinct styles when writing an essay, remaining unbiased and developing an argument. Developing an argument pertained to taking “a view on the question” (participant 1), using evidence to support that view and refute alternative views:

“... I will go and read specifically with a viewpoint of finding references and examples to back up the various points I have got in each section.” (participant 18)

‘Remaining unbiased’ is the alternative situation in which students felt that not presenting both sides of an argument, as equally valid, was detrimental to their essay:

“I don't want to restrict myself at all, so I like to be unbiased.” (participant 2).

Many students expressed confusion regarding the correct way in which to express their opinion or argument:

“I find it really difficult to put across your own views but not say things like ‘oh I enjoy this’, it sounds really childish...But I want to put my own view over. . .” (participant 13)

This last quote suggests that some students lacked the skills or knowledge regarding how to ‘develop an argument’ in an essay.

Both the style of writing and the problems encountered in writing when it is approached with an understanding motivation are issues which arise in students’ experience of course-work essay writing when there is a lack of feedback. Such problems are likely to be reflected in a ‘bad’ mark, described as:

“The mark that you'd expect for it and if you don't get that mark.” (participant 3)

A mark that a student is disappointed with acts as a punisher which they try to avoid in the future. However, without effective feedback the students cannot understand where they have gone wrong or learn the essay writing skills required to overcome these problems, thus avoiding a punishing mark.

Ineffective feedback was defined by the students as that which lacked consistency with the mark, was not given often enough, did not contain enough detail or was difficult to understand:

“Basically it is poor or non existent in most cases. You just get ticks or question marks in the margin and at the end of it you might get three lines of sort of ‘could do better’ or ‘this needs more expanding’ ...” (participant 25)

“It’s too much of a catch phrase (‘develop an argument’) and it’s easy and trite to say. You say well how? And they don’t say.” (participant 25).

Students discussed how it was difficult to learn when writing course-work essays or demonstrate learning in an essay because of the lack of instruction and feedback:

“I have never been told what has been required of me. There has always been a strong feeling of not being certain of what they want and even today I am still not really certain what is expected and I have finished the ***** degree . . . and they never tell you.”
(participant 18)

“. . . but as it is now I don't see that serves much purpose as you don't get the feedback.”
(participant 24)

Almost half of the students in the current research describe their essay writing experience as one which lacks effective feedback, if any (n=10). Hence, for them, understanding motivation and achievement motivation were in conflict. In this situation students' perception of the course-work essay writing as a learning tool was likely to diminish. This is extremely worrying since the data here suggested that where ineffective feedback and guidance, or none at all, existed two important occurrences followed. Firstly, students tried to learn by 'trial and success' over many repeated exposures to the reinforcement contingency of essay writing:

“ If there are clues to be taken, then you should take them, as far as I'm concerned, as long as its legal, you've got to get this degree, you should use every tool, or every... bit of fortune that comes your way.” (participant 21)

The current research highlighted the existence of a dangerous contingency in course-work essay writing, exposure to which meant students risk discovering ROGs. Effective feedback and guidelines early on in students' experience of course-essay writing would have the effect of permitting extremely rapid learning (see Skinner, 1968) without exposure to this potentially dangerous contingency (see Owen, 1997).

Unfortunately, students discovered that ROGs are functionally equivalent behaviours since they can be effective in gaining the desired reinforcer:

“ that's why I chose (lecturers name), because I know she is a good marker, ...I did well in that last year.” (participant 10)

Disenchantment was associated with the use of more extreme ROGs:

“you ring up a friend from another university and get them to send down an essay from their essay bank.” (participant 9)

Secondly, students with understanding motivation but without effective guidance and advice regarding how to overcome the problems this approach caused, tended to avoid interesting essays, since this was mutually exclusive to gaining good marks:

“ I would always choose the subject I didn't like and I should have chosen something for my project I didn't like.” (participant 25)

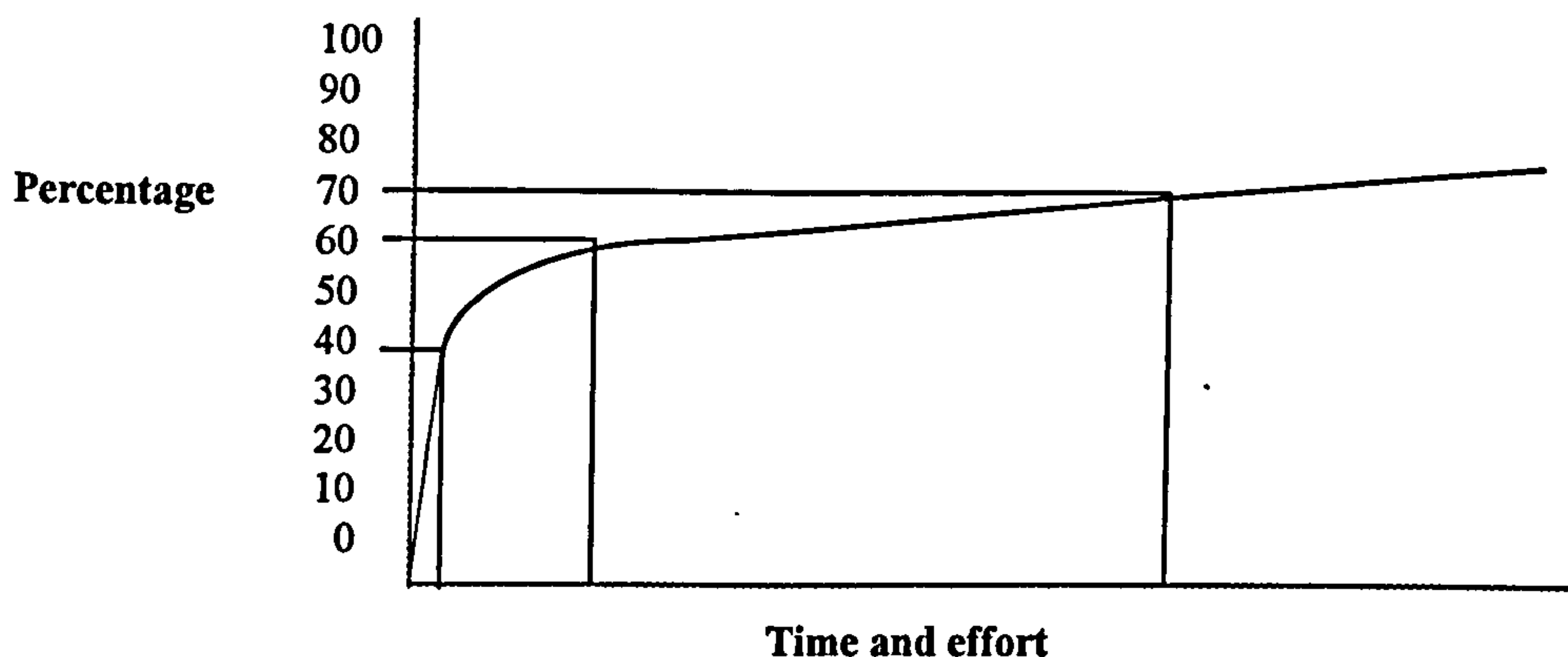
In the case of conflict between achievement and understanding motivation, understanding motivation was sacrificed . Where the focus for essays had become solely external achievement students were at risk of becoming disenchanted, a form of learned helplessness. Data suggested that disenchantment occurred when students, focusing on achievement, became dissatisfied with marks as a form of positive reinforcement.

Unfortunately, one of the most prominent themes of the focus group data was the unanimous perception of essay marks as unsatisfactory. One might assume that this demonstrated students' dissatisfaction and frustration at their own inability to obtain high standards. However, it can be argued, given the students' clear expression of distinct problems with the marking system, that this is not the case. Students contended that the issue of inconsistency between markers meant that the mark they were awarded depended on the marker in question, and even their mood when marking:

“what you write for one lecturer you could get a good mark for, and then do the same sort of structure for another lecturer and get a really crap mark.” (participant 10)

However, the most salient issue raised regarding marks is best described as the perception that marks are awarded on a schedule of diminishing returns, with a glass ceiling, see Figure 2.6.

Figure 2.6
Schedule of diminishing returns



The belief that the range of marks awarded for essays is too limited given the potential range available to markers was also a consistently re-occurring theme:

“... because everyone’s essays fall in such a small area, I mean its such a narrow thing. . .”
(participant 8)

Students in the focus groups often expressed not being able to understand why the range of marks was so limited -- causing confusion as to what percentages represented: had they been positively reinforced or punished?:

“... what is the difference between an essay that gets 60% and one that gets 62% because the lecturer can’t tell you.” (participant 11)

There was also a perception that it took a disproportionate amount of time and effort to achieve small percentage increases and that regardless of the time and effort expended on an essay it would not gain a mark above approximately 70%:

“... if I rushed it off I would probably get about a 65, and if I work my arse off I will only get 70. . . you know that even if you write a really excellent essay and get comments on it like really well presented, you know you are not going to get higher than 70, so it is really frustrating.” (participant 6)

Where a high workload existed students were likely to lower their expectations in terms of the grade they wished to achieve and carefully calculated the time and effort they would have to spend on an essay in order to achieve that mark:

“I always think I could spend x amount of time on it . . . but when it gets close to exams and you’re still doing course work you are getting into your revision time as well, so you just think if I get 65% or 63% it isn’t worth it if I’m going to miss out a whole topic in my revision.” (participant 7)

It seemed that where students become disenchanted they will not even attempt to spend the time and effort required to reach much lower marks. Some students reported only spending as much time on an essay as they thought was required to pass any particular assessment or even the whole module:

“I think like the main thing is finding out how much I need to actually get in the essay to pass (the module). . .” (participant 12)

For one student the fact that they did not get 100% but 70% was not explained adequately by one tutor who suggested to them that it was ‘tough luck’ (see participant 6), when another participant sought advice the response was “I’m not telling you sunshine.” (see participant 25).

Perhaps lecturers need to mark on a scale within which they are willing to use the extremes. Students who produce essays which even lecturers deem to be excellent do not reach 100% - providing a percentage which gives the students the impression that they have failed to be positively reinforced for their work:

“I can’t accept that no-one gets into the top 30%, you say to your lecturer what’s wrong with my essay, and they’ll say nothing, its fine. So then I want to know how did I lose 30%” (participant 9)

2.7.2 Discussion

To recap, in contemporary higher education, where exams are not the sole method of measuring students' attainment, course-work essay writing is a widely used method of continuous assessment in the social sciences. Essay writing requires students to simultaneously learn and obtain the desired grades. However, the situation described by many students in the current research was one of ineffective reinforcement and feedback in which understanding motivation and achievement motivation were in conflict. Where students were motivated to understand the relevant issues when writing an essay, they were likely to incur problems which were detrimental to their marks. In the absence of guidance to help students learn how to overcome these problems they were likely to avoid essays which they might enjoy. Instead, students underwent cycles of trial and success in which they aimed to discover other ways of gaining positive reinforcement in terms of 'good' marks. However, due to the existence of ROGs in the hidden curriculum students were likely to come across these as alternative but successful strategies, not necessarily in the marks they obtained, but in their own sense of control or ability to write essays of equivalent quality with less time and effort being expended. However, in some cases students continued to feel that their essay mark was beyond their control, due to the limited range of marks given and the existence of a 'glass ceiling', which they did not know how to break. In some cases this appeared to have caused disenchantment with essay writing.

Many of the themes in the current model support the findings of previous research. For example, links between enjoyment in essay writing, understanding and learning have been found, in that those who enjoy writing do so mostly because it helps them to think (Lowenthal and Wason, 1977; Wason, 1980). Entwistle and Tait (1990) found that students believed that their learning was more effective when they were taught material which was interesting and relevant to them. Hughes-Jones (1980) in a study of students'

perceptions of the reasons for success and failure in essays also highlighted interest as a prominent factor in explaining both. Hence it may be that essays written with interest and enjoyment may not always gain a lower than expected essay mark, but may instead be adopting a risky approach which can lead to success or failure. However, the findings of Hugh-Jones' research may simply represent the different outcomes of this strategy for different students. For example it may be students with few writing skills that are less successful when writing essays they are interested in, in an environment where they are unable to gain feedback.

Mahalski (1992) also discovered that selecting material and linking it together was nominated by 43% of students as the most difficult part of producing an essay. The current research provides a possible reason for only 43% of undergraduates in this investigation finding this process difficult: they may have been the students approaching essay writing with an understanding motivation.

With regard to the style of an essay, Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (1980) reported that not all students develop an argument, but found that well over three quarters (85%) tried to present their own ideas and draw their own conclusions in the essay. Norton (1990) discovered that only 17% of the students who completed her questionnaire felt that the purpose of an essay was to manipulate ideas to present a persuasive argument, whereas 38% felt that an essay only required them to organise the information around a central unifying theme. Hayes and Flowers' (1980) model describes a similar process in which students decide what argument they will develop, if any. However, the description in the current research of this process (labelled 'style') is more detailed. From this description it is clear that not all students are aware of an audience or the need to develop an argument.

Even when students acknowledge developing an argument as part of writing an essay they do not always possess the skills to do so.

Overall the model of the undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing that arose out of this qualitative research is more specific than Hayes and Flowers' (1980) model. Environmental influences are included as a factor in the Hayes and Flower model, but in abstract terms rather than with specific explanations. Their model identifies factors relating to the task environments as acting to influence the process of writing. These contextual factors (i.e. the lecturer's attitude, the description of the topic, the intended audience, motivational factors and the writing assignment) are similar to those identified in the current research. However, their impact on the process of writing is explained more in the current model.

Another interesting finding not described in depth by Hayes and Flower is the cyclical nature of the complex relationships between students' motivation and the process of essay writing, which impacts upon the product. A student's motivational approach to essay writing is a product of his/her previous experience of essay writing. This motivation is then either maintained or changed according to key factors of their current experience such as interest in the essay, the marking system and feedback.

The current model, then, has implications for the theoretical dichotomy produced by the opposing approaches of Biggs and Gibbs. This disagreement relates to the question of whether changes to improve students' learning in higher education must be holistic, as advocated by Biggs (1989, 1996), or if such changes can arise out of changes in teaching strategies and quality, as Gibbs (1983a, b; 1990a; 1992; 1995) contends. The current data suggest that in the case of assessed course-work essay writing at least, teachers play a

fundamental role. Departmental support would, of course, facilitate improvements in marking systems and feedback, but teachers alone could make improvements in students' motivation in this task.

The current model also has implications for the research into writing. Although it reflects many previous findings, it also highlights aspects of essay writing previously overlooked or dealt with in vague terms, namely the motivational and affective dynamics of course work essay writing. To the author's knowledge, no model exists which has identified the impact of motivation on students' experience of course-work essay writing and the factors which determine that motivation. The current research revealed that the examination of 'non writing' activities in the writing process is essential in order to describe the student's whole experience of essay writing. Hayes and Flower for example did not encompass students' 'research' activities in their model and hence overlooked tactics adopted by students, such as plagiarism, which alert the researcher to the existence of inappropriate motivations and perceptions of essay writing. The current research acts to raise awareness of the impact of motivation on the writing experience and the way in which motivation is influenced by factors external to the undergraduate. This finding is discussed in the light of current research regarding motivation.

In a small scale qualitative study Entwistle (1995) discovered that students who had treated the essay in an instrumental way (similar to achievement motivation) had generally done less reading. However, the finding of Prosser and Webb (1994) that a deep approach (similar to understanding motivation) produced a structured essay, is contrary to the current suggestion that an 'Understanding Motivation' led to a less structured product. Although contradictory, the fact that both research findings suggest a link between motivation, approach to reading and the product does suggest that this sequence of relationships is

important, but requires further investigation. Indeed Prosser and Webb suggest the direction of this relationship. They state that writing processes are informed by students' conception of an essay. Their conception will have a profound effect on the essay itself. The current research suggests that students' experience of writing also informs their conception of the essay, in terms of what purpose they perceive it to have. In short, the current research suggests that this relationship is cyclical.

Another clear finding of the current research is the impact of marking on motivation. The idea that the way in which essays are rewarded, in the form of marks, has an impact on student behaviour is not a new one. Thorndike identified a relationship between the knowledge of the consequences of one's actions and learning. Skinner also, in the form of 'contingencies of reinforcement', highlighted that feedback is fundamental to learning (Hounsell, 1987). Wason (1980) stated that the "natural process" theory of writing may be a myth founded on romantic notions of creativity, with their emphasis on freedom from external constraints. Lecturers must realise that students do not write essays in a vacuum. Their behaviour is tightly linked to the external constraints put upon them. If student behaviour is to be developed then the reinforcement must be effective and appropriate.

This point was illustrated by Hartley and Branthwaite (1976) in an investigation of a psychology course at Keele which had been divided into three sections. The overall assessment had been based on two essay examinations at the end of the year, later this assessment procedure was changed. Two end of year examination papers were to be taken as before, only this time they constituted two thirds of the total assessment. The other third came from three course-work essays, one for each section of the course. The findings indicated that this change made very little difference to the overall end of year marks achieved by the students, but if the assessment had been based on the examination marks

alone twice as many students as before would have failed with the new system. It was clear that the students had adopted different strategies to deal with the new system, expending as much effort in the examination as was required to get the marks they desired, according to their essay marks, rather than putting in as much effort as possible regardless. Indeed this parallels the finding in the current research, that students carefully calculate the effort required in each piece of work in order to gain the overall mark they desire. It may also be the case that the students in Hartley and Branthwaite's study were also doing this because they realised that above a certain level effort would be 'wasted' as it would not gain them a mark above a certain ceiling. Some had lowered their level of effort for the examination because they knew they had secured three good essay marks which would compensate for under achievement in their exams. Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) found, as did the current qualitative research, that perceived deficiencies in assessment related to surface approaches to studying.

Using a questionnaire, Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (1980) found a population of third year students whose description is similar to the disenchanted students in the current study. They described these students as pessimistic, inactive regarding studying and with a defeatist approach to work -- although in terms of actual marks they were successful. The current research suggests why these students may be defeatist even given their successful marks. Since the same characteristics were not found in the first year or second year students in their study these results support the current finding that prolonged exposure to the cyclical experience of essay writing leads to disenchantment. The current research suggests that this may be caused by a lack of adequate feedback and a perceived lack of control over marks.

This research is not the first to have found feedback and guidance to be ineffective in the eyes of students. Hartley (1984) for example states that the grade and comments provided on an essay are generally the only assistance they receive but he admits there is some evidence to show comments can be unreliable between tutors (Settle, 1981). Norton's (1990) study also showed that a large proportion of students (21%) were dissatisfied with feedback. From the lecturers' perspective, a study in which comments made by tutors on 50 students' assignments at the Open University were examined (Mackenzie, 1974) found that some tutors relied excessively on ticks. He found that only about half the tutors commented on what was good in the essays, and few attempted to explain or justify the grades they gave. Similarly Sommers (1982) found that many teachers' comments were not text specific but could be interchanged, or rubber stamped from text to text.

Many researchers (e.g. Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Knox 1993; Mahalski 1992; Norton 1990) have suggested that students do not understand the criteria on which their essays are judged. Norton (1990) revealed that students typically focus on content and on demonstration of their knowledge acquisition as being important, whereas tutors are far more concerned that students use relevant information to develop a structured argument that answers the question at hand. Where guidance does occur it may not be useful to students because, as the current research suggests, it contains terms which students do not understand. In fact Hounsell (1987) suggested that when students' conceptions of essay writing are qualitatively different from those of their tutors, communication cannot readily take place because the "premises underlying the two disparate conceptions are not shared". His interview data suggested that some participants may be locked into a 'cycle of deprivation' in terms of feedback and guidance simply because it is incomprehensible to students. Hounsell (1987) stated that this 'deprivation' could lead to de-motivation, a theme reflected in the current research findings.

The current research also suggests that where feedback is not effective, students will attempt to gain clues in the form of ROGs. Although it was unclear from the current research, Norton (1996) suggested that these ROGs evolved from implicit messages from lecturers, which form a student folklore. Bergenhenegouwen (1987) also refers to this implicit communication by lecturers, some of which they are not conscious of making. The existence of ROGs was also supported by Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (1980) who found that almost a quarter (22%) of the students they surveyed actively sought existing essays on the same topic as the essay they had been set.

The realisation that university teaching might have unintended consequences for learning - encouraging students to use tricks and strategies to pass examinations - is certainly not a recent one. Indeed Becker, Geer and Hughes, (1968) suggested that in a situation where there is an opportunity to learn and simultaneously obtain grades, students feel pressure to focus on the grade. Miller and Partlett (1974) stated that some 'cue-conscious' students might become contemptuous and 'play this system'; however, if students were intrinsically motivated, this system might lead students to withdraw in despair (see Snyder, 1973).

Assessment rules which are not explicit leave students to guess them. This led students to adopt strategies which were so "wide of the mark" that they would be funny, if not quite so sad (Crooks, 1988). Rogers (1969) provided further support for this view when he stated that human beings have a natural potentiality for learning. They are curious about their world, until and unless this curiosity is blunted by their experience in an education system, where 'education' becomes the futile attempt to learn material which has no personal meaning.

2.8 Stage 5

Verification of the Model of The Undergraduate Experience of Course-Work Essay

Writing.

As has already been discussed in Chapter 1 qualitative data can be an attractive nuisance in that it is difficult to ascertain whether or not self-delusion has occurred at any stage in its analysis (Miles, 1979). Since the author of this thesis carried out Grounded Theory for the first time in this research she felt it necessary to test the main themes of the model of the undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing, particularly those pertaining to motivational dynamics. It is hoped that this precaution enables the avoidance of reporting "earthy, undeniable, serendipitous findings." (Miles, 1979), which are in fact erroneous.

2.8.1 Procedure

The data from the original focus groups were examined participant by participant. The key factors of the model of undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing were examined. To elaborate, each student's motivation, enjoyment of essay writing, perception of feedback and essay marks, difficulties in writing, style and use of ROGs were identified and recorded. These records were then examined in order to identify students that *did not* 'fit' the qualitative model, but in fact refuted the relationships between the key factors of the model.

2.8.2 Results and Discussion

Of the 24 participants examined, three provided accounts of writing experience which conflicted with the model in Figure 2.5. These were participants 11, 18, and 19. However, possible explanations are provided for two of these cases.

On first inspection participant 11 appeared to refute the model since he/she possessed achievement motivation and understanding motivation, but viewed assessment and feedback as ineffective and described using ROGs. The problem here lies in the student's continued use of understanding motivation and mark motivation in a system which they perceive to lack effective feedback. On further inspection a possible explanation for their co-existence became clear. This student discussed understanding motivation and enjoyment as facilitating their essay marks, as opposed to it causing problems in essay writing (this finding is atypical). This finding relates to the issue discussed in the previous section relating to interest in an essay being risky, but not necessarily detrimental in all cases. It seems likely that this positive relationship between understanding motivation and mark motivation in this student's case is due to their entering higher education with already developed writing skills. However, the focus groups do not provide enough information for any conclusion to be made with regard to the student's skills on entry to their degree.

Participant 18 also reported that understanding and achievement motivation co-existed. However, he/she did perceive feedback to be ineffective and incur problems when writing essays. The conflictual information here, according to the model of undergraduates' experience of essay writing, is the persistence of understanding motivation in this context. However, this persistence may reflect a transitional stage in which the student is still learning that understanding and marks are in conflict and has not yet moved to solely achievement motivation. This possibility is supported by the fact that this student, although still attempting to gain understanding from essays, no longer enjoyed writing them.

Participant 19's description of their experience of essay writing is less easily explained within the current model. This student expressed using understanding motivation, but perceived feedback as ineffective and used ROGs. Again it may be that this student is in a

transition in which they have yet to lose their understanding motivation but have already developed ROGs. However, there is no further information to support this from the focus group, since this student did not discuss enjoyment or achieving motivation.

Regardless of the possible explanations for these conflictual accounts, it must be pointed out that they suggest that the model cannot include every experience students encounter when writing course-work essays. Further testing and refinement of this model will inevitably be required.

2.9 General Discussion

2.9.1 Implications for the validity of the Approaches to Studying Inventory.

To recap, one of the advantages of measuring students' generic and specific approaches to essay writing is that the construct validity of the ASI can also be determined. Although the current research has not yet produced quantitative tools to measure essay writing, the scores of which could be compared to ASI scores, the qualitative findings do provide some useful information regarding this issue. The essay writing motivations described in the model are qualitatively similar to some concepts identified by Entwistle and Ramsden (1983). Understanding motivation in the current research relates to intrinsic motivation or interest in learning for learning's sake, a sub-category of meaning orientation. Entwistle and Ramsden's reproducing orientation is similar to the achieving motivation discussed in the current research, in that it relates to extrinsic motivation, a focus on the essay mark. Disenchantment in the current model also relates to a component of the ASI's achieving orientation: the component relating to negative attitudes to studying in the form of a lack of interest and application. Achieving orientation and achievement motivation in the current research are also similar in that they both deal with the issue of competition between students.

2.9.2 The Motivational Dynamics of Essay Writing

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the Grounded Theory of essay writing, identified here, is the light it has shed on the motivational dynamics of writing. These findings add a great deal to our knowledge of essay writing. Furthermore they shed light on all three areas that Hayes (1996) outlined as having special importance for writing research: the nature of motivation in writing; interaction among goals; and affective responses.

It is important to note here that Hayes' request for enlightenment in these areas, or indeed the motivational dynamics of writing in general, did not influence the procedure for data collection or analysis in the current research. The current findings were grounded in unconstrained data. In fact Hayes' suggestions were not published until after this stage of the current thesis was carried out.

Hayes (1996) discussed the nature of motivation in writing in terms of the way it is manifested. He suggested that motivation is not only a short term reaction to certain tasks but a long term predisposition to engage in certain types of activities. Hayes provided an example of this with the research by Hayes, Schriver, Hill and Hatch (1990) which found that students admitted to college as 'basic' writers engaged much less in computer-based activity designed to improve their writing skills than 'average' or 'honours' students.

Indeed the current research found that students' experience of essay writing was cyclical. Motivation influenced students' choice of activities, particularly essay writing processes. However, this motivation was a product of their previous essay writing experience.

Hayes went on to state that research by Dweck (1986) suggested that school childrens' attributions of the causes of successful performance are one source of these long term predispositions. Dweck compared students who believed that success depended on innate ability with those who believed skills were acquired. She found that the second group

responded to failure by asking for help, whereas the first group tended to avoid situations in which failure was experienced. Given this research Hayes suggested that it is easy to imagine how long term exposure to failure could lead to the avoidance of certain aspects of writing. Indeed the current research findings revealed that students exposed to essay writing experiences in which they did not achieve their desired grade avoided the activities related to this perceived failure, namely an understanding motivation and choosing interesting topics.

In which case it seemed that effective feedback could overcome this sequence of events. Dweck's work suggests why adequate feedback may be the key to avoiding negative self perceptions relating to ability since, if effective, it acts as salient demonstration that ability can be improved, rather than it being rigid and innate. If feedback is non-existent or ineffective it may reinforce students' perceptions that there is nothing they can do to overcome their failure.

Interaction among goals relates to the phenomena of dealing with many constraints or goals in essay writing, which often compete. Hence some goals do not lead to action. Again Hayes provided an example of this in Nelson's (1988) study which examined college students and found that some goals are set aside because they compete with other goals. The current research supports this idea but specifies that in certain contexts, i.e. those in which ineffective or no feedback and guidance exists, students will act on the goal to achieve grades as opposed to the goal to understand and learn.

Hayes also stated that "motivation may be seen as shaping the course of action through a kind of cost-benefit mechanism. Even when the overall goal of an activity is fixed, individuals will select the means that, in the current environment, is least costly or least

likely to cause error. ” (1996, p10). Hence choice among methods is an important issue for consideration. The current research sheds light on this issue, suggesting that students’ motivation for essay writing drastically effected their choice of essay writing process, for example whether or not they used ROGs. In addition this cost-benefit analysis is exhibited in students’ careful consideration of the time and effort required on an essay to gain a given goal (i.e. grade). The grade they desired depended on their motivation and the time and effort spent was calculated in order to avoid a cost which outweighed the benefit, i.e. spending a disproportionate amount of time on essay writing for only a small increase in marks.

Affective responses in reading and writing were also considered by Hayes to be a special case for further investigation into writing. The current research does contribute to our knowledge of the affective components in essay writing in terms of emotion, however, it does not cover the specific responses Hayes seemed to be considering -- who or what students attributed blame for failure on. He used Schriver’s (1995) study to illustrate this. The students found that when using manuals to use electronic equipment over half the problems were blamed on themselves rather than the manuals -- even though two thirds of the problems related to badly written manuals. However, Schriver’s findings do indicate that where ineffective or incomprehensible feedback leads to a lack of development in students’ writing abilities this may be attributed to their own inability or lack of potential for improvement. This attribution may then have implications for students’ reaction to failure in terms of motivation, as has been discussed above.

2.9.3 Next Stage of Research

As Watkins and Hattie (1981) predicted this qualitative analysis provided a conceptually rich description of student learning, in this case experiences of essay writing. However, to

reiterate the concern raised by Miles (1979), qualitative data can be an attractive nuisance in terms of self delusion and generalisability. Furthermore the current research reports the experience of a small number of students, and since some volunteered to take part, there is likely to be some selection bias due to these students' reasons for self selection. In addition the measurement of the approaches to essay writing of a large number of students requires a practical method of measuring individual differences in the experiences outlined in the qualitative theory. Therefore Chapters 3 and 4 concern themselves with the development of a quantitative tool to measure students' experiences of course-work essay writing, informed by the grounded theory.

Chapter 3 deals with the development of questions to measure students' process of writing and Chapter 4 addresses the development of items capable of describing the motivational dynamics of course-work essay writing. The quantitative tools, once developed, will enable the reliable and valid investigation of individual differences in the essay writing experience and their relationship with generic approaches to studying, as measured by the ASI.

2.10 Conclusion

This qualitative chapter has provided a rich description of a group of students' accounts of their experiences of course-work essay writing, enabling the cyclical nature of the motivational dynamics of writing to be described. To the authors' knowledge this is the first model of course-work essay writing which is grounded in students' perceptions and captures the motivational dynamics of the task. While it is acknowledged that this model by no means provides a definitive account, it does identify and describe in detail components overlooked in previous research. It is clear from the current research that for understanding motivation to exist, effective reinforcement and feedback are required. Only where these

occur can students gain understanding and develop skills in essay writing while simultaneously being assessed.

The current findings suggest that course-work essay writing has the potential to be a useful task in higher education which can facilitate students' development of skills transferable to many vocations (Henderson, 1980): the selection; integration; organisation and evaluation of material and the use of language to express ideas. If indeed this is what educators require from students writing essays it should be clearly communicated, carefully taught and rewarded effectively when it is demonstrated. Where it is not demonstrated, effective feedback is essential for students to learn the skills to do so.

If the 1970s was the decade that identified features of the composing process, the 1980s was the decade that has uncovered the importance of context in the composing process (Nystrand, 1989). As Nystrand highlights, there has been a shift in perspective from things cognitive to things social. This change of focus has been facilitated largely by the growing choice of methodologies with which to carry out educational research (see Hartley and Knapper, 1984). By using a little used methodology in the field of writing, the current investigation has enabled yet another aspect of essay writing to be uncovered: the impact of contextual factors on the motivational dynamics of essay writing. The author does not contend that motivation is the most important factor in essay writing, rather that it is another aspect of writing, the identification of which has been facilitated using a novel methodology. If such a methodology is embraced and researchers continue to strive for new methodologies, we could see a further shift in the research into composition, shedding light on other aspects of undergraduates' essay writing experiences which have not, as yet, been uncovered.

Chapter 3.

Undergraduates' Essay Writing Processes.

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 concentrated on identifying students' experiences of course-work essay writing, which are reported in the form of a qualitative theory. This theory contained two distinct types of information, information regarding the process and the motivational dynamics of writing. It is the writing process which is explored in more detail in this chapter, the aim being to develop a quantitative tool to measure students' processes of writing course-work essays, informed by the qualitative theory.

Once developed the quantitative tool will have two purposes: firstly it will enable the measurement of the development of students' essay writing processes across the years of a degree; and secondly it will provide a measure, scores from which can be compared to scores from the ASI. This will indicate whether the ASI has construct validity in terms of its ability to relate to students' essay writing processes.

A large amount of research has focused on the essay writing processes of undergraduates over the years (e.g. Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1980a; Hounsell, 1984 a and b; Mahalski, 1992; Norton, 1990; Torrance, Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, in preparation a). The qualitative theory of essay writing described in Chapter 2 highlighted components of the essay writing process which generally support the findings of much of the existing research literature. These components were 'basic research' (reading lecture notes, basic introductory texts, talking to peers and using information from memory), 'gathering information' (using specific books or journal articles), 'planning', 'selecting relevant information' and 'editing'. The qualitative theory also suggested that

four distinct strategies (combinations of the above components) were used by undergraduates when writing course-work essays.

'Extensive processors' used all of the possible components of essay writing identified. Eight participants were identified as using this strategy of writing for most of their course work essays. 'Editors' (n=6) used of all the possible components except 'planning'. Seven participants were 'reliant researchers', using all the components of essay writing except 'basic research'. 'Limited processors' (n=3) only carried out 'basic research', 'planning', and 'editing', they did not select relevant information or gather information.

The qualitative description of these practices is rich in information. However it is based on a small number of participants. In addition further qualitative investigations would be impractical for use where the aim is to identify the individual differences in the writing process of large numbers of undergraduates. Hence the aim of research at this stage is to develop a quantitative tool to measure these individual differences in undergraduates: the 'Essay Writing Process Questionnaire'. It was deemed that a quantitative tool would be a valid measure of the essay writing process since this process was described by all participants in the qualitative stage of research as stable and developing gradually rather than sporadically altering from essay to essay.

Initially this chapter reports how the qualitative data regarding students' essay writing process informed the development of the pilot Essay Writing Process Questionnaire. The chapter then moves on to describe Study 3. The main purpose of Study 3 was to provide an opportunity to trial the pilot version of the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire and gain information to inform further development of the tool. This information was regarding the

ability of the writing strategies identified in the qualitative research to generalise to a larger population and effectively discriminate between students.

In addition Study 3 provided an opportunity to obtain more information regarding the factors which relate to students' processes of essay writing. Hence information regarding students' attributes and academic achievement was also gathered in order to maximise this opportunity. The demographics included the number of years out a student had taken, the timing of this time out, their entry qualifications, and their sex. Whether students' used computers in their composition process was also measured.

3.2 The Development of The Essay Writing Process Questionnaire from the Qualitative Theory.

The first decision that was made in the development of the pilot Essay Writing Process Questionnaire concerned how the qualitative theory of essay writing would be utilised. It was felt that describing the four writing strategies identified in the grounded theory and asking students to identify themselves as using one or other of them may influence and restrict their responses prior to ascertaining the generalisability of these strategies. It was for this reason that a questionnaire was constructed which contained questions, each relating to the components and sub-components of essay writing identified in the qualitative theory. Ten questions related to these components and sub-components. This information enabled students to be allocated to the relevant essay writing strategies, while also enabling the specific components of essay writing which best discriminated between students to be identified. It also permitted additional strategies to be identified and prevented participants being forced to select a writing strategy which they felt did not reflect their writing process.

Five additional questions were included in the questionnaire which focused on information obtained from the focus groups in Study 1, the importance of which in the overall experience of essay writing was difficult to ascertain at that time. One question pertained to writing an essay in one session, another to reading at least part of all the references obtained, two questions related to how many of the set references were obtained and the remaining question referred to whether original references not cited by the tutor were used.

The pilot of the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire therefore consisted of 15 questions, four of which contained sub-questions relating to the sub-components of the essay writing process (i.e. is the plan is rigid or flexible, lengthy or brief etc.) (see Appendix D). Key terms such as 'draft essay' and 'final version of an essay' were defined in the questionnaire since it was apparent from the focus groups that students often understood these terms in different ways. The questionnaire was first subjected to piloting by a think aloud protocol analysis with 30 volunteers who thought aloud as they answered it; 13 postgraduates and 17 undergraduate psychologists. The only problems highlighted were typing errors and these were duly corrected. Demographic questions (see Appendix E) to obtain additional information such as the years out students had taken were also subjected to the same piloting with 5 psychology undergraduates. This confirmed that the demographic questions were comprehensible

3.3 Study 3

3.3.1 Participants

Essay Process Questionnaires were sent to 428 psychology undergraduates from the University of Plymouth and 303 were returned (a return rate of 71%).

3.3.2 Procedure

All psychology undergraduates from the University of Plymouth (excepting 17 who participated in the piloting discussed above) were sent The Essay Writing Process Questionnaire, the demographics questions and a letter explaining the research. These were sent to students' home addresses with a self addressed, free post envelope. One month later a further questionnaire was sent out with a reminder to those who had not responded.

Although the questionnaire was confidential it could not be anonymous due to the intention to relate students' questionnaire responses to their average essay mark for their previous academic year. This aim was made clear to the students in the introductory letter sent out with the questionnaire. The essay marks of first and second year students who had returned their questionnaires (for whom complete academic records were available) were obtained. Third year essay marks could not be obtained as the course work they carried out varied from option to option - and is not identified as essay, presentation or case report in course records. For the same reason it was only possible to identify the marks for single honours students. Therefore a smaller population of 164 undergraduates was used when achievement was investigated.

3.4 Generalisability of Essay Writing Strategies.

Before continuing it is important to note that the reliability of the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire proved acceptable, with split half reliability reaching .78 and a Cronbach alpha of .71.

An attempt to cluster students' questionnaire responses, using hierarchical cluster analysis, proved unsuccessful. It was difficult to identify any statistical clusters of responses regarding either the main components or sub-components of the essay writing process.

Where clusters could be formed they made no conceptual sense in that they were not particularly distinct from each other (see Appendix F). Therefore, strategies were identified without the use of statistical cluster analysis. This entailed identifying which of the following components of essay writing each student used: 'basic research', 'gathering information', 'selecting relevant information', 'planning' and 'editing'. These strategies were very different from those reported from the qualitative research, in Chapter 1.

To reiterate, the qualitative data indicated the existence of four distinct strategies of essay writing: 'extensive processors', 'editors', 'reliant researchers' and 'limited processors'.

However, in the current study nine essay writing strategies were identified, as shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1
The Writing Strategies Identified.

Essay Writing Strategy	%	n
All components except selecting relevant information.*	49.1	119
~		
Extensive Processors.	39.3	114
All components except selecting relevant information and planning.*	5.0	15
Editors.	3.0	9
All components except editing.*	2.0	6
All components except edit and select relevant info.*	2.0	6
All components except planning and editing.*	0.4	1
Only basic research and selecting relevant information.*	0.7	2
Only basic research and editing.*	0.3	1
Only gathering information and editing.*	0.3	1
Reliant Researchers	Not Reported	
Limited Processors	Not Reported	

*Strategies not previously identified.

~ Will be referred to as General Writers.

2.6% (n=8) of the data regarding essay writing strategy was missing.

The 'reliant researchers' and 'limited processors' were not found in Study 3, indicating that these strategies may not be generalisable or stable strategies of essay writing. Alternatively they may only emerge using qualitative methodologies.

However, the 'extensive processing' strategy was as popular here as in the qualitative research. It is important to note that its reported popularity may in fact be the product of social desirability, rather than a reflection of students' use of this strategy. Such social desirability would not be surprising given that this strategy of writing incorporates the components of writing often advocated by teachers, counsellors and books on essay writing skills. However, it was not reported as the most likely strategy for essay writing in this study. Instead, a strategy previously not reported (which will be referred to as 'general writers'), in which students carry out all the components of essay writing except 'selecting relevant information', was reported by 49% of students. This was the largest proportion of all respondents. It is possible to conclude from this study that the strategies identified in the qualitative research, except 'extensive processors' and 'editors', did not appear to generalise to a larger population, examined using quantitative research methods. It is important to note that the strategies identified in the qualitative investigation were based on a relatively small number of participants (N=25). Hence it is not surprising that additional strategies were identified, but surprising that two of the original strategies did not materialise in the questionnaire study. This finding may be due to the different methodologies used in this study and Study 1 which used focus groups. It may be the case that a structured questionnaire which breaks writing strategies into independent questions relating to each component does not allow students to provide an overall description of their writing strategy. It may also be the case that differences arise from variance occurring between the interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data.

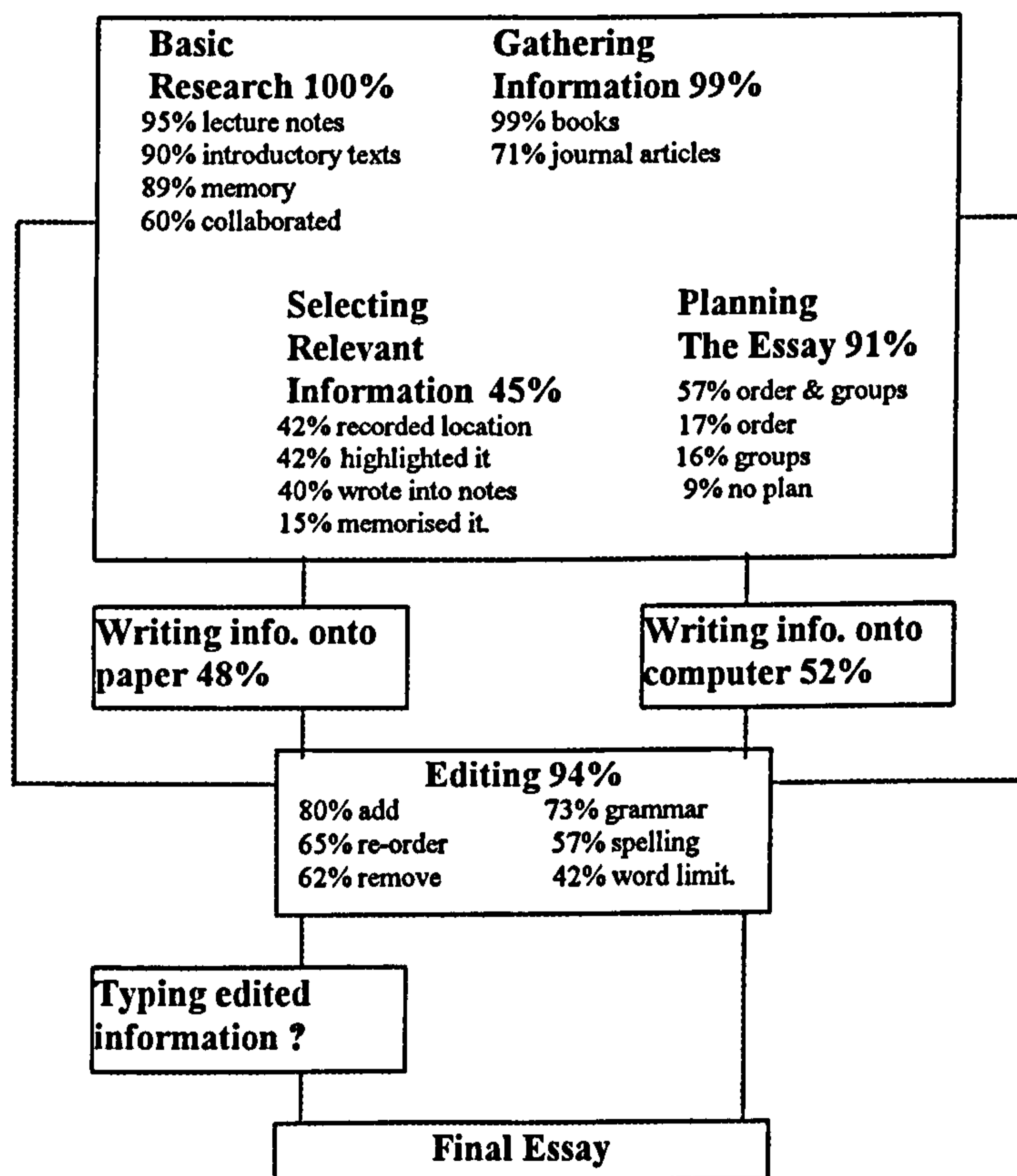
3.5 Discrimination Between Students

It did appear that the two most popular strategies, that excluding use of 'selecting relevant information' (to be known as 'general writers') and the 'extensive processors',

discriminated between students effectively, splitting the population almost in half. The remaining strategies were used by only 15% of the respondents.

A more detailed examination of the questionnaire's ability to discriminate between students was carried out by examining students' responses to each question in the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire. An account of the proportion of students carrying out each component and sub-component of essay writing is provided below, see Figure 3.1 for a summary.

Figure 3.1
The proportion of Students Carrying Out Essay Writing Processes



Basic Research

90% of respondents stated that they used introductory texts in the production of their essays, 95% read lecture notes, 60% collaborated with their peers and 89% recalled

information from memory. However, basic research was not a component which discriminated effectively between students, since all participants except one reported carrying it out in some way or another.

Gathering Information

99% of participants stated that they carried out 'gathering information' by either finding books on specific topics or journal articles, with 71% of the participants reporting the use of journal articles and 99% using specific books or chapters. This is promising in academic terms but does indicate that the use of specific books was not an effective process in highlighting individual differences in essay writing. However, the extent of the information gathered did vary from student to student. 81% of the participants stated that they obtained references which were not cited by lecturers. 97% obtained some of the references set by the lecturer, 2% obtained all of the references set by the lecturer and 1% stated they obtained none of the references set by the lecturer. 63% of students read at least part of every reference that they obtained.

Planning

Of all the students in Study 3, 91% planned their essay in some form. 57% wrote a plan in which they both prescribed the order in which information would appear and organised issues and topics into groups. 16% organised issues and topics into groups but did not order the topics and 17% wrote plans prescribing the order of information without grouping topics. 9% of respondents wrote no plan at all (1% of the data were missing).

Of those who wrote a plan which organised information into the order they wished it to appear in (n=225), 70% stated that this plan was brief as opposed to extensive, 45% stated that this organisation changed over the course of their essay production, and 91% of

students wrote the plan down. 82% did this for the whole essay with the remainder doing this for part of the essay.

Of those who organised information into groups of topics in their plan (n=222), 83% did so with a brief plan, 47% stated that these groupings changed as they wrote their essay and 93% wrote the information down. Therefore, although planning is an activity that did not discriminate between students, the form planning took did (2% of these data were missing).

Selecting Relevant Information

Selecting relevant information appeared to be a component which discriminated effectively between students since 45% of the population stated that they carried it out, with the remainder omitting this component in their essay writing process. Of the undergraduates who selected relevant material, 92% made a record of the place they found relevant information, 88% wrote the relevant information into their notes and 92% highlighted relevant information in some way in the text they were reading, but only 32% memorised the relevant information as they read it. Of all participants 42% recorded the location of relevant material, 42% highlighted it, 40% wrote it into their notes, and only 15% memorised relevant material. These percentages revealed that selection of relevant material was carried out using a combination of methods by each student.

Writing

77% of the undergraduates responding to the questionnaire reported writing their essay 'a bit at a time' as opposed to 23% who prepared and wrote it all in one session. Hence this particular process was another which discriminated between students.

Editing

A large proportion of students, 95%, reported editing their essays before they were submitted. Only 4% of undergraduates did not revise. 52% produced one draft version of an essay before arriving at the version to be submitted and 43% wrote multiple drafts. Of the latter students 48% attributed their editing to fitting their essay to the word limit, 83% to correcting the grammar and 65% to checking the spelling of their essay. 71% took information out of their essay, 91% added information and 74% changed the order of the information in their essay. It therefore seems that it is the type of editing carried out, rather than whether or not students edited at all, that identified individual differences (1% of data regarding editing were missing). When considering all of the participants 65% changed the order of material, 80% added information, 62% removed material, 57% corrected spelling, 73% corrected grammatical errors and 42% fitted their essay to the word limit.

Using a computer

Computer use was clearly a discriminating factor. Its use was split roughly down the middle, 52% used computers in the production of their essays and 48% either wrote their essays by hand or only used a computer to type up a neat version of it.

The results above not only provide a picture of undergraduates' essay writing process but also enable the identification of questions which discriminated effectively between students in terms of this process. Where a high proportion of students (i.e. more than 80%) reported carrying out a particular component or sub-component of essay writing this component was considered to be a practice which did not effectively discriminate between students' writing process. Such information was essential in refining this pilot questionnaire.

3.6 Additional Information: Essay Writing, Student Attributes and Achievement.

As was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, in addition to achieving its main aim of developing the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire, Study 3 also provided an opportunity to learn more about undergraduate course-work essay writing, in particular the relationship between the writing process, students' attributes and achievement. The original intention was to use statistical clusters of the questionnaire responses, gained using hierarchical cluster analysis, as the dependent variable in a discriminant function analysis. This would have indicated whether any particular type of student, or achievement level were more heavily represented in one of the statistical clusters (i.e. strategies of writing). However, because cluster analysis was not successful, the qualitative strategies of essay writing (see Table 3.1, on page 100) were used as the dependent variable in a discriminant function analysis. Only the 'extensive processors' and the 'general writers' were examined as these strategies accounted for 85% of all respondents. Variables examined as possible determinants of students' use of one or other of these essay writing strategies were year of study, entry age, entry qualification, sex, entry qualification, how many years were taken out of formal education before and after entry qualification had been obtained, and achievement in essay writing. Categorical variables (i.e. sex and entry qualification) were dummy coded. A step wise procedure was adopted in which one canonical discriminant function was arrived at. This function consisted (in order of correlation size, largest correlation first) of: students' average essay marks; whether they had A levels (negative correlation); the number of years taken out before obtaining their entry qualification; whether they had non-traditional entry qualifications; whether they had both traditional and non-traditional qualifications; their study year (negative correlation); the number of years they had taken out after obtaining their entry qualification; their sex; and their entry age. However, this function did not significantly discriminate between students' reported writing strategy ($p > .05$). Hence the conclusion must be that these factors do not effectively

determine which essay writing strategy students' report using. Interestingly, the results of the discriminant function analysis confirm findings by Torrance, Thomas and Robinson (in preparation a) who found no systematic changes in strategies over the three years of a degree course or any relationship between strategies and achievement.

Due to a lack of relationship between students' essay writing strategy and their attributes and achievement, each question of the pilot Essay Writing Process Questionnaire was analysed separately. By examining each question information could be obtained regarding the relationship between components and sub-components of the essay writing process and students' attributes and achievement. These relationships are described below.

3.6.1 Essay Writing Process and Student Attributes

A series of chi square tests were carried out using the responses (yes or no) from each question of the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire with each of the student attributes: age on entry; sex; entry qualification; how many years were taken out of formal education; year of study; and when these years out were taken. Relationships with a p level of 0.01 or less are reported below.

Entry Age

Entry age was divided into three categories: up to 20 years old; 21 to 25 years of age; and over 25 years of age. Entry age and use of journal articles, $\chi^2 (2) = 8.6$, $p < .01$ were significantly related. Participants from all age groups were more likely to use journal articles in the production of their essays. However, a larger proportion of the 21-25 age group (83%) used journal articles compared with those over 25 on entry (77%). The lowest proportion using journal articles (65%) came from those of under 21 on entry to their degree. Since one would intuitively think that journal article use is a process which is

beneficial to learning it could be suggested that learning through essay writing is of a higher quality for those students who are neither straight from school nor have waited until after their mid twenties to begin a degree. However, it could also be said, since a high proportion of all age groups use journal articles in the production of their essays, that this finding is of little concern. It must also be noted that the qualitative theory of essay writing, reported in Chapter 2, indicates that where students read more for an essay this can, in the absence of feedback and guidance, lead them to encounter problems when writing their essays related to the management of information. Hence there is no reason to believe at this stage in the research that using journal articles is likely to lead students to write 'better' essays and hence achieve higher grades than other students.

Timing of Years Out of Formal Education

Although whether or students take time out does not effect essay writing process, for those who have taken time out of formal education before beginning their degree the timing of this appears to be important. There are three levels of this variable: those students that had taken time out *before* they had obtained the entry qualifications; that gained them entry to University; those that had taken time out *after* gaining this qualification or *both*. The use of lecture notes to help in the production of essays was related to this variable, $\chi^2 (2) = 8.4$, $p < .01$. Those that had taken time out *after* obtaining their entry qualifications (98%) were more likely to seek guidance for essays by referring to their lecture notes, and this group is closely followed by those that had taken time out *before* (94%). Those that had taken time out *both before and after* obtaining their entry qualifications were the least likely to use lecture notes (79%), indicating that they were less in need of guidance for writing essays, or less bound by lecture content. This finding could indicate one of several possibilities. Students who have taken time out both before and after obtaining entry qualifications for higher education may be more confident about their ability to write essays without referring

to lecture notes; or they may be less aware of this as a useful method of gaining a topic outline; or they may be more inclined to extend their essays to realms outside of lecture content; or they may have a stronger idea of the way they want to go about writing essays. Another possibility is suggested in Weil's, (1986) study, since her results indicate that a desire to remain free from lecturers' constraints existed in students who had taken at least 5 years out of formal education.

Sex

The sub-component of editing -- checking and correcting grammatical errors, related to students' gender, $\chi^2 (1) = 6.0$, $p < .01$. Women were more likely to edit the grammar of their essays. 82% of women revise this aspect of text compared to 68% of men.

Women may be more conscientious in their essay presentation or may be less confident in their ability to write grammatically.

To summarise, entry age related to use of journal articles, the timing of years out related to talking to use of lecture notes and students' gender related to whether they edited grammatical errors. Surprisingly none of the remaining attributes (i.e. whether students took time out of education, entry qualifications, year of study and computer use) related at $p < .01$ or less to any of the essay writing process factors.

3.6.2 Essay Writing Process and Achievement

Anovas were carried out on the data from participants for whom essay marks were obtained (N=164), in order to discover if students' use of any essay writing components or sub-components influenced their achievement in essay writing. Since the data relating to all the components and sub-components of the writing process could not be entered into an anova

simultaneously, due to empty cells, a separate anova was carried out for each of the 33 questions from the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire.

Whether part of every reference obtained is read did relate to students' average essay mark from their previous academic year, $F(1) = 5.7$; $p < .05$. Those students that read part of every reference gained a mean essay mark of 62% compared to those that did not read at least a part of every reference who obtained a mean essay mark of 60%. However, in real terms a difference of 2% is minimal. When this finding was investigated further, no interaction was found between this factor and the number of cited references obtained by students (all, some or none) or whether they obtained original references. Hence it seems that students who read at least part of every reference they obtained gained higher essay marks regardless of the number of cited references they obtained and regardless of whether they obtained any original references. However, it is important to note that one can expect 1 out of 33 variables to be significant at .05 by chance. None of the remaining 32 components and sub-components of the essay writing process significantly influenced achievement.

3.7 Discussion of additional findings.

This discussion begins by addressing the relationships between students' attributes and their essay writing process. Any findings with regard to computer use are extremely important given the increased use of technology in higher education and the work place. However, here it is the lack of relationships between this factor and essay writing strategies, components and sub-components which is salient, especially since much of the previous literature suggests that computer use aids processes in which extensive revision, but little planning, is involved (see Elbow, 1973, 1981; Haas, 1987; Wason, 1970, 1985). Gould and Grischowsky (1984) also found that writers' use of computers in the composition process related to their editing: where computers were used writers were less effective at editing.

Here, though, analysis using chi-square failed to reveal relationships between computer use and essay writing processes at a significance level of $p < 0.01$. This distinct absence of relationship was also reported by Torrance, Thomas and Robinson (1994), who carried out cluster analysis on the responses from 101 questionnaires regarding students' writing strategies. In their study, writing strategies did not change according to word processor use.

The current study also failed to find a relationship between computer use and student attributes. However, it is perhaps reassuring that students' age, years out or education, entry qualifications and gender do not relate to computer use since this indicates that no group is disadvantaged in an increasingly technology-orientated university system.

Another result which was striking in its absence was any difference in students' processes of essay writing according to whether or not they had taken time out of education or had no traditional entry qualifications. This is perhaps not what one might intuitively expected to find, given that such students are likely to be 'out of practice' in terms of academic writing. There was a relationship between the use of lecture notes in essay writing according to the timing of students' years out. Those that had taken time out *both before and after* obtaining their entry qualifications were the least likely to use lecture notes. This could be viewed positively, as revealing less dependence on the lecture content or negatively, indicating a lack of awareness of this as a useful method of gaining a topic outline.

There was relationship between students' entry age and their writing process, specifically their use of journal articles. Students' between and including 21 and 25 years of age were more likely to use journal articles in the production of their essays. This is indeed a process considered by many to be positive and desirable in course-work essay writing.

The finding revealing that women were more likely to check the grammar of their essays can also be interpreted positively, indicating that women were more conscientious or negatively, indicating they were less confident in their ability to write grammatically.

Although many of the processes of essay writing measured are regarded as positive in practice all but one of the components and sub-components (6 writing components, 27 sub-components and computer use) measured in this research failed to relate significantly to achievement. Given the finding of existing literature which reveals a relationship between achievement and writing processes (e.g. Elbow, 1981; Glynn et al, 1982; Hartley and Branthwaite, 1989; Kellogg, 1987, 1988; Mahalski, 1992; Oliver and Kerr, 1993 and Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, 1994; Wason, 1985) one would expect the current findings to reveal that more of the writing processes determine students' average essay marks.

However, only one of these essay writing factors (whether part of every reference obtained is read) had any impact on students' average essay mark from the previous year. Those reading part of every reference obtained higher essay marks. None of the students' attributes were related to this process factor. However, it could be said that the effect of this process factor on achievement (an increase of 2%) is minimal and even insignificant in real terms.

The lack of relationship between process factors and achievement may be due to the way in which achievement was measured. The only complete data available were the average essay marks from each students' previous academic year. It is not unreasonable to assume that they may have changed their writing process since, or even as a reaction to, their essay marks from the previous year. The lack of relationship between process factors and

achievement might also be an indication that the focus of this questionnaire and many before it on processes such as planning and editing is inappropriate. Other processes which intuitively seem less integral to the overall writing process may indeed be influential in terms of achievement.

However, neither is it unfeasible to assume that the essay writing process may be unrelated to essay marks. This is not the first time research findings have suggested this as a possible conclusion. The fact that planning behaviour has no effect on essay achievement was also found by Hounsell (1984) in an investigation of 16 psychology and 17 history undergraduates using semi-structured interviews to investigate students' planning strategies. Norton (1990) in a larger study of 133 first year undergraduates revealed that the number of drafts and the type of plan a student wrote made no difference to the essay mark. More recently Torrance, Thomas and Robinson (in preparation, b), who examined records of 25 first year students' writing activities concurrently with writing two essays, found no significant association between writing strategy and essay mark. This finding was confirmed by a further study which followed a cohort of undergraduates moving from their first to their final year of a degree and found no simple relationships between writing strategies and essay marks (Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, in preparation a). However, students who used a single polished draft strategy produced essays of equivalent quality in significantly less time than students adopting other strategies (Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, in preparation a).

If, as the current results suggest, the relationship between performance in essay writing and writing processes is questionable one must focus attention on the considerable number of guides promoting certain essay writing processes, such as planning and drafting. These manuals give advice on the most effective strategies for writing essays (e.g. Freeman, 1982;

Clanchy and Ballard, 1983; Rowntree, 1988; Hall 1989) even though research findings are inconsistent. In a study examining essay writing and whether study manuals gave relevant advice, Mahalski (1992) examined five general study guides: Anderson, Durston, Katz, Poole and Horton (1969); Burnett (1979); Fletcher (1987); Orr (1988); and Thackray and Thackray (1989). The advice which was examined included when students should get started on their essays, how they should gather material, the content of their planning, how they should go about composing the text and how they should 'finish off' or revise their essays before submission. Study 3 also examined the majority of these practices. Mahalski (1992) found that at least some of the advice in the study manuals investigated does indeed, when followed, positively correlate with students' essay marks (i.e. reading widely, selecting relevant material and relating it to the question, making at least one draft and providing adequate references). The current research supports this finding only in relation to reading widely. Even then the current finding revealed that reading at least part of every reference obtained related to higher essay marks, regardless of the amount of references obtained. Relating material to the question was not examined in Study 3.

3.8 Future Use of the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire.

The results of Study 3 are interesting in that they reveal very little difference in students' writing strategies. The two strategies which accounted for the majority of participants are different by virtue of only one component of essay writing. In fact both represent model writing approaches in that they contain most of the processes advocated to students via many media. Hence these results may be attributable to social desirability.

The current results indicate that even where differences exist in writing strategies these are slight. Where individual differences did occur in a few components and sub-components of essay writing in the current research these did not relate to students' attributes or achievement. This latter fact and the lack of individual differences does suggest that

focusing solely on students' essay writing process would be to overlook other, possibly more influential, aspects of students' essay writing experience. In terms of the implications of these results for the current research this chapter tells a disappointing story. Since the Essay Process Questionnaire used in Study 3 can tell us little about individual differences it is of little use in evaluating the ASI. In terms of implications outside the aims of this thesis the current questionnaire results indicate that there is a universality in essay writing processes. The Essay Writing Process Questionnaire will, however, be included later in this research since although there is a little difference between participants in terms of their writing processes the relationship between essay writing processes and generic approaches to studying have not yet been determined. In addition the use of a yes/no response scale may have been too crude to detect differences in students strategies and use of essay writing components, hence the EWPQ will be used with a likert scale in further studies.

In accordance with the findings of Study 3, changes were made to the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire in order that in future use in this research it contained only the items pertaining to components or sub-components of essay writing which discriminated between students. Reducing the number of items in the questionnaire had the additional advantage of reducing the length of the questionnaire and therefore helping to ensure reasonable return rates. Questions regarding components of essay writing which failed to effectively discriminate between students were discarded. Where questions relating to the sub-component of the discarded question did discriminate effectively these were used instead. The modified questionnaire (see Appendix G) consisted of eight questions, the content of which is described below.

The 'basic research' component of writing did not discriminate effectively between students since all except one participant carried out this process. The sub-component relating to

students' collaboration with peers did identify individual differences in process. However, it was not included in this modified questionnaire since development of the tool to measure students' motivation in essay writing included an 'isolation in writing' dimension (see Chapter 4). In addition the sub-component of 'basic research' pertaining to the use of introductory texts was omitted. The justification for this arose from points raised by students who completed the questionnaire in Study 3. There appeared to be some difficulty interpreting the difference between a general/introductory text book and specific text books. The remaining two sub-components of basic research, reading lecture notes and using information from memory, were also ineffective in discriminating between students (more than 80% reported carrying out both). However, these revealed more individual differences than the 'basic research' component. Hence they were included, but they were combined into one question since 96% of students who used information from memory also used lecture notes, and 89% of students who read lecture notes also used information from memory.

The main component of essay writing known as 'gathering information' also failed to discriminate between students as 99% used this component in their essay writing process.

The question relating to the sub-component 'use of specific text books' also failed to identify individual differences. However, the question relating to use of journal articles was included in the final Essay Writing Process Questionnaire since over one quarter of students did not use journal articles.

Selecting relevant information was a component which discriminated effectively between students as 45% of the population stated that they did so. Hence the question pertaining to this main component remained in the final version of the questionnaire.

Planning was not a component which discriminated between students, with nearly all students carrying out the process. However, when examining the sub-components of writing, whether students planned groupings (16%), order (17%), or both (57%), individual differences were identified. Two questions were therefore included in the final Essay Writing Process Questionnaire: one inquiring whether students' planned groupings, and the other enquiring whether they planned the order of their essay. Ascertaining whether students used computers to write their essay did discriminate effectively between them, with 51% using a computer. Hence the question regarding computer use in essay writing was also included.

Students were not discriminated between on the basis of whether they edited their essays since 95% claimed to do so, hence this question was omitted. The question relating to the extent of students' editing, in the form of the number of drafts they wrote was also omitted since the number of drafts written varied from essay to essay. Individual differences in editing techniques were evident (i.e. no more than 80% of the participants carried out each sub-component). In order to keep the number of questions to a minimum two questions were included in the final version of the questionnaire relating to these sub-components of essay writing. The first concerned superficial revision, i.e. spelling, grammar and word limit and the other concerned adding, omitting and changing the structure of material in the essay.

Study 3 has ensured the development of an appropriate quantitative tool to measure students' processes of essay writing which contains questions which are both grounded in unconstrained data from students and which discriminate effectively between these students.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter Study 3 has been described. This enabled the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire to be piloted. As well as providing information which contributed to the development of the tool this study added to our knowledge of course-work essay writing. However, results indicated almost no individual differences in the essay writing strategies and only some individual differences in the components and sub-components of the essay writing process. In addition Study 3 resulted in findings which demonstrated that the essay writing process was largely unrelated to students' attributes and achievement. Perhaps future research should reconsider its pre-occupation with essay writing processes such as planning and editing and aim at highlighting other aspects of writing which may have more impact on the students' experience of writing.

Indeed Perry (1977) suggested that amidst the flurry of technical tips regarding the essay writing process, it is hard to get a sense of students as "makers of meaning", or of writing as "a struggle to give meaning to experience." (Berger 1979). Perhaps it is the focus on limited essay writing processes which has meant students have not been challenged to reflect on their own conceptions of what an essay is in the particular academic discipline in which they are writing, as some suggest is the case (e.g. Prosser and Webb, 1994). Hence the next chapter focuses on an additional aspect of students' experiences of course-work essay writing, highlighted in the qualitative theory which is described in Chapter 2, the motivational dynamics.

Chapter 4.

The Motivational Dynamics of Essay Writing.

4.1 Introduction

To recap, Chapter 2 saw the development of a qualitative theory of course-work essay writing which shed light on both the writing process and the motivational dynamics of writing. Chapter 3 explored the writing processes of students further and a quantitative tool to measure these processes was developed. Although this tool, the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire, is grounded in students' own perceptions of course-work essay writing Study 3, in Chapter 3, revealed few distinct essay writing strategies. Furthermore, when responses to this questionnaire were examined in relation to students' attributes and achievement, few relationships proved to be significant. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that the process of essay writing was not the only salient component of the qualitative theory of course-work essay writing. Students' rhetoric also focused on the motivational dynamics of writing course-work essays. Hence the current chapter focuses on motivation, an aspect of the essay writing experience not explored in any great detail in existing models of writing (e.g. Hayes and Flower, 1980).

The current chapter describes how these dynamics were explored and how a quantitative tool, the Essay Writing Orientations Questionnaire (EWOQ) was developed to measure them. As with the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire, the EWOQ will be used in Chapter 5 alongside the ASI (18 item) in order to facilitate the evaluation of the ASI's construct validity, more specifically whether scores on the ASI relate to students' essay writing motivations. Furthermore the development of students' motivation in course-work essay writing across the years of a degree can be measured.

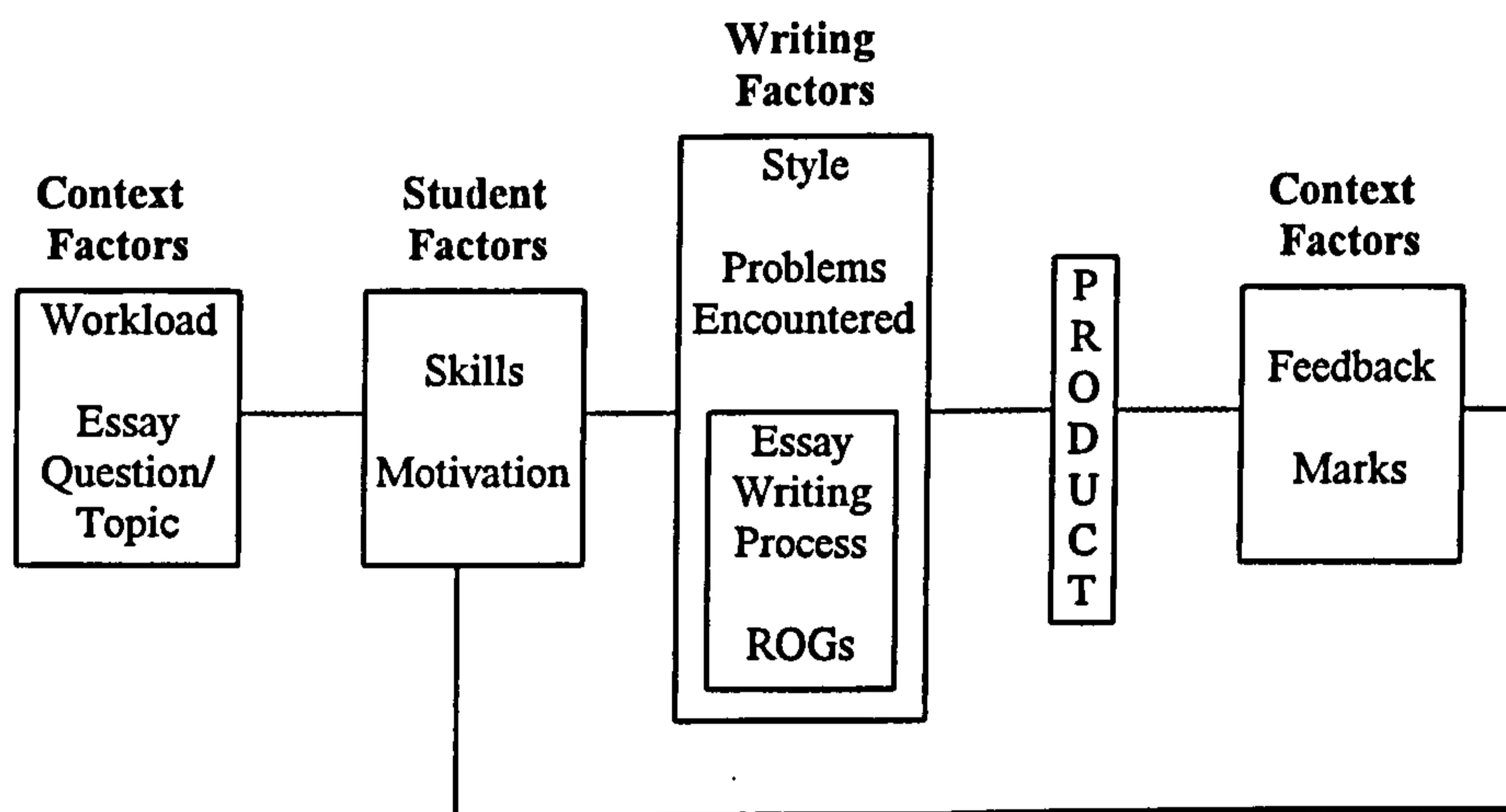
The current chapter begins by outlining how the items for the first pilot of the EWOQ were generated, based on non-statistically derived categories, known as domains. Then Study 4 and Study 5, in which the EWOQ is refined, are described.

4.2 Domain and Item Generation

A pilot questionnaire was constructed covering ten domains. Six of these domains were derived directly from the qualitative theory of the undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing, in that they are components of this model (see Figure 4.1). These domains were: achievement motivation; competition; understanding motivation and the affective component of this motivation -- enjoyment of the writing process; disenchantment; deadline motivation; and style.

Figure 4.1.

The Undergraduate Experience of Course-work Essay Writing: A Grounded theory



A further four domains were decided upon which were not directly derived from the model but related to its key components. These were students' reactions to marks, sociability, awareness of the audience and problems encountered in writing, represented by the ability to keep to, or reach the word limit.

Awareness of the audience is included as a domain since the focus groups data (see Study 1 and Appendix A) revealed it to be an important component of the undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing (36% discussed this issue). This component appeared to be related to students' use of ROGs and writing style:

"He's a lecturer that um... I think... is very biased in what he writes, so therefore many students are trying to please him with what they write. But I think my own tutor is far more open and will accept your comments and your opinion." (Participant 22)

". . . OK it's got to be well written, but if they agree with you at the end then they are going to give it an extra mark aren't they, especially if its their paper." (Participant 6)

"No, I think its totally the opposite, because if you criticise their views on it and back it up with enough evidence then they've got to read that essay and think - 'oh, god, someone else has actually come out with something that I've written' and if you can justify it then that will stand out in their mind." (Participant 11)

Sociability in the writing process was included as a domain since the focus groups suggested that this was used by students in order to gain understanding of any given essay, or as a strategy to assist quick completion of an essay with less effort. For example participant 16 tries to understand the meaning of the title of any particular essay and asks their friend for their opinion in this quest:

"When I get a title I'll try to work out for myself what the title is actually about because often its not the face value but the depths of the questions you're looking at. I talk to my friends, see what they think, what they would do with their essays." (Participant 16).

Participant 9's motives are clearly different. The aim in asking friends for assistance is to limit the time and effort they need to expend on any given essay:

" I think first of all as soon as you've got a title ask everyone what they think of it. You know, someone might have a good idea straight from the start, saves you the trouble." (Participant 12)

Another important component of the qualitative theory of essay writing is students' perceptions of essay marks and feedback. However, the perception that marks were unfair and feedback not useful was expressed unanimously in the focus groups, hence asking

students about their perceptions of these aspects would not effectively discriminate between them. Instead, items were generated regarding students' reactions to their marks. It was supposed that if disenchantment existed, a possible consequence of students' perceptions of marks and feedback as useless, students would not be de-motivated by 'bad' marks or inspired by 'good' marks. This lack of reaction would be due to the belief in disenchanted students that marks are arbitrary and not a reflection of the quality of their essay or the effort and time they afforded them.

A further issue raised in the qualitative analysis is the possibility that students who adopt an understanding motivation are more likely to read extensively, the result being difficulty in keeping to a word limit. If students approach an essay with achievement motivation, competition or disenchantment it is more likely that their reading will be limited and that they produce essays with too few words. Therefore, it was felt that a domain regarding students' ability to reach the word limit was important for inclusion in the pilot questionnaire, since it would provide information regarding this association.

Rules of the game, although not included as a domain, were referred to in items generated for the domains regarding motivation, since the qualitative analysis indicated that students' use of rules of the game was linked to their motivation for writing essays. Two examples are outlined below:

- If copying chunks from books meant writing something in an essay I didn't understand I would not do it.
- I will pick an option on the basis of the lecturer being an easy marker.

Between seven and fifteen items were generated for each of the domains discussed above.

This is indeed a much larger number of items than was intended for use in the final questionnaire, but is intended to facilitate the identification of the best possible items for the final inventory (see Devellis, 1991). The majority of these items were generated by

returning to the focus group transcripts and using discourse from the participants specific to each of the domains. In some cases items were direct quotes from participants. Once completed, the pilot questionnaire consisted of 101 randomly ordered items (see Appendix H). Each item was followed by a choice of responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Five responses were used since it enabled the inclusion of 'neither agree nor disagree', allowing students to indicate if any items were irrelevant to them, as opposed to forcing them to choose an option.

Ten psychology undergraduates thought aloud while completing this pilot inventory.

Spelling and grammatical errors were the only amendments made to the questionnaire, as the participants understood all of the existing items.

4.3 Study 4

4.3.1 Participants

300 pilot questionnaires were sent to a random selection of 150 business studies and 150 psychology undergraduates from a range of academic years. Completed questionnaires were returned by 152, 110 business (a return rate of 73%) and 42 psychology undergraduates (a return rate of 28%).

4.3.2 Procedure

Questionnaires were sent to undergraduates' term time addresses with prepaid return envelopes. There is disagreement regarding the number of participants per variable required before factor analysis can be carried out, some researchers suggest as many as 10 (see Child, 1990). However, in this case practical difficulties in obtaining large numbers of participants meant being satisfied with the ratio of at least 1 participant per variable, advocated by Rust and Golombok (1989). Since the current pilot contained 101 items it was not unreasonable to proceed with 152 completed questionnaires.

4.4 Item Analysis

The number of items in pilot 1 of the questionnaire was reduced using three methods, in order that the 'best' items could be selected before factor analysis was carried out. First, the responses to items were examined in order to identify positively or negatively skewed distributions (5% of the participants or less responding at one or other end of scale). This would indicate that an item was not discriminating between participants but instead represented a majority view. Ten items were removed for this reason. Secondly, items were examined for a lack of relevance to the participants. It was thought that this would be reflected by a substantial proportion of the population, i.e. 35% or more responding with 'neither agree or disagree'. Based on this criterion a further 10 items were removed. Finally a statistical item analysis was carried out using Cronbach's alpha. Appropriate items were removed until a Cronbach's alpha of .8 was obtained for the remaining items. This led to the further removal of 9 items. The first pilot inventory was therefore reduced by a total of 29 items, leaving 72 items remaining for factor analysis.

4.5 Factor Analysis - Phase One

A principal components factor analysis was carried out on the reduced pilot questionnaire consisting of 72 items. Dollinger and Dilalla (1996) recommend principal components be used where the aim is to reduce a tool by extracting a large number of items. Oblimin rotation was used due to the suspicion that factors would correlate (see Cattell, 1978).

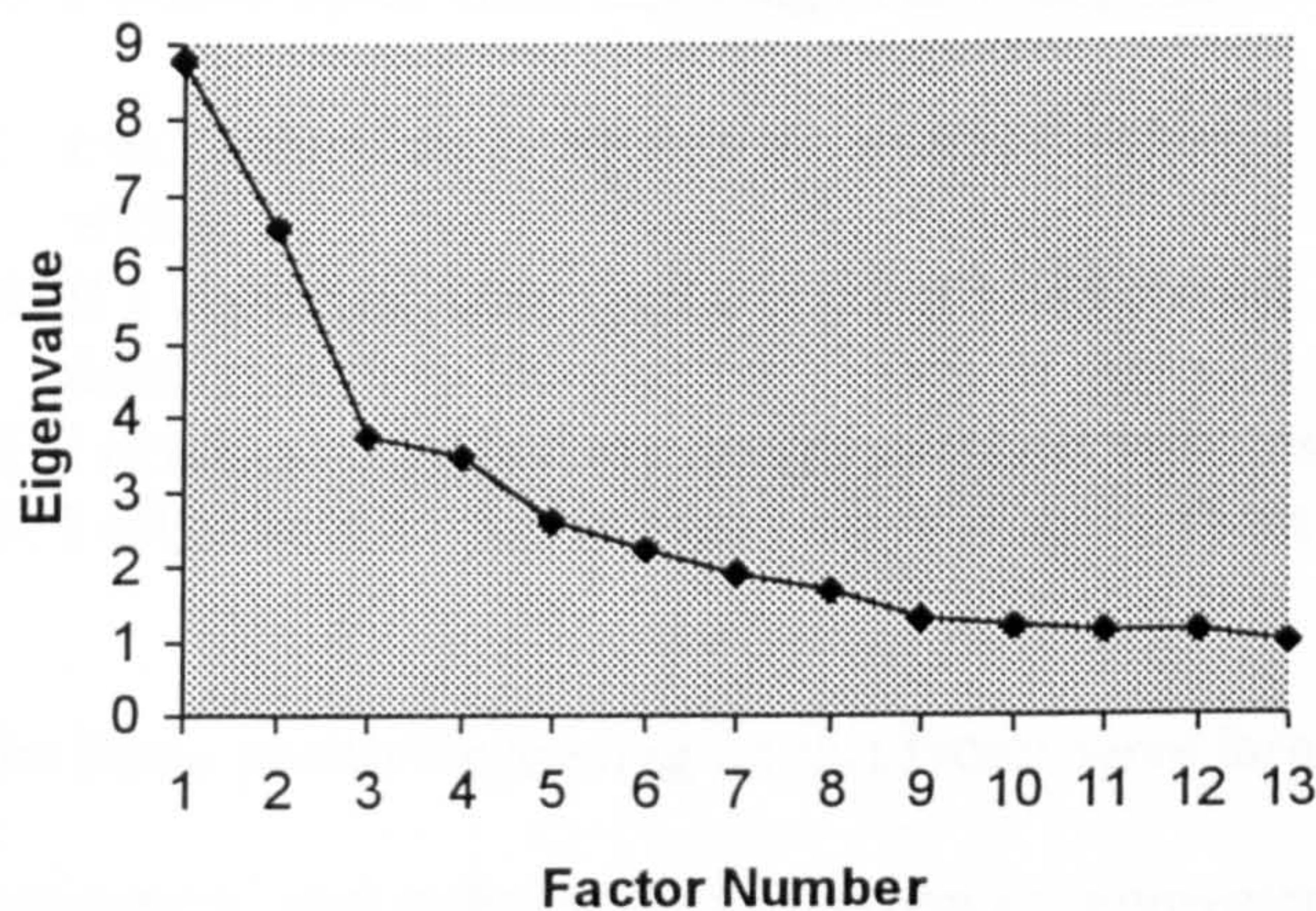
A procedure for determining the number of factors to be extracted proposed by Cattell (1966) was adopted. This entailed extracting factors until successive eigenvalues increased at a constant level, often interpreted using a 'scree plot'. This method was used instead of the eigenvalue-one criterion proposed by Kaiser (1960). Even though the eigenvalue-one criterion was used as a default procedure in the package used by Entwistle and Ramsden for

much of the ASI's development, it seems that this criterion has a tendency to lead to the extraction of too many factors and appears to be less accurate than the scree test (Zwick and Velicer, 1982; 1986). In fact Gibbs et al. (1990b) used the scree test in order to justify extracting only three factors from the ASI when developing the 18 item short form.

The scree plot from the current factor analysis (see Figure 4.2) could be interpreted as indicating a 3, 4 or 5 factor solution. On further inspection the 4 factor solution made the most conceptual sense. This solution accounted for 34% of the variance in the questionnaire scores.

Figure 4.2

Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire -- Scree Plot From First Pilot.



The items loading at 0.3 or above on each of the four factors were examined using the pattern matrix. Where items cross loaded they were removed. This led to three items being removed (items 6, 33 and 52). Factors one and two had to be greatly reduced since they contained 24 and 17 items respectively, loading at 0.3 or above after cross loading items had been removed. Both of these factors were reduced to 12 and 11 items respectively based on the loadings and conceptual value of the items. Factor three contained 10 items loading significantly, which were all retained. Factor four contained 12 items loading

significantly, two of which were removed since they were deemed to have little conceptual value in this factor.

4.5.1 Description of the Factors.

Factor One - Understanding Orientation

Factor one accounted for 13% of the variance in scores.

Item	Loading
8. I cannot write an essay unless I have understood the topic.	.34
21. I will work on an essay for as long as I can to get it right.	.60
34. Once I have handed in an essay I realise that I actually enjoyed writing it.	.37
39. I will put in as much effort as I can to get an essay perfect, before it is handed in.	.48
42. I get a real buzz out of an essay, when all the information comes together.	.36
57. There are many things I wish to gain from writing an essay, other than a high mark.	.48
70. Regardless of how long it takes me to write an essay I would never copy sections from books.	.44
86. I would never write anything in an essay that I didn't understand.	.30
3. I will submit an essay as soon as it is finished, even if I am not pleased with it.	-.56
23. If a choice of essay topics is given I will choose a topic that I am familiar with to increase my chance of getting a good mark.	-.36
72. I nearly always find my essays are short of words.	-.36
95. I often have to pad out my essays to make them fit the word limit.	-.41

The items positively loading on this factor were largely from the domains 'understanding motivation' and included items relating to 'enjoyment of the process' of writing. A high score on 'understanding orientation' would be reflected in enjoyment of the process of writing and a desire to gain understanding by writing an essay, in fact writing an essay would not occur until understanding of the relevant material was gained. This finding supports the qualitative theory of course-work essay writing which indicated that, where a motivation for understanding exists students will also demonstrate enjoyment of this process. Additional items loading positively on factor one revealed that students with high scores on understanding motivation are inclined to work on an essay until it is 'perfect'. In

support of this the item indicating students would hand in an essay as soon as it is finished negatively loaded on factor one.

Other negative loadings supported the findings of the qualitative research since they indicated, in common with the qualitative theory of course-work essay writing, that where understanding motivation and enjoyment of the essay writing process existed, students tended not to write too few words or 'pad out' their essays. Negative loadings also revealed that students with understanding orientations are unlikely to focus on achievement, particularly gained with the assistance of ROGs. Indeed, this finding supports that of the qualitative theory of essay writing whereby understanding motivation and achieving motivation can in certain situations be conflictual.

Factor Two - Mark Approval

Factor two accounted for 10% of the variance in scores.

Item	Loading
10. When handing in an essay I hope to come near the top of the class.	.52
44. A bit of competition with my peers, regarding essays, is a good thing.	.54
45. When producing an essay, I aim to do better than other people on the same course.	.66
47. What the marker of my essay thinks of me, when reading my essay, concerns me.	.47
49. I am very aware, when producing an essay, that someone else will be reading it.	.34
83. If it meant getting a better mark, I would copy from books when writing an essay.	.34
63. Once I get a bad mark I find I get trapped in a downward slope of bad marks.	.44
4. Essay writing is not a competition with other people on my course.	-.57
9. Getting a low mark on an essay is not important, as long as I have learnt something from my mistakes	-.33
37. It is not important that the reader of my essay is impressed with it.	-.35
90. It is not the end of the world if I get a low mark on a course-work essay.	-.53

The items loading on 'mark approval' indicate that high scores reflect an anxiety in students regarding their marks in terms of their position in relation to peers and their tutor's impression of them from their essays.

Factor Three - Deadline Motivation

This factor accounted for 6% of the variance in scores.

Item	Loading
5. I worry that I never show the essay marker what I am capable of producing.	.41
17. I will spend as little time as possible producing a course-work essay.	.34
26. I often find myself writing an essay in the early hours of the morning on the day of the deadline.	.84
28. I generally leave writing my essays until the last minute.	.86
29. I often find myself in a situation where I have to rush my essays to get them finished in time.	.88
94. Even though I start off with good intentions I never seem to start an essay until the last minute.	.77
43. I rarely feel that I have to rush an essay.	-.77
69. I make sure I have enough time to write an essay without rushing.	-.82
92. I always have my essays finished before the day of the deadline.	-.59
93. I am not aware of any competition between my peers and myself, regarding essay writing.	-.49

Students obtaining high scores on this would rush their essays because they left writing until the last minute, regardless of their good intentions regarding early completion. This would mean writing in the early hours of the morning on the day an essay had to be submitted. It is not surprising then that students motivated to write an essay by the deadline write essays with as little time and effort as possible and as a consequence become concerned that the essay marker is not given the opportunity to see the quality of work they would otherwise be capable of.

Factor Four - Isolation in writing.

This factor accounted for 6% of the variance in scores.

Item	Loading
12. I don't like to know what other students are writing in their essays.	.63
16. I rarely discuss my essays with friends on the same course.	.80
73. I never talk to peers about the contents of their essays.	.74
98. I don't like other people to know what I am including in an essay.	.62
14. I enjoy discussing essay topics with friends studying the same subject	-.63

22. I often discuss, with fellow students, the topics that should be included in an essay. - .75
51. Competition between peers, regarding essay writing, is a good motivator. - .43
54. I find talking to other students in my department a useful way of picking up information about a particular essay. - .66
81. Getting a low mark in an essay is a good motivator to try harder on the next one. - .31
85. I talk to peers about the way they go about writing essays. - .55

A high score on this factor indicated a lack of awareness of competition between peers and little sharing in terms of giving or taking information regarding essay topics or content, in effect isolation in the writing process.

Inter-factor correlations, which can be seen below in Table 4.1, reveal negative, albeit small correlations between understanding orientation and deadline motivation, and between mark approval and isolation in writing. Therefore, as a student's understanding orientation increased their deadline motivation decreased. Furthermore as a student's mark approval decreased their isolation in writing increased.

Table 4.1

Inter-Factor Correlations of EWOQ at Phase One of Factor Analysis

	Understanding	Mark Approval	Deadline
Mark Approval	-.01	1.00	
Deadline	-.19	-.00	1.00
Isolation	-.07	-.13	.05

4.6 Study 5

4.6.1 Participants

124 questionnaires were returned, roughly half from psychology and half from politics students (a response rate of 52%).

4.6.2 Procedure

Following the item and factor analysis described above, the second pilot version of the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (EWOQ) consisted of 43 items (see items outlined above). This second pilot was sent to 80 psychology undergraduates and 80 politics undergraduates' term time addresses with prepaid return envelopes. However, only 81 questionnaires were returned and since this study would be the last in the questionnaire's development it was decided that more participants would be required. Hence a further 80 questionnaires were sent to first year psychology undergraduates via their departmental student pigeon holes. 43 of these questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 54%, making the overall response rate 52%, $n=124$). Therefore the factor analysis on this second pilot commenced with 124 participants.

4.7 Factor Analysis - Phase Two

In order to check the stability of the factor structure extracted from the first pilot questionnaire, responses to the second pilot questionnaire were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with oblimin rotation in which a four factor solution was imposed. In this case four factors accounted for 42% of the variance in the questionnaire scores. An examination of items with loadings of 0.3 or above in each factor (using the rotated pattern matrix) revealed little problem identifying the factor structure predicted from the factor analysis of the first pilot inventory, described in Study 4. The factor loadings and the factors each item was predicted to load on can be seen in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2

Factor Loadings of EWOQ in Phase Two of Factor Analysis.

Item	Predicted Loading	Actual Loading				
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	
3	Understanding Orientation	.71	-.04	-.14	.03	
8		-.49	-.02	.01	-.12	
21		.57	-.13	-.13	.10	
23		.43	.02	.36	-.08	
34		-.71	-.13	.05	.06	
39		.65	-.16	-.13	.13	
42		-.64	.05	.11	.10	
57		.52	-.15	.16	-.04	
70		.21	-.03	.11	.29	
72		-.65	-.16	.06	-.00	
86		-.54	-.16	-.08	-.08	
95		-.67	-.04	.02	-.01	
4		Mark Approval	-.07	-.06	.62	.22
9			.18	-.19	.37	-.26
10	-.04		.05	.73	-.10	
37	-.09		.10	.47	-.16	
44	-.11		.31	.62	.09	
45	-.07		.07	.81	-.05	
47	.04		-.07	.39	.01	
49	-.23		-.13	.27	-.07	
63	-.12		.00	-.38	-.03	
83	.34		-.24	.36	.17	
90	-.08	-.07	.17	-.22		
12	Isolation in Writing	.02	.43	.18	.21	
14		-.17	.55	-.01	-.06	
16		.11	.74	.10	.02	
22		.04	.79	.15	-.01	
51		-.05	.35	.64	.01	
54		.21	.72	.09	-.19	
73		.06	.74	.07	.01	
81		-.09	.34	-.10	.09	
85		.05	.66	.13	-.02	
98		-.08	.34	-.18	.05	
5	Deadline Motivation	.15	-.09	.04	.12	
17		.37	-.17	.20	.25	
26		-.16	-.11	.12	.89	
28		.09	-.01	-.01	.83	
29		.03	-.01	.06	.90	
43		-.09	-.02	-.05	-.56	
69		.10	.04	-.04	.80	
92		-.14	.12	-.01	.75	
93		-.24	.17	.57	.14	
94		.18	-.04	.03	.82	

Understanding orientation is clearly comparable to factor one in this phase of development.

All items that should have loaded on this factor in excess of 0.3 did so, excepting item 70 which loaded only at 0.2. Also, a further two items, not predicted to load significantly on

this factor, did so: items 17 and 83. Factor two was isolation in writing since all relevant items loaded significantly, although item 44 unexpectedly loaded significantly. Factor three was presumably mark approval, since nine predicted items loaded significantly on this factor, although three items were missing (49 and 90) and three additional items loaded significantly (23, 51 and 93). Factor four appeared to be deadline motivation as six predicted items loaded significantly on this factor.

However, item 43 loaded negatively when it had previously loaded positively and a further three predicted items did not load significantly on this factor (items 5, 17 and 93). Clearly the last two factors of this second pilot, mark approval and deadline motivation appear to be the weakest factors, but are still recognisable from the factor analysis of the first pilot questionnaire described in phase one.

An examination of the inter-factor correlations seen in Table 4.3 reveals that, as in phase one of the factor analysis, there is a correlation between the understanding orientation and deadline motivation. Although the correlation is positive (in the opposite direction to that in phase one) this still reflects a relationship in which an increase in understanding orientation leads to a decrease in deadline motivation decreases. This is due to the fact that the positive and negative loadings of understanding orientation have reversed. Hence, in effect a high score on this factor would now represent a mark orientation rather than understanding orientation. In addition mark orientation correlates negatively with mark approval. Hence as mark motivation increases need for mark approval decreases reinforcing the earlier description of mark approval as need for approval rather than the sole motivation to gain higher marks than peers. In this phase of factor analysis there was no substantial correlation between mark approval and isolation in writing.

Table 4.3

Inter-Factor Correlations of EWOQ at Phase Two of Factor Analysis

	Understanding/ Mark Orientation	Deadline	Isolation
Deadline	.29		
Isolation	.04	-.02	
Mark Approval	-.17	-.08	-.06

Items which cross loaded (items 23, 44, 51, 83), items which were missing from factors they were expected to load on (items 5, 17, 49, 70 and 90, 93) and items which loaded in a different direction to that expected (item 43) were removed from the pilot questionnaire. A further two items were removed, items 81 of factor two and item 63 of factor three, due to the increase in the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the factors after their removal, and their presence adding no conceptual value.

The concern that some items were too conceptually similar was also explored at this stage. Items were rated by five independent judges enabling those failing to reveal different aspects of the same domain to be identified. Where items were similar the item was removed which led to the least decline in the relevant factor's reliability, measured using Cronbach's alpha. In this way the questionnaire was reduced by a further 10 items (items 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 21, 22, 26, 69 and 95). The questionnaire that remained, the third pilot questionnaire, contained 20 items (see Appendix I). In order to verify the factor structure of this much reduced questionnaire, particularly in the absence of the 9 conceptually similar items, a further factor analysis was carried out, using the data collected in Study 5. This analysis is described in phase three of the questionnaire development.

4.8 Factor Analysis - Phase Three.

As in phases one and two of the factor analysis, phase three was carried out using principal components analysis with oblimin rotation, imposing a four factor solution on the responses to the 20 item questionnaire. Four factors accounted for 56% of the variance in scores, with factor one accounting for 24%, factor two accounting for 13%, factor three accounting for 11% and factor four accounting for 8% of the variance in responses.

The inter factor correlations in Table 4.4 reveal again that deadline motivation decreases as understanding orientation increases. In addition isolation in writing increases as understanding motivation increases.

Table 4.4

Inter-Factor Correlations of EWOQ at Phase 3 of the Factor Analysis

	Understanding	Deadline	Isolation
Deadline	-.11		
Isolation	.24	.07	
Mark Approval	.03	.06	-.07

The factor loadings, described in Table 4.5 reveal that the factor structure of this 20 item questionnaire was comparable to the structure predicted. Factor one of this analysis was almost identical to the understanding orientation. Only one item, item 72, loaded over .3 on this factor when it was not expected. Factor two contained all of the items expected in the deadline motivation factor. Factors three and four were mark approval and isolation in writing. The items which loaded on these two latter factors remained the same, except that item 9 failed to load at .3 or above on mark approval. Therefore, items 72 and 9 were removed from this pilot questionnaire.

Table 4.5

Factor Loadings of EWOQ in Phase 3 of the Factor Analysis.

Item	Predicted Loading	Actual Loading			
		Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
3	Understanding Orientation	.68	.03	-.03	-.26
8		-.56	-.12	.01	-.16
34		-.76	.05	-.10	.04
39		.64	.12	-.21	-.06
42		-.73	.09	.08	.03
57		.55	-.01	-.21	.16
72		-.56	-.05	-.23	.31
86		-.59	-.11	-.12	-.22
28		Deadline Motivation	.13	.85	-.03
29	.04		.89	-.00	-.00
92	-.12		.76	.14	.00
94	.20		.84	.00	.02
54	Isolation in Writing	.15	-.14	.80	.15
73		-.00	.08	.76	.17
85		-.02	.02	.75	-.01
98		-.08	.04	.31	-.09
9	Mark Approval	-.11	.90	-.10	-.05
37		-.04	-.15	.14	.68
45		-.09	.01	.11	.66
47		.10	.10	-.12	.75

The results satisfactorily demonstrated that the Essay Writing Orientations Questionnaire (EWOQ) remained stable regardless of the large reduction of items. The final EWOQ contained 18 items (as in Appendix I, with the removal of items 72 and 9). These 18 items and their factor loadings can be seen in Table 4.6 below.

These four factors account for 57% of the variance in EWOQ scores. Understanding orientation accounted for 24% of the variance, mark approval accounted for 11% of the variance, with isolation in writing accounting for 14% and deadline motivation accounting for 8% of the variance.

Table 4.6

Items and Factors Loadings of the Final Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire

Item and Factor	Loading
Understanding Orientation	
There are many things I wish to gain from writing an essay, other than a high mark.	.59
I will put in as much effort as I can to get an essay perfect, before it is handed in.	.59
I would never write anything in an essay that I didn't understand.	.58
I cannot write an essay unless I have understood the topic.	.54
Once I have handed in an essay I realise that I actually enjoyed writing it.	.76
I get a real buzz out of an essay, when all the information comes together.	.73
I will submit an essay as soon as it is finished, even if I am not pleased with it.	-.63
Mark Approval	
When producing an essay, I aim to do better than other people on the same course.	.56
What the marker of my essay thinks of me, when reading my essay, concerns me.	.63
It is not important that the reader of my essay is impressed with it.	-.69
Deadline Motivation	
I generally leave writing my essays until the last minute.	.88
I often find myself in a situation where I have to rush my essays to get them finished in time.	.89
Even though I start off with good intentions I never seem to start an essay until the last minute.	.86
I always have my essays finished before the day of the deadline.	-.77
Isolation in writing.	
I never talk to peers about the contents of their essays.	.78
I talk to peers about the way they go about writing essays.	-.77
I find talking to other students in my department a useful way of picking up information about a particular essay.	-.70
I don't like other people to know what I am including in an essay.	.35

Inter-factor correlations, see Table 4.7, reveal that deadline motivation scores, as in previous phases of analysis, decrease as understanding orientation increases. In addition isolation in writing increases as understanding orientation increases.

Table 4.7

Inter-Factor Correlations of Final 18 Item EWOQ

	Understanding	Deadline	Isolation
Deadline	-.25		
Isolation	.13	.02	
Mark Approval	.02	.04	.07

The reliability of the dimensions of the final questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha. Understanding orientation reached 0.57, mark approval reached 0.50, deadline motivation reached 0.89, and isolation in writing reached a level of 0.68.

4.9 Discussion

4.9.1 Psychometric Properties

It was decided that if the newly developed EWOQ was to be used to evaluate the ability of the ASI (18 item) to measure students' experiences of specific academic tasks, it should be at least comparable in terms of its psychometric properties. Applications of the 18 item ASI have revealed levels of internal consistency of approximately 0.50 (Newstead, 1992; Richardson, 1992). The EWOQ has demonstrated a greater level of internal consistency than the 18 item ASI, with Cronbach's alphas reaching 0.50 to 0.89 (mean alpha of .66). Hence, the reliability and internal consistency of EWOQ are equal to, if not superior, to the ASI (18 item).

4.9.2 Theoretical Similarities Between the ASI and EWOQ

Although quantitative comparisons between the ASI and EWOQ have yet to be made in this research, there are many qualitative similarities between the two tools. Much of the discourse in the literature concerning the development of the ASI has been concerned with two key concepts, deep and surface approaches to learning. 'Approach' consists of intention and process. Process is sometimes referred to as a style or strategy (see Svensson, 1977). The EWOQ also includes items relating to both intention and strategy. However, the main factor accounting for most variation in EWOQ scores, understanding orientation also includes affective components of the writing process, in terms of enjoyment. The intention aspect of this factor is conceptually similar to Entwistle and Ramsden's deep and surface approaches. For example, a deep approach relates to the intention to gain

understanding from essay writing, and so too does a high score on understanding orientation. The surface approach of the ASI would be reflected in low scores on the understanding orientation, indicating the intention to gain the extrinsic reward - working as a means to an end.

4.9.3 Implications for the Qualitative Theory of Essay Writing.

The factor structure of EWOQ clearly confirms that these motivational dynamics are stable phenomena in the experience of writing. In addition the specific items loading together on the same factor provided some insight into course-work essay writing which supported the qualitative theory developed in Chapter 2. The items contained in these factors reinforced the description of understanding motivation in the qualitative theory which included an affective component, enjoyment of the writing process. There was support for the finding that an understanding motivation leads to problems in the writing process, in terms of writing too many words. Perhaps most interesting is that the understanding orientation factor revealed that understanding motivation and mark motivation are at opposite ends of a continuum and hence, as the qualitative theory suggested are mutually exclusive in some contexts. Systematic investigation of the factor structure of this tool in departments with varying levels and types of feedback might reveal different factor structures in the EWOQ that has been discovered here. For example, where feedback is perceived by students as effective understanding and mark motivation may not load at opposite ends of the same factor. Hence this tool may provide an indicator of the effectiveness of feedback in different learning environments.

However, no severe disenchantment was discovered in this factor structure, since the items referring to this kind of disenchantment, such as 'I aim to get essays done as quickly as possible, even if that means scraping a pass' did not load significantly on any factor. Hence

it appears that motivational dynamics are important and worth pursuing if the effects of the demands and constraints of essay writing on students' orientations are to be ascertained.

4.9.4 Future Use of the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire.

Clearly, distinct essay writing orientations exist in students providing not only an effective psychometric measure of individual differences of essay writing motivations but one that is grounded in students' own perceptions of essay writing. The last pilot of the EWOQ will be used in Study 6 of Chapter 5 in order to chart the development of students' essay writing orientations, along with the development of their essay writing process and generic approaches to studying. In addition this tool will enable conclusions to be made regarding the ASI's ability to relate to this particular aspect of course-work essay writing. Since the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire, developed in Chapter 3, will also be used for this purpose Study 6 will provide a complete picture of essay writing from which to assess the construct validity of the ASI.

4.10 Conclusion

The ASI measures students' *generic* approaches to studying which as yet has uncertain validity. However, its main constructs are reflected in the newly developed Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire. This indicates, at this early stage, that generic approaches to studying may indeed relate to students' approaches and experiences of a specific academic task in higher education -- course-work essay writing. This issue and the development of students' essay writing orientations are investigated in the next chapter.

Chapter 5.

The Development of Approaches to Studying and Course-Work Essay Writing in Higher Education.

5.1 Introduction

As was discussed in detail in Chapter 1, the British system of higher education has expanded massively since its first conception, now containing both 18 year olds with A levels and mature, less traditionally qualified entrants. However, this expansion has occurred at a time when there is little in the way of consistent or conclusive research findings regarding the type of learning occurring within higher education, despite a growing field of research into adult learning.

Hence Study 6 of the current chapter investigated the development of students' generic approaches to studying and specific approaches to essay writing across the years of a degree in order to discover if they became deeper or more surface in their orientation. Before this study is described it is first necessary to revisit the rationale for the progress of this thesis, building up to this final research chapter.

Higher education is assumed to be a general preparation for life, encouraging individuality, critical reflection and self expression, or to put it another way, a deep approach (see Biggs, 1989, 1990; Entwistle, 1981). However, some researchers have expressed the concern that higher education does not engender deep approaches, but rather the longer students are exposed to higher education the more surface their approach will become (e.g. Gow and Kember, 1990; Watkins and Hattie, 1985). Biggs (1996) described higher education as an environment in which the ability to reproduce previously learned content quickly and

accurately had become the criterion of success. This concern is reinforced by a quote from a participant in Ramsden's (1984) investigation of psychology undergraduates:

"I hate to say it, but what you have got to do is to have a list of 'facts' you write down the important points and memorise those, then you'll do all right in the test ... then you'll get a good mark." p144.

This quote refers to writing an examination essay. One might assume that the focus on memorising would not be as marked in course-work essay writing. However, Biggs (1996) stated that even in supposedly qualitative assessments, such as course-work essay writing, there is a quantitative bias.

The main aim of this thesis was to address the concerns raised by Biggs and other researchers regarding the type of learning promoted in higher education. The reason for examining course-work essay writing, as well as generic approaches to studying, using the ASI (18 item) was twofold. Firstly, course-work essay writing offered the opportunity to examine Biggs' concerns at their extreme, since course-work essay writing is perhaps one of the most qualitative forms of assessment in higher education, but one which Biggs (1996) felt also promoted surface approaches. Secondly, examining students' essay writing provided an opportunity to evaluate the ability of the ASI to relate to students' experiences of one specific academic task.

In Chapter 2 data from focus groups informed the grounded theory of undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing. It was clear from this theory that for understanding motivation to exist, effective reinforcement and feedback were required. In the absence of effective feedback two goals of essay writing, to learn and to achieve the grade were in conflict. In this situation 'mark chasing' became the predominant strategy. Unfortunately such a strategy risked students becoming disenchanted with essay writing

altogether represented by a careful calculation of the time and effort spent on an essay so that no more is expended than required to pass an assessment or even a whole module.

The EWPQ was developed (see Chapter 3) to cover aspects of undergraduates' experience of essay writing relating to their writing processes. Chapter 4 concentrated on the development of the EWOQ, a tool to measure the motivational dynamics of essay writing. To recap, the final EWPQ consists of nine questions relating to: basic research; using information from memory and reading lecture notes (combined in one question); use of journal articles; selecting relevant information; planning groupings; planning order; use of computers; superficial revision, i.e. spelling, grammar and word limit; and revision involving adding, omitting and changing the structure of an essay. The EWOQ contains four factors: understanding orientation; mark approval; isolation in writing and deadline motivation. Students with a high understanding orientation score feel that gaining a high mark is unimportant, are likely to work on an essay until it is perfect, less likely to submit an essay as soon as it is finished, gain enjoyment from the writing process and intend to understand the essay material. Mark approval relates to students' aims to get a better mark than others on the same course, but also the need to impress the marker and a concern regarding the marker's opinions of them. Leaving writing an essay until the last minute, even having to rush to submit on time, regardless of initial good intentions, would be reflected in high scores on deadline motivation. Essays, in this case, are unlikely to be ready for submission before the day of the deadline. Those with high scores in isolation in writing are disinclined to collaborate with peers to pick up information about the content of a particular essay, or about how to write essays in general, and are reluctant to tell others what material they are including in their essays.

Study 6, in the current chapter employed both the EWPQ and EWOQ, along with the ASI (18 item). The main aim of this study was to reveal the development of students' approaches to studying and essay writing in higher education. Since students' approaches to learning are "social phenomena that evolve as a response to a long exposure to educational situations." (Saljo, 1984), the results should provide an indication of the type of learning induced by the system of higher education. Previous attempts to answer this question have resulted in inconsistent findings (e.g. Newstead, 1992; Norton and Dickins, 1995; Watkins and Hattie, 1985).

As discussed in Chapter 1 there are two possible reasons for the inconsistencies in existing research findings which Chapter 5 aims to explore. The first possibility was highlighted in research by Arnold and Fleighny (1995) who suggested a model of how approaches to learning relate to the academic context for different students. The model incorporates students' initial scores on learning approaches as an element that influence perceptions of the educational context which in turn informs the approach they adopt. This study highlights the importance of learning experiences before university which may have induced the initial learning approach.

The importance of previous experience is also supported by Wilson (1981) who argued that first year students' conception of learning is likely to be found in their school experiences. He went as far as to suggest that these orientations were largely reproducing. Marton and Saljo (1976) suggested a possible reason for this, stating that the demands of the examination system at school require the recall of factual information rather than a deep level of understanding. By way of contrast, mature students are more likely to have had exposure to 'life' before entering university. This exposure teaches people to assess

evidence and relate ideas to the extent that it may influence study behaviour (see Biggs, 1985; Harper and Kember, 1986).

In the current study students will not be examined as an homogeneous group but as traditional and non-traditional entrants, since they are likely to have very different experiences of learning prior to joining higher education. Students' entry age is not the only factor relating to students' status as traditional or non-traditional entrants; entry qualifications and whether or not students have taken time out of formal education before embarking upon their degree course are also taken into consideration.

A second possibility for inconsistencies in the results of existing developmental studies of learning styles is the use of tools which measure learning generically, across tasks.

Although the ASI, the tool used in the studies mentioned above, seems to be fairly stable and reliable a concern expressed in Chapter 1 has yet to be examined -- do generic approaches to studying, as measured by the ASI relate to students' reality of specific tasks in higher education? In order for this research to identify and to avoid distortions, which existing literature may have incurred, it will determine whether the ASI has construct validity, i.e. does it offer a realistic reflection of students' approaches to a specific task in higher education, in this case course-work essay writing?

The results arising from Study 6 are discussed in relation to the issues raised above, and comprise three sections. The first addresses the psychometric properties of the ASI (18 item) and EWOQ, in order to confirm, for the final time in this research, their internal consistency and reliability. In addition this section examines the reliability of the EWPQ; the second section examines how generic approaches to studying, as measured by the ASI, relate to students' experience of course-work essay writing, hence providing an indication

of the validity of measuring generic approaches; the final section addresses the main aim of this thesis, in that it describes the development of students' Approaches to Studying and Essay Writing across the years of a degree.

5.2 Study Six

5.2.1 Participants

1500 questionnaires were sent out to a random selection of students from a range of courses (Politics, Psychology, Sociology, Rural Resource Management and Humanities and Cultural Interpretation) at the University of Plymouth for which course-work essay writing was used as a form of assessment. 576 questionnaires were returned (an overall return rate of 38%). These students are different to those used in previous and subsequent studies, since at the beginning of this research one address label was printed for each randomly selected student. Hence there was no chance of including each participant more than once.

5.2.2 Procedure

Courses from the university in question which assessed course-work essays were identified. For all courses, except psychology, permission was given to obtain the addresses of a random proportion of their students. The head of the Department of Psychology permitted this for all psychology students. For all courses the participants were from a range of academic years. The Essay Writing Process Questionnaire (EWPQ) and the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (EWOQ) were combined, with the questions from the EWPQ presented before those from EWOQ, both preceded by a sheet of 7 demographics questions (see Appendix J). A letter explaining the research, the combined version of these questionnaires with demographic questions and the 18 item ASI (see Appendix K) were sent to students, with a self addressed, free post envelopes. Of the total returns, 228 came

from psychology, 134 from humanities and cultural interpretation, 100 from sociology, 58 from rural resource management and 42 from politics students, and 10 were unidentifiable.

Although the questionnaire was confidential it could not be anonymous as it was the intention to obtain each student's course-work essay marks and overall degree mark for their current academic year. This was made clear to the students in the introductory letter which accompanied the questionnaire. In the event this intention could not be realised due to the way in which data regarding students are collapsed in their records, i.e. course-work essay marks were aggregated with other course-work marks. It is suspected that this lack of anonymity may have contributed to the poor return rate.

5.3 Psychometric Properties of the Approaches to Studying Inventory (18 item) and the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire.

5.3.1 Lancaster Approaches to Studying Inventory (18 item).

This will not be the first time the 18 item version of the ASI has come under psychometric scrutiny, indeed other occasions were discussed in Chapter 1 (i.e. Newstead, 1992; Richardson, 1992). Both Newstead and Richardson reported fair levels of reliability on all three factors (approx. 0.50). Newstead found that all factors were identifiable as those predicted by Gibbs et al (1988). There were some anomalies: one item failed to load significantly on achieving orientation; one item failed to load on reproducing orientation and two unexpected items loaded significantly on meaning orientation. However, Richardson (1992) reported a pattern of anomalies which may give cause for concern. Items relating to 'intrinsic motivation', but not 'deep approach' loaded on factor one, while the second factor loaded on 'surface approach' but not on 'extrinsic motivation'. The third factor loaded on 'organised study methods' but not on 'achieving motivation'. This indicates that factors are measuring only study processes not the global orientation predicted.

Data from Study 6 of the current investigation were also subjected to a factor analysis using, as Gibbs et al (1988) did, principal components analysis with varimax rotation, imposing a 3 factor solution. At this point it is worth noting that Gibbs might have considered using an oblique rotation since it was likely that these three factors would correlate. For this reason their use of a varimax rotation could be argued to be inappropriate.

The factor loadings from the present study, in Table 5.1 below, reveal that all the items Gibbs et al (1988) predicted loading significantly (at 0.3 or above) on meaning orientation did so. However, a further 4 items loaded significantly on this factor. Three of these give little reason for concern since they were negative loading items pertaining to reproducing orientation. However, item 5 - 'When I'm reading I try to memorise important facts which may come in useful later', loaded positively on meaning orientation.

Table 5.1
Predicted and Actual Factor Loadings of the ASI (18 item)

	Predicted Loading	Actual Loading		
		Factor 1 Meaning	Factor 2 Achieving	Factor 3 Reproducing
Item 1	Achieving	.06	.73	-.14
Item 3		.12	.24	.21
Item 6		.00	.41	.39
Item 9		.20	.70	-.07
Item 12		.12	.59	-.10
Item 15		-.06	.27	.19
Item 4	Meaning	.47	.37	.17
Item 7		.62	.01	.05
Item 10		.47	.40	.08
Item 13		.59	-.03	.02
Item 16		.61	.22	-.07
Item 17		.65	.11	-.01
Item 2	Reproducing	-.33	.01	.60
Item 5		.31	.12	.38
Item 8		-.51	.23	.32
Item 11		-.03	-.18	.61
Item 14		-.47	-.20	.15
Item 18		.01	-.03	.68

Five of the items predicted loaded significantly on reproducing orientation. Only one predicted item failed to load: item 14 - 'I tend to read very little beyond what's required for completing assignments'. Four of the items predicted loaded significantly on achieving orientation. However, two predicted items (item 3 - 'It's important for me to do really well in the course here', and item 15 - 'It is important to me to do things better than my friends, if I possibly can') failed to load. In addition, two unexpected items had high loadings on this factor (item 4 - 'I usually set out to understand thoroughly the meaning of what I am asked to read' and item 10 - 'I generally put a lot of effort into trying to understand things which initially seem difficult'). The factors have moderate reliability, measured using Cronbach's alpha (see Cronbach, 1951): .48 on the achieving orientation; .43 on the reproducing orientation; and .69 on the meaning orientation.

Before the factor loadings from the present study are discussed further it is necessary to recall some of the sub-scales of the ASI, which are shown below in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2

Main sub-scales of the Achieving and Reproducing Orientations of the ASI taken from Richardson (1990).

Main Sub-scales	Meaning
Achieving orientation	
Disorganised study methods	Unable to work regularly and effectively.
Achievement motivation	Competitive and competent.
Reproducing orientation	
Surface approach	Preoccupation with memorising.
Extrinsic motivation	Interest in course for the qualifications they offer.

Although the factors predicted are clearly recognisable, the factor loadings revealed some anomalies. Achieving orientation loaded on all items relating to 'disorganised study methods', but not on two items relating to 'achievement motivation'. All items relating to

‘surface approach’ but not all items relating to ‘extrinsic motivation’ loaded. Therefore the current results are consistent with those of Richardson (1992), who found that the factor structure of the ASI indicated that factors were not measuring global orientations but part of them. Hence although the predicted factor structure of the ASI (18 item) is recognisable and its factor structure reasonably reliable, it must be noted that the stability of its factor structure is not completely convincing.

5.3.2 Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire.

In order to check the consistency of the factor structure of EWOQ the results were subjected to a factor analysis using, as was used in developing the tool, principal components analysis with oblimin rotation, imposing a four factor solution. The results are given in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3
Predicted and Actual Factor Loadings of the EWOQ

	Predicted Loading	Actual Loading			
		Factor 1 Deadline Motivation	Factor 2 Isolation in Writing	Factor 3 Understanding Orientation	Factor 4 Mark Approval
Item 17	Understanding Orientation	-.03	.13	.70	-.06
Item 19		.05	-.09	.72	.04
Item 20		-.45	-.05	.31	.26
Item 21		-.04	.03	.67	-.09
Item 22		.28	.13	-.25	-.20
Item 24		.00	.13	.60	-.06
Item 25		.06	-.13	.69	.08
Item 18	Deadline Motivation	.75	-.03	.05	-.01
Item 26		.91	.03	-.00	.06
Item 29		.94	-.03	.03	.06
Item 31		.91	-.03	.05	.05
Item 34	Mark Approval	-.04	.05	-.02	.58
Item 28		-.03	-.01	-.07	.64
Item 30		.12	-.00	.03	.73
Item 23	Isolation in Writing	.06	.83	.08	-.06
Item 27		-.02	.71	-.02	-.03
Item 32		-.08	.77	.03	-.03
Item 33		.04	.58	-.04	.34

Deadline motivation was recognisable as all predicted items loaded at .3 or above (in this case no loadings were below 0.7). However, a further item which loaded negatively at above 0.3 was not expected. This item was from those predicted to load on the understanding orientation: item 20 - 'I will put as much effort as I can to get an essay perfect, before it is handed in'. All items predicted loaded significantly on isolation in writing. The understanding orientation was clearly recognisable, since all expected items loaded significantly (.03 or above) except one which loaded at 0.25: item 22 - 'I will submit an essay as soon as it is finished, even if I am not pleased with it'. All items predicted loaded significantly on mark approval.

Inter-factor correlations shown in Table 5.4 reveal that as understanding orientation increased, need for mark approval decreased. This was a consistent finding throughout the various phases of the EWOQ's development. Furthermore as the need for mark approval decreased, deadline motivation increased, indicating that the need for approval may provide the motivation to avoid rushing an essay and completing it close to the deadline.

Table 5.4
Inter-Factor Correlations of EWOQ

	Understanding	Deadline	Isolation
Deadline	-.31		
Isolation	-.03	.06	
Mark Approval	.08	-.12	.03

Cronbach's alpha revealed fair reliability on two dimensions (0.58 on understanding orientation; and 0.40 on mark approval) and good reliability on the remaining two factors (0.71 on isolation in writing; and 0.90 on deadline motivation). Hence not only is the EWOQ the first tool, to the authors' knowledge, which measures motivational and affective components of course-work essay writing, but it is practical to use, consisting of only 18

items. In addition it is stable and reliable, with reliability scores and the number of items loading on predicted factors higher than for the ASI (18 item) advocated by Gibbs et al. (1988).

5.4 Approaches to Studying and Students' Experiences of Essay Writing.

5.4.1 The Motivational Dynamics of Essay Writing.

Entwistle and Ramsden's work into adult learning, which has found both a qualitative and quantitative distinction between deep and surface learning, has done so in terms of approach, intention and process. The EWOQ also measures students' intention and process, since this was how students described their experiences of essay writing in the focus group data from Study 1, reported in Chapter 2. The ASI (18 item) and EWOQ have other similarities. The understanding orientation of the EWOQ is parallel to the reproducing and meaning orientation of the ASI. Some items, relating to competition in the achieving orientation of the ASI are similar to items from the mark approval dimension of the EWOQ. However, the remaining items of the mark approval dimension relate to awareness of the marker and a desire to impress them rather than efficiency in study methods as is the case in the achieving orientation of the ASI. However, the EWOQ also includes students' affective experiences of essay writing (i.e. enjoyment) which are not obviously covered in the ASI (18 item). It appears, on first inspection, that most of the constructs of the EWOQ are reflected in the ASI (18 item). Whether similarities continued to exist under the scrutiny of quantitative analysis was examined by correlating the factor scores from each questionnaire. These correlations can be seen below in Table 5.5.

The correlation coefficients reveal a certain amount of consistency between the two scales. There was a significant, positive correlation ($p < 0.001$) between the EWOQ's understanding orientation and the achieving orientation (0.29) and meaning orientation (0.58) from the ASI. As understanding orientation in essay writing increased so did meaning and achieving

orientation. A significant, negative (-0.33, $p < 0.001$) correlation between the understanding orientation from the EWOQ and the reproducing orientation from the ASI also existed. As understanding orientation increased reproducing orientation decreased. Deadline motivation in essay writing significantly correlated with all three factors of the ASI ($p < 0.001$). As the ASI's achieving and meaning orientation increased as deadline motivation decreased (-0.42 and -0.26 respectively). As reproducing orientation increased so did deadline motivation in course-work essay writing (0.20, $p < 0.001$). However, there were no significant correlations between isolation in writing and any of the ASI's factors. Although many dimensions of the EWOQ were not obviously measured by the ASI all the EWOQ's dimensions (except isolation in writing) did significantly correlate with at least one factor of the ASI.

Table 5.5
Correlations Between Constructs of ASI and EWOQ

ASI	Achieving Orientation	Reproducing Orientation	Meaning Orientation
Essay Motivation			
Understanding Orientation	.29***	-.33***	.58***
Deadline Motivation	-.42***	.20***	-.26***
Mark Approval	.26***	Not Significant	.12**
Isolation in Writing	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant

$p < 0.001$ ***

$p < 0.01$ **

$p < 0.05$ *

5.4.2 Essay Writing Process

The question of whether the ASI relates to students' experiences of essay writing in terms of their writing process was also addressed using correlations (see Table 5.6).

Table 5.6

Approaches to Studying and Processes of Course-work Essay Writing

Process	ASI	Achieving	Meaning	Reproducing
Basic Research		Not Significant	.22***	Not Significant
Use Journal Articles		Not Significant	.21***	-.23***
Select Relevant Information		Not Significant	Not Significant	-.23***
Plan Groupings		.21***	.15***	Not Significant
Plan Order		.23***	.14***	Not Significant
Check spelling or grammar		.08*	.13**	Not Significant
Re-arrange, add or take out material.		.21***	.20***	Not Significant
Use a computer.		Not Significant	.08*	Not Significant

p < 0.001 ***

p < 0.01 **

p < 0.05*

This highlights that the higher the achieving orientation scores, the more likely students are to carry out both types of planning, check the spelling or the grammar of their essay and edit it by re-arranging, adding or submitting material. Scores on this construct are not related to computer use, basic research, use of journal articles or selecting relevant information. As meaning orientation scores increase students are more likely to carry out basic research, use journal articles, plan the groupings and order of their essay, use a computer in its production and make both superficial revisions (spelling, grammar and word limit) and more substantial revisions (adding, removing and re-arranging material). The higher a student's reproducing orientation scores are the less likely they are to select relevant information and use journal articles. Therefore, every aspect of the essay writing process identified in the current research is related to at least one construct of the ASI (18 item).

The correlations between the EWOQ's dimensions and essay writing process components were also examined (see Table 5.7).

Table 5.7
Essay Writing Orientations and Processes of Course-work Essay Writing

EWOQ	Understanding Orientation	Mark Approval	Isolation	Deadline Motivation
Processes				
Basic Research	.28***	.11**	Not Significant	-.14***
Use Journal Articles	.18***	Not Significant	Not Significant	-.21***
Select Relevant Information	.10**	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant
Plan Groupings	.16***	Not Significant	Not Significant	-.11**
Plan Order	.13**	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant
Check spelling or grammar	.20***	Not Significant	Not Significant	-.11**
Re-arrange, add or take out material.	.29***	Not Significant	Not Significant	-.19***
Use a computer.	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant	Not Significant

p < 0.001 ***

p < 0.01 **

p < 0.05*

By examining Table 5.6 and Table 5.7 it is possible to see that the relationship between approaches to studying and essay writing process is comparable to the relationship between essay writing orientations and essay writing process. The EWOQ also correlates significantly with most of the components of the writing process. The direction of the relationship between processes and understanding orientation in essay writing are the same as with the meaning orientation of the ASI. As understanding orientation increases students' likelihood of carrying out all components of writing, except computer use, increases.

Basic research, use of journal articles, planning groupings, basic and advanced editing are less likely to be used if students have high deadline motivation scores, indicating that many aspects of the writing process are forfeited where students are motivated only by the deadline. Mark approval correlates only with basic research. Where mark approval is high so is the likelihood of basic research occurring. However, isolation in writing relates to none of the components of the essay writing process measured in the current study.

It seems then that the ASI does relate to students' experiences of essay writing in terms of the processes of writing. Therefore a lack of construct validity in the ASI is not likely to be at the root of inconsistencies in findings of developmental studies investigating these approaches. In fact the ASI's relationship with writing processes is comparable to that of the specific tool designed to measure approaches to essay writing: EWOQ. The approaches to studying inventory also correlates with a factor which the specific tool does not: computer use. This finding is perhaps not surprising since computer use is likely to be something that occurs across assignments and so is best measured by a scale that attempts to tap into students' approaches across them. In addition the fact that isolation in writing is not related to any process factors indicates that the ASI's inability to correlate with this factor may not be a major failing.

5.5 Development of Learning Across the Years of a Degree.

Given the reassuring evidence (see Section 5.4) supporting the 18 item ASI's ability to relate to students' experiences of essay writing, it was used in conjunction with the EWOQ and EWPQ to examine the development of learning across the years of a degree.

To carry out an investigation that treated the population in the current study as homogenous would be to ignore the reported differences in their approaches to learning

according to entry age (e.g. Richardson, 1994). Therefore analysis consisted of multiple univariate ancovas: a series of seven, one for each dimension of the ASI and EWOQ, in which students' entry age and year of study were the dependent variables (see Appendix L for full report of ancovas). In order that the possible confounding factors - entry qualification, most recent entry qualification and years out of education were not overlooked they were treated as covariates. Other factors which were measured, such as students' time out of formal education, sex and department of study were not examined due to the difficulty of 'empty cells' in analysis.

Before the results of these ancovas are considered it is important to note that an alternative option for analysis existed. This was multivariate analysis of covariance (manova). Some believe that multivariate analysis offers the opportunity to reduce Type 1 errors. However, "the comfort of statistical protection is an illusion." (Huberty and Morris, 1989). The decision to carry out multivariate or multiple univariate analysis should be made on the basis of theoretical, not statistical criteria since the research questions addressed by manova and multiple anova are very different (Huberty and Morris, 1989). A univariate analysis should be used where the research question relates to individual outcome variables, for example when the enquiry pertains to how levels of a dependent variable differ according to levels of independent variables. The current research is examining exactly this kind of relationship, i.e. what effect does a student's academic year have on their meaning orientation scores and their understanding orientation scores?

To continue with the findings, the examination of factors from the ASI revealed no significant differences in the achieving, meaning or reproducing orientation scores according to students' year of study. Neither was there a main effect of students' entry age on achieving orientation scores. See Table 5.8 for these results.

Table 5.8

Dimensions of the ASI (18 item) According to Entry Age and Year of Study. Non-Significant Main Effects.

Dimension	Mean Score	Ancova Data
Achieving		
Entry Age		
Up to 20	14.5	F(2)=.4 p>.5
21- 25	14.6	
25 and over	14.5	
Study Year		
1st Year	14.9	F(2)=.7 p>.1
2nd Year	14.4	
3rd Year	14	
Meaning		
Study Year		
1st Year	15.3	F(2)=.7 p>.1
2nd Year	16	
3rd Year	15.8	
Reproducing		
Study Year		
1st Year	14.8	F(2)=1.6 p>.1
2nd Year	14.3	
3rd Year	13.7	

In addition there was no significant interaction between entry age and study year on the three dimensions of the ASI (18 item), see Figure 5.1 for achieving orientation, Figure 5.2 for meaning orientation, and Figure 5.3 for the reproducing orientation data.

Figure 5.1

Achieving Orientation (ASI) According to Entry Age and Study Year
(Out of a possible score of 6-30) F(4)=.8 p>.5

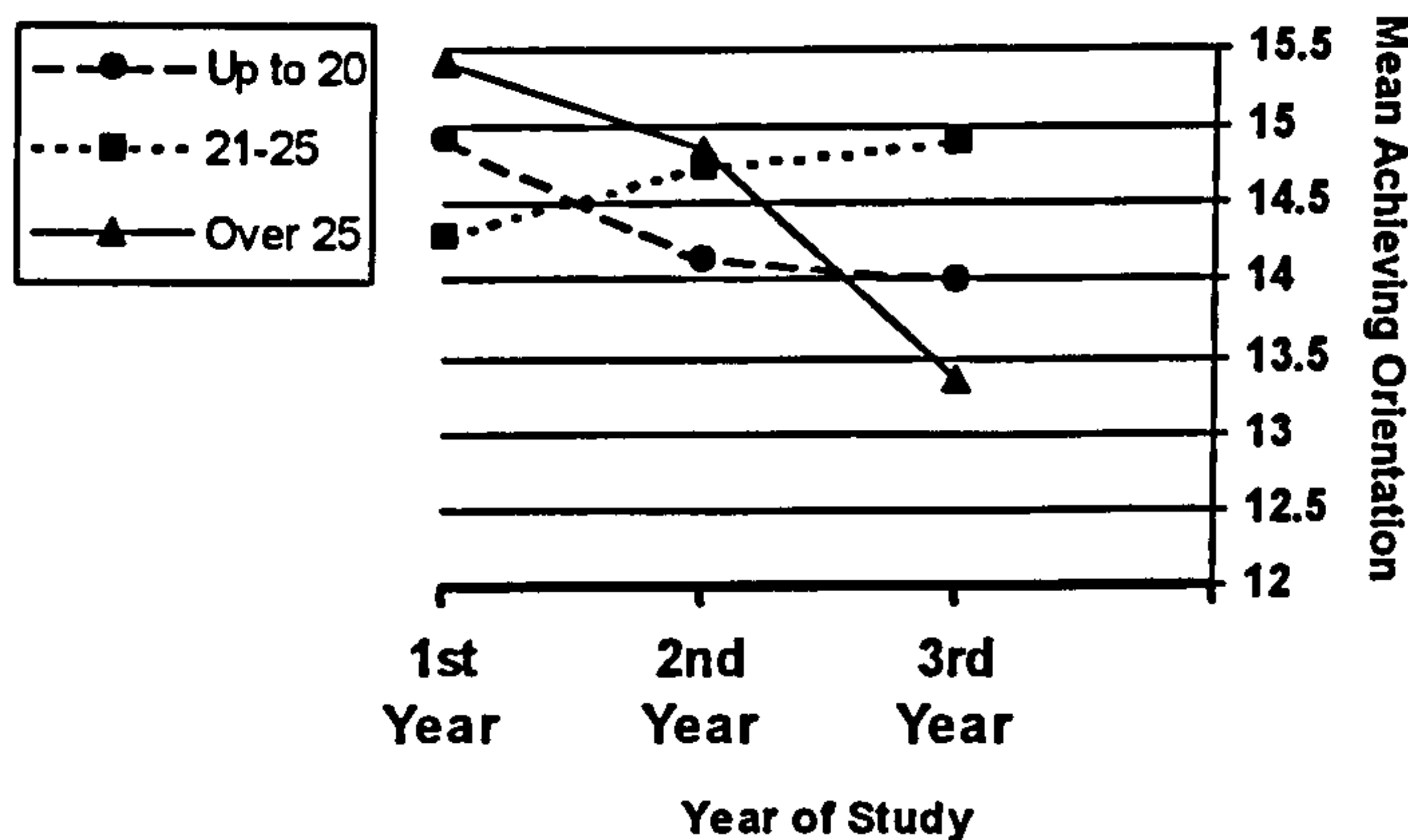


Figure 5.2

Meaning Orientation (ASD) According to Entry Age and Study Year
 (Out of a possible score of 6-30) $F(4)=1.3$ $p>.1$

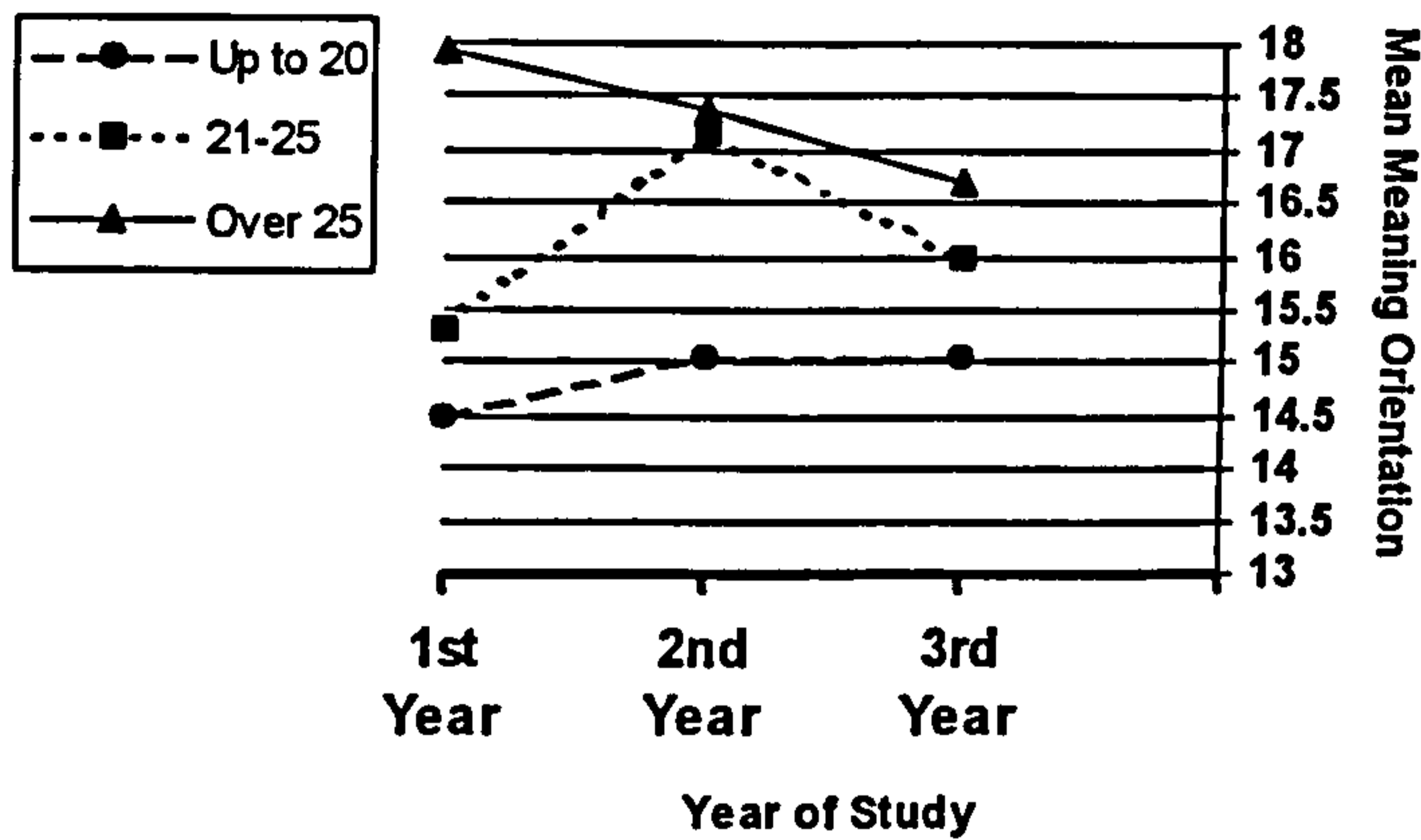
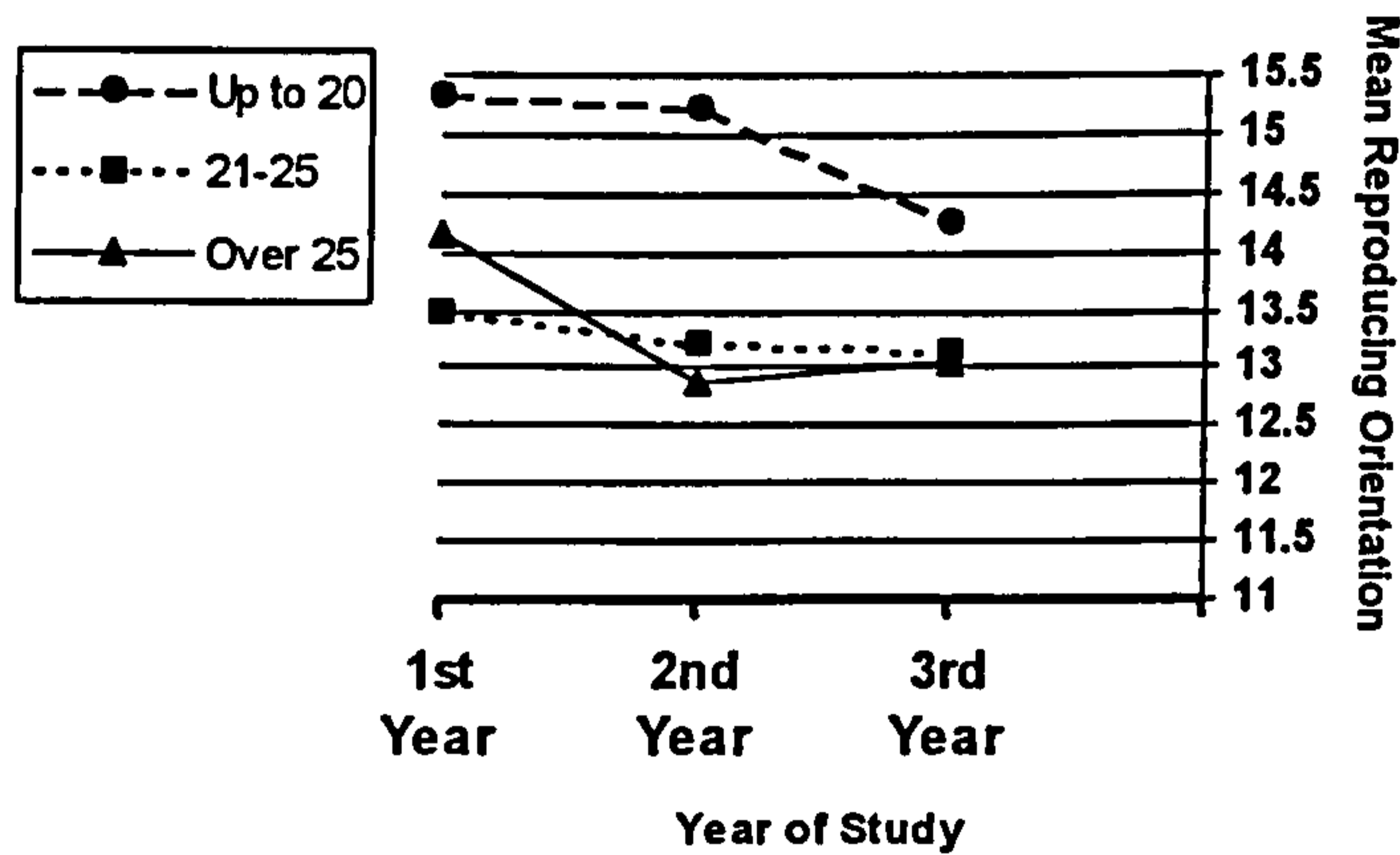


Figure 5.3

Reproducing Orientation (ASD) According to Entry Age and Study Year
 (Out of a possible score of 6-30) $F(4)=.3$ $p>.5$

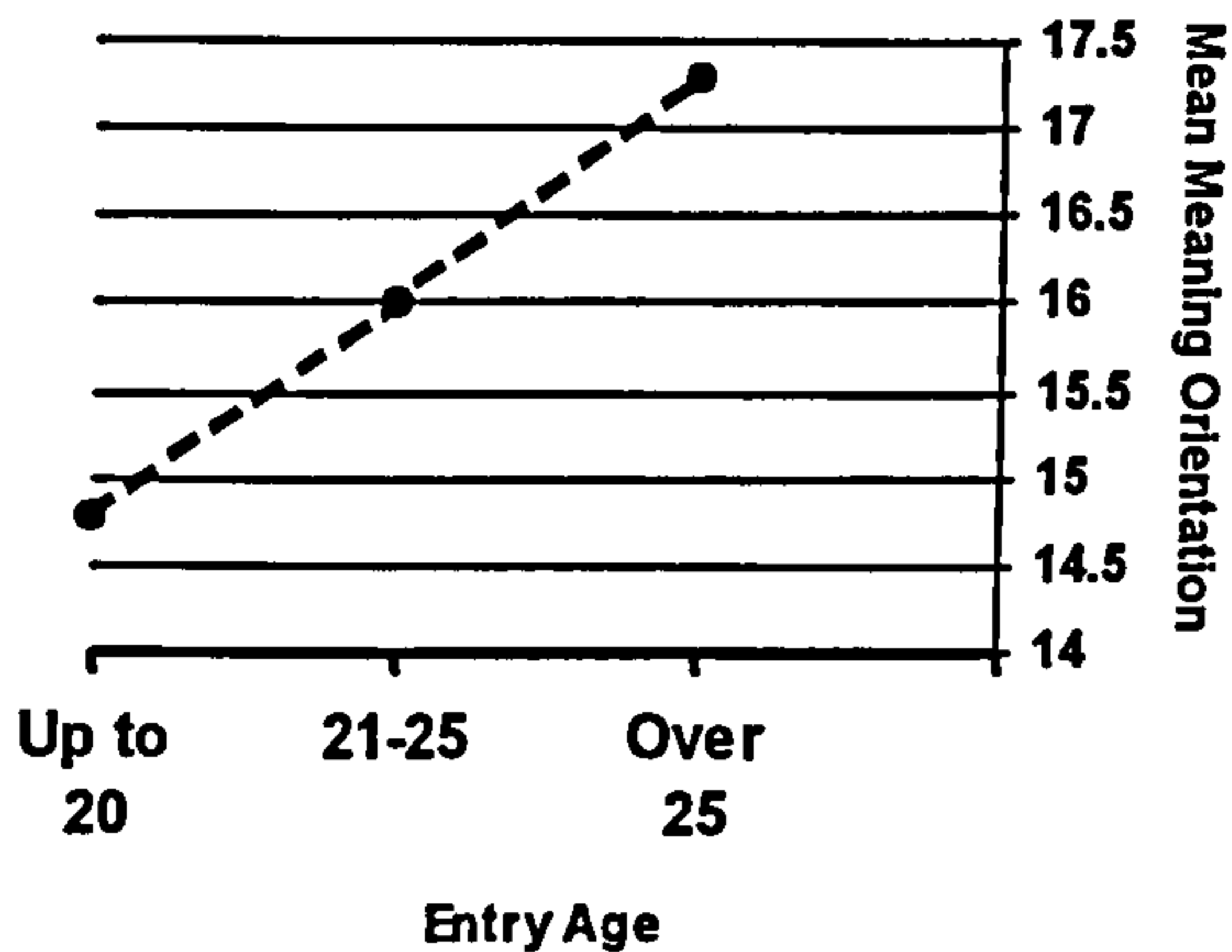


NB: on all factors represented in these and subsequent figures a high score represents an approach in line with that factors label, e.g. a high score on the 'achieving orientation' represents a high achieving orientation.

However, there was a main effect of entry age on meaning orientation scores $F(2)=8.99$; $p<.001$, see Figure 5.4. Those entering higher education up to 20 years of age obtained the lowest meaning orientation score (an average of 14.8), those entering between and including 21 and 25 scored 16 and those entering over 25 years of age scored 17.3 out of a

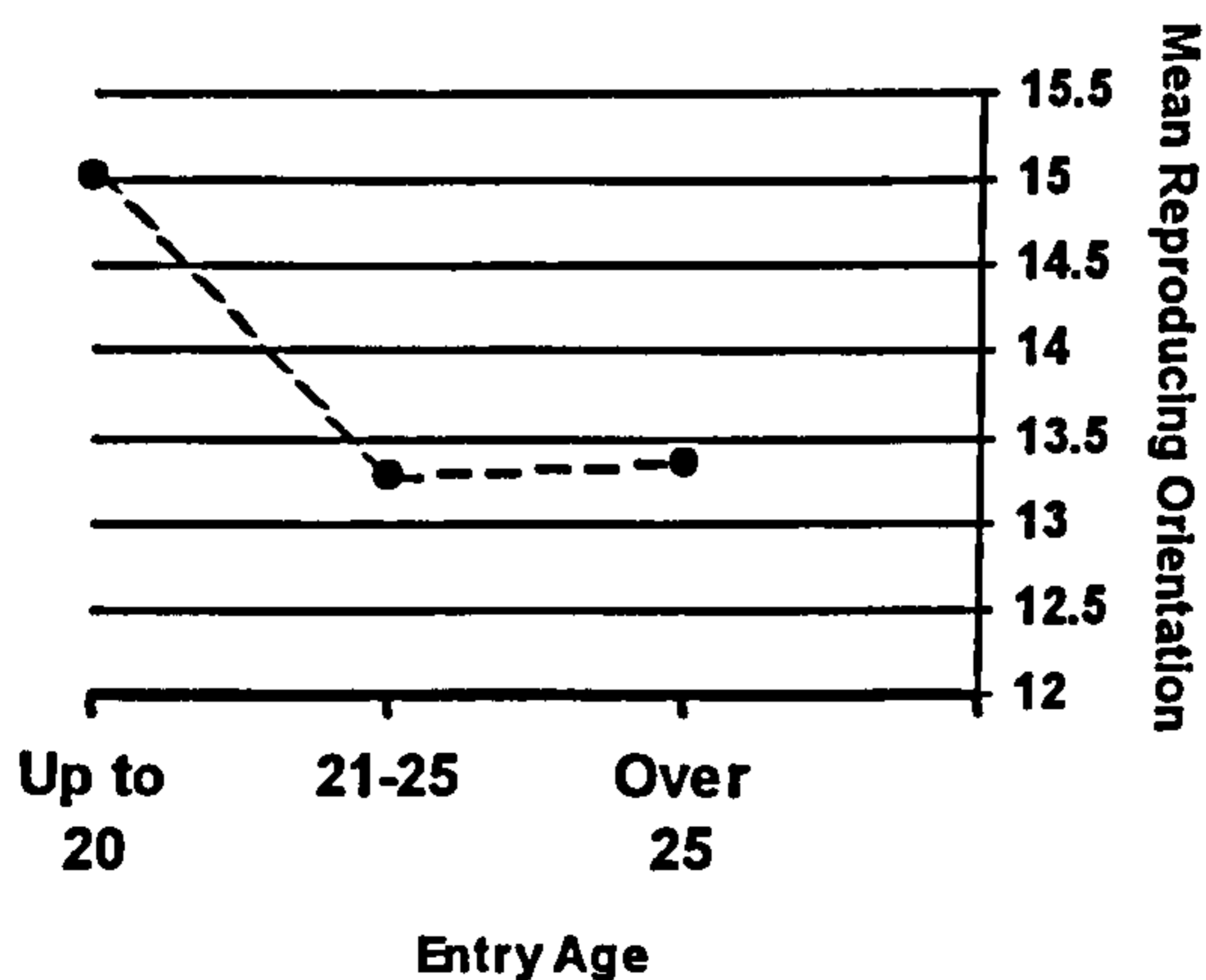
possible 24. A Newman-Keuls follow up analysis revealed that the differences between all possible combinations of mean scores were significant ($p < .01$).

Figure 5.4
Meaning Orientation (ASI) and Entry Age
(Out of a possible score of 6-30)



There was a main effect of entry age on students' reproducing orientation scores $F(2)=4.77$; $p < .01$, see Figure 5.5. Students entering up to 20 years old scored an average of 15 in the reproducing orientation, whereas those entering between 21-25 and over 25 scored 13.3 and 13.4 out of a possible 24.

Figure 5.5
Reproducing Orientation (ASI) and Entry Age
(Out of a possible score of 6-30)



A Newman-Keuls follow up analysis revealed that the only means failing to reach a significant difference at $p < .05$ were those of the 21-25 and over 25 year olds.

Again when examining the EWOQ there were no significant differences according to year of study on any of the factors. Neither were there any significant differences in mark approval scores according to students' entry age. See Table 5.9 for these data.

Table 5.9
Dimensions of the EWOQ According to Entry Age and Year of Study. Non-Significant Main Effects.

Dimension	Mean Score	Ancova Data
Understanding		
Study Year		
1st Year	24.5	F(3)= 2.0 p >.1
2nd Year	25	
3rd year	25.2	
Isolation		
Study Year		
1st Year	10	F(2) = 1.2 p <.5
2nd Year	10	
3rd year	10	
Deadline		
Study Year		
1st Year	11	F(2)= .01 p > .5
2nd Year	10.7	
3rd year	10.6	
Mark Approval		
Entry Age		
Up to 20	10.4	F(2)=2.5 p >.05
21- 25	10.2	
25 and over	10.1	
Study Year		
1st Year	10.5	F(2)=.7 p >.1
2nd Year	10.3	
3rd Year	10	

Furthermore there was no significant interaction between study year and entry age on any of the EWOQ factor scores. See Figure 5.6 for understanding orientation, Figure 5.7 for isolation in writing, Figure 5.8 for deadline motivation and Figure 5.9 for mark approval scores.

Figure 5.6

Understanding Orientation (EWOQ) According to Entry Age and Study Year
 (Out of a possible score of 7-35) $F(4)=1.1$ $p>.10$

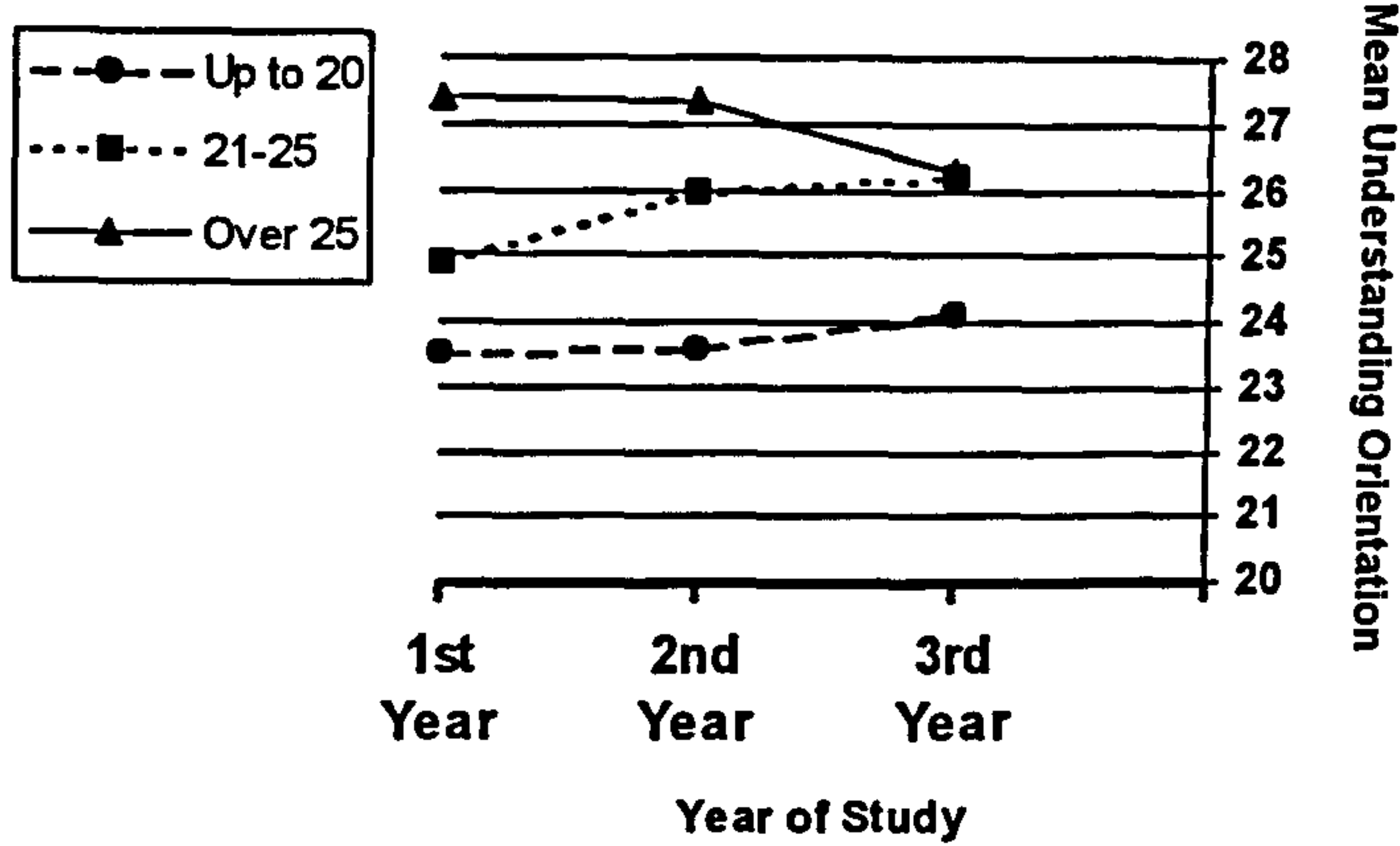


Figure 5.7

Isolation in Writing (EWOQ) According to Entry Age and Study Year
 (Out of a possible score of 4-25) $F(4)=1.6$ $P<.10$

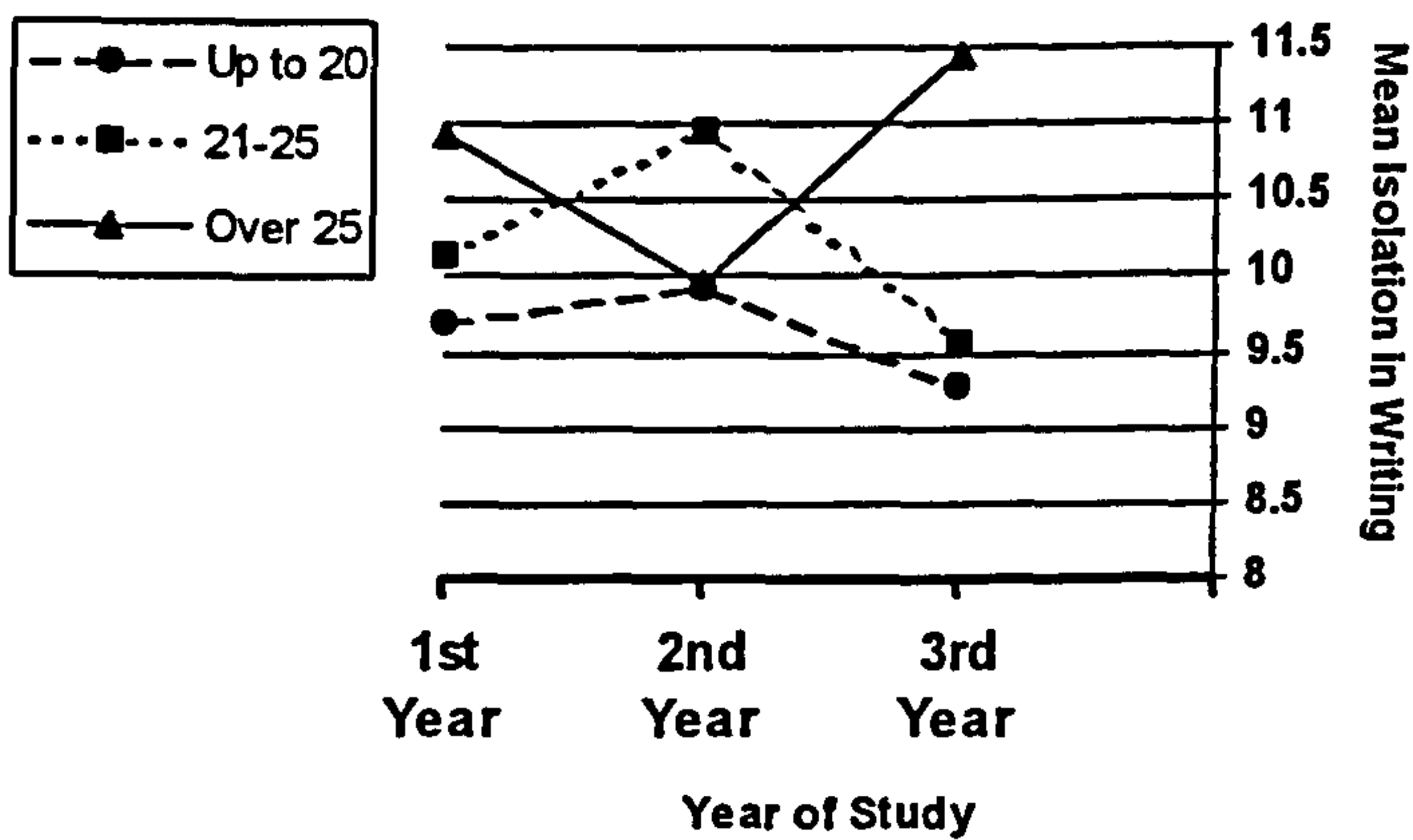


Figure 5.8

Deadline Motivation (EWOQ) According to Entry Age and Study Year
 (Out of a possible score of 4-25) $F(4)=.6$ $p>.50$

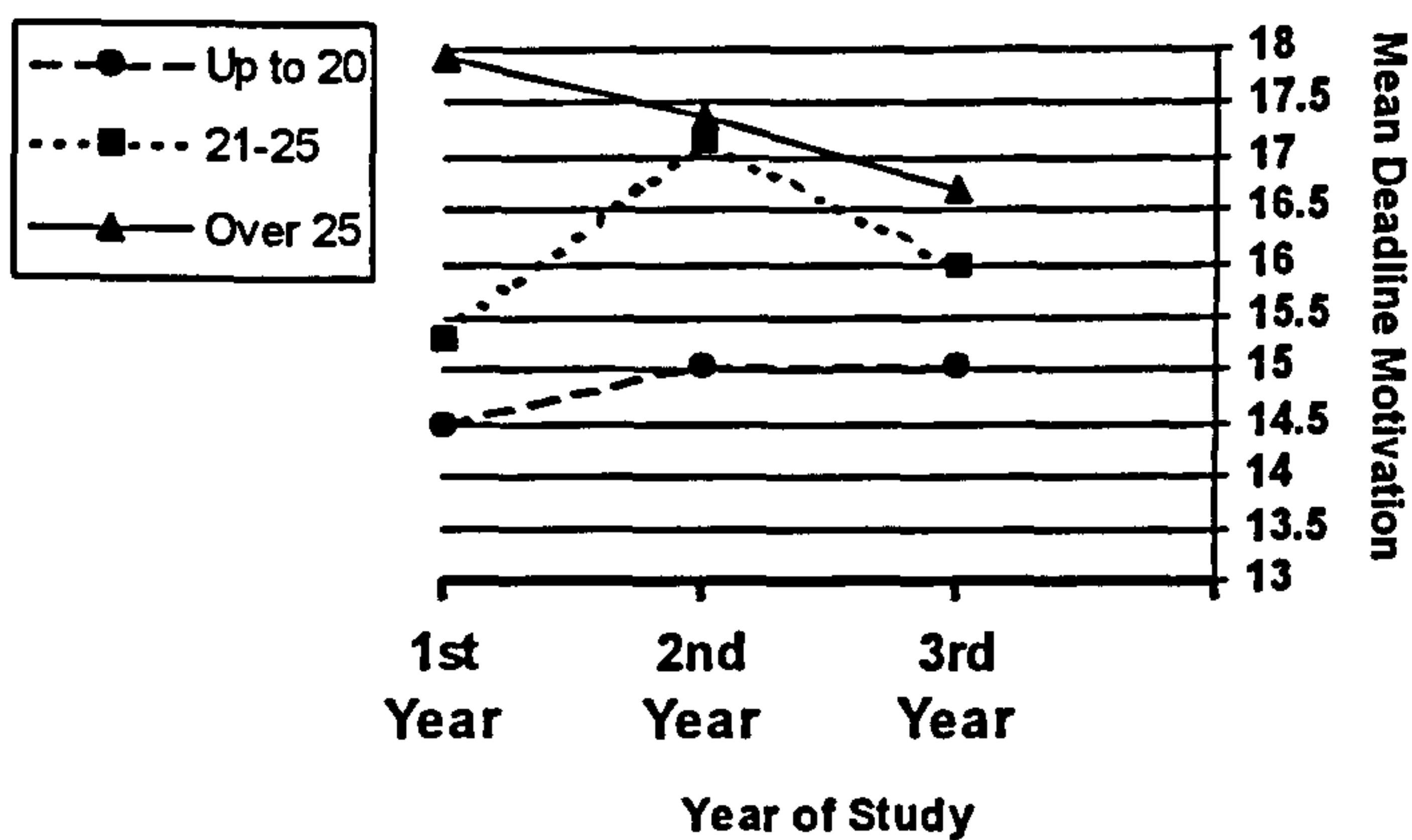
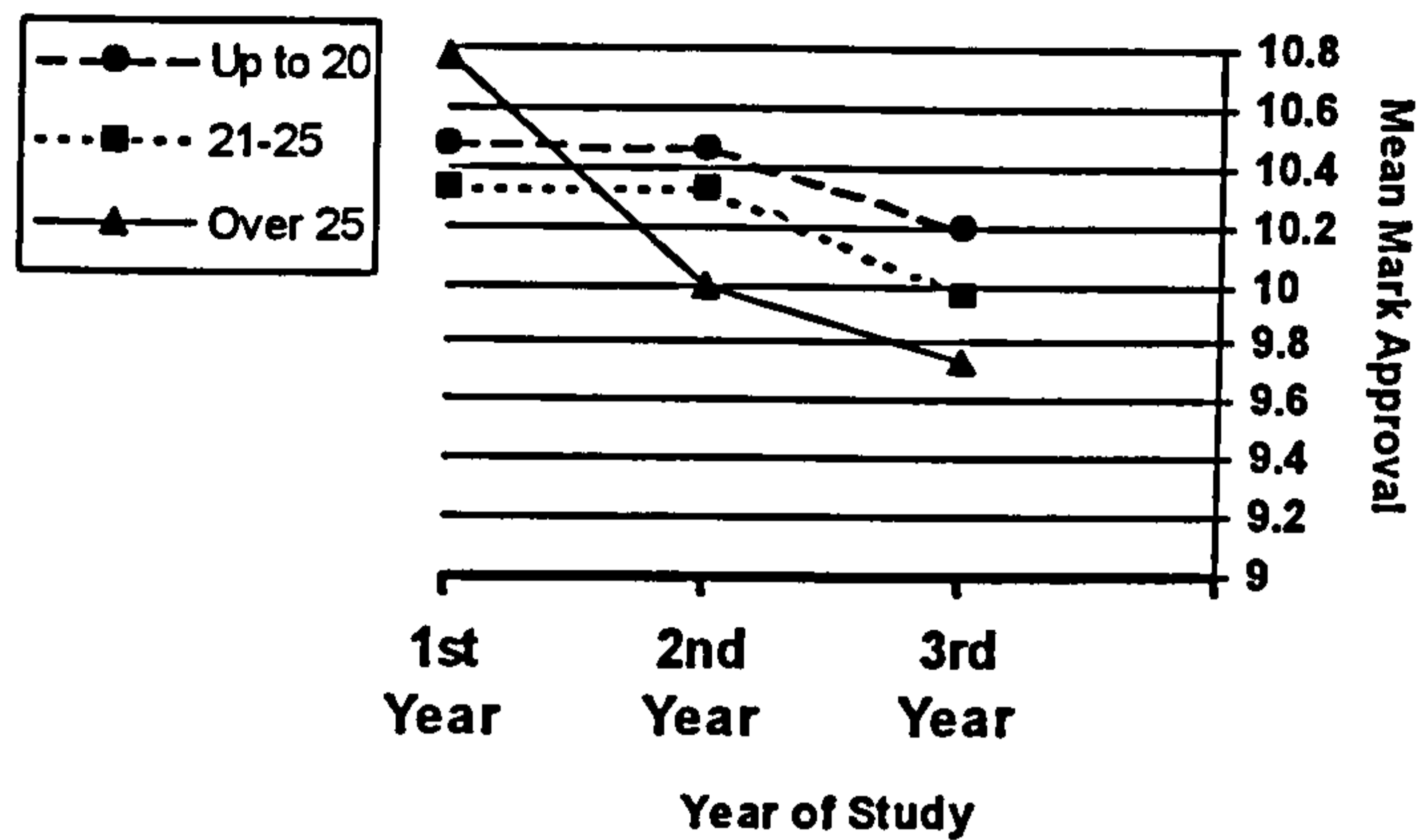


Figure 5.9

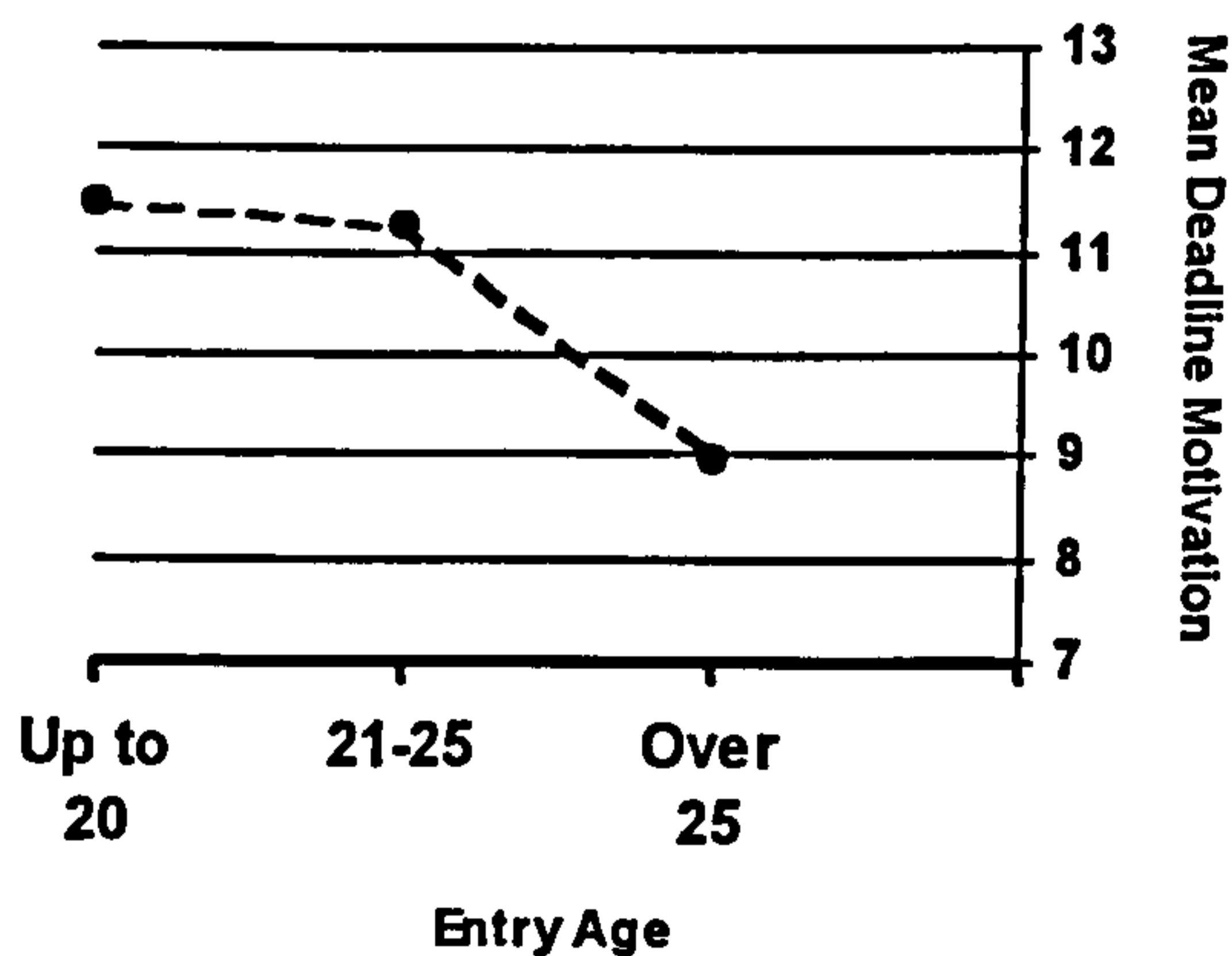
Mark Approval (EWOQ) According to Entry Age and Study Year
 (Out of a possible score of 3-15) $F(4)=.8$ $p>.5$



However, deadline motivation differed significantly according to age, $F(2)=9.79$; $p<.001$ as did isolation in writing $F(2)=6.147$ $p<.01$ and understanding orientation $F(2)=9.76$; $p<.001$. Those entering in the two youngest age groups (up to 20 and 21-25) scored 11.2 and 11.4 on deadline motivation, whereas those entering over 25 scored 10 out of a possible 25, see Figure 5.10. The only means failing to reach a significant difference at $p<.05$ in a Newman-Keuls follow up analysis were from those entering up to 20 and the 21-25 year olds.

Figure 5.10

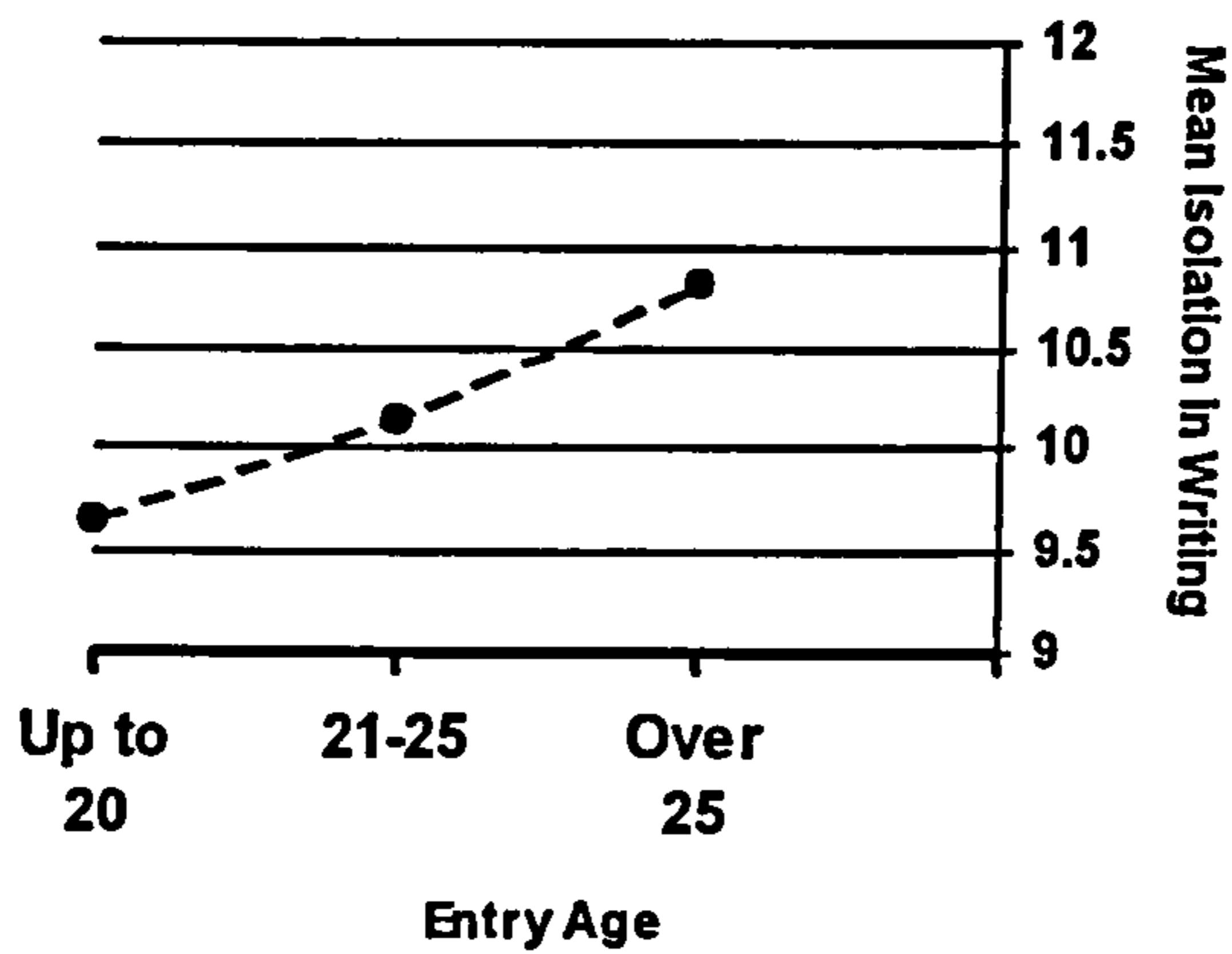
Deadline Motivation (EWOQ) and Entry Age
 (Out of a possible score of 4-25)



When isolation in writing is considered the youngest entrants (those of up to 20 and 21-25 on entry) are least isolated with mean scores of 9.6 and 10.1. The oldest entrants (over 25

on entry) scored 10.8 out of a possible 25, see Figure 5.11. A Newman-Keuls follow up analysis revealed that the only significant difference was between those entering up to 20 and those entering over 25 ($p < .05$).

Figure 5.11
Isolation in Writing (EWOQ) and Entry Age
 (Out of a possible score of 4-25)



Understanding orientation scores were lowest in students entering up to the age of 20 (23.7). Those entering between and including 21 and 25 years of age scored 25.7 on the understanding orientation. However those entering over the age of 25 scored the highest, 27 out of a possible 35, see Figure 5.12. A Newman-Keuls follow up analysis revealed that the differences between all possible combinations of means were significant ($p < .05$).

Figure 5.12
Understanding Orientation (EWOQ) and Entry Age
 (Out of a possible score of 7-35)

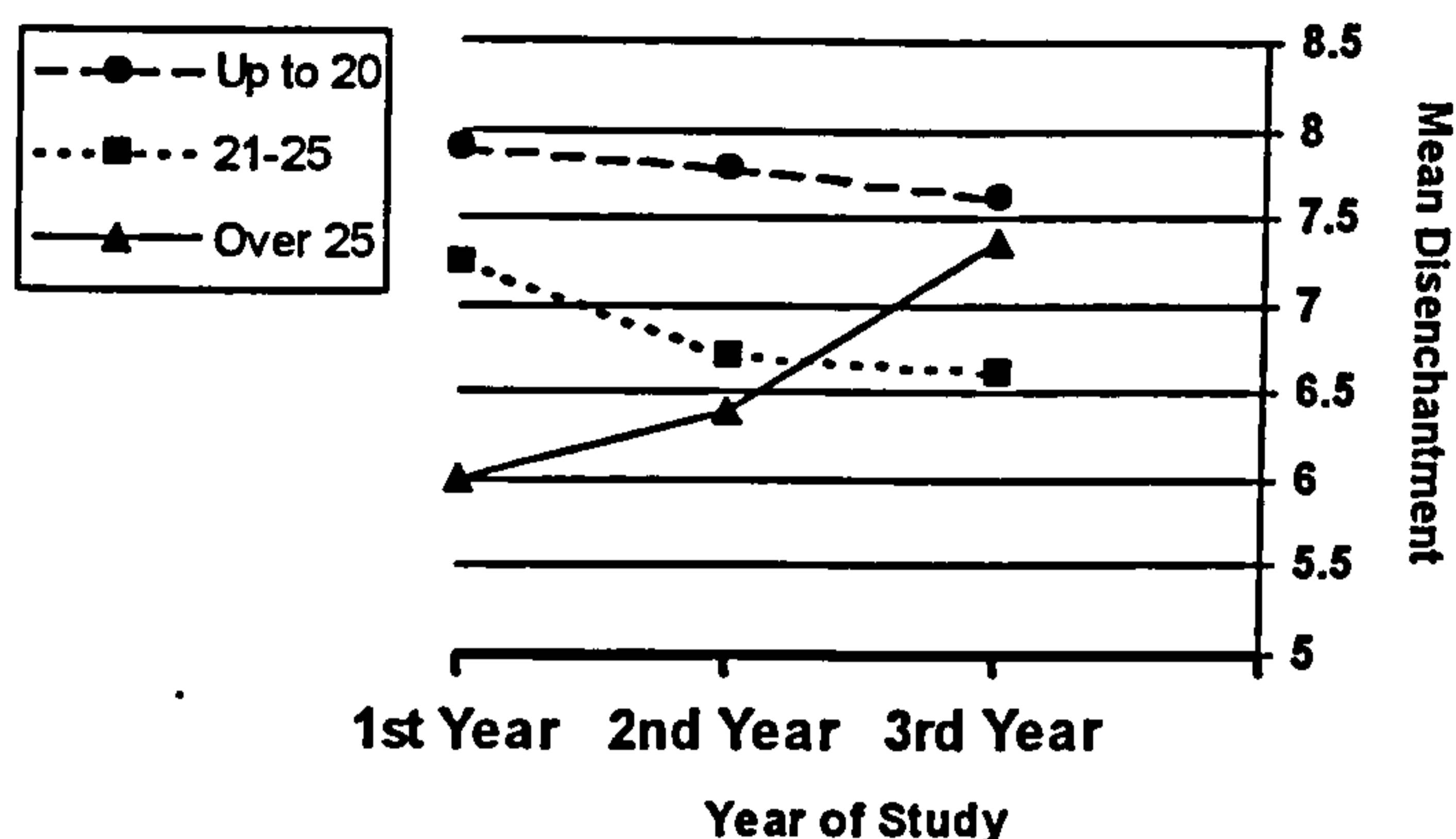


A further univariate ancova was carried out with a dependent variable formed from three items from the understanding orientation (see Appendix M for full report of the ancova). These three items represented a lack of understanding motivation. They were analysed separately since the three items, although an integral part of the understanding orientation psychometrically, represent a dimension which is conceptually more than a lack of understanding motivation. They represent a mark chasing strategy, combined with a lack of willingness to put time and effort into essays, or as Newell and Simon (1972) referred to it, to 'satisfice'. This entails a writer choosing to take the first acceptable solution rather than struggling to find the best solution. These items will be referred to as disenchantment since they reflect the qualitative description of this term in the grounded theory of essay writing in Chapter 2. This theory described disenchantment as a focus on external rewards due to disenchantment with feedback and the learning role of essay writing, in some cases leading to a lack of time and effort spent on essays. It was felt that carrying out a separate analysis of these items would avoid overlooking information regarding this conceptually distinct aspect of the writing experience.

This examination revealed a main effect of entry age $F(2)=7.25$; $p<.001$. The two mature groups of entrants (21-25 and over 25) scored the lowest on the disenchantment construct (7), whereas the traditionally aged entrants (up to 20 on entry) scored 8 out of a possible 15. In addition there was a significant interaction between entry age and year of study when considering disenchantment $F(4)=2.67$; $p<.05$ (see Figure 5.13).

Figure 5.13

Disenchantment (EWOQ) By Entry Age, Across the Years of a Degree
(Out of a possible score of 3-15)



A Newman-Keuls follow up analysis of the interaction between year of study and entry age revealed a significant difference between the over 25s and the youngest age group in the first year $p < .05$. The difference between the over 25s and 21-25 in the first year was significant only at $p < .10$. There was no significant difference between the two youngest age groups in the first year. Hence the over 25s begin their degree with significantly lower disenchantment scores than the remaining age groups, who are fairly homogenous.

However, the over 25s still remain significantly lower than the traditional age group in the second year ($p < .05$) but at this stage in the degree there is no difference between the oldest and 21-25 age group. Meanwhile the disenchantment of the over 25s from first to third year increases significantly ($p < .05$), (an increase of 1.36) so that at this stage in the degree there are no significant differences between the different age groups -- they are now homogenous in terms of disenchantment with essay writing.

The development of students' responses to questions from the EWPQ was also examined. Students' responses were collapsed over the five point scales. All those responding with strongly agree or agree were classified as carrying out the task for the majority of their course-work essays. Those responding with strongly disagree or disagree were classified

as not carrying out the task for the majority of their course-work essays. Those responding with neither agree nor disagree were presumed to carry out the task for some essays but not for others. The three classifications were then examined along with students' year of degree in a chi-square analysis. Question 10, referring to students' use of journal articles was the only question whose responses showed a significant change ($p < .05$) across the years of a degree, $\chi^2 (4) = 67.7, p < .001$.

Students in all years of study were less likely to use journal articles in some essays but not in others than they were to use them in all course-work essays. In addition this proportion decreases across the years of a degree with 17% of first years, 10% of second years and only 5% of third years using journal articles sporadically. Roughly equal proportions of first and second years used journal articles as did not (40% and 43% respectively). However when examining the third year students the large majority (81%) did use journal articles in the production of the majority of their essays. These changes were also examined for each of the three entry age groups: up to 20 on entry; 21-25 on entry; and over 25 on entry. This result revealed no difference in journal article use across the years of a degree for mature and traditionally aged students.

5.5.1 Discussion

The finding regarding journal article use is extremely encouraging given that it is a transferable skill which students appear to be developing across the years of a degree.

However, the use of journal articles did not appear to relate to students' essay marks when examined in Study 3 of Chapter 2.

The finding that students entering university aged over 25 had the highest isolation in writing scores may be due more to practical limitations than a conscious strategy. Older

students may be more likely to have home circumstances and dependants which make it difficult to meet up with other students, or be on a university campus as frequently as other students. Study 3, in Chapter 3 indicated no relationship between collaboration with peers in essay writing and achievement indicators, although there may be detrimental implications of isolation in writing for factors other than achievement. However, much of the new and developing technology may provide a solution enabling use of virtual learning environments in which students can interact synchronously with large or small groups of peers without leaving their homes.

The systematic increase of the ASI's meaning orientation as age of entry increases and higher reproducing orientation of traditionally aged students (up to 20 on entry) is consistent with many earlier findings (e.g. Harper and Kember, 1986; Watkins, 1982).

There was also a systematic increase across the age groups on the EWOQ's understanding orientation and a decrease across the age groups on the EWOQ's deadline motivation.

Researchers have already begun contemplating the reasons for such findings, with regard to generic approaches. Some suggest that exposure to 'life' has taught mature students to assess evidence and integrate knowledge (e.g. Biggs, 1985; Harper and Kember, 1986).

The answer to why traditional entrants are lower in deep approaches to learning, as Arnold and Fleighny (1995) and Wilson (1981) argued may be in their previous experience of learning, more specifically school and further education. Harper and Kember (1986) suggested that younger students entering higher education straight from conventional further education have experienced surface learning to such a degree that rote learning remains their predominant learning style while at university. Certainly it seems from the current data that while at university these students, although not becoming more surface in

their approaches, remain at a lower level of sophistication in learning than mature students.

Higher education does not compensate for their previous experience.

Interestingly there were no developmental changes in the dimensions of generic approaches to studying as measured by the ASI or specific approaches to essay writing as measured by the EWOQ in any population in higher education. This finding fails to support Biggs' concerns that surface type approaches, either generic or in essay writing, increase as does exposure to the quantitative system of higher education. However, neither do the data indicate that there is a decrease in surface type learning or an increase in deep learning as one might hope and as higher education institutions advocate. This finding is contrary to Wilson's (1981) suggestion that first year students, although beginning a degree with relatively simple conceptions of learning would gradually develop a depth approach across academic years of study.

Perhaps it is fair to say that a lack of change in ASI scores should be expected since the ASI measures a generic approach amalgamating approaches to many different tasks which students encounter during their time at university, not all of which require and so elicit a deep approach to studying. Rather some material in higher education requires a student to adopt a reproducing orientation such as learning a language, an equation, or a theory, whereas other material or the same material once learnt requires a deep approach in order that it is evaluated, integrated and reflected upon. Hence it is likely that in asking students to provide rapid responses regarding a general approach to all of these varying tasks they do not, and probably could not calculate accurately the proportion of tasks in which they adopt a surface approach against the proportion of tasks in which they adopt a deep approach. Hence, even if the proportion of tasks requiring and eliciting deep approaches increases in each subsequent degree year it is unlikely to be revealed using a generic measure.

However, one would expect to be able to accurately measure and therefore see an increase in students' understanding orientation to course-work essay writing across the years of a degree. An increase in learning sophistication in terms of essay writing would be revealed if students were developing additional skills in critical reflection, conveyance of ideas and arguments etc., if essay marks helped communicate that understanding was required and if essay questions became more in depth across the years of a degree. Therefore, the current data indicate that assignments such as course-work essay writing may not elicit critical thinking and understanding (see Tang, 1994; Thomas and Bain, 1984) but only maintain the levels with which students enter university. However, before firm conclusions are reached further investigations of the newly developed EWOQ would be necessary to ensure its stability and reliability and rule out the possibility that the current results are a product of an ineffective tool. If, given further development of the EWOQ the current failure to find any development in students' learning styles across the years of a degree were replicated in other institutions this may have serious implications for what we know about students' learning in higher education.

In terms of the effect of learning types on learning outcomes we do know from the results of Study 3, reported in Chapter 3, that there is no relationship between essay writing strategies and essay marks. In addition this current thesis could not examine achievement in relation to the EWOQ and research findings regarding the ASI's predictive validity are inconsistent. Some studies report a relationship with degree performance (e.g. Elbow, 1981; Hartley and Branthwaite, 1989; Mahalski, 1992; Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, 1994) while others have failed to find one (e.g. Hounsell, 1984; Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, in preparation, a and b). However, it is debatable how valuable marks are in determining the quality of students' learning. Achievement may be an ineffective way of assessing the effects of learning types, since the marks allocated in higher education may not

increase as learning sophistication does. What is a convincing and prolific idea in the research literature is that although "good" approaches to studying may or may not be related to academic achievement, they increase a student's chance of understanding a given topic (see Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). Given the present finding regarding the systematic increase in understanding and meaning orientation scores across the three entry age groups it seems that mature entrants may gain more understanding and insight than traditionally aged entrants during their time in higher education. However, this is not due to their experiences in higher education but to their previous learning experiences.

However, it also seems that mature entrants sacrifice something during their stay at university: their faith in course-work essay writing as a learning tool and their willingness to expend time and effort on this task. That is not to say that traditionally aged entrants are not disenchanted with essay writing, but unlike mature entrants they entered higher education already disenchanted with this tool. More specifically there is an increase, across the years of a degree, in non-traditional students' mark chasing and 'satisficing' in essay writing until they attain the same level as traditional students entered with.

Although this finding is not substantial since it is based on the scores from only 3 items (Cronbach alpha of 0.65) it does give sufficient cause for concern and further investigation. If replicated it has far reaching implications for higher education and research into student learning with regards to treating the student population as an homogenous group. The examination of the emerging population of non-traditional students was imperative, since only by examining changes in approaches to essay writing, in a way that avoided treating undergraduates as homogenous, did the full picture of learning in higher education come to light. Furthermore, if we consider the finding of the qualitative theory, that ineffective

feedback and guidance in essay writing can cause disenchantment, it appears that the context investigated here is one in which feedback is either non-existent or ineffective.

5.6 Conclusion

The current study revealed that the ASI (18 item) correlated with students' experiences of essay writing in terms of both their process and motivation, but not their isolation in writing. It also revealed interesting information regarding levels of learning sophistication which appeared to be largely dependent on students' status as traditional or non-traditionally aged entrants, with mature entrants exhibiting higher deep approaches both generically and in course-work essay writing. The data do not support fears that students become more reproducing in their approaches to learning and essay writing, and less meaning oriented across the years of a degree. However, neither do they reveal that with increased exposure to learning in university meaning orientation increases and reproducing orientation decreases. The current data do indicate that course-work essay writing does not encourage understanding but only maintains the level at which students enter university. This indicates that it is not a learning tool but solely a method of assessment. Furthermore, with regard to mark chasing and 'satisficing' in essay writing non-traditional students begin their degree with more desirable approaches than traditional students, but across the years of a degree increase to the same level as their traditional counterparts.

Chapter 6

General Discussion

6.1 Chapter Summary

The current chapter first outlines the background for this thesis followed by an account of its development, recounting the findings of this research story. These findings are described in relation to both the theoretical and practical implications of the research. The theoretical implications discussed in the current chapter focus on whether Biggs' fears regarding the type of learning promoted in higher education are justified; whether the findings of the qualitative theory of essay writing support his pessimistic view that improvements in learning can only be attained if the whole system of higher education is overhauled; and whether the current research sheds light on the reasons for inconsistencies in the existing literature regarding the predictive validity of the ASI, and development of learning. The qualitative theory of essay writing is returned to in order that further comment can be made regarding possible reasons for the findings in this thesis and so that recommendations for the use of course-work essay writing in higher education can be discussed. In addition the future of the two newly developed tools (the EWOQ and EWPQ) will be addressed, as will the weaknesses of the current research.

6.2 Thesis Background

The aim of the current research was to explore further a question which many researchers have posed as the British system of higher education has evolved (e.g. Becker, Geer and Hughes, 1968; Biggs, 1996; Newman, 1852; Pattison, 1876; Prosser, Trigwell and Taylor, 1994; Snyder, 1973; Whitehead, 1932): what type of learning do students develop in higher education? The distinction is between learning which focuses on understanding and interpretation and that which is concerned with the memorisation and regurgitation of

knowledge. This issue is perhaps even more salient in higher education today since not only is the system vastly enlarged, but it now incorporates a population of mature, non-traditionally qualified adults and the polytechnic teaching philosophy. However, the existing literature does not present a clear picture. We do not know if higher education engenders critical reflection.

The current research aimed to shed light on this issue by identifying the development of students' approaches to studying as exposure to this system increased, using The Lancaster Approaches to Studying Inventory. This tool would enable the measurement of students' learning in terms of memorising (reproducing orientation) or understanding (meaning orientation). In addition students' approaches to a specific task, course-work essay writing, were measured using the newly developed Essay Writing Process Questionnaire (EWPQ) and the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (EWOQ).

The theoretical framework for this research came from Biggs (1996). He stated that higher education has grown into a quantitative tradition in which increased knowledge rather than 'critical reflection' is rewarded. It was Biggs' (1996) research which stimulated the investigation of course-work essay writing as well as generic approaches to studying, since he expressed the fear that this type of learning is generalised to course-work essay writing, as well as assessments which one would accept are quantitative in nature, such as multiple choice examinations.

There were two additional reasons for examining course-work essay writing. Firstly, as a specific task in higher education essay writing provided an opportunity to examine a further theoretical question raised by Biggs, specifically his systems approach to change in higher education. Biggs (1989, 1996) stated that changes aimed at improving students' learning

must be holistic. However, other researchers, such as Gibbs (1983a, 1983b, 1990a, 1992, 1995) concentrate on the impact teaching has on students' learning. The question of whether teachers are a fundamental factor in facilitating significant improvements in student learning, without the 'whole' system of higher education being transformed, could be clarified to some extent by the current research.

The second reason for examining course-work essay writing as well as generic approaches to studying related to the inconsistencies in research findings regarding the development of students' learning. Some research showed increases in learning sophistication over the period of a degree (e.g. Beaty and Morgan, 1992 and Norton and Dickins, 1995; Watkins and Hattie, 1981; Volet, 1991), while others demonstrated decreases over time (e.g. Biggs, 1985, 1987; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Kember and Gow, 1991; Watkins and Hattie, 1983, 1985). In addition, the lack of consistency in research findings relating to the predictive validity of the ASI remain unexplained.

One possible reason for these inconsistencies is that higher education may not consistently reward deep approaches to studying, but instead reward surface approaches. However, before this possibility is accepted other possibilities must be ruled out. Another possible reason for these inconsistencies is the use of tools, such as the ASI, which measure students' learning generically. To the author's knowledge the construct validity of generic approaches in terms of their relationship to students' experiences of specific tasks has not been investigated. Hence the current research used students' experience of course-work essay writing as a 'bench-mark' from which to assess the ability of generic approaches to studying to relate to students' approaches to specific tasks.

A further explanation for these inconsistencies was investigated in the current research: homogeneity in the student population, or lack of it. As was discussed in Chapter 1 higher education currently contains a population of mature students without A levels. They are therefore likely to enter higher education with very different experiences of learning to traditional entrants. These experiences, as Arnold and Fleighny (1995) discussed, can influence how undergraduates perceive higher education which in turn may impact on the approaches to learning they develop during their stay here.

The rationale outlined above was used as the basis for research spanning 4 chapters of this thesis. Although the main aim of this thesis was to examine the development of students' generic approaches to studying and approaches to essay writing, much of the research work necessarily focused on the development of tools to measure students' approaches to essay writing. Therefore, although not the main aim of this research, the focus on essay writing was a substantial part of this thesis.

6.3 Development of the Thesis

This focus on essay writing began in Chapter 2 which was concerned with identifying students' qualitative experiences of course-work essay writing. Students' processes of writing which were identified in this qualitative stage of research were described in terms of the following components: basic research; gathering information; selecting relevant information; planning and editing. Each component consisted of a number of sub-components. For example basic research could be carried out in several ways: collaborating with peers; reading lectures notes; using introductory texts and retrieving information from memory. Students carried these actions out recursively, returning to components many times before essays were considered ready for submission.

Much of the previous research into essay writing has also identified these components and sub-components as important aspects of the writing process: collaboration with peers (e.g. Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980); the use of lecture notes (e.g. Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Mahalski, 1992; Norton, 1990); the use of books and journal articles (e.g. Norton, 1990); plans and their diversity (e.g. Norton, 1990) and selecting relevant information (e.g. Mahalski, 1992).

The qualitative description of the essay writing process also had similarities with the most predominant model of essay writing, the model of composition, devised by Hayes and Flowers (1980a) and revised by Hayes (1996). Both the model of undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing and the model of composition describe essay writing as a recursive process broken up into smaller parts, one of which is selecting the most useful material; both discuss the importance of long term memory; and both describe planning as a combination of a number of possible phenomena.

Chapter 3 concentrated on the development of the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire which was informed by the qualitative theory of essay writing. As well as providing information which contributed to the development of the tool, Study 3 in this chapter added to our knowledge of course-work essay writing. However, it indicates few major differences in essay writing strategies existed and only some individual differences in students' use of the components and sub-components of the essay writing process.

Furthermore Study 3 demonstrated that the essay writing process was largely unrelated to students' attributes and achievement. This Chapter concluded by suggesting that future research should reconsider its pre-occupation with essay writing processes such as planning and editing and aim at highlighting other aspects of writing which may have more impact on different populations' experience of learning in this task.

In fact the current investigation of essay writing differed from the previous research in this sense, since it also identified and provided a detailed description of the motivational dynamics of course-work essay writing. The model of undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing told a story in which the motivation to understand and learn from writing essays was in conflict with an achievement motivation (gaining the grade), in situations in which ineffective or no feedback existed. Where students were motivated to understand the relevant issues when writing an essay (influenced by their interest in the essay question or topic) they were likely to incur problems when writing their essay, relating to the management of vast amounts of material, which this motivation inspired them to obtain. This tended to lead to substandard essays which failed to gain positively reinforcing marks. In the absence of instruction or feedback to help students learn how to overcome these problems they were likely to avoid getting involved in their essays, since they had learned that this was detrimental to their marks. In some cases students believed marks were unrelated to the work and effort they put into an essay, perceiving a glass ceiling in the marking system and dissatisfied with the limited range of marks awarded. This situation seemed to be the cause of some students displaying disenchantment with course-work essay writing, a form of learned helplessness, reflected in the intention to write essays aimed only at 'scraping a pass', quickly and with little effort.

Chapter 4 described the development of the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire to measure the motivational dynamics of essay writing. This questionnaire proved to be more promising than the EWPQ. Clearly distinct essay writing orientations existed in students, providing an effective psychometric measure of individual differences in essay writing motivations. The four factors of the EWOQ account for 57% of the variance, with the first factor understanding orientation accounting for a large proportion of this. The EWOQ had a good average Cronbach's alpha of 0.69 (see Cronbach, 1951) across four factors.

Furthermore this tool is grounded in undergraduates' perceptions of essay writing and supports many of the findings of the qualitative theory of undergraduates' experiences of course-work essay writing.

Finally the EWOQ, EWPQ and the ASI (18 item) were administered in a large scale study spanning all three academic years of various degree programmes at the University of Plymouth. The results of this study, Study 6, described in Chapter 5, revealed that the constructs of the ASI (18 item) related to essay writing orientations. To elaborate, the main concepts of meaning and reproducing orientation in the ASI are parallel to the understanding orientation exhibited in essay writing. Understanding orientation was significantly, positively correlated with the ASI's meaning orientation and significantly, negatively correlated with the reproducing orientation. Correlations also revealed that items from the deadline motivation and mark approval constructs of the EWOQ correlated with constructs of the ASI (18 item) -- only isolation in writing did not correlate. However, as described in Chapter 3, this latter dimension related to neither course-work essay writing processes nor achievement. Therefore this deficiency of the ASI is not considered to be an important one. In addition all process variables measured in this investigation using the EWPQ correlated with one or other of the ASI constructs. In fact this outcome was better than for the EWOQ, since none of its dimensions correlated with computer use. In conclusion the current research findings support Beckwith (1991) and Sheppard and Gilbert (1991) who stated that the ASI (18 item) is appropriate for use in educational settings to evaluate undergraduates' approaches to studying, in any given context.

It must also be noted at this stage that longer versions of the ASI include several constructs other than meaning, reproducing and achieving orientation which also relate conceptually to aspects of the model of undergraduates' experience of course-work essay writing. For

example, the 64 item version of the ASI (Entwistle et al, 1979; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) contained four scales: the familiar achieving; meaning and reproducing orientation in addition to 'style and pathologies'. Even the familiar factors contained more sub-scales than in the 18 item ASI. The deep approach contained a sub-dimension 'inter-relating ideas' examining whether students relate what they learn to other parts of their course. This sub-dimension is similar to a sub-component of 'basic research' in the Essay Writing Process Questionnaire, which involves thinking of knowledge already learnt and relating it to the current essay. Another sub-scale, 'disorganised and dilatory', appears to be comparable to the deadline motivation of the EWOQ. Fear of failure, an aspect of meaning orientation in the 64 item ASI, also relates to a dimension of the EWOQ, mark approval, part of which represents students' concern to impress the audience of their essay and fear that they may not be showing the marker what they are capable of. Part of the achieving orientation in this version of the ASI relates to negative attitudes to studying, in terms of a lack of interest and application. This seems to reflect the finding of the qualitative theory of essay writing that some students became severely disenchanted, represented by no desire to gain good marks or learn from essay writing, but a desire only to pass the essay or module it was part of. However, these conceptual similarities cannot be assessed quantitatively since the decision was taken earlier in this research to use the 18 item ASI in order to protect against low return rates.

However, since what we have learned about essay writing in this thesis has been discussed in the relevant chapters, this chapter focuses mainly on the type of learning which develops in higher education in terms of essay writing orientations, processes and approaches to studying across the years of a degree.

In Study 6 of Chapter 5 students' approaches to studying and essay writing were examined using the ASI (18 item) and the newly developed EWOQ and EWPQ. This examination avoided the treatment of undergraduates as an homogenous group given their diversity in terms of their traditional or non-traditional status, particularly their entry age. The findings revealed that deep approaches, measured using both the ASI and EWOQ, increased across age groups and surface approaches decreased across the age groups. In addition results indicate that mature and traditionally aged students' approaches to studying and essay writing neither decreased or increased during their time in higher education.

Furthermore, this study revealed a significant interaction between students' year of study and entry age with regard to disenchantment. To recap, high scores on this dimension represent a focus on solely the essay mark and a 'satisficing' strategy in terms of the use of time and effort. The results for first year students revealed that those entering at over 25 years of age had significantly lower disenchantment than those entering at up to 20 or 21-25 years of age. In fact the disenchantment of these two age groups did not differ significantly across the years of a degree. However, there was a significant difference in the disenchantment of those in the oldest age group in the first year compared to those in the third year. Those that had been exposed to the system of higher education for longer had a significantly higher disenchantment with essay writing. In fact by the third year of a degree there was no difference between any of the age groups -- by this stage they were homogenous in terms of disenchantment with essay writing.

6.4 Possible Explanations for Thesis Findings

The findings that deep approaches increased across age groups and surface approaches decreased across the age groups might be explained by the likelihood that mature students bring 'life skills' with them to education, enabling them to question the material they are

presented with at university (see Biggs, 1985; Harper and Kember, 1986). However, Harper and Kember (1986) suggest that experiences of conventional further education can be the cause of traditionally aged students' lower deep approach and higher surface orientation in higher education. Therefore, it appears that students' previous experience of learning is an important influence on the learning styles they enter university with. Given the additional result of Study 6 indicating that mature and traditionally aged students' approaches to studying and essay writing neither decreased or increased during their time in higher education it seems that higher education does not encourage the development of deep approaches, nor compensate for traditionally aged entrants previous learning experiences. Therefore mature students are more likely to obtain deeper understanding of their course content than traditionally aged entrants but due only to their previous experience of learning predisposing them to deeper approaches.

Since essay writing entails not only making sense of a topic, but communicating understanding entails putting learning on display (Hounsell, 1984). Therefore, the result indicating mature students' increased disenchantment with essay writing across the years of a degree indicates that they become less willing across the years of a degree to spend time and effort on essay writing strategies which may help them display their understanding effectively. Hence while mature students are likely to learn more in higher education they are also likely to experience disenchantment with essay writing as a learning tool, whereas younger entrants come to university with a focus on marks and tendency to 'satisfice'.

However, it may not be solely sixth form education that causes traditional entrants' higher disenchantment scores than mature students on entry to their degree. This dimension may reflect a strategic approach caused by their motivation to enter higher education. The education required to enter many occupations is now degree level, hence the vocational

relevance of higher education is likely to be paramount in the minds of traditional students when further education (Bouffard et al., 1995). Indeed Newstead, Franklyn-Stokes and Armstead (1996) in a study of undergraduate cheating found that traditionally aged entrants were more likely to enter higher education as a means to an end, whereas mature entrants entered for personal fulfilment. Therefore, traditional students may be more likely to adopt instrumental learning approaches.

In addition motivation for beginning a degree, or to put it another way - expectations, may also be a possible explanation for the increase in mature students' disenchantment across the years of a degree. Weil (1986) highlighted mature students' disappointment with higher education. Based on a grounded theory analysis of in-depth interviews with 25 non-traditional learners (25 and over and with at least a five year break from education) in four different departments, Weil suggests these learners entered higher education with high expectations. They thought higher education would reflect their learning experiences outside of the education system after their schooling. These experiences were of learning which stretched their critical and intellectual faculties. However, they found re-introduction into higher education reminiscent of their school learning. This is illustrated by the following quote taken from one of Weil's participants:

“ Re-encountering the system as an adult jarred me into realising what was happening again. Once again, the formal system didn't allow for thinking, curiosity, enthusiasm, reflecting, and to challenge. Nothing to do with my experience as a learner. I know what I need as a learner.” (Weil, 1986) p 225

This is certainly illustrated by one mature participant's description of their disappointment with higher education, taken from the qualitative stage of the present research:

“ . . . I sort of got the idea that coming to university would sort of develop these skills I have talked about, sort of thinking, developing the argument and trying to think at a higher level than you thought at before. It is almost like the degree has lost its way, it has become a battery of assessments and achievements and levels, . . . It is not what I thought it would be, it is a disappointment from that point of view. It is more sort of --how many graduates can we get through and let's put them through tests and so we can get their marks and decide what degree they will get. . . . It should be higher education, but actually what we have been through is further education almost.” (Participant 25).

The current data indicate that assignments such as course-work essay writing may not elicit critical thinking and understanding as Thomas and Bain (1984) and Tang (1994) suggested. Rather it maintains the level at which students enter university. This is indeed dismaying since it suggests that one of our most qualitative, and widely used assessment procedures, is failing to 'educate' students in terms of understanding content or developing the skills required to demonstrate this understanding in written prose. The qualitative theory of essay writing from Chapter 2 does provide some insight into this finding. Students' essay writing processes and goals were determined by their motivation, which was influenced by their previous experience of essay writing and the constraints of this task, but most importantly the guidance and feedback provided and their perception of the marks they received. Where feedback and the marking system were perceived as ineffective and unfair the learning goals and performance goals of essay writing could not co-exist. In this case learning goals were sacrificed for performance goals.

Other researchers have related the choice of strategies or goals in essay writing to motivation. As Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1975) have described in studies of school children, this is not purely a cognitive decision; many affective concerns shape the writer's choices. Shaughnessy (1977), who examined childrens' writing, also suggested that not only can a writer choose between strategies and goals but that their choice is determined by motivation, and he suggested that students' motivation can be determined by specific aspects of this task. Shaughnessy stated that essays required writers to make an intelligent response to an imposed question, whether or not they are motivated by it, or have an opinion regarding it. Furthermore the mode of expression, depth of treatment, sources, length and preparation time are all specified in advance. Hence it is not surprising that students' motivation to deal intelligently with an essay question may come into conflict with the obligations of the task (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Rogers' (1969) also suggested the circumstances in which motivation for learning might fall foul to the 'obligations of the task'. He advocated that humans' 'natural propensity for learning' was lost only when they were exposed to an education system in which learning becomes the futile attempt to learn material which has no personal meaning. Paulsen (1908) commented that when courses are assessed students focus on the forthcoming examination rather than on the subject they are studying. This has the effect of diminishing students' interest in learning since they are preoccupied with passing the forthcoming examination.

The potential for conflict, due to learning and assessment co-existing uneasily, was highlighted in the classic American study 'Making the Grade' (Becker et al 1968). In this study students opted for the grade where learning and being successful in terms of assessment were in conflict. Entwistle and Entwistle (1992) find it "worrying" that examinations seem to be in conflict with students achieving their own personal understanding of content. Perhaps most pertinent to our present findings and ensuing questions is Crooks' (1988) finding that many assessment procedures are in fact detrimental to the quality of student learning because they allow them to get away with the kinds of short cuts associated with surface learning. Furthermore, such 'short cuts' may even be learnt from exposure to institutions of higher education via the hidden curriculum (see Norton, 1996; Snyder, 1973).

Chapter 5 supports the qualitative theory of essay writing in Chapter 2 in that it demonstrates an increased level of mark chasing across the years of a degree in a population of students who entered higher education uncontaminated by conventional further education. This indicates that the constraints and procedures of course-work essay writing, particularly marking and feedback systems in the context investigated in this thesis lead to conflict between learning goals and performance goals. Ultimately this situation is

detrimental to the learning goals of essay writing and it becomes purely a method of assessing the learning approach and skills that students enter university with, rather than a tool which facilitates the development of skills and sophisticated learning styles.

6. 5 Theoretical Implications

The quantitative data fail to support Biggs' concerns that surface type approaches, either generic or in essay writing, increase as does exposure to the quantitative system of higher education. However, neither do the data indicate that there is a decrease in surface type learning or an increase in deep learning as higher education institutions advocate.

Furthermore, this finding is contrary to Wilson's (1981) suggestion that first year students, although beginning a degree with relatively simple conceptions of learning would gradually develop a depth approach across academic years of study.

However, the qualitative theory of essay writing in Chapter 2 supports Gibbs' view that teaching can improve learning substantially. To elaborate, if students are not performing as expected administrators are inclined to blame the declining standards on the intake, teachers blame students for being deficient in motivation, or in appropriate study skills, and students look to teachers and their uninspiring teaching (Entwistle 1984). Biggs suggests that all these components, and more, must be transformed in order for students' learning to become more sophisticated, whereas Gibbs states that considerable improvements can be made if we address teaching.

Existing research does demonstrate that focusing on students alone cannot have a sustained impact on student learning. For example, Purdie and Hattie (1995) who examined the effects of motivation training on the approaches to studying of a sample of female secondary school students (n=70) revealed promising initial results regarding an increase in

deep and achieving motives and a decrease in surface strategies for some students.

However, these changes failed to be sustained. Biggs might argue that the failure to maintain increases in deep and achieving approaches is due to the failure to change all of this learning system. Although this research demonstrates that sustained changes in students' approaches to studying cannot be gained by focusing on students alone it does not entirely support Biggs belief that the whole learning system must change (see Biggs, 1989; 1996). The researchers themselves point to the academic environment for the failure to sustain these changes but the research does not indicate which components of the learning environment must change, or the degree of change required.

The qualitative theory of course-work essay writing reported in Chapter 2 indicates that, as Gibbs posited (see Gibbs, 1983 a; 1983 b; 1990a; 1992; 1995), teachers are a fundamental factor in influencing student learning, with regard to this specific task. The way in which teachers use feedback and mark course-work essays certainly appear to be key factors in students' essay writing motivations and processes. It is also evident that changes in these practices can be made by individual teachers without overhauling the system of education they teach in. However, it is also reasonable to suggest that one teacher alone could not transform students' learning approaches, since essay writing is a cyclical process in which a few 'good' experiences are unlikely to produce change.

6.6 Recommendations for the use of Essay Writing

The detailed findings of the qualitative theory of undergraduates' experience of essay writing and the existing literature provide useful information from which to make recommendations regarding specific aspects of course-work essay writing which teachers may find useful. Given the results of the current research a specific aim for improvement would be to reinstate the learning role of essay writing and avoid mark chasing and

'satisficing' by addressing issues relating to feedback and marking. It is these aspects of course-work essay writing which have the potential to affect learning before it can be demonstrated in the essay (see also Entwistle and Entwistle, 1992). McKenzie (1978) also found that marking is ill used in essays in that grades frequently fail to be used to bring about the sort of learning desired. Perhaps this is due to the myth that writing is a creative pursuit free from external motivators such as grades (see Wason, 1980). It appears that these external constraints and extrinsic motivations need to be acknowledged by educators as legitimate and useful tools to reinforce other motivations (Elton, 1988). However, if student behaviour and motivation are to be developed using assessment procedures then the reinforcement must be effective and appropriate (e.g. Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley, 1980; Knox, 1993; Mahalski, 1992; Norton, 1990). Changes in practices relating to feedback and marking may enable the learning and performance goals of this task to exist simultaneously.

In order for behaviour change to occur the behaviours to be increased and decreased with reinforcement must be identified specifically and clearly communicated (Martin and Pear, 1992). To an extent these behaviours can be communicated in the essay question itself.

Henderson (1980) stated that the kind of question which

“fails to give adequate guidance to the students as to the nature and scope of the response required is indefensible. When a question is lacking in focus it can neither aid the learning process, nor serve a diagnostic function, nor fulfil any useful assessment purpose. It becomes no more than a guessing game in which the student has to discover the rules to beat the system.” p199

Such instructions are a requirement for effective behaviour change since the positive reinforcer (essay mark) cannot be given immediately after the essay has been written or submitted. Not only do instructions influence an individual to work for delayed reinforcement, (Martin and Pear, 1992) but specific verbal instruction will speed up the learning process for those that already have experience with the process (Ziegler, 1987).

Hence it is important to provide clear essay questions which outline the focus of the essay. In addition the qualitative theory of essay writing indicates that essay questions should inspire interest in students. Perhaps a way of achieving this would be to give students some autonomy and negotiate questions. However, it is not recommended that they develop their own question or choose from a selection since if a student is already inclined to focus on performance goals or are disenchanted they are likely to choose questions for their ease of completion, the reputation of the marker as a high marker or the likelihood of the topic coming up in an exam. These are just some of the examples of Rules of the Game that can be used in the selection of the essay. Instead it is recommended that students' interests are considered where this is possible, where this is not possible essay questions or topics should be challenging or contentious.

Instructions can also exist in the form of feedback, and since students usually experience more than one essay the experience is cyclical and feedback will influence their motivation and essay writing processes in any subsequent essay. The current research suggests that for feedback to be effective it must be provided with each essay and in a form that is clearly understood by the students (see also Norton, 1996). Where terms such as 'developing an argument' are used there must be an explanation of their meaning, perhaps illustrated with examples. This sounds like an impossible task for lecturers. In fact it would take an investment of a couple of weeks work by members of staff, perhaps a small working party, to build a database of examples which would act as an essay feedback bank that they could draw from. This would enable educators to demonstrate what aspects of an essay they will reward.

The use of marking schemes which require tutors to tick boxes would also make providing feedback a more feasible activity in terms of time. However research suggests that headings

should be arranged hierarchically in order of importance to prevent what Collins and Gentner (1980) refer to as 'downsliding'. This is where students focus on low level activities such as correcting spelling mistakes and grammatical errors rather than complicated revisions such as developing an argument which require changes in the semantics. The guidelines provided in feedback must also be appropriate. If feedback fails to describe the behaviour that will prove successful in achieving a desired reinforcer, i.e. a higher grade, the source of that feedback will not be attended to in future (see Owen, 1997).

Tang (1994) showed that students simply did not know how to tackle assignments which required and allowed deep approaches. This suggests, as does the current research, that they have not been effectively instructed. Furthermore if no instructions or feedback are given students attempt to learn by 'trial and success' in which learning is slower than it is in the presence of clear instruction. Feedback and guidelines given early in students' experiences of essay writing will have the effect of permitting extremely rapid learning (Skinner, 1968).

However, competence in the skills required to gain understanding of material and demonstrating this in a text may require more than effective feedback. Study skills training may also be required. This is another form of feedback or instruction but one in which learning occurs by 'showing' students how to carry out certain tasks, sometimes termed modelling (see Bandura, 1969). Modelling involves providing a match between the stimulus and the desired behaviour (in this case the product that should result from this behaviour) making stimulus control stronger (Owen, 1997). However, experience in UK higher education suggests that few institutions or departments have introduced policies which ensure that students have had adequate preparation even in general study skills (Elton,

1994). Indeed as Branthwaite, Trueman and Hartley (1980) discuss that it is remarkable that little formal instruction is given in universities about the skills of acquiring knowledge, evaluating information and communicating findings. There seem to be difficulties, in some instances, in persuading academic staff that study skills training is needed (Elton, 1994).

Once students are demonstrating the appropriate learning and skills in an essay the effective use of marks is required to reinforce the appropriate behaviours. What constitutes the effective use of marks is highlighted in the qualitative theory of essay writing and existing research literature. For marks to work effectively as an external reinforcer they must be distinguishable -- a student must be able to identify the differences between positive reinforcements and punishment. Using marks as a reward in essay writing causes a further problem since marks are given whether a student demonstrates the required behaviour or not. Hence it is imperative that they are used carefully, i.e. that students can discriminate between a reward and a punisher. This could be achieved if lecturers used a scale within which they awarded the extremes, otherwise students are neither effectively punished or rewarded. In the current system students who produce essays which even lecturers deem to be excellent do not reach 100% -- so why provide a percentage which gives the students the impression that they have failed to be positively reinforced for their work? If the current marking system persists it is essential to communicate to students effectively how to break the glass ceiling. An opportunity for this communication would be via instruction and feedback.

The qualitative theory of essay writing in Chapter 2 related mark chasing to a perception of the essay as useless as a learning tool. Hence a further suggestion is that the rhetoric surrounding essay writing should focus on the purpose of writing and the development of skills. Elton (1982) felt that educators often focused too heavily on the reliability of essay

writing as an assessment tool rather than on the validity of the task. Educators must accept that validity is as important as reliability because it is that feature of assessment which influences student learning (Elton, 1982). If rhetoric was concerned with the skills learned by exposure to this procedure and the relevance of these skills in the workplace, students may be convinced that essay writing is a useful learning tool. Writing is a highly valued skill in most subsequent employment (Bulmer, McKennell and Schonhardt-Bailey, 1994; Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, in preparation a). The time to promote the essay as a learning tool would be in students' first year in higher education since as Branthwaite et al (1980) pointed out, first years are keenly motivated and are very concerned to do the right thing. It is therefore extremely important to clear up misconceptions at this early stage.

In order for a student to progress with an understanding motivation it is also important that they are not exposed to unrealistic time limits in which to achieve and demonstrate understanding in their written prose. This recommendation is supported by the findings of Chapter 2 and by previous research (e.g. Gibbs, 1990b; Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981).

6.7 Implications for Future research

As has already been discussed, findings in the research literature regarding the development of students' approaches in higher education and the predictive validity of the ASI are inconsistent. The inconsistencies in findings regarding the predictive validity of the ASI might not provide cause for concern since it is fair to say that the use of tasks in higher education which induce reproducing orientations are valid where, for example the aim is to teach students content, a language or a technical skill. Hence, it will not always be the case that scores on meaning orientation positively correlate, and reproducing scores negatively correlate with aggregated degree marks. However, one would expect that a high proportion of investigation revealed an increase in deep approaches to studying with

increased exposure to higher education. However, since the findings of Study 6, in Chapter 5 revealed that the ASI (18 item) does relate to students' processes and motivations in essay writing it is unlikely that a lack of construct validity is at the root of these inconsistencies. Hence one is more inclined to look to higher education for possible explanations for the failure of some research to reveal this trend.

It appears that treating students as a homogenous group in such research may have distorted the picture of learning in higher education that this research presents. Even the most recent of these studies (see Busato et al., 1998) assumed that the student population was homogenous and failed to break down the results according to students' status as traditional or non-traditional. By examining students according to their entry age in the current research we can see clearly very different patterns of development in students' essay writing orientations. Overlooking the differences in the current population in higher education is an oversight that if addressed may result in interesting and less distorted findings in future research.

The present results also suggest that any research into learning styles in higher education should also examine or at least consider carefully the system of conventional education as a factor contributing to learning styles in higher education. Ideally longitudinal research examining traditional students' paths from one system to the other, with comparisons to alternative routes to higher education could be carried out.

The qualitative findings regarding students' approaches to essay writing also have implications for research investigating school childrens' attributions of success. Nicholls, Cobb, Wood, Yackel and Patashnick (1990) and Walling and Duda (1995) show that some pupils believe success is attributable to hard work, whereas others attribute it to an innate

and inflexible ability. It is those with high learning orientations who hold the former view and those with high performance orientations who support the latter. The grounded theory of undergraduates' experience of essay writing may provide clues as to how this distinction may occur. Once again the key is feedback. The qualitative theory indicates that students often lose their motivation for learning and understanding in essay writing due to the problems they encounter which are detrimental to their essay writing marks. These problems seem to them to be insurmountable in the absence of feedback and guidance from tutors, hence they look instead for other strategies to gain success in their essay writing marks and avoid the understanding motivation. Hence students who are motivated only by achieving 'good' marks are likely to be those who have not experienced feedback and guidance in essay writing. This does indicate that by not being exposed to feedback and guidance which is effective in improving their essay marks these students have not learnt that the correct behaviours can lead to success. Therefore they are likely to attribute their failure to their own inability.

6.8 Future Use of the Tools Developed To Measure Students' Experiences of Essay Writing

6.8.1 Essay Writing Process Questionnaire

The outlook for this questionnaire is disappointing in terms of its use as a tool to measure individual differences. Not only did Study 3 in Chapter 3 reveal that the processes measured in this questionnaire did not relate to students' attributes and essay mark but neither did it identify any substantial individual differences in students' writing strategies or in their use of specific writing components or sub-components. In addition, Chapter 5 revealed that only one of the processes this tool measured, journal article use, developed across the years of a degree. Hence it seems that the majority of students use much the same essay writing processes, making this a fairly universal process, which remains

reasonably stable across the years of a degree. Therefore the author recommends that research into undergraduate essay writing focuses on other aspects of this task which have not yet been fully explored. The motivational dynamics of course-work essay writing is one such aspect.

6.8.2 Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire

The Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (EWOQ) is grounded in students' own accounts of the motivational dynamics of this task. This tool also proved to be both reliable and stable, as well as a measure which was sensitive to changes across the years of a degree. It is therefore deemed to be a useful tool in the investigation of students' motivations in essay writing which is sensitive to the effects of prolonged exposure to an academic environment. However, much of the development of the EWOQ was carried out using psychology undergraduates, and only in Study 4 were there more questionnaires returned by students from courses other than psychology -- business students. Hence, further investigation of its generalisability is required.

6.9 Limitations of the Current Research

There are, of course, some important provisos which must be raised with respect to the present data. An important proviso is that the present results are based on cross sectional data as opposed to longitudinal. The lack of development in the ASI and the EWPQ scores, and indeed the significant findings relating to the development of disenchantment scores from the EWOQ may be due to 'noise' in the data created by examining different cohorts. For example, Busato et al. (1998) examined the development of different approaches to learning using both a cross-sectional and longitudinal methodology. The cross sectional methodology revealed no change in learning styles across the years of a degree. Using the longitudinal methodology a significant change was found in one of four learning styles.

In the case of Study 6's findings one has to consider the possibility that the finding that mature students had lower disenchantment with essay writing in their first year of study compared to those in their third year of study may be due to occurrence of improvements in the use of essay writing after the current third years began their degree. However, the lack of change in traditionally aged entrants' scores on disenchantment would indicate that this is not the case. Some longitudinal research would be required before findings can be considered conclusive. However, the present results do provide ample food for thought.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, questionnaires and inventories of study approaches can be accused of measuring what students say they do, not what they actually do in any given task. Although the current research focuses on students reports of their approaches and experiences in a specific task (course-work essay writing) it must be noted that it still reports what students *say* they do, not necessarily what they *actually do*.

In addition, there may have been biases in the selection of participants in Study 1 and 2. This bias concerns the way in which some participants were recruited. The first year students volunteered to take part in these particular studies, but participation in a certain number of studies being run in the Department of Psychology was a course requirement. However, there may have been an element of self selection with the second and third year population, with a particular type of students volunteering, since these students were not required to take part.

Another proviso relates to the institution in which these investigations were carried out. The data are derived from a single institution, the University of Plymouth, which has four geographically distant campuses, the largest being in Plymouth itself, accommodating approximately 20,000 undergraduates, most of whom are studying science, social science,

business, humanities and engineering. Students are admitted with a varying number of A level points due to the wide range of courses offered. While there are significant numbers of students from the south west of England, the student intake is drawn from all parts of the UK (and outside). However, it is not clear to what extent the results will generalise to other universities, since this university was established in 1992, having previously been Polytechnic South West, and may use teaching practices in line with old polytechnics. Some have accused these practices of 'spoon feeding' their students (Scott, 1993). There are further suggestions in the literature that there may be interesting differences between the old and new universities. Hence the current findings may not be generalisable to older universities and investigations of this type would be useful in determining the approaches to studying and essay writing across the years of a degree of traditional and non-traditional students in older universities.

Despite these reservations as to their generality, the present results are in many ways more informative than many previously published findings. The numbers of mature and non-mature students exceed those in most previous data sets, and few published studies have examined traditional versus non-traditional entrance qualifications, and time out of formal education. Neither had any previous research, to the author's knowledge examined the development of traditional and non-traditional undergraduates' approaches to studying and to essay writing specifically.

The current research does not present a complete picture of undergraduate essay writing or of the development of learning in higher education. However, the results do suggest that changes in students' essay writing orientations relate to both their process of writing and their generic approaches to studying, as measured by the ASI. In addition the current investigation did not investigate students' achievement due to pragmatic limitations.

Therefore, the data from the present research cannot shed light on the relationship between students' essay writing orientations and their essay marks, nor can they lead to conclusions regarding the predictive validity of the EWOQ relative to the ASI.

6.10 Conclusion.

It has been said that the most outspoken critics of research into education are often those who have yet to conduct such research (Entwistle and Wilson, 1977). It is perhaps the sheer complexity of this field which makes it such an enthralling but challenging one to be working in. As Parkyn (1967) explained, the academic behaviour of students is unpredictable, often resulting from sporadic experiences which are difficult to measure, such as an intimidating teacher or a contentious topic. However, as he himself added, this does not exclude the possibility of identifying general trends. Only by approaching this research with an unconstrained and holistic qualitative methodology which reflected the complexity of the research field could the current research highlight aspects of students' essay writing and learning development often overlooked (see also Entwistle and Wilson, 1977). It is hoped that the trends identified in the current research will be useful to the practitioner and researcher in achieving the changes which are necessary if understanding and critical thinking are to develop in higher education.

Higher education does not induce surface approaches in undergraduates, however, neither does it lead to the development of deep approaches either generically or in course-work essay writing. The finding regarding course-work essay writing is particularly disappointing since this is a qualitative task which provides an opportunity to take a depth approach and has the potential to help students develop many transferable skills, highly valued in many vocations. However, course-work essay writing is not developing depth approaches but maintaining the level with which students enter university.

Therefore, traditional students seem least likely to gain understanding of the material presented to them while at university since they enter with lower understanding and meaning orientations and higher reproducing orientations and deadline motivations than mature students. For mature students experience of course-work essay writing in higher education leaves them with higher levels of mark chasing and 'satisficing' than they entered with.

The current research confirms Weil's (1986) belief that we can learn a great deal from non-traditional students. In addition it seems that for now higher education does not serve these students well, at least in terms of course-work essay writing orientations. Neither does it offer any benefits to traditional students for whom higher education offers them 'more of the same'.

These results are surprising since it is often said that the university will engender 'critical reflection' (Bertilsson, 1992). However, based on the current research the author would have to conclude that this is not the case with even the most qualitative of assessment procedures. Although it is reasonable to suggest that assessed course-work essay writing measures students' understanding of material and their ability to demonstrate this understanding in persuasive rhetoric, educators do not seem to have questioned the effect of their assessment procedures on the learning required to do this.

As Scott (1993) affirmed, rather than the future of higher education being 'bleak', "tomorrow's future is exciting in its challenge to the academic community." p58. The current research has highlighted specific challenges that lie ahead if we are to help students achieve understanding of the material we give them the opportunity to experience.

However, the author would have to agree with Weil (1986): if the purpose of higher

education is to put people through examinations, measuring only what they already know, let us have the courage to make those purposes explicit. If, on the other hand there is a genuine commitment to life-long learning within tertiary education, we need to carefully examine and modify the impact of assessment procedures on the learning role of the essay, particularly marking and feedback, so that understanding and obtaining an extrinsic reinforcer are not mutually exclusive.

Appendix A

Key

..... At the end of a piece of text this represents somebody failing to finish what they were saying, or being interrupted. At the beginning of text this represents an interruption of the previous speaker.

[...] Inaudible.

1st Focus Group of Phase One

1st years (semester two) 1995

Facilitator- From the point of getting an essay question, or knowing you have to write an essay, to the point at which that essay is handed in could you tell me about things to do with the process of writing that essay. Whatever you think is relevant.

Participant 2- I personally delay writing the essay for a while.

Participant 3- As soon as the deadline gets nearer, like a day before, I do it.

Participant 2- It would be a lot better I could do it in advance and spend a lot longer on it, but I never do. I always do it in a concentrated few hours. Do you lot spread it out or do it in dribs and drabs? (Directed to other participants).

Facilitator- Do you lot spread the process out or....

Participant 4-yeah, well I try to take lots of time to research it, but I find I get a whole load of books out find out what is relevant, read through them and write too many notes. I think the process takes me longer than it should.

Participant 2- I think it takes me longer than it should since I've started doing it on the computer. I just used to write it, obviously I do the rough copy, and then do the best copy, and I wouldn't dare do another one - but with the computer when I've finished it and read it, I like, want to put this back up here, sort it about, move things.

Participant 1- I think I would take it back a few steps. I think about the question and my own stance on the question - how I am going to answer it. Not necessarily what people want to here but I take a view on the question, then I go and find research to support my view. I am often surprised you know, there is so much research that I often end up with a slightly modified view and then I suppose I let it all mull over for a while and then I feel a pressure to write and I go and write.

Participant 2- I don't so much mull it over. I just sit there and start it.

Participant 4- It would be better to think about it first, get a view really, instead of just jumping in.

Participant 2- Yeah it's definitely best to write it down - not so much of a plan.

Participant 5- I never do that, no I never like write introduction - those bits, middle - those bits, ending - that. I just sort of write bits and pieces all over the place. That why it's hard I think, because I don't really write it very structured and when I come to write it on the computer I have to shift things around all the time.

Participant 1- Yeah, I do use mind maps occasionally. I think they're very good for....

Participant 2-making sure you get everything.

Participant 1- Yeah, helping with the creative process, covering all the things you need to cover. Of course the wordage is an important factor. If you've got a 15,00 word essay or 2,000 you've got to be very concise you can't say much in 15,00 words - you have to be concise and punchy

Participant 2- That's the thing, you've got to really think about the words you are using as well because sometimes I write a sentence and think - 'no I want to sound more sophisticated than that and more intellectual' and I think so hard of really good words to use. I'm always trying to do that so it sounds intellectual.

Participant 1- I think one quite important factor which I consider is the audience. I mean they obviously have a level of knowledge. I think it's important that you actually write to that level.....

Participant 2-so that your not boring them.

Participant 1- It's a game in a way, your playing a game, whoever it is a professor and assistant lecturer, you know, whatever.

Participant 2- Yeah a lot of times you know when you need to be really succinct. Otherwise you will be waffling on, because they hate waffle don't they.

Participant 5- Yeah I tend to waffle a bit, like you read it back and think - 'I could have said that in one sentence'.

Participant 2- Yeah.

Participant 3- When I read the finished thing I always think - 'oh that should be up there' and always turn it round a different way. (Silence for a few moments)

Facilitator- Can I ask a question - when you get the actual essay title do you look at the title and organise what it means to structure your reading, or do you just do all the reading you can find?

Participant 2- I definitely home in on certain aspects. I don't sort of get one massive topic and go and look at everything I can possibly find. I look for specific things in books as well. I just skim over pages and pages because I know it's not relevant, like vaguely related to the topic, but not central.

Participant 5- Yeah I usually get the essay title then think about what I think it means. Then think of the areas, like from basic knowledge, of what I am going to put in the essay.

Participant 1- There are two aspects I think, there is the set question and the essay question that you devise yourself or perhaps with some help. Then you have much more freedom of choice you have in the research you do. That makes it more interesting.

Participant 2- Because titles often mean various thing it's not just one thing, you have to sit down and think about the various things.

Participant 3- Whereas sometimes the question indicates that you have to get a certain point across.

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- What about there, from your reading? You are all generally agreeing that you look at your title get an idea of what you should be reading. So you have your pile of notes where do you go from there? Or is it as simple as that? Do you read at the same time as you write?

Participant 5- I'm reading and copying notes down as I read but then I'll tend to write the essay soon after that and I'll be lying in bed or something, not doing anything sat on a bus and I'll think of how I want to write it better. Like change it all around.

Participant 2- I actually don't refer to the books first. I actually pick the tilt then write down what I actually know myself from notes and then I'll refer to books if I need to. I don't go to books first, ever. I don't go to the library and start looking up things, I always think for myself first.

Participant 4- I don't, I probably should. I get a title, see what it is on then get the books. I don't know, maybe that's the wrong way of doing it.

Participant 3- Yeah because then you rely too much on the books.

Participant 2- (Directed at participant 1) Do you do that or do you go straight to the title?

Participant 1- Well as I said before I spend quite a lot of time mulling over the question and when I start my research, apart from anything I may have knowledge of prior to the question, I think of connections between the specific subject area and other subject areas

and I try and encompass those as much as possible in answering the question. To give it some body, some validity if you like.

Participant 2- Books sometimes help with your wording as well don't they. I mean if you're writing an essay, reading a passage on the topic you are writing about can help you sound more like you know what you are talking about.

Participant 1- It does, you end up knowing what you are talking about or writing about by doing that.

Participant 4- Yeah.

Participant 2- Essay writing is quite a good process of helping it sink in.

Participant 3- Sometimes I'll be reading a book and I'll find that I've written like..., just taken it from the book then when I put the book away it was a support and it's gone now and I'm like oh no.

Participant 5- What I try and do when I am getting stuff out of books is to try and think of aspects in real life that come into it so it helps to clarify it more and also gives me evidence, backup, rather than just writing a point down without illustrating it.

Facilitator- So does that enable you to understand what your reading and writing?

Participant 5- Yeah.

Facilitator- Do you think you need to understand to write the essay?

Participant 5- Yeah. If you're just copying out of books and you didn't really understand it your argument....

Participant 2- it won't flow well, it won't look right in your essay....

Participant 5-no.

Participant 2- If you copy chunks you really don't understand what you've written down.

Participant 5- I think you can tell when an essay has just been copied out of a book rather than writing and really understanding what you are doing.

Participant 2- Sometimes when I do write essays I read a sentence in a book and use it, maybe not completely as it was in the book, but then I will back it up with another statement of my own.

Participant 4- That's good what you say about illustrating what you write down, think of examples as you go through.

Participant 2- It makes the essay more interesting as well.

Participant 4- Yeah relating it to current things.

Participant 1- What about having a goal as you write - what kind of stance are you trying to achieve? What mark are you aiming to achieve and how are you going to do that?

Producing the work do you have a..., I mean if I've like done one essay and it's a 2-1 or whatever I think 'right I want to go a bit higher this time and how do I do that'.

Participant 2- I could never sit down and write an atrocious essay. I could never want to hand one in anyway if it was atrocious. So I always have a goal in mind that I want to do well.

Facilitator- Do any of you here make a plan at any stage in writing an essay?

Participant 2- I wouldn't call it a plan, I sort of write maybe words or even a sentence that incorporates loads of things but never sort of.....

Participant 4- I think I know in my mind what I want to put in, points and specific areas, how I want to structure it but I don't actually make a written plan.

Participant 5- I think it's important to write one down otherwise the essay doesn't flow properly, it's just little bits really.

Participant 2- I don't think at the planning stage it is possible to say what order it's going to go in because it's impossible to do that because when you start writing it will all fall to pieces and change completely.

Facilitator- So at what stage will you start saying what order things will go in?

Participant 2- Right, I usually write the introductory paragraph and then things sort of progress on in the way they should, you just sense it really.

Participant 5- I always write a rough plan but I don't generally stick to it really. I write the plan and then as I am writing the essay I might want to put in the second bit of the plan or the third bit or something, just because it flows better like that.

Facilitator- When would you write your plan.

Participant 5- Um well I think of the title then I usually write a plan of the things I want to look at and then I'll go and do the research on that and when I've got all the research and stuff like that I'll write another plan which usually gets changed around a bit.

Participant 1- Yeah I write down areas that I would want to include but I don't structure them. I think it's a very fluid process. I find it a creative process anyway and for me to restrict myself to the hard academic plan of an essay would impinge on me - perhaps it's a failing because it doesn't help in an exam where you need to be pretty focused, punch punch as it were.

Participant 2- It is an art really, like you say, but in exams you really have to stick to point one, point two, point three - you don't get to put in all of the sort of 'flowiness' that you do when you've got the time.

Participant 1- I take it we are talking about course-work essay writing.

Facilitator- That's write.

Participant 5- I think it's important when you write a course-work essay.... that it is important to have a plan but not to stick to it too rigidly because otherwise if you find another bit of research a bit later on it's difficult to put it in. When I use a plan I only stick to it roughly.

Facilitator- Do most people here have an idea of the order they do things in when they write an essay? I don't mean introduction - conclusion, but reading, planning etc. Could you all say a few words about the order you do it in.

Participant 1- Yeah, as I've already said - the title, a period of mulling then I go to reading and that may be from many diverse sources, then I home that reading down too.... I get a feel for what I am going to write then at that point, once I've read sufficiently, then I mull again, let it all churn, sleep on it. Then I start writing depending on the deadline. I usually start writing a week before the deadline.

Facilitator- That's writing after you've prepared?

Participant 1- Yes that's the actual writing about a week before.

Facilitator- What about the actual preparing and reading?

Participant 1- I think, depending on how long I've got, anything from 3-4 weeks.

Facilitator-and then from the actual starting of the writing.

Participant 1- Umm, I like to give myself a week so that I can do an initial draft and then go back and polish it. Then everything is flowing at that point so I don't have to consult too much, except the references obviously. I've got a pretty good idea of what I want to say by that time, I go and say it.

Participant 2- I get the title, refer to my notes.... umm.... write down the bits of the notes that are relevant. I know notes don't cover everything but they are the basis of what we are doing and then write everything that I myself think might be relevant that I can then look up. Also I can look up things that I notice that need elaborating on. Then I tend to write about half in really scruffy writing and leave it for about a week and come back to it and never actually finish it in rough. I do the first half on computer then do the second half impromptu on the computer, so I never actually do a complete version in rough, I always just do about two sides for some reason that's as far as I get.

Participant 3- I usually when I get the title.... I just saunter along to the library and get the books and spend the next week or so getting books, it wouldn't be on my mind [...]. A day before I write it I write lots of notes on bits of paper and score them.

Facilitator- And from scoring those notes?

Participant 3- It just comes out of that, rough drafts.

Facilitator- Would they change?

Participant 3- Yeah.

Participant 4- Umm well I get the title. Sometimes I underline the key points to make sure that I am concentrating, because one time I wrote an essay that wasn't actually on the question. I read it quickly assuming what it was about. So I think it's important to make sure you know what it is actually about. Then I go and get some books and read up on it. I tend to make notes as I am reading the books then I find I've got piles and piles of notes and so I have to go through them, and I find half of it wasn't that relevant. Then I make a rough copy of the notes. Then I keep amending the essay until I am happy with it, changing it round and round.

Participant 2- Can I just say one thing - when I do the rough copy I put stars all over the page with arrows all over the place. (Mumbled agreement from participants 3,4 and 5)

Facilitator- So it's basically forming as you go.

Participant 5- I tend to get the essay title and I re-write the essay title so I'm clear about what it is that I actually have to do. I find that if I re-write it in my own words I know where it is going more than if it's in like intellectual style. Then I would usually go to the library and get all of the books out that I can on the subject. Then I go back and read through, picking the relevant bits from the book and writing notes on it. Then I'll write a rough essay from that. Then I'll be lying in bed or something and I'll think about the essay and I'll think about the introduction of something and think about how I could re-write it. Then the essays will keep getting new introductions and bits and swapping around. Then in the end I just write it up on the computer.

Facilitator- What about the actual ordering of the parts of an essay, like introduction and conclusion?

Participant 2- I think that both the introduction and the conclusion are really important, they've got to sound like you really know what you mean and that you really know what your essay is about. I think if you don't get those right then the whole essay is a bit of hash, well that's my problem anyway.

Participant 4- You need to get a good introduction to make it interesting, to make them want to read it.

Participant 3- Yes it catches some one's attention.

Participant 4- It's quite important in it to say what you are going to do.

Participant 2- It's hard though isn't it.

Participant 1- Yeah.

Participant 3- Because you think - 'this lecturer has to sit through forty of these essays', if your introduction is just a little bit different from everybody else's then it can make a difference.

Participant 1- I mean I try and answer the question in the some sense in my introduction and I almost invariably tell the reader that I am going to tell him or her something that they might not know, something like introducing an extra piece of knowledge or research outside of the specific question area so that then people have an added interest and read on to the conclusion, where I again recap briefly and go into possible future research areas - the way forward.

Participant 5- I don't know, but for me it tends to help if I write my introduction and conclusion first. Just really basic ones so that I know where my essay is going to start and end rather than just getting to the end and then writing the conclusion. I mean the conclusion will change obviously at the end but it helps me to know the direction of my essay if I do the conclusion and introduction at the beginning.

Participant 2- I think writing the conclusion at the beginning, no offence, but I don't personally think that it is a good move because as you go through and the essay develops it might be completely the opposite of what you have planned. I think it is only at the end, that you can really.... once you've done all of the research, you know the knowledge is in your head that it makes sense to you, that you can come out with an informed conclusion.

Participant 1- Do you form your own opinion about the question? (Directed to participant 2)

Participant 2- I don't think I do actually, no I don't because I don't want to restrict myself at all. I make it as broad as possible, usually so I like to be unbiased really.

Participant 3- I think in the end it depends what type of essay it is.

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- An interesting point there is what type of essay it is, do you have, can you talk about different types of essays.

Participant 2- I like essays where it's more emotional, I don't like practical reports, you get the sense that you are part of it kind of thing. Sounds very tacky but you are part of the essay, you can get involved in it, it's a lot better.

Participant 5- If you are interested more you will go and get more research and find out more about it [...].

Participant 1- I try to treat practicals the same and be as much a part of them as essays, because in so doing I find that I understand the research and the thinking behind the practical to greater depth. That doesn't mean I put any personal things in that apart from research that I've stumbled across. I try to give equal weight to both areas of writing.

(Discussion now wanders to practical write ups - transcript starts again where conversation becomes relevant)

Participant 4- I enjoy writing essays more than practical write ups.

Participant 5- Once a practical is done you think you aren't going to look back on it, but an essay you really look back on it and polish it into how you want it to be.

Facilitator- So is an essay something more personal?

Participant 5- The titles are usually so broad that they allow you to have your own opinion and you can get more involved in it, whereas a practical you just have to sort out research that is relevant to that umm.... cause usually you have a choice of essay titles as well.

Participant 2- I think essays are really nice when you can see that everybody is writing in a distinctive style. It is not an essay to me if everyone is writing the same thing - which is what a lot of practical write ups are like.

Participant 4- Yeah an essay is something that has our personal style in it.

Facilitator - What do you think an essay is?

Participant 3 - [...]

Participant 5- I think an essay shows to you and the person who is marking it that you understand, really understand it.

Participant 1- Yeah umm perhaps also of course the content that is being measured or looked at by the marker as well as your understanding of the subject area. Umm and your ability to look beyond it as well and incorporate other factors and I am very interested in semantics the meaning of things and I suppose I tend to use a lot of that in my writing.

Participant 2- I think that in psychological writing you are too restricted, I mean you are not allowed to be all flowery, I mean I know that's the way it is so like it or lump it. I think a lot of people like to..... it's not waffle it's just something special isn't it.

Participant 3- I think if you look at it there are certain essays that people write about their subjects - you can really see that they know what they are talking about, they are really interested and they love the subject because their essays are just really good they really flow.

Facilitator- So you think enjoyment plays a big part.

Participant 3- Yeah.

Participant 1- Absolutely.

Participant 2- When I'm sitting down doing it I'll enjoy doing it and I'll want to make it as, you know.... really good and handing it in is such a great feeling to know that you have completed that and that you know you are proud of it.

Facilitator- Lets go a bit further than the handing in stage, what happens when you get the essay back?

Participant 3- Well if you really took pride in it then got a bad mark or something you just think - 'what have I done wrong?'

Facilitator- How would that effect the way you would subsequently write an essay.

Participant 5- First of all I would think - 'oh well I worked really hard on that essay what the point in bothering', but then I would think - 'well I've got to get the marks to do well I just didn't do well on that essay, I got to really try hard on my others'.

Facilitator- Would your essay writing style change at all if you had a really bad mark?

Participant 5- Yeah I'll try and see what they are looking for and what I've done wrong. It really helps if they say why you got the bad mark then you can look back and say - 'oh yes that bit was a bit rubbish' and you can try and improve it next time.

Participant 1- What about when you know you've done good work. I would go and challenge the marker and say - 'justify what you've said'.

Participant 3- I think it depends on the marker. I always go away thinking - 'maybe they were just in a bad mood or something'.

Participant 1- I think you need to know there is consistency in marking as well. I think particularly when practicals that you got three or people involved in.

Participant 2- I always hope that they have read it and thought - 'God this person has worked really hard'. You just never know whether they have thought that. If you haven't done brilliant I worry that they will think I am really thick. I don't want people to have that impression of me.

Participant 4- If you work really hard and you enjoy it you get a better mark.

Participants 2, 3 & 5- Yeah.

Participant 1- What is a bad mark and what's a good mark?

Participant 3- The mark that you'd expect for it and if you don't get that mark.

Participant 1- So it's not a competition with others it's just with yourself?

Participant 3,2 & 4- Yeah.

Participant 3- If you think that you should have got a certain percent and you didn't get it you just think - 'oh no'.

Participant 5- I think once you've finished an essay you always have in mind the type of mark you are expecting to get and if you don't get that mark you always think - 'why?'

Participant 2- What peeves me sometimes is that you hear people make marks when they have got their work back, they'll say things like - 'God I got 65% and I did it in an hour' and I think - 'piss off I spent days doing it'. I think that's bad because marks don't take account of how long you've spent doing something.

Participant 4- Sometimes I find I am in situations where it doesn't seem fair because you thought you did your best. That's because the person marking is obviously looking for something a bit different which isn't necessarily the way it should be, it's often up to them and how they feel.

Participant 5- I found that if the person marking, not here but when I was at college, if the person marking the essay didn't agree with the comment that I put forward I got [...]

Facilitator- Back to the essay writing. Which are the bits of writing the essay that you think are most difficult, the bits you struggle on?

Participant 5- I think it's the introduction.

Participant 3- Yeah.

Participant 5- Once you've got your introduction down and you know basically where your essay is going to go, from there everything seems to fall into place, but when you've got all these notes from all different books and all this stuff in your head that you have to put down on paper it's like 'oh no where am I going to start'. Once you've got that start point it seems....

Participant 3-it's just the first sentence isn't it.

Participant 5- Yeah and you want it to be really snappy as well. You want it to start off like.... I don't know. When I was at school I used to always start with 'this essay will'. I don't want to start off an essay like that.

Participant 2- I think all sections of it can be difficult at some point, sometimes the introduction is really clear.

Participant 4- Actually getting down to doing it is my problem.

Facilitator- Is that getting down to writing or getting down to reading?

Participant 2- Both.

Participant 4- A bit of both. Once you've actually got it, actually starting it and researching it then actually writing up properly.

Participant 2- It's just motivation I think. If somebody actually sat me in front of the computer I would be fine, it's just getting to do that kind of thing, it's not laziness.

Facilitator- What about once you are actually doing it. Is it as hard as you expected?

Participant 2- No I actually like it?

Participants 3, 4 and 5- Yeah.

Participant 5- It's just the thought of having to write this big essay. When you are actually there it seems to take no time at all and everything just flows, but it's just the thing of - 'oh my god I've got this 1,550 word essay to write'.

Participant 2- I actually get a buzz out of sitting there and writing it.

Participant 5- Because it's when all these things come together and you know you actually understand it.

Facilitator- What about for you - (directed at participant 1) is the expectation actually worse than the essay itself?

Participant 1- Umm what I do is I look at ..well I've got this essay to do and three or four other bits of work and that annoys me that I've got other bits of work to do because I want to concentrate on one piece of work to the exclusion of everything else, and once I start an essay that's what I do. I tend to get right into it and everything else gets pushed back a bit and I have to rush on all that I suppose. I enjoy essay writing most of all though, researching and writing. The whole process for me is creative. I wouldn't want to be prescriptive about how anyone should sit down writing an essay, although here are good texts and study guides for me as a writer anyway. I mean it's a creative process and I let it happen as much as I can without anything interfering into that process. I know that once I start structuring everything and nailing bits down, that bit there and that bit there, the whole becomes stale and sort of over cooked.

Participant 2- When I actually start doing things on the computer I want to get things finished. I won't leave a section half done, I've got to finish it. With essays I've always got to just sit there no matter how long it takes me to finish it.

Participant 1- I think we are in a field of knowledge, psychology, where we need to be creative and we need to be expansive in the way we think and write, even though it may not be academically required at this stage, in the first year. I think that we need to be expansive because we are linguistic beings.

Participant 3- I think we should be able to put more expression into our essays.

Facilitator- What do you mean by expression?

Participant 3- Just umm, you know how you do it for mechanical subjects like chemistry where you just put in all of the facts, I think we should be able to put more of ourselves in.

Participant 2- Like you say, only some subjects allow for that though. I mean not every subject really allows you to develop the English language we have, which is a shame because I think it's really important to do that. Psychologists on 'telly' are really getting into self expression more, relating to people, it's not sort of all rigid.

Participant 1- I think it's possible to take the opposite view to you about practical write ups. When I read practical reports or journal articles they are very readable, by and large they are almost chatty some of them. Watson for example, because they are well known

they have the licence to speak in casual terms. I don't see why we shouldn't be able to develop that now.

Participant 2- Yeah it would make it more interesting.

Participant 1- Yeah to be free and talk in that way.

Participant 3- [...]

Participant 2- You don't read journal articles that are like our practical reports do you.

Participant 5- When I am writing an essay I always try and explain something and ask a rhetorical question about it so that is engaging the person who is reading it to think about what they have just read, rather than just carry on reading it.

Participant 2- I think that breaks it up really well.

Participant 5- It also gives you something to write about as well when you are writing it. I think if you can think up a question like that then you can understand it. It also leads you on to other things you can write about.

Facilitator- In the last few minutes you can talk about anything you think is relevant that you want to say.

Participant 1- I would like the whole course to be essay writing, course work and no exams.

Participant 2- Yeah I would like that.

Participant 4- I never finish an essay in time. I always end up rushing it, I never feel that I've shown them what I can do.

Participant 1- Yes but an essay is what we make of it. I mean the mark we get. Do we get what we deserve? The questions that we are set will cater to all levels of ability. Those with less ability or motivation will put in less ability, others will really go for it and try and impress upon themselves how much they can understand about the subject area and reproduce in a different sense from the reading, because anyone can just do it parrot fashion.

Participant 2- I sometimes wonder if the A levels people do has a bearing on their ability to write essays. I mean I did an English A level and that's a real essay writing style subject and I am at an advantage writing essays. I think if you've got trouble writing essays now at this stage then it must be a real problem.

Facilitator- Does anyone else want to make any comments?

Participant 1- I sometimes wonder what markers think when they are marking essays. I hope that if mine is the fiftieth in the pile there is something there which is going to wake them up and make them think - 'oh wow'. Pride in the job if you like.

Facilitator- Can I just ask one more question about timing. Do you generally do essays in time or quite near to deadline for motivation?

Participant 3- Yeah when the deadline is approaching.

Facilitator- Will the style of an essay or process of writing change depending how close to the deadline you are?

Participant 3- I think it is probably better to do it over a space of a few hours or it gets to mechanical, a sentence here a sentence there.

Participant 2- I concentrate a few hours on an essay so that it flows.

Participant 4- I find that [...]

Participant 5- I always write my first draft at least a week before I hand it in because I write that all at one time so that it all flows, but I like to be able to think about how I can improve it, so I have time to do that

Participant 2- I don't ever like to hand an essay in the day after I have done it, so that I have piece of mind that it hasn't been done in a rushed state.

Participant 5- Once you've done an essay do you think - 'oh I can't read over it again cause it's just going to sound awful and I don't want to know if it is going to sound awful'? When I am on about the third draft I think - 'oh I just don't want to read it again', I always get to that stage where I just want to hand it in.

Participant 4- I like to read it just to make sure.

Participant 5- As soon as it's been handed in I just think - 'that's it I cant do anything more about it'.

Facilitator- Anything else anyone wants to talk about?

Participant 1- What has come across here is that there is no one particular way of going about it.

Participant 4- It is what works for you.

Facilitator - I think we've worn out the conversation.

(Everyone laughs)

End of Focus Group

Note: Participant 4 agreed with a lot of what people said but with non verbal communication - so it is now impossible to comment on what was agreed with.

2nd Focus Group of Phase One

2nd and 3rd years (semester two) 1995

Facilitator- So, from the moment that you know that you have an essay title to the moment when you have to hand an essay in, can you just talk about that process - anything that you feel is relevant.

Participant 6- Usually you get about six weeks to write it.

Participant 7- I think the first bit is you amble over to the library find none of the references you want are actually there because someone else has sprinted off and got them before you. Then go into the union and have a long chat with everyone else moaning about the lack of references and then wait until they come in and start doing the essay the night before.

Participant 8- And if they are on short loan they are put back on the shelf and someone nicks them anyway so you can't find the book and if you are really keen you actually go on CD-ROM and look for references, which I've actually done for my essay for educational issues - first time ever!

Participant 9- Go and get a review book out and read a general introduction of the text on the subject, read a chapter on the section of your subject to get an idea of what's going on.

Participant 8- Yeah, but quite often you've had introduction type lectures on the area any way.

Participant 7- Or you find someone else who has already done the essay and you say - 'what are the relevant areas' and read through that to give you some idea about what you want to do.

Participant 8- And then once you find a book you just sort of paraphrase it.

Participant 9- You ring up a friend from another university and get them to send down an essay from their essay bank.

Participant 6- I never thought of that!

Participant 8- How do you get into the essay bank?

Participant 7- How do you get into it!

Participant 9- You see you collect essays....

Participant 7-you collect essays and then they are sold on. Has no one ever approached you about this?

Participant 8- No, why didn't they?

Participant 9- That's the only reason E-mail works! Have you not seen the bulletin board on the internet?

Participant 7- No.

Participant 9- "Get an essay".

Participant 8- I hate computers.

Participant 7- So you can't cheat because you haven't got a computer. Well there you go!

Participant 6- Well if I actually think of the process I go through when I write it I spend... well usually you get six weeks, so about two weeks before it has to be handed in I ask everyone what the date is because I never know and then I usually panic because I think I've got about three days. I go to the library and look books up on libertas, get the book out I want, photocopy everything I need and then I sit at my desk for about a week and then, when I've got about a week left....

Participant 9- Do you actually do anything when you're sat at your desk?

Participant 8- Do you make notes?

Participant 11- Do you just sit the references on your desk and you have a pad of blank paper and a pen?

Participant 7-and keep your legs crossed while you are having lots of cups of coffee.

Participant 6-and then a week before it, I always give myself a week.... one day I'll read through the references and make notes and then the following day I'll probably do a rough

essay plan and then I'll well my essay plan is usually really brief - introduction and then conclusion.

Participant 11- Do you write your essay on paper first?

Participant 6- I used to but now my writing is so bad I think it looks really awful when I write it so I write it straight onto the computer.

Participant 8- Yeah, because I write straight onto the screen as well.

Participant 7- Actually I'm getting into that, but for ages I couldn't think on the screen but my writing is so appalling I have to, I think.

Participant 11- See, I write my essays in bed which I think is the best place as I can bring my computer over to right beside the bed, put my keyboard on my knee with my mugs of coffee and I've got a double bed which is great so I've got all my references in neat piles with a few quotes out of each on with the relevant bits and I try then to draw a mind map on paper.

Participant 7- Yeah I do mind maps.

Participant 11- But then because all my paper is around me I sort of roll into it.

Participant 6- Mind maps don't work with me.

Participant 7- Do they not? I think it's how your brain is organised, as I'm quite visual and I can't cope with pages and pages of text.

Participant 11- I do mind maps all the time.

Participant 7- But mind maps are something I do a lot for [...]

Participant 9- I never do mind maps, for exams or anything. I just do the reading for it and then I've got a rough idea in my mind about what I want to do and then I just type it out. I spend weeks agonising over what I'll put there.

Participant 11- But you can't do that once you've started it. I've actually started my essay for next week, which is pretty impressive for me. I've written about three pages - Wow! But last time I started it on the Friday. It had to be in on the Monday and I worked all day Saturday. I wrote it on the Friday, edited it on the Sunday and then had it all done by Monday.

Participant 7- I tend to write everything at the last minute but I'm assimilating bits. I tend to have two sort of plans. I do an initial plan when I get something, probably when I'm feeling enthusiastic, which wears off after about half an hour and then I go and skim through the books, all be it very briefly, to get a bit more of an idea about what I want to bring into it. Then do what I think I am going to do as a plan on mind map and then I'll probably have it about three weeks just lying around and then at the last minute I get the books that I need and then start reading all the relevant bits and getting something down on paper.

Participant 11- One thing I try to do now is that I know what information I want to put in, but I try and work out how I can use that to formulate an argument because it is so easy to sit there.....

Participant 7-paraphrasing.

Participant 11- Thinking - 'I know this, I know this' and chuck it all down and then you read it and it is lots of separate paragraphs.

Participant 9- Yeah it's just chunks isn't it, there is no structure to it

Participant 7- I think it is quite interesting how people are swapping essays now that we are coming up to exams, to use as revision purposes and the different styles of essay writing - because some of them are justobviously everyone has found the same book and they are all just paraphrased it. But it sticks out like a sore thumb when someone has put a bit of thought into it.

Participant 8- Yeah, because in clinical we only had one essay title so they are all going to be the same, so we will not have to swap before the exam which is a real git.

Participant 6- We've got one essay title to choose from, well choose from!

Participant 9- Given enough preparation for writing essays at the start of the course.

Participant 6- Just A levels.

Participant 9- Yeah, A levels.

Participant 7- But I didn't come straight from A levels. I did them ten years ago.

Participant 8- But there are courses aren't there over at Portland Villas and stuff.

Participant 7- Then I should be in one at this very moment.

Participant 8- But they are there if you want, then I think.....I think it's just a case of finding them.

Participant 11- In the first year psychology I don't think we actually wrote any essays for anything.

Participant 7- Yeah, it was journal writing in the first year.

Participant 9- But aside from exam questions I've only written eleven essays for the whole of my degree.

Participant 6- That's quite a lot.

Participant 8- That's not that many! I've written more than that because I've done sociology. In the first year I had to write sociology essays but I think they are totally different from writing psychology essays, because in sociology you can say more or less what you want.

Participant 7- You can can't you.

Participant 8- But in psychology you have to back it all up with evidence.

Participant 6- There is a really strict format for writing psychology essays.

Participant 7- Yeah because also it is established as a science, where in sociology you can write anything, as you were saying it doesn't really pass as a science.

Participant 8- And we had to do essays for criminal justice as well where you do draw on evidence but it is not the same as writing a psychology one. You just tend to regurgitate more, whereas in psychology you try to reformulate an argument, whereas in sociology or criminal justice, well you know, 'compare policing in the states with policing in the UK' - well fine, you're just comparing and that's it. It don't have to formulate an argument to say whether they are similar or different.

Participant 11- The problem is you write all your notes and you find that you have your essay there, whereas in psychology you write your essay and you find you're still a few thousand words short - 'OOH God, where can I get them from!'

Participant 9- Padding out your sentences!

Participant 11- I've still got a few hundred to write!

Participant 9- You have to rework it - 'now it's 100, then 95, oh it's 90, no it's 85! It's agonising!'

Participant 6- I write too much and then have to cut it down.

Participant 9- I cant' understand people. I've never ever written too much!

Participant 6- I always write too much!

Participant 8- Why do you worry about reaching the word count?

Participant 9- I'm always way under.

Participant 8- Because I often don't bother.

Participant 7- Reaching the word count - I do at the end. I mean if your a thousand words over it's really obvious in a thousand words essay.

Participant 8- But if you start off with a 1,000 word essay then you know what constraints you've got on yourself.

Participant 7- Yes.

Participant 8- So you say - 'right I've only got a thousand words to write so I can cover this and this'. I mean I usually find I'm quite good.

Participant 7- Because the thing is, when you start something like that, by definition isn't going to be a long in depth essay it's going to be just the superficial points and making some sort of argument that leads to the conclusions.

Participant 11- I tend just to estimate by pages.

Participant 6- Yes, I do.

Participant 11- That's it, that's as close as I get to word counting. I just don't bother. At the end of the day there is nothing worse than somebody who has padded out an essay just to make it up to the words.

Participant 7- And they put loads of platitudes to try and make it a lot longer - "and therefore it can be stated that possibly" - you know 15 extra words, desperately trying to pad it out. We've all been reading each others essays and it's very obvious the ones who are trying to pad them out to make them a lot longer on the project.

Participant 6- I always think the introduction and conclusion are the most important. I've had so much practice writing introductions because like when I had English literature we didn't write an essay we just wrote the introduction and conclusion for every essay and that's all we had to write. That way we had to write the essay in, I don't know, two hundred words or something. It's a really good way.

Participant 8- Do you write your introduction first, because I never write my introduction until I've finished my essay.

Participant 6- I always write that first because that's my essay plan.

Participant 7- I do my conclusion first, that's assuming I've got a reasonable idea of what I'm doing, because if I've read something I've formulated some sort of idea in my head, you know which way I'm going to.....

Participant 11- I usually have a rough idea about where I'm going, but sometimes, like when I write a sentence, I sort of stop mid-sentence in my introduction and I don't exactly know how I'm going to go after that.

Participant 7- That's the beauty of when you work on a computer though isn't it.

Participant 11- And when I sit in exams I might write like three or four introductions which more or less regurgitate the question saying this is what I'm going to do and I leave about five or six lines before I start my essay, because once I've finished it I know I'll go back and alter the introduction.

Participant 7- Yeah, very good.

Participant 10- I leave stars in so when you turn to the back page there are about ten stars on the back page.

Participant 7- Another thing is I've double-spaced things in exams when I know I'm going to be adding things extra and putting extra bits in.

Participant 10- Mmmm, I do that.

Participant 7- You've completely forgotten what you where going to say, you know it's something very relevant!

Participant 8- You're the person that shouts out for extra paper that panics everybody else.

Participant 10- Yeah, because everyone is going - "Oh shit, I haven't even started that".

Participant 6- My exam essay writing style is totally different from when I write an essay for course-work, because the way I revise is I revise in terms of essay plans.

Participant 10- Yeah, I do, so what ever the question is asking you still write the same essay.

Participant 7- What actually happened last year is we were revising before the exams and everything and it was a case of.... that everybody was swapping essay plans over because I think we all realised that everyone should have started about three months earlier on their revision. It was just a case of revising questions and hoping they came up, or something you could bend slightly.

Participant 10- We all write the same questions too as we're all regurgitating the same work

Participant 9- It must be so boring to mark!

Participant 7- Yeah, but sometimes, like last years social exam, you realise there is no way you could not possibly shove everything in that we were going to do, so we all revised....

Participant 8-(lecturer's name) bits!

Participant 9- She must have had 150 essays.

Participant 11- And (lecturer's name) had two!

Participant 7- But it doesn't do well for us coming out with a good knowledge or anything.

Participant 11- I think in the second year I did that, but for the exam this year

Participant 7- Yeah, I'm talking about second year.

Participant 11- I think this year's exams.... I tried to avoid revising essays as such, because the questions I know.... they were not always worded exactly the same and it is so tempting to chuck down everything you know, because I tried to revise like a few names and references and just read generally around the subject and when I get into the exam I just quickly write down those names and references and then try to fit them into the question.

Participant 7- Regardless, Smith and Jones et al.

Participant 9- [...]

Participant 11- Yeah, because rather than actually learn the set essay, that this is this, then I'll try and use those references and I think because we have the integrative questions to do as well I was very conscious of the fact I needed to know names and bits that I could then use in an integrative question in a different way from what I would use in another question.

Participant 7- I've always learnt the names of people that do things because it is the only way I can actually remember who said what and like relate it.

Facilitator- Can I just come in there, sorry it's my fault. Can we concentrate only on course-work essays.

Participant 8- No, we want to talk about exams! Because we are all thinking about it now.

Participant 7- But essays are really an individual experience of course.

Participant 10- I have to start mine weeks before it has to be in or else I get too stressed, like I've just handed my course-work essay in now.

Participant 8- Because I work best when I'm stressed.

Participant 6- Yeah, I do.

Participant 8- That's why when I'm only half way through my essay and I haven't started writing up my project yet.

Participant 7- Actually, I find normally... I usually stay up all the previous night if it's in the next day.

Participant 10- I can't do that anymore.

Participant 7- I do because then I find there are less things to distract me. I mean even the wall paper can distract me, so it's quite good as by that point I would have already had quite a good outline and quite a lot of chunks on it. I'll also put into some sort of order while I think, but I do find that it is best for me to write through the night.

Participant 11- I collect the references ahead of time. I have the references in piles sitting around and I keep thinking if they sit there long enough I may get round to reading them.

Participant 10- Once I've started it I have to finish it. I can't be bothered to leave it for a couple of weeks before I actually finish it.

Participant 8- Oh no, I can.

Participant 11- I can, yeah.

Participant 10- But what I hate is once you've put all your notes down it is trying to put your notes together and relate them. That's the worst bit I hate doing.

Participant 9- I usually do about ten minutes a day on it.

Participant 6- Ten minutes a day!

Participant 9- I'll spend a couple of days where I'll read both the references and then I'll have it on a disc and I'll go in and I'll spend ten minutes a day.

Participant 10- But you've got a computer at home though, so it is easier for people who have a computer at home because they can just sit there and do it when they want to, whereas I can't.

Participant 11- See that's why..... I'm really, really slow at typing. Although I'm much better now than I was, but I found with my first year stuff I had to write essays, but in the second year they had to be typed so I'd have to write them all out by hand and then I'd come in on the computer and it would take me like eight hours to type out a thousand word essay - you know, where's the next letter!

Participant 7- Why can't we pay someone else to do it!

Participant 11- It's awful, I could spend hours just typing up my essays, whereas now, by working on the screen it is a lot easier because by the time I've looked where I was, then I've lost where I was, then I was looking at the screen, then I was like this, whereas now because I've got my computer I work straight onto the key board.

Participant 6- I work straight onto the screen.

Participant 11- And you know I look up at the screen every couple of seconds.

Participant 9- I never look at the screen.

Participant 10- You're fast you are! When you sit next to me in the computer room I hate it, it really puts me off!

Participant 7- They should have typing lessons as part of the degree.

Participant 10- Yeah, we should have typing lessons for psychology to help you do your essays.

Participant 11- I just want to know why I did "O" level accountancy instead of "O" level secretarial skills.

Participant 10- And I hate doing references.

Participant 11- Oh, they are the worst.

Participant 6- I always write them as I go along.

Participant 9- So do I.

Participant 6- Every time I mention someone's name I put it in the reference section straight away and then you are not left with the laborious task of remembering where you got them from, especially when you are using lots of references.

Participant 9- When ever I am reading a journal article I'd write the reference name at the top and then write the notes underneath and then at the end of the day I'm left with about 19 or 20 pieces of paper with various, you know, reference ordered pieces of paper, if you see what I mean.

Participant 11- Well I do it, if I've got journal articles out I just highlight them as I use them, highlight the references in the back of which ones I've sort of like secondarily quoted from.

Participant 10- Yeah, but change the words slightly.

Participant 11- But I find if I highlight them then they are in alphabetical order and then I've just got to slot the two or three journal articles I've actually read together.

Participant 6- Paraphrasing is still plagiarising.

Participant 7- Still plagiarising, yeah.

Participant 9- Only if you are cool.

Participant 7- Actually I think the department makes this great big thing about plagiarism, but I've never actually yet known anybody that's been dragged up and said to - "look you've copied great chunks out".

Participant 11- The thing is at the end of the day you've got to back everything up with evidence. So like if you say something you've got to say where it's from, but if you quote every single thing that you've actually got, do you know what I mean, you can't can you? I mean this title of this section I lifted up.

Participant 6- As long as you put their name in brackets after what they say.

Participant 7- When you have brackets after, mine tend to be loads and loads of brackets all the way down.

Participant 6- Then it's not plagiarism is it?

- Participant 7-** But I came from a course, sociology, where it really was a sin. I mean you'd be thrown off if you plagiarised. So we would sort of go completely the other way, you know making sure that nothing you put had been paraphrased.
- Participant 8-** But with psychology you can't say your own thing without using other peoples evidence because you've got to back it all up, and therefore
- Participant 7-** ...as long as you quote it and say, you know - "Lawrence said this in 1995". As long as you're not passing it off as your own in the way it's written up.
- Participant 11-** Yeah, but the chances are, you now that quote from Lawrence, the reason your using it to back up something is that something else that you found in a paper that's been backed up by this quote by Lawrence, so by saying the first thing, you know what I mean, it gets really complicated, because you're using that quote to back up something that you've read in another journal article anyway.
- Participant 9-** I never ever used to quote in my essays.
- Participant 6-** Don't you?
- Participant 11-** I don't use quotes very often.
- Participant 6-** I know I don't quote it, I just put it in brackets.
- Participant 7-** I've actually quoted directly when it's been really well put and I've thought there is no way I can paraphrase or make it sound as though it is my own so I just put it in quotes.
- Participant 6-** I always try to be as original as possible about it as well, because then I think at least it stands out, because you've been original when everyone else has paraphrased.
- Participant 11-** I try to take a really controversial stand point like that, like totally different to what they expect. I think - 'how can I turn this question around and say something', you know what I mean, and like really be
- Participant 6-** I do totally the opposite and find out exactly what the lecturers viewpoint on it is and I just agree with them. That's how I write my essays.
- Participant 9-** Creep!
- Participant 6-** No, but they are obviously going to mark you higher if you've like. OK it's got to be well written, but if they agree with you at the end then they are going to give it an extra mark aren't they, especially if it's their paper.
- Participant 11-** No, I think it's totally the opposite, because if you criticise their views on it and back it up with enough evidence than they've got to read that essay and think - "oh, god, someone else has actually come out with something that I've written" and if you can justify it then that will stand out in their mind.
- Participant 9-** [...] their egos, doesn't it.
- Participant 11-** Yeah, but often that is more thought provoking isn't it, if you write a more controversial viewpoint than they've actually thought up.
- Participant 10-** But some lecturers you can't do that can you.
- Participant 11-** You can't do that with all the lecturers.
- Participant 6-** Oh no, when I write essays I always find out exactly what they think first.
- Participant 8-** How do you know, do you go and see them and say what do you think about this?
- Participant 6-** You can usually tell from what they say.
- Participant 9-** They usually make a [...]
- Participant 10-** I always go and ask them and say what sort of stuff should I be putting in here.
- Participant 8-** Well, you start with this and this.
- Participant 10-** So I just do as she's told me.
- Participant 9-** Nice to know you're [...]
- Participant 7-** What do you want and I'll write it down for you.

Facilitator- Can I ask you, when you get given a title how do you decide what you are going to read from the title?

Participant 10- You're normally given references with it.

Participant 6- No, not always.

Participant 10- But when we were given our clinical title, we were just given one reference and so we looked up that reference and then got the references from the back of that reference.

Participant 7- Yes.

Participant 6- But they didn't have all of them in the library.

Participant 10- Quite a lot were there, I got about 15, if not 20.

Participant 7- Actually I've done that before, where you work back through, you look at their references overviews.

Participant 8- Yeah but I don't like that because if you've got a reference, say from '89, then that's quoting references from about '87 and back and you end up going backwards and backwards and you're not getting anymore recent stuff on it. So I just take the phrase from the question and go and play with it on CD-ROM.

Participant 9- See, I'll go to a journal and see who the prominent name or names are and then I'll go to CD-ROM and see the recent work that's been done by them and get out the most recent journal that seems to be published in the area.

Participant 8- See I quite often actually just flick through the latest journal because if you've got key references and you know that they will be in, perhaps two journals, and you're doing it on addictive behaviours and there is a journal of addictive behaviour and I just went through the last years and looked at the back to see what the articles were on.

Participant 9- But I'll find out what a particular researcher has been doing recently in the area and I'll also find out if he or she has been doing other work in related areas to see if there is a tie in because you generally find that there is that. When they research one thing, they've got two or three things on the go at once and you find out how they relate together, because you generally find that they have all got some common tie and see if it can link in between them.

Participant 6- Then first thing I do when I get an essay title is look at what it says. If it says "discuss" then they want an argument, but if it says "compare and contrast" then it should be pretty simple. So I read it very carefully.

Participant 9- But the questions vary between the first and third year, whereas in the first year you had to describe and compare and contrast, it's now more discuss, evaluate.

Participant 10- What are your own thoughts.

Participant 9- Yeah, that's it.

Participant 8- What I had to do was - 'what future is there for compensatory education'.

Participant 7- There is none.

Participant 8- I mean that is really difficult. You must go back after everything that has gone on and then look how that you know, that's quite difficult actually because it is not something like evaluate the evidence for or whatever, but I mean that is really what they want you to do.

Participant 7- But there is an element, isn't there, when you're writing stuff when you think - 'well, I can spend absolutely hours and hours doing something and give a really evaluative answer and spending hours looking for it', and then you sort of think - 'are they actually going to realise that I've done this?' I mean it's like, I could do the same essays everyone else is doing, you know descriptive essays or whatever, you know, everything I know about compensatory education. I remember in the first year one of the tutors actually telling us that both in exams and outside of exams when it says, whatever the key word in the title is about, - 'compensatory education' it basically means write all you know about it and I'm thinking.... I'm not saying who this is, but this is actually a tutor who is here, it's not a postgraduate, it's actually a tutor, and I was absolutely amazed at this, and I just

thought, because his argument was if it is not down on the paper they can't mark it, but surely you would give reams and reams of it.

Participant 8- In exams I would say that happens. You get to a stage in exams when you think that's all I know I've got to write that down, but for a course-work essay you just can't do it.

Participant 7- This is what my argument was but perhaps he didn't want to mark the essays.

Participant 8- So we know it's a male.

Participant 7- It is a male, but anyway yes.... I just thought it was a rather interesting view, I thought, from an academic.

Participant 6- I think, practically every psychology essay regardless of what it is has some percent of that, like it says "discuss the main idea" which you do and then you put all the arguments for and all the arguments against it. You can't sit on the fence so you say what you agree with and that's every essay plan.

Participant 9- It's very frustrating isn't it.

Participant 11- Think it probably is now, though because you've got a background knowledge and the essay at the moment there is so much I could put in, I am really having to pick and choose because I know to stick to the 2,000 word limit. There is a limited amount of what I can include.

Participant 9- Essay titles seem to have become more general rather than more specific, so there I was more rope to hang yourself with.

Participant 8- Yeah [...] because shatters theory of whatever it was, do you know what I mean, whereas no it's, you haven't got to take a particular theme.

Participant 9- Describe something to do with psychology [...]

Participant 10- Yeah, but I think (lecturer's name) like that isn't he. He's in all his lectures.... he's put us [...]

Facilitator- Can I ask you to go round, one by one and actually give me a brief synopsis of how you go about writing your essay - from getting your reading, how you formulate that into notes, then how you write, sort of a very brief - I do this, I do that, then this and then that.

Participant 7- Right, well looking through the actual references, once I've managed to physically get hold of them off the shelves, I'll be, if it's sort of a reasonable short one of say ten, fifteen pages or whatever, I'll read it through and skim it very very briefly. Then I'll try and find anything useful. I might try and highlight a few key phrases if it's a photocopy that I've done and then I might write a few things down, or, depending of what the sort of essay question is, I might write a bit more of a descriptive thing down about what I think about what I've read - if I think it is actually rubbish or it could be that this is a less valid view point and I shall carry on through doing all these things and through whatever references I've managed to get hold of and then if I don't find that any of them are particularly good I just sort of take the best of the bad and sort of base it round.... sort of do my introduction and then sort of bung all the references into the main part and just do..... evaluate everything and then do a conclusion.

Facilitator- What about a plan, do you do a plan?

Participant 7- Yeah, I always do essay plans, yes.

Facilitator- Right, and what stage does that come in?

Participant 7- I normally do one, if it's something I know anything about, I normally do one before I sort of look at anything. I mean because it is not often that it is something I don't know anything about, and then I sort of revise it as I go along.

Facilitator- Is that as you read or as you write your essay?

Participant 7- As I read. I often think of something and I've got an A2 sheet and I sort of like draw all over it with diagrams and I sort of tend to work from that but I'll be putting

extra bits in as I go. When something occurs to me and there are some links I can make and associations and things, that might hopefully say something intelligent about it.

Facilitator- What about if it's an essay you've never heard anything about before, say if you start an option?

Participant 7- The first thing, say I'd go to CD-ROM or something, you know if it's something in education you go and look that says anything about the topic, or even go back to the "A" Level book if you've got no idea what it's about and I think it's very rare to actually have no idea.

Facilitator- And can you give me some idea of the time span?

Participant 7- What, that it takes me to actually

Facilitator-at what time stages you do all those things?

Participant 7- The initial burst is maybe after I've been given the question, which maybe lasts for about half an hour and then probably I'd not pick it until about two weeks before it has to be in, or perhaps four weeks, depending how bright I'm feeling, but usually it's a mad furry in the last two or three days to get the whole thing done.

Facilitator- Reading and writing in those last few days?

Participant 7- Yes.

Participant 9- Well after getting the title, assuming I had some prior knowledge about it I would go to a review book. I would read the review book. I would read key words by people stated in the book and will read abstracts of literature search items, and then after making notes on these as I'm reading them, I would then sit down and bash some relevant points into it. Then I'll come back every day or every other day and spend between 10 and 30 minutes work on it and develop it and fill it out in the main body and then I'll come and do the introduction and the conclusion after I feel I've got some sort of flow in it and then I'll spend the last few weeks refining it, making the grammar right, [...]signposts, paragraphs, all that sort of thing and that's it.

Facilitator- There is no plan at that stage except putting your statements into a computer.

Participant 9- No, there is no plan except putting the key statements in. At least I do not consciously plan it, but it's done over the course of setting the assignment to the handing in day and I've generally finished about five days before that anyway.

Facilitator- When you put in those key points are they in the order that they are going to appear in the essay?

Participant 9- I'd like to think they are but during the refinement stages they might get changed around [...]depending on the length of the essay.

Participant 6- So I get the essay title at the beginning of the option, say about week one, and I won't look at it until about two weeks before the deadline. I then go off and try to get an introductory textbook because usually I don't know a heck of a lot about a subject as all my essays are usually quite specific. So I usually don't know that much about it so I start off with an introductory text book and from that text book I'll make a note of the main ideas and the main authors and then I'll go and try to find papers which describe those main ideas. I always try to get not too many references otherwise you get totally confused and you start writing a lot, as long as you have presented the main arguments and have not left anything major out. A few comments made by little research projects don't matter too much. So, then usually I start writing about a week before the deadline and I get all my references and go. I try to put them into some order that they will be in the essay so I start by writing an essay plan and my essay plan is literally about ten lines of a page.

Facilitator- When does that occur?

Participant 6- That occurs at the very beginning when I've got all my references, before reading. I've already sort of screened all the references and chucked out all the ones that are not really related and then I've got all my main references that I am definitely going to use and then before reading I start my essay plan and I start reading all the references and highlight or underline all the points I think are really good and the main arguments and then

I might adjust my essay plan and then I start writing, but I don't write and then edit. I edit as I go along. So, I'll agonise over the introduction and the introduction will normally take me about an hour to write because I always try to write my introduction really original. I try to make it a whole summery of the whole essay, of what's going to follow so it is almost like an essay plan. So I start off with maybe a brief introduction to the topic laid down to what I'm actually going to say in the essay. Then, I'll discuss each main idea, the main arguments in the essay one by one for and against, and I always edit as I go along. I never go back after I've written it, it's very rare that I will actually..... when I read it over at the end when I've finished writing there is usually not very much editing to do apart from a few punctuations [...]

Participant 10- Normally when I get the essay title I normally, within the nest week, go to the library. Normally we have key references given out by the lecturer so I try to find those and put key words into libertas and find books that are relevant and then go onto CD-ROM and find actual research papers and journals that have done it. Then after I have done that I will stay in the library and photocopy what I need. Then within the next few weeks start working through each bit of reference, taking notes and as I'm actually taking notes I start forming my essay plan because as I read I know roughly where I can slot it so that is how my essay plan comes along. Then, once I've got my various notes I won't actually look at it again. I'll actually just throw it all onto the computer and then once it's on the computer I'll print it out in psychology and I will actually take it home and reorganise it all and then swap it around and then bring it back into psychology and type it, delete things, or reorganise them and then print it out again and keep going through this process. I might not have to if it's how I want it.

Facilitator- What form does your plan come in?

Participant 10- Normally as I'm taking my notes from my references I can see what is going to be relevant so I'll start off the introduction and then how the information flows to me in my mind. That's how I'll write - like the key words I'm going to put in each paragraph really, or what I'm actually going to discuss about.

Participant 11- Well, I normally wait until about two or three weeks before the essay is due in then hope that I've had some lectures or something on the relevant area and then I'll go to the library and go on CD-ROM and look books up on libertas and generally find what information I can. I might read the abstracts and decide what articles I want to photocopy and then I'll get home and I'll sit around my flat and I might read one here and there Or if it's nice weather I might go and sunbathe in the park and read them. I usually highlight what I want out of them and then I'll read through them again and actually take notes from them and I try and keep the notes with each journal article and then, like I say, I get on my bed with my computer on my knee. I have all my references around me. I might at that point do some sort of mind map of sort of the key issues and how to draw them in and the I really start working straight onto the computer. I don't tend to write my introduction, I write roughly what I'm going to do, but I might just write one sentence about the topic area and then say a rough idea of what I'm actually going to do in it, but I tend to go back at the end and rewrite my introduction and then I'll work through my main points. Sometimes I might have to swap things around afterwards just to get it in some sort of right order, and that's really it. Normally it's about two or three days before the deadline when I do that, but like I say, I always finish it the day before. I never have a panic because I know how long it takes me and I could never write an essay in a day.

Facilitator- Are you all happy with the way you write essays? Are there any things you would like to change?

Participant 11- Well, I wish I could actually motivate myself to write it when I first got the title, but it know I just can't. I know I [...] and this essay I've actually tried to start writing earlier and I just haven't got the motivation to sit down and do it. I sit there at the keyboard and it's just like, you know, well I've got tomorrow and time for neighbours and coronation street.

Participant 6- I have to be under pressure to write it.

Participant 7- I've found also that in the past, through experience, that when I have done it, not just here but at my previous place, I used to do it perhaps weeks early and the rest of the year would do it perhaps a week before D-day. It didn't actually get reflected in the marks, so I got no brownie points for doing it that way! I thought - 'why am I hassling myself when I could do it at the last minute and get the same mark'.

Participant 8- The other thing going through a psychology course has taught me as well like, at the end of the day I could spend another week on my essay and get maybe 2% more on the mark and can I really justify spending an extra week on the essay just to get 2% more, because everyone's essays fall in such a small area. I mean it's such a narrow thing at the end of the day. I can write this and it might be a 60 or what ever, or if I work on it longer it might be a 62, or if I really slog my guts out I might even get a 64 or 65, but do I really care because that 4 or 5 % is such a small percentage of my overall degree mark.

Participant 6- Even if I aimed to get the highest mark I could possible get I'm not going to be to get 70.

Participant 10- I can't be hassled, once I think it's all right then I go onto the next piece of work, I haven't got time.

Participant 6- I'm such a perfectionist I'll spend until I'm happy with it.

Participant 8- Do you get 70s for it then?

Participant 6- Yeah, occasionally.

Participant 8- Bitch! Obviously it works.

Participant 6- Yeah, because I'm such a perfectionist if I'm not happy with it then I won't get a good mark for it, but if I am happy with it then it is good because I am so hard on myself.

Facilitator- Do you find you can tell as you write an essay what sort of mark it is going to be?

Participants 6, 7, 8 9, 10 & 11- Yeah.

Participant 7- I think it is because there is an element of aiming for something. If you do it at the last minute then you know it is only an [...] part I'm aiming for a high 2:2, or I don't really care about this.

Facilitator- Right, so it's not got to do with the product and what the product is like, but how you actually felt when writing it. Whether you were just churning it out or whether you put a lot of effort into it.

Participant 11- I think it depends on how you feel about it as well, as I mean a lot of essays I've written this year [...] and I've got about 62 for, but an essay I wrote for my tutorial second year I got about 73 for - one of the highest marks I ever got, but it was a feminist type thing. It was on menstruation and stuff and I really got my teeth into it. When I started reading the stuff it was really winding me up and there was so much emotion in it, because when you looked at what had actually been done and what assumptions had been made about different things I was really - you know! and anybody who spoke to me in that week when I'd started reading those references would have known that I was really wound up about it and there was so much emotion in my essay and that came out. I think that is the problem with most of this essay writing, that we don't really care at the end of the day about what we're doing.

Participant 7- Because if it's a topic you don't feel anything about, or if it just bores you, you just want to get it out of the way as quickly as possible. I always think I could spend x amount of time on it rather than other things, but not only does this cut into your leisure time, but when it gets close to exams and you're still doing course-work you are getting into your revision time as well. So you just think - 'if I get 65% or 63 it isn't worth it if I'm going to miss out a whole topic in my revision'.

Participant 10- I always find that those I think I've done quite well on I haven't, but those I think are really crap then I get a good mark on. I think maybe I should do them all crap.

Participant 11- I know whether or not I've put a good argument through it and I think that is what a lot of lectures really mark for. If you've really formulated your ideas and you've got a good argument, it doesn't matter if you've put three more references in at the end of the day, it's whether or not you've managed to use them.

Participant 10- The problem is though that what you write for one lecturer you could get a good mark and then do the same sort of structure for another lecturer and get a really crap mark.

Facilitator- So do you feel the mark you get for the essay show how good the essay is or is it down to the lecturer?

Participant 11- I did adult learning last year and we looked at things like correlation in marking and it really put you right off and you think - 'well why bother, it's pot luck'.

Participant 10- Especially as it's marked on normal distribution here so only so many people can get that. So it's unfair anyway because at the end of the day there will only be so many people who get firsts, so many who will get 2:1s.

Participant 9- Because I feel totally powerless, as the mark often seems irrelevant to the amount of hours you put in or the quality of the work, sometimes I feel I can predict my mark within four percent.

Participant 11- I think the problem is as well that we don't write that many essays and the feedback on the ones we do write.....

Participant 9-it's crap.

Participant 11- So how are we supposed to improve our essay writing? And the other thing is that the course-work makes up such a small percentage of the final mark of your module than at the end of the day you are better doing an extra day's revision than spending an extra day on your essay because it is such a small percentage there is no incentive to work harder.

Participant 10- Also, some of the time a lecture is actually told to keep their marking down because you're going to have too many people getting into the 2:1 bracket.

Participant 7- It's silly isn't it that when the second years are choosing their options one of the things you're going on is who marks them.

Participant 11- That's why I picked (lecturer's name).

Participant 7- That's right, because you look at some of them and they tell you they don't give marks over 65, and it's stupid because you're meant to be marking out of a hundred, but they don't.

Participant 11- It is very rarely that they will mark over 70.

Participant 7- But you should still be starting at 100 and working backwards.

Participant 9- I can't accept that no-one gets into the top 30%. You say to your lecturer - "what's wrong with my essay", and they'll say - "nothing, it's fine". So then I want to know how did I lose 30%.

Participant 10- They are told to aren't they.

Participant 9- I know.

Participant 11- As a rep. I've brought this up and they say that they do mark out of a hundred, but you know we get high marks on statistics and things like that.

Participant 7- But you don't get it on the other things do you.

Participant 9- I've never heard of anyone in our year getting a mark for an essay over 75, 78 something like that.

Participant 11- And even that's statistics.

Participant 9- Yeah, but that's a right or wrong answer.

Participant 6- Yeah, the best essay that I've ever written, that I was totally happy with and there was nothing wrong with it I got 74 for.

Participant 7- What was that in?

Participant 6- Addictive behaviours and (lecturer's name) told me it was tough luck as well.

- Participant 9-** You lost 26% somewhere. They mark it out of 80 basically.
- Participant 11-** I don't think they mark it out of 80 to be honest.
- Participant 6-** No, it's more like 70.
- Participant 10-** They may as well have from about 55 to 70 and mark in that bracket.
- Participant 7-** Unless it is absolutely brilliant or absolutely awful they don't
- Participant 9-**yeah, because I'm really disillusioned in a way.
- Participant 7-** I know in the second year a group has handed in an essay of a particular study package or whatever and we all had between 60 to 62, which is ridiculous as they could not all have been that close.
- Participant 11-** What I want to know as well is what is the difference between an essay that gets 60% and one that gets 62% because the lecturer can't tell you.
- Participant 7-** It must be different coloured paper or something.
- Participant 11-** I mean nobody in a scale of 0 to 100 could tell you what the difference between one or two percent is.
- Participant 6-** That doesn't really bother me, it is the discrepancy between markers. If they all consistently marked low or high or whatever, but they don't. There is such a discrepancy between them.
- Participant 11-** See I think they should mark essays on a seven point scale and that should be it.
- Participant 7-** What, like they used to do in "A" Levels?
- Participant 11-** Or a five point scale.
- Participant 7-** In some universities and on some courses here they mark it as a 1st 2:1, 2:2.
- Participant 11-** This is what I mean, when essays differ from 58 to 62 you can't actually tell what the difference is between the essays.
- Participant 10-** But with some people you do really good and others really crap. Like with some of my reports I used to get feedback so I knew where I was going wrong on mine and one of them read really good and I got 66 and the other one I wrote only got 58 and that just says it all.
- Participant 9-** But it does make a difference, because if you get a 2:2 rather than a 2:1 then it could be 3% difference but it actually makes a lot of difference to your employability.
- Participant 11-** The problem is that the mean of the year is 60%, so where you discriminate between 2:1s and 2:2s is where you have most people sitting. That's why it is the worst point possible to discriminate. You'd be better doing it like say between 55, above and below, or whatever because at least you haven't got
- Participant 10-** That's what is horrible.
- Participant 11-** It's pot luck.
- Participant 9-** These people are sliding, most of the jobs you get nowadays need 2:1s.
- Participant 10-** Lets go up there now. (lecturer's name) watch out.
- Participant 9-** Yeah, start hanging them now.
- Facilitator-** Would you choose a marker because they were somebody who gave high marks, or someone who gave justification for what you got?
- Participant 11-** I think it's somebody who discriminates and who is not afraid to use a wide span, who will actually give out 45% and 75%, rather than putting everything in the safe bracket of between 55 and 65.
- Participant 10-** Why I chose (lecturer's name) because I know she is a good marker. I did well in that last year which is why I choose her, strictly because I knew she marks well. That's why she gets told off for it.
- Participant 9-** Yeah, and there are other people who
- Participant 6-**pride themselves in being hard markers, it is so unfair.
- Participant 8-** Because people doing combined honours know that they can do better and get higher marks in their other subjects and that will bring up their psychology grades.
- Participant 10-** Yeah, I know that with sociology.

Participant 9- A lot of people who went to the states came back with very good marks because they tend to mark up higher.

Participant 10- I think most people came back with firsts or two ones, now they are back here they are getting two twos.

Participant 6- But their degrees are not equal to ours, their lectures involve - 'turn to page 23 and do chapter 4 today' and that's all they do.

Participant 10- But at least you can't go wrong when you are revising.

Participant 9- But at the end of the day you still sit in front of a potential employer with a piece of paper with a degree class written on it. They don't know that OK you went to America and you had a reasonable year.

Participant 11- I was going to say that they are not going to do that though, because obviously it will depend on what marks people get this year.

Participant 7- Yeah, because in your second year it is only 30% of your final degree mark.

Participant 8- Yeah, but they will account for it anyway because they are bound to have noticed that they all come back with much higher marks.

Participant 9- Yeah, but I still think there is a disparity in the marking. Listening to the marks that most people got in their first semester exams this year, it's incredible that most of them got between 58 and 62.

Participant 6- The only thing that I resented was that I got 69.3. How the hell did I get a point 3? No, that wasn't the average, the actual exam was point 3.

Participant 8- Because there were three questions I suppose?

Participant 6- Yeah, but how do you discriminate between 0. something of a percent?

Participant 7- They are probably marking out of 20 or something and then converting it to a percentage, or something strange like that, or out of 30.

Facilitator- How does this make you feel about writing essays?

Participant 10- I'm put off now, after this discussion!

Participant 6- You know that even if you write a really excellent essay you will get comments on it like really well presented, you know you are not going to get higher than 70. So it is really frustrating.

Participant 9- That's it, and if you do a lot less work you still manage to get 64, 65.

Participant 6- Yeah, because if I rushed it off I would probably get about a 65, and if I work my arse off I will only get 70.

Participant 7- But a lot of it is a game, it is finding where that point falls, the amount of work you put in, the best possible mark you can get. As if you work an extra week you will only get half a percent. So you must work out - 'if I put in x amount of work what is the highest mark possible for that amount of work that I have put in'?

Participant 10- Yeah, because I just think - 'sod it I will go onto the next piece of work'.

Facilitator- OK.

End of Focus Group

3rd Focus Group of Phase One

1st years (semester two) 1995

Facilitator- I'd like you to talk about how you produce an essay - from the moment you know you have an essay to write, to the product - that is the essay you hand in.

Participant 12- I think first of all, as soon as you've got a title, ask everyone what they think of it, you know someone might have a good idea straight from the start, saves you the trouble.....

Participant 15-and all those different sections of it as well and the areas you have to do, go into. So you know what kind of books to look into.

Facilitator- As I mentioned before from the title, what area do you think.....

Participant 14- is this how we think we should be writing an essay or how we really do approach it?

Facilitator- How you really do approach it, but if you think it's relevant to also mention how you think, perhaps how, you are not doing it right or how you would like to get better or how you think it should be done as well, mention it all, but indicate what you are mentioning.

Participant 14- Yeah OK, well I tend to leave it a few weeks [...] time thinking about it then get my references and then I've forgotten what structure we write.

Participant 15- We usually run out of time.

Participant 14- Yeah start reading through them and then what else is it. I write the important bits and you write it up.

Participant 15- I usually end up with pages and pages of stuff 'cause I just read through the references and I think I'm underlining the relevant bits but end up underlining most of it and I have to go through all that as well. It takes me ages.

Participant 14- Yeah.

Facilitator- How do you decide what you are going to read?

Participant 16- Try to get slightly organised, like sit down and talk about something the essay might entail and write down what you think [...] the essay might roughly be about.

Participant 14- It's always difficult if you don't know much about the subject. It's difficult to know what the relevant bits are. You go into far too much depth about things that aren't really the key issues.

Participant 15- Yeah you want to look at this and you want to look at this.

Participant 12- I think also like with any essay I always check to see if anyone else has done a similar essay or I've done a similar essay before and then.....

Facilitator-an essay?

Participant 12- I think we can do it - it works well.

Participant 15- It's really annoying though if you just do it on your own and you get a book or something out and you wade through it for ages and find out like it's not really relevant at all and there's nothing [...] about it.

Participant 14- You actually find yourself writing about all the wrong stuff.

Participant 15- Yeah and I tend to get slightly off the point as well, just waffle on and on and on.

Participant 12- Yeah but say, for example, Sociology portfolio they've been given like the same question for the past 3 years so if you know a second year then.....

Participant 12- The thing I do straight away really is to work out.... Yeah but I mean the tutor doesn't remember what..... It worked last year.

Participant 15- It's a good idea to find out what marks are for what, so you know that you are concentrating on the right area. 'Cause if you write a whole chapter about one particular point that you know their not really going to be bothered about, then it's a bit of a waste of time so there are some people that are repeating the year and stuff that have got

those forms like the sections that are telling that so many marks go to this and so I've got that at home so I kind of think - 'what I'm going to concentrate on'.

Facilitator- Right, so what is contained in that form, what type [...]

Participant 15- I can't remember.

Facilitator- Is it specific topics or just things like marking and content?

Participant 15- No, Yeah stuff like that, it doesn't improve my marks very much.

Facilitator- So from reading this then you start writing straight away.

Participant 15- No I don't start writing right away. I like write sections and then try to put them.... but then I have trouble putting them together because I can't link them properly.

Unless you write them all kind of flowing it doesn't follow does it?

Participant 14- I start writing and I cut as I go and add as I go. It depends on if your in a hurry or not.

Participant 16- I start on introduction a little bit, conclusion, and brief lengths on each of the sections, like a draft essay.

Participant 15- You get lots of quotes. I normally go through it and get lots of quotes and then try.... not quotes but try to explain the quotes in my own words.

Facilitator- It may be if we go through each person 1 by 1 and recap on what we've said already and just say in a brief way from the moment you get the essay personally what you do and the stages you do it in.

Participant 15- Well I look at the title and stuff and think what bits are going to be most interesting about that, like what areas to look at, and then go to the library and get referencing and stuff relevant to that and then wade through them. Make notes on them and then make loads more notes and like in separate sections and then try to piece them together afterwards and try to like add in a conclusion on the end. I haven't got much of a strategy.

Facilitator- Where does the introduction come in now?

Participant 15- Well sometimes I try to write it first, but then if I don't really understand what I'm doing it's best to concentrate on the rest of the essay and get that done and kind of sum it up and do the introduction afterwards, the same as the conclusion. It depends really on if I know what I'm doing, then I'll do it first, but if I'm not sure I'll leave it.

Facilitator- OK next.

Participant 14- OK I've got the title and wait a while and then I get my references and then I start reading through them and I highlight what [...] and then I start writing and then I don't do it sections like some I just start writing and I cut as I go. It's not very structured and I end up with half way through the essay I don't know where I'm going and I've either gone off the point or I just don't know where I'm going and I come to one bit and I'm really stuck.

Participant 15- Yeah, if I do it in sections, I find it doesn't actually go anywhere 'cause all of the sections are covering different bits and it's not flowing through and leading anywhere.

Facilitator- Are you saying that you get a title and then go and do some reading? How does the title influence your reading or does it not? Do you just read everything on the general topic or do you read much more specifically?

Participant 14- Ah it depends how much I know about it. If I don't know anything about it then I'll get really quite general stuff, but if I understand a little bit then [...]

Facilitator- So you write as you go along. How many drafts do you do?

Participant 14- I just do one, but do scribbling out, putting bits in and until it's all right.

Participant 13- I start off [...] and if I don't know much about that I'll go and get a basic Psychology Book and see what sections I could cover. Then I'll try and see if it's like an essay [...] for and against and try and get points and pick on them [...] I'll probably go through a first draft and then scribble most of it out.

Facilitator- OK after reading do you have any strategy on what the [...] Talk a bit about how you would structure your essay.

Participant 13- Well whilst I'm reading I look at things and decide whereabouts in the essay they should go, but I won't look at what I want in each section, first [...]

Participant 13- Because by then you know everything about it, you know what you've put in your essay.

Participant 16- When I get a title I'll try to work out for myself what the title is actually about because often it's not the face value but the depths of the questions your looking at. I talk to my friends, see what they think, what they would do with their essays [...] topic anyway. OK so general reading, I try and make some kind of plan with the introduction a little point, what sort of points leading so I know roughly what it's about. I try to make points of what sort of arguments I want to give in my essay and then I'll go back to the books and the notes reading those. Underline what I think are good points and then try and write it out and normally speak to my friends again and see what they've done and then when I'm writing it up I'll expand on the points I've already written. Usually change a couple of bits but try and get structured before I actually write the essay, gather all the information together.

Facilitator- Would what your friends say influence what you actually did?

Participant 16- If they had arguments which I thought was relevant that I hadn't thought of then perhaps I think some of those, but if I didn't think it was relevant about the points I was going to make in the question then what they said wouldn't influence me.

Facilitator- Any specific problems you have along that process?

Participant 16- The most essays I write are for Sociology which I don't know anything about anyway and most people I know, who are friends, have done it in A Level tend to know more about it than I do. The main problem is actually sitting down and writing the actual essay even though I've got all the books and the notes it's having to get started.

Participant 12- I think like the main thing is finding out how much I need to actually get in the essay to pass it or whatever, might see if I've done really well in the other things in the module and I only have to get 20% then I just scribble, but I mean I very rarely go in the library and look in books. If I haven't got it in notes someone else probably will and then the main text book to try and browse around and just pick loads of different points from each one. Don't put them in any particular order, it's like a brainstorm. I don't usually listen to other peoples views of what they are going to put in. I mean usually I just try to start straight from scratch and just write the whole thing without a draft, but that all depends on how many marks I've got to get.

Facilitator- Would that be from notes that you've made or [...]

Participant 12- Notes from lectures usually which are usually friends notes as well.

Facilitator- Do you put those notes in order before you start writing?

Participant 12- I just write down the most important parts in no particular order, so just by me writing down I'll remember them and then I'll probably split them up into groups of 4 or 5, like 4 or 5 main words and then when I'm writing it up - like this paragraph is going to be on childhood or whatever and then I'll keep drifting back over the other little points, see which comes under childhood. I mean I find that reading... usually you can spend a whole day reading, but if the essay has got to be in for the next morning you've only got 2 hours to write it up so half the stuff you've read and you'd love to put in you haven't got the time to anyway.

Facilitator- Discuss what you think are the easiest and hardest and most fun bits of an essay.

Participant 12- Starting.

Participant 15- Once you know where you're going.

Facilitator- Now you say starting but how do you define starting. Starting writing up or
.....

Participant 15-no, knowing where to look, not as in books, but as in what sections, like I can split it up into sections but it's knowing what to put in there. Once I've started writing then I just carry on and it comes quite easily.

Participant 14- I find it's just starting, opening sentences to knowing the write ending.

Participant 15- Yeah the endings really difficult as well. Coming to a conclusion and summing everything up, because there's so much in it that's really hard just to do it.

Participant 16- Normally I'm all right when I'm writing the main bulk of the essay it's just having to write the introduction and explain what it's about and the conclusion, drawing all your loose ends together. Once I get going I'm fine, but then I don't normally have loads of loose ends. I mean, my conclusion is normally really short 'cause I feel that I've said everything I have to say.

Participant 16- Yeah I get caught up in the past with 'you've already said that', but if I don't write that I'm going to get told off for not finishing it properly.

Participant 14- And joining it on never.... mine always stops really abruptly at the end.

Participant 12- I mean I think it all goes down to how much time you've actually got left. Like there's been quite a few times where I would have loved to have written a conclusion but I just didn't have time.

Participant 15- I find it easier as well if I've done all the reading and stuff I can't get started so I have to wait until I've only got a day or something and then if I know that I've got to get it done then something will come and I can do it, but if I've got ages I just can't think of anything.

Participant 12- You've got so many different view points in your head and so many facts you don't want to be harsh on them and just say - 'chuck that out, chuck that out', so you wait until time pressure and you've got no choice.

Facilitator- General agreement on that then?

Participants 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16- Yeah.

Participant 16- You start off with good intentions to do it early to just get it out the way but....

Participant 12-but you do it and you spend days and days and you think I'll get it done in half an hour if I just leave that there.

Participant 14- With me it always I always feel as though I'm not ready to write it down and I need to know more, or for some reason something is holding me up and I want to do it properly. So I delay it until I do know more about what I want to say but in fact I'm just delaying until I have to do it and when it's time to do it I find I can't have the time to do it properly anyway, but it's because I want to do it properly that I delay it.

Participant 12- Your like waiting for the perfect introduction and the perfect like structure.

Participant 14- And then you'll sit there and go shit and have to do it at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Participant 15- And then you think - 'Oh I could have done this a while ago'.

Facilitator- What sort of time-scale are we talking about?

Participant 15- It depends on whether you understand it or not.

Facilitator- When does the reading start, and the actual writing start? What do you call enough time and what you call rushed?

Participant 12- Rushed - about an hour.

Participant 15- The night before. I usually say morning - it's got to be in by 12. I usually get books out quite a while before but they just sit there. There's so much there that I don't know where to start so I just look at them and I think Ah.

Participant 16- Sometimes in the afternoon I've got the title, I think - 'right I'm going to do this', so I sit down get my books out read some of the books make a couple of notes and then just forget all about it.

Participant 15- Yeah then I think - 'Oh I've made some notes' and leave it for ages [...]

- Participant 16-** About the week before, or 2 weeks before - so we panic then and think ahhhh it's got to be in.
- Participant 14-** The night before.
- Facilitator-** Does anybody consistently do it in a certain amount of time, either very late or very early?
- Participant 12-** Um I'm starting to do it earlier now. Just realising that slap dash isn't just a bad way after all you know it's only first year, you've only got to get 40%. I mean I hate leaving it to the last minute, cause like you've always got something else at the last minute, so I prefer just sitting down and thinking I'm doing it and thinking oh that'll get 40.
- Participant 15-** There's always so much going on that I don't tend to do it in advance 'cause I'm doing other things and I think - 'oh I've got ages' and I'll leave it and then.....
- Participant 16-** Yeah 'cause I never have just one essay to write. It's sometimes two or three at the same time.
- Participant 14-** If I start early all that happens is I get far too ambitious with it and spend ages on things that aren't actually important, aren't actually going to earn me marks and I feel as though I've done something so I just like [...] and then I leave it for a while and I end up doing [...] so if I start early I just beat about the bush and go into too much depth, but if I start late I get right into it and I finish it.
- Participant 16 -** Yeah but I always try and get it done at least the day before the deadline, so then I think - 'right I've done it I can relax I've just got to hand it in', but then there's always the big let down when you read everybody else's.
- Participant 14-** Either I do it early or I do it late [...]
- Participant 12-** That's only when everyone else is talking about it and you think oh yeah that reminds me.
- Participant 16-** Yeah it makes you feel good, 'cause you think at least you've done something and suddenly they all overtake you.
- Participant 13-** The problem is though that when you start reading, especially a fairly boring topic but there's interesting bits to it, you'll read about the interesting bits and just leave the essay totally and so you're sitting there in the Library and you look up at the time and oh shit I haven't done any of the work I'm supposed to do for it.
- Participant 16-** I always find something more interesting in the book and start reading about that instead.
- Participant 12-** Yeah there'll be another chapter completely irrelevant chapter in the book.
- Participant 15-** Essays are always really boring I never want to read about it.
- Participant 13-** The reading about it is fine, it's the actually [...] you get fed up with reading.
- Participant 15-** You end up reading so much that you can't take it in. You end up reading the same book for about an hour.
- Facilitator-** Do you think that anything in your essay, you now how we talked about how you write an essay, do you think that anything drastically changes in any situations, perhaps to do with size or the way you go about writing an essay, change drastically?
- Participant 12-** Yeah I mean I still try to maintain the same brainstorming and then structure, but like if I'm under time pressure and I now I haven't got any time to get facts, well I try to get as many as possible, but then I'll just try and use.... waffle on about using examples of real life situations to demonstrate these facts which actually works quite well. So I think I'm going to stick with it, less facts more waffle, but it's full of facts if I've got loads of time. If I haven't got loads of time I always refer to real life situations.
- Participant 13-** When I'm pushed for time I like to start structuring by building myself a deadline - by 10 o'clock I will have finished the first paragraph. It always takes me longer than I think though. I think - 'oh I'll allow that much time for that and I've got plenty of time to do this' but it takes twice as long. 'Cause I write something and then I think no

that's not right so I write it again, no that's not write and it takes me a while to get it how I want it.

Participant 16- I've learnt in the past I've always got to have some sort of structure when I've got a time-scale otherwise I just write complete dribble and go totally off the point. It's got to have a point so otherwise I'd just waffle like anything, babble.

Participant 15- I never know if I'm supposed to be doing like a full in-depth [...] I never know whether to put the four points together [...] or whether do it, cause I like normally I do it in sections, and then others do it [...] and then you do half one way and half another and you think no that's not right.

Participant 14- Or [...] it's really difficult to try to put it into one, cause you start doing it in that one and then [...] instead of doing it half and half [...]

Participant 15- Everything always overlaps. It's difficult to kind of put it into sections, 'cause you could put it in one but then it's relevant to something else as well and you end up repeating yourself.

Facilitator- Do you find that means you're changing the structure constantly, not being happy with one or the other?

Participant 15- Yeah.

Participant 12- It's trying to get the flow charts and like that main topic [...] and just trying to make sure that you don't go and do one topic, another topic, and then realise that that should have gone there.

Participant 16- I've got to try and do when I'm writing [...] oh that topic relates to that one so I sort of learn to continue [...]

Participant 16- When you read something it's just put in the way that you wanted to put it so it's very much copying, but trying to put it in your own words, but I find that really really difficult, because I did English Literature for A Level and it's mainly writing your own views and you don't have to think about what somebody else does.

Participant 16- The trouble is you're [...] have criticism of what you're doing [...]

Participant 12- I mean I think another factor is watching people from Single Honours 'cause they have presentations and have to read out to the rest of the tutorial group to do it, your essays.

Participant 14- Yeah a lot of presentations.

Participant 12- An awful lot of people know your marks and stuff but if you're just combined honours and you get 40 you don't have to [...] I think you can do it more slap dash 'cause as long as you get 40 it doesn't really matter.

Participant 14- Yeah but it's the same with Single though [...]

Participant 12- But don't you want to still look good in your tutor's eyes?

Participant 14- In my tutor's eyes I don't have to look good, yeah I suppose with my tutor.

Participant 12- If you were one of like a hundred to the one tutor I mean you wouldn't do it cause you'd think [...]

Participant 14- Oh no I mean other people in your group, but other people on the course you know.

Facilitator- Why do you want to get good marks? I know it seems like an obvious question and the answer is obvious but

Participant 14- My tutor is simply..... makes you feel good, he thinks you're working and thinks you're capable and got the ability there and do work sometimes. Whereas if you were just really stuck or not getting good marks or anything he's going to come down hard on you.

Participant 15- He's not going to be much help either.

Participant 16- If I get a good mark it makes me feel like I've actually learnt something. It's like I've never done Psychology with Sociology before. It just makes you feel like work means something. If I get a rubbish mark [...]

- Participant 15-** It makes me panic if I get a low mark 'cause it makes me realise how little I understand about it.
- Participant 12-** I find that if you start getting bad marks like say a couple of months before the exams it keeps you on your toes. Whereas if you start getting really high marks you just like, well I just get really blasé and that's the easy way to fail.
- Participant 16-** I think that if I get good marks I work harder, if I get rubbish marks I just sort of.....
- Participant 12-** It depends if other people know. If everyone knows what you got 70 and then the next one is marked 60 then you've got this thing to live up to.
- Participant 12-** It's competition. If someone says to me well I'm going to beat you on this and I say - "right OK", it's a helpful motivation. If I'm really bored with something who can I use as competition, who's going to take the bait.
- All Participants-** [...]
- Participant 15-** I always look at other people's marks.
- Participant 12-** There's a limit to it, like I mean I'm not really competitive, but it's like the last straw if I can't find anything to motivate me whatsoever, it's a really tough one.
- Participant 13-** When people are saying like - "oh I got 78" and you say - "well I passed" and you're very pleased you passed, but still you wouldn't mind doing well, but what am I doing wrong?
- Participant 15-** It's only really worrying if you put loads and loads of effort in and then you get a really bad mark [...] or if you get too much work and you expect it anyway.
- Participant 13-** I know people who don't really push themselves so that they say [...]
- Participant 12-** I always get more fuss out of getting all my work up to date as long as it's just passing that's much better than just like having peeled through with brilliant essays. 'Cause I mean, the amount of exams I've like really done badly. Just like my first essay English Lit.... first essay wow that is pure gold I'll get an A for that one and you don't, then you do like half a page for the other essays, it's just pure time factor. I think you've just got to slap dash through it all. When I say slap dash it's not really.
- Facilitator-** When you get an essay what is the aim of that essay, just to do it, to get a good mark, is it to make yourself feel good, is it to learn something?
- Participant 16-** I think it's to expand your knowledge on the topic.
- Participant 15-** You do learn a lot 'cause you read so much and because you're writing it you take it in more and just go over it more and more.
- Participant 16-** Most of the time I don't know anything about the topic anyway, so you've got to learn, you've got to understand it.
- Participant 12-** To get it done as painlessly as possible.
- Participant 14-** Yeah, exactly yeah, and to get it typed up [...]
- All Participants-** [...]
- Participant 12-** I think like it's a huge difference between like now and say in your second year when you start to say - "I can't really do this slap dash anymore", third year certainly can't but like you've got to have time to enjoy yourself as well as everything else.
- Facilitator-** So how do you think your essay approach [...]
- Participant 12-** In the second year? Well I'm dropping Sociology and that's about two thirds of my essays in Sociology, really boring, but I'm looking forward to that. I think you just have to realise that marks are more important then and going in for a more detailed, a more disciplined routine, things like that. Being a bit more conscientious.
- Participant 15-** I'm going to have to get used to typing everything up in the second year 'cause I'm going to have to be a lot more prepared and get it organised a lot sooner 'cause I can't type and most of my essays are hand written now and I just like think bits of it as I'm going along whereas with a computer I'd have to get have it all done to go and type it up.
- Participant 16-** [...] 'cause I've got a computer as well and I make my hand written notes and then type it up and change it.

Participant 16- I have notes everywhere.

Participant 14- I can't, I just don't know if it's right when I look at it on a computer. Do we have to do that in the second year all on computer?

Facilitator- Yeah, I mean you don't have to actually write it on a computer as long as it is handed in done on a computer.

Participant 16- I'll only find it easier if I can type quicker.

Participant 12- Yeah I mean everyone says they find it easier. I just think the actual initial, you know putting all the jargon down, would take them days.

Participant 16- [...] can't find a word you've written, you know roughly and you can see it on like a page how much you've written and how much more you've got to go.

Participant 12- But then again I think that if you're scraping the barrel for things to say, like if you write it on a computer and word process it's tiny, but if you write it on an A4 with big writing here and gaps there you know.....

Facilitator- For those people who don't write on a word processor now, do you think you are going to have to change the way you approach writing essays when you have to start writing on a word processor?

Participant 15- Yeah, because unless I actually do it on a computer as I'm going then it is going to take me a lot longer and I'm going to have to be a lot more organised because I'm going to have to write everything up and then take it in and type it all up, which will take longer than I'm currently doing. There's no way that I'm going to be able to write up on a computer gradually, 'cause I need lots of different piles of notes, different information about everything, so because it's going to take me longer, I'm just going to have to get the books out straightaway, read through them straightaway. I'm not going to be able to leave it and then get organised and sort out what sections I'm going to do and start on it.

Facilitator- Would you feel comfortable sat at a computer with your pile of notes writing as you went?

Participant 15- No, I get stressed as well.

Participant 13- Yeah on a friend's computer sitting there.

Participant 16- Yeah 'cause I've used computers in like the library and stuff, but I feel much better at home when I'm sat down and got my books around me and I can concentrate more [...]

Participant 15- Yeah you can't do it at your own pace 'cause you have a certain slot of time and you have to get it down. Perhaps if I do it at home then I'll get a break and then come back and do some more.

Participant 12- But it's also like the time management factor, like I mean how many essays do you do mid-afternoon. I mean it's always I'll get finished by nine and one o'clock in the morning you're still..... so I mean I could be using a computer room, but I'd rather do it last thing at night.

Facilitator- So in which case you'd have to write your essay and then literally type it up once it's written?

Participant 12- Well I mean I've got a word processor. I don't use it that much. I just do the brainstorming by hand and then just type it straight on and I mean that suits me.

Participant 16- The trouble is whenever I do that, if I've written an essay by hand and I'm typing it up I think ah I've got to change that so that changing happens when even though I think I've got a perfect draft.

Participant 15- When I'm doing it by hand you can just flick through your notes really quickly and just look through and watch how it flows whereas if you're on a computer you have to kind of do it gradually and then you can only see so much of it at a time.

Facilitator- Is everybody happy with the way they write essays at the moment?

Participant 16- I've got better [...] A level essays were completely scatty.

Participant 12- I mean I have to do essays in exams [...] multiple choice [...] four essays in thirty five minutes, no way, but then again that could be because I didn't know it well enough. I mean you don't know if it's that or your style.

Facilitator-[...]Anybody else?

Participant 14- I'm happy enough if I don't have to do it on computer [...] it would really muck things up because it won't be practical to write it up first and then type it up. It'll take ages so I'll end up having to do it on computer first and I hate that. I mean I know I will have to use it but I can't use a computer to..... I just won't be at all in the mode for writing an essay.

Participant 15- It'll take me so long to type it that by the time I've done a bit I'm going to have forgotten where I'm going and what I'm doing, you can write really quickly.

Participant 14- Yeah you can write what you're thinking about. So yeah it will have to change.

Participant 15- And you can put little notes on the paper to move this over here and do this, but if you're on the computer you have to do it there and then and you've lost your sort of thought.

Participant 14- Is it just that they prefer it or does it have to be typed?

Facilitator- I think it has to be,

Participant 13- So when they get to do A Levels what I done was I couldn't stand using computers I used to write everything by hand, and a couple of my friends were doing it by computer, but all throughout my second year of A Levels when I was doing essays on computer I had to have a full new draft before I actually done it whereas now I could have a half draft and then type it up and think about changing it, it's much easier.

Participant 16- You don't have to worry about the spelling so much either.

Participant 13- No.

All Participants- [...]

Participant 15- I really hated doing like computer assignments. You had to do it and type it up took days.

Participant 14- I mean you can't think about writing an essay and concentrate on that.

Participant 13- I got my little sister to help with the computer and that is when I started to learn to like them 'cause she was sitting beside me.

Participant 14- And now you can sit and write on them.

Participant 13- Yeah.

Participant 14- Really.

Facilitator- Can you see your style of writing changing as you go whichever way you do, does it improve, or get worse, or is it developing as you get marks in?

Participant 15- I think it is, 'cause the more you do the more you know what's wanted of you and what they expect. I think it subconscious 'cause you don't really concentrate on it but if you look at it afterwards you can see how they are getting better.

Participant 16- For me it depends on what topic it is, 'cause I do free standing modules on combined honours. I do Astronomy but with Sociology. Like last semester I was given a title and I didn't know anything about it so I had to sit down and do all the background reading whereas in Astronomy he gave us a list of points we had to cover in the essay so he like almost gave us an essay plan before we actually did the essay.

Participant 13- Sometimes especially if it's not essay but with my practicals I look back on my first practical see where I went wrong then and then change it in the second practical.

Participant 15- I find it easier to write the essay that I'm doing at that minute if I look at essays that I've done before and I have them there while I'm doing it 'cause I can compare them.

Facilitator- Do you want to have a free for all and talk about anything [...]

Participant 13- I find it really difficult to put across your own views but not say things like - 'oh I enjoy this', it sounds really childish.

Participant 14- Yeah.

Participant 13- But I want to put my own view over. I really hate the fact that I don't put, you can't really put your own view.

Participant 15- 'Cause it's just irrelevant in a way.

Participant 15- I find it really difficult to write it in a scientific way 'cause my style of writing is like really chatty and really my opinions and it's completely different 'cause I've never really done science or anything, and I find it hard to just state things and just classify things.

Participant 16- I find the practical reports quite easy 'cause I've got Biology A level as well and I did things like.

Participant 15- I find the practicals really difficult.

Participant 13- That's what I'll like use my computing for trying to put what I've got from what I've looked at [...]

Participant 15- I always go into too much detail as well about everything. I'll get little notes sometimes you don't really need to tell us that.

Participant 16- But your never quite sure how much detail to put in. You think you've put in everything but they tell you no.

Participant 16- Or it's why don't you do that because it's something completely obvious that you've missed cause you concentrate on [...]

Facilitator- How do you find keeping to word limits?

Participant 15- I can never work out how. I always get it wrong. I either do way too much or not enough. It's usually way too much 'cause I try to fit too much detail about everything in and I want to put everything in. I can't discriminate what's important and what's not.

Participant 13- In essays it's way too much but in most poster presentations I find [...] 250 words of, you think 500 words is nothing it really is frustrating.

Participant 15- If it's a small number of words you have to do it's more difficult than if you've got a huge amount of words.

Participant 12- I always think I'm never going to manage like 400 words, but you get to 400 words and you think - 'I've done it', but you've got loads more to say but you just think this will do.

Participant 16- Yeah if I have a large, like 2000 words, I always tend to waffle more whereas if it's a 600 word small report I make my points more precise and then I don't write enough. I've got everything they wanted but it's not long enough.

Participant 13- Like when you said you reach 400 right that's it I won't bother with the rest of it. I think - 'oh I'll have to shorten that bit' it always [...]

Participant 14- If you feel like I'm never going to be able to make it 400 words you really start waffling and then you realise you're doing all right and you count the words [...] I actually enjoy it. I have [...] with that one I actually went over and over, but if you're counting the words I think that [...]

Facilitator- Enjoyment plays a big part?

Participant 14- Yeah, yeah.

Participant 16- Yeah if I enjoy like an essay I'll write more about it. If I find it really boring I can't manage.

Participant 12- I normally like get through to it and you're half way through and you think you've got 15 - 20 minutes to finish it and you think if I searched this out I could really enjoy this but now I've just got to skip through it you think next time.....

Facilitator- Do you think you're all worn out by talking about [...] for the last sort of 10 minutes I just write and think about it and if I explain to you the research I'm doing and I'm going to ask you how many more variables you think are going to be important. I basically want to look at essay writing and what things might effect the process and try and identify different types of processes of writing essays and then look at what may effect people

writing it differently. So different things within people and between people. So if you want to throw around some ideas

Participant 12- First of all I don't have any complex essays to write whatsoever. Doing combined Sociology is all like writing up a workshop and then Applied Psychology is just like a little case report which is like pretty.... I mean you can waffle a good 50 marks and it does seem that the single honours has a lot more detail, a lot more library work, library research, more references.

Facilitator- Do you think whether people are combined or single honours is relevant?

Participant 12- Yeah I reckon.

Participant 16- I'm doing combined as well and the only essays we ever write for Sociology or Psychology are the case reports and practical reports. One of the reasons I do Psychology you don't have Sociology portfolio [...] and Astronomy we have like 2 essays - a lot depends on how much you already know about the subject, how enjoyable you find it.

Participant 12- And I think like, talked to a few combined honours students and it's like Sociology and things like that are a bit on the side, you know what I mean. You want to get a Psychology degree you want to be a Psychologist.

End of Focus Group

(Tape was turned off at this point as conversation turned to what courses students wished they had done.)

4th Focus Group of Phase One

2nd and 3rd years (semester two) 1995

Facilitator- What I want you to talk about is essay writing from the moment you get the essay title to the finished product.

Participant 17- When I get an essay title the first thing I do go to the library and find everything I can do with the topic, take home and read through it, see what is necessary, see how the articles structure their arguments for and against and I make that the basis for my essay.

Participant 18- First thing look at when the deadline..... If there is about three weeks I'll wait till I have a spare moment and pop into the library, won't go straight into the library, panic at the last minute, but it seems to work for me.

Participant 20- In your head you think you are going to start writing earlier than you do. Plan it, but end up writing a week before the deadline.

Participant 18- Do you write essay plans?

Participant 20- Yes.

Participant 17- I judge it all from the journal, so if they bring in this argument and that one, I think-that's a quite good, I'll use that one as well.

Participant 19- I use references to make my plan, but always write down points to guide me through the title.

Participant 17- Is it a very detailed plan?

Participant 19- Not really, about 6/7 lines.

Participant 18- I tend to just photocopy loads of journals and snip out all the relevant bits, go through those bits with the highlighter, then cut out the relevant bits and I have them scattered all around my room. Then I make little piles of them so that all the relevant ones are together, then sort piles into introduction, middle bit, conclusion and just write through.

Participant 19- That's really good, because I just type, searching through the journals thinking where did I see this.

Participant 20- How do you know which comes from where though? Which references comes from where?

Participant 19- I just give them all capital letter names. For example, like page numbers and references it comes from this book, page that, but then I forget what it is really about and I have to go back and look at it anyway.

Participant 17- How many references do you use?

Participant 18- It depends really. Depends if we have done the topic in a lecture, then we tend to go back to the lecture notes.

Participant 19- Go into short loan because they have the best books and hopefully they are not all out on loan.

Participant 17- You might have to wait a day for them. More and lots of our questions books do not cover so we have to go to the journal article and photocopy pages and pages.

Participant 18- I go back to basics first, to the text books to cover the real ground work.

Participant 19- Maybe because we are second years, it may change in the third year.

Participant 17- So how long does it take you to write the essay then?

Participant 18- I started it and did a couple hours on Monday, it had to be in on Wednesday. Read up on it and did about four hours on Tuesday.

Facilitator- What was the word limit?

Participant 18- 1000 words.

Participant 19- It takes me so long to write an essay if I'm researching it. Then planning it and actually writing it.

Participant 17- When I have the middle bit, researching it is OK, but when I have done the research and read it, I just kind of block before I actually do the writing.

- Participant 18-** Lets do the hoovering, anything else but the essay. Hoovering becomes really important.
- Participant 17-** Once you actually start it and you have the article it's OK.
- Participant 18-** I find that I'd rather get started and just do it all or in two separate big lumps. I don't like writing a half an hour here, a half an hour there.
- Participant 20-** I just like putting it straight on the word processor then if you find a bit that is important you can go back and slot it in.
- Participant 18-** Can you do that? Write and type at the same time?
- Participant 20-** No I don't write. I just have all the books there and whatever I'm going to do and just tap the notes straight in, then you can just add bits in that you find. You don't have to keep re-writing it.
- Participant 18-** I wish I could do that. I have to have my pencils handy and find I have stars here and stars there.
- Participant 17 & 20-** General agreement.
- Participant 17-** So what do you do if you have lots of assignments and deadlines at the same time?
- Participant 18-** Tend to panic quite a bit.
- Participant 20-** Start with the easiest bit, start with the bit you can do.
- Participant 19-** Some people can work on several deadlines at once. I have to work through on one bit and finish it.
- Participant 20-** You would get too confused else.
- Participant 18-** If we have a statistics assignment and a social essay to do, I find it's like a break. I'll do a big chunk of the social essay, have a break and do some statistics, then do the second chunk.
- Participant 17-** I couldn't forget the first one while I was working on the second one until it was completely finished, chopping and changing from subject to subject.
- Participant 20-** You don't actually achieve anything.
- Participant 18-** No you might come back to it with fresh ideas and things.
- Participant 19-** Do you find once you have written an essay you just want to forget it, never go back to think about other things you could put into it.
- Participant 17-** Yeah, you think - 'I should have done this, I should have done that'.
- Participant 18-** Yeah, that's true, as soon as I've done it I like to hand it in. I don't like to read over it. I always worry too much.
- Participant 17-** Do the research and not worry too much over writing it.
- Participant 18-** I can't plan it. If I have three essays to do I do them all in the last three days.
- Participant 17-** Yeah, but say you have three deadlines in three weeks.
- Participant 18-** Yeah, that would be all right, one a week. One deadline a week, that would be OK.
- Facilitator-** But you wouldn't necessarily use one week would you? It only takes you a couple of hours to write.
- Participant 19-** Once you have your books open and you have a bit of flow going.
- Participant 17-** You have to work yourself up to it, be in the mood for it.
- Participant 18-** I know you play certain music like I do don't you? I tend to play my classical music. I think that quite important as I can't think else.
- Participant 20-** I can't write with music, I can't concentrate. I can write up i.e. without having to think, but not to concentrate.
- Participant 18-** I don't think I could write without music now, I'd have to sing or something.
- Participant 17-** The more noise there is outside the more likely I will stay and work.
- Participant 18-** Really?
- Participant 18-** I can't work when it is sunny either, that gets me.

Participant 17- I can't work if I'm miserable either.

Participant 20- You all prefer to working in your rooms to the library don't you?

Participant 17- Yeah I can't work in the library, too many distractions. If I can hear the noise and not see the people, I'm OK. I could work in study rooms, but not in the compartments.

Facilitator- How do you write essays in exams, do you write a plan then?

Participant 17- In exams? No I write down everything that it concerns.

Participant 20- I write a list and put down everything I know and divide it into the introduction and so on.

Participant 17- No once I can remember the picture of what is in there, I can remember what order I wrote it down in which will be the order it came in the book or magazine I was reading.

Participant 18- I kind of do that, but don't you find it really hard when you want to put in all the stuff you know. That is why I have to plan it because otherwise I would put in all the irrelevant stuff. I don't normally plan but in exams I do for this reason.

Participant 20- You need to break the question down in exams don't you as well.

Participant 17- Highlight certain bits. Discuss-pros and cons.

Participant 20- Do you find you keep looking back at the title to check you are answering it properly?

Participant 17- I know the conclusion you use is the title and I rarely use that in the summary.

Participant 18- Do you link the introduction and the conclusion as well when you write an essay?

Participant 17- Try to.

Participant 19- Do you write the introduction last because they say you should always write it last, i.e. write the whole essay and write the introduction last.

Participant 17- I do my essays in course-work but not in exams.

Participant 20- Once I feel ready to write an essay I know what's all about so I can write the introduction.

Participant 17- I just lift things out of journals. I don't write very much of my essay at all. Odd sentences here and there.

Participant 19- At the end of your references, do you just write down all the different names or do you put what you read and write 'as cited in.....'.

Participant 20- No it takes too long.

Participant 19- So they think you have read them all.

Participant 18- Do you bind your essays as well?

Participant 19- Not essays because they are only a couple of pages.

Participant 17- If it doesn't look good on the outside then I'd be stuffed I think. That's why I do it.

Participant 18- Do you find you have to be in a certain mood to write an essay?

Participant 19- Yes unless you find you HAVE to write it that night.

Participant 18- I just think about it and can essay write whatever the mood I'm in, but that's because I always leave it to the last minute.

Participant 17- I'm never in the right mood, then all of a sudden it will just hit me and I'll think Yeah I'm going to write it now. Inspiration starts and ideas. That's the only way I can do it.

Participant 18- Do you think about it during the day? She does.

Participant 17- I wake up in the morning and think - 'I could open with this line' frequently. In fact I may wake up with different ways of saying it until I think - 'YES- I'm going to write it down and that going to be my opening line'. So it really must worry me if I think about it like that.

Facilitator- What's the longest period of time spent writing an essay? From the time you start planning to the time you actually start writing.

Participant 17- About a week.

Participant 19- Some people start the background reading weeks before then start.

Participant 20- I find I can't do that 'coz' you just forget what you're saying even over a couple days I forget. It gets boring.

Participant 18- You have to read sort of what you want to do.

All Participants- [...]

Participant 20- When you read through the beginning you think - 'why did I say that for'.

Participant 18- Then you think you have written something stunning and you read that back and then it's ridiculous.

Participant 17- If you write it quickly in one or two blocks, like you do, then it flows and you can remember exactly what you have said before and what you want to say next because you are on a run aren't you.

Participant 19- Yes that true.

Participant 18- Don't stop when you are warm and don't get a big box of biscuits, it won't help you.

Participant 19- How do you sort out which title you are going to use if you get a big choice?

Participant 20- Do you not get choices then?

Participant 17- We get six choices each time for each subject and for one we have ten titles.

Participant 18- How do you decide?

Participant 17- Well the one with the ten, look through and see what's most likely to come up in the exams and if I think one of them is then I'll choose that one. I'll take one that is more general and write about it then if it comes up in the exam at least I can take out at least one case study and write about it. Whereas if I wrote about something more specific, the chances of it coming up are pretty low, even though it may be more interesting. I choose what I think is going to be most helpful for the exam.

Participant 19- If you know about something it helps.

Participant 18- Like if you have a lecture about it then I'll do that one.

Participant 19- Helps if somebody else is doing it at the same time, somebody to talk to.

Participant 17- I don't like talking about it, the more I talk the more I worry.

Participant 19- When I finish the essay I don't want to talk about it, it's like an exam you don't want to know.

Facilitator- Can you tell me about your essay writing and what they entail.

Participant 18- Basically just begin with introduction on a piece of paper and then I just write down - middle, write down - discussion and work out how many words for each e.g. 100 for this 100 for that and I just have my little piles of paper around the room with journal articles in them and I just pile up those for introduction and it's just as little as that and that's my plan. Then I just look at the journal articles.

Participant 19- I seem to do like a picture and divide that into what I'm going to do. It won't be very detailed. It will be like a name or a theory or something like that.

Participant 17- I just do the names, headings and the arguments, really brief. Then I try and structure it. I wouldn't add anything else myself so if I wrote too much of a detailed essay plan, I wouldn't add any thoughts as I wouldn't know where to put them in. The briefer the better.

Participant 20- I tend to do a lot of reading and not write much. Look through the basic text which helps with the structure of the essay. I write notes as to where they are heading and then read round that as well, putting in references. I try and say I'm going to write one side the introductory going into the bulk of the essay that leaves sort of a side at the end for criticism.

Participant 19- Do you plan your introduction and conclusion and what's going to go in it then, before you actually start writing anything.

Participant 20- Well no, I plan the bulk of the essay more and I do actually think about what I'm going to write before I write it, because I can't write off the top of my head. I have to have references in the back of my mind as well.

Facilitator- Can you tell me the basic stages of how you do things one by one?

Participant 18- Get title.

Facilitator- Do you interpret that at all?

Participant 18- Yeah simply is there a discuss or an appraisal or anything like that, see if I've got a lecture on it and get a basic text on it. This is all at the last minute by the way. When we're given a title we have some references with it anyway to give us some idea. So we go and photocopy the journals, three maybe four, take them home, read everything, highlight, cut and chop. Don't write anything, arrange it around my bedroom and write conclusion, 100 words discussion, start writing introduction through to conclusion. Go and type it up the next day and hand it in.

Facilitator- After you type it up, will you change it at all?

Participant 18- No.

Facilitator- At what stage do you stop changing things around?

Participant 18- The night before I type it up. Possibly, I get up in the morning and read it through once but I don't like doing that because I think - 'Oh no'. The quicker I do it the better it is, so I've learnt that the best thing for me is to leave it to the last minute, do them and hand them in. 'Cause I've always done better in exams than in essays. I've spent ages over essays and I've got lower, or the same marks, so I might as well carry on with what I'm doing.

Facilitator- So what sort of time scale are we talking about when you say do them quickly?

Participant 18- Usually the last two or three days before a deadline.

Facilitator- Does this include reading or just the writing then?

Participant 18- It usually includes the reading but I've got some articles by then, but I just haven't read them. So when I come to write it I just see if I've got an article on that, but I won't really read it. I might read the start of it, but not really fully.

Participant 20- I get the title and see what it's all about, just sort of a general area and then go and get some books, just sift through anything on that and see how relevant they are, and read bits. Sometimes I write notes from a book, other times I just have them open and pencil bits or markers to show me which bits I want to write from and then I'll write some kind of plan and then I'll start my essay. I don't spend long, the last essay I spent half a day making notes from books and then half a day I wrote half the essay and wrote the other half the next day. So it took me about a day and a half to write the essay. See I find that if I write it in rough and then type it up I change it too much. I spend ages just changing it, that's why I always type it straight up, that way I don't change it too much. That way when I type it in, it's not too disjointed. It's so much easier to add information you get later. You can just slot it in without changing the main body of the essay too much.

Participant 19- I just don't think I could do that.

Participant 17- We actually have weeks when we are given essay titles right at the beginning of the course and submission date is not until the very end. What I do is decide which title I want to do, looking at all the other lecture topics. Decide what might come up in the exam and what would be a good basis to use. Then I'd go and photocopy all the journals that are relevant within the next few days or get the books and journals out. It's so much hassle if you leave it until the end when everyone has the books out etc. Therefore I do all the photocopying at the start and do nothing for the next six or seven weeks. Then I have got four deadlines with a week for each essay. Then I start working and I will stick pretty well to a week for each essay. So I will get my photocopies out and have a look at the title again. Then I will read and highlight them and then start writing. I usually end up

writing at midnight until about two in the morning and start again the next night. I don't seem to be able to write during the day, but when you come to the evening, you realise you have wasted a whole day. But I will get it done in a week and then I'll bind it and get it out of the way and begin the next one. I will do that one in exactly the same way, but I have to have the photocopies there because I need the books as I'm not one of these people who can write off the top of their head. I have to have all the material in front of me as I copy out loads of notes and combine them all. Therefore I have to have all my stuff ready and waiting else it would be awful and I would be worrying all the time. As it is I feel I can leave it to a week for each one and know everything will be OK.

Participant 19- That's the problem I have actually. I don't prepare far enough ahead. I always leave it to the last week to do my reference reading and I might look at the title, but I'll leave it to one side because I haven't got time to work on it. I'll choose a title if it is something that interests me or I think it is going to be one of the easiest to write because of the structure of it or the arguments that have to be put forward or maybe if we have had some lecture material based on it. Then I'll do my plan. I suppose it will take me about a week from beginning to end to do that.

Participant 17- Do you not sit and worry about it from when you're given the essay title.

Participant 19- Not if there is other things I have to be doing. You've normally got work on going so you finish one piece of work and do the next piece.

Participant 18- I'm like you. I like to pop in and get the journal articles sometimes just so that I know they are there. I won't start it but I just want some bits of paper around.

Participant 20- If you can't get a journal article you can always find a book with it in. It would be ideal to be able to get the books and take them out but you can only keep them for so long and you have to make notes and by the time you get round to doing the essay you would have forgotten what your notes were about. Probably wouldn't understand your notes because they are in shorthand.

Participant 18- Just take armfuls of books out, bound to be something relevant there.

Participant 20- But you don't need articles you can always get the basic structure from text books. Most of the time it's in your lecture notes and you might have a reference for it.

Participant 19- The lecture notes are as good as a plan 'cause they are obviously expecting the points they've given out. So if you use those you can't be told you are wrong.

Participant 19- I never think that far ahead, exams and things.

Participant 18- I don't worry about exams, I worry about today.

Facilitator- Is there anything about essays that you find really hard or really good fun?

Participant 17- Just writing them.

Participant 20- Oh I like writing them.

Participant 18- I loathe them. If it's an essay I don't like, I don't really want to finish it. I don't enjoy it, but if you are writing something you do enjoy, then you think it is good.

Participant 20- I don't mind writing essays.

Participant 19- Makes you think doesn't it? Writing an essay makes you think about the subject.

Participant 20- It makes you understand it because you have to understand it in order to be able to write an essay.

Facilitator- What do you think is the aim of an essay?

Participant 20- To précis everything you know. A structured argument based on the question you are being asked to do.

Participant 18- Tests your knowledge and formulating of arguments.

Participant 19- I don't think it's what you write but the way you write it really.

Participant 17- How you find the information, how you plan and so on.

Participant 20- It's ever so useful anyway, they do make you understand much better.

Participant 20- You can be much more general in an essay. As long as you show an understanding you are bound to get marks.

Participant 18- That why I don't like them because they are so general and you are not always sure you are writing what the lecturer wants. I think - 'I'll put this in', but I'm not sure what they mean by the question because it is so general. I think the worst thing about writing essays is deciding how much area to cover.

Participant 19- Even once you have written the essay you think - 'maybe it's not quite right', but you are not sure and you cant really change it because if you do, it could be wrong.

Participant 20- But you can't include everything and they wouldn't expect you to.

Participant 19- But how do you decide? How do you decide? As long as you write about anything you feel is appropriate that's all you can do.

Participant 19- It's hard if you haven't got enough time or words to write an essay.

Participant 20- A 1000 word essay is not long and it's hard to compact it all.

Participant 17- I have the opposite problem because I cant make it any longer than a1000 words. I find it really hard to do that.

Participant 20- Word restrictions are a problem.

Participant 19- I'd rather have a restriction instead of being able to write as much as you want because you wouldn't know how detailed to be.

Participant 18- It's all right discussing with some people, but when some say they have put this or that in then you just want to hand yours in there and then. I don't want to listen to them.

End of Focus Group

Note: Students informed me before the focus group began that they would have to leave at a certain time for a lecture, hence this group had to finish even though the students could have continued talking about this topic.

5th Focus Group of Phase One

Two 1st years (semester two)1995

Facilitator- [...] to talk about is course-work essays, as I've said several times before, from the moment you know you have to write an essay to the finished product, when you hand it in. Um what do you think is relevant, if you'd just like to talk about anything that you think is relevant.

Participant 21- Well, basically, its deciding.... when you say a course-work essay, are you suggesting one that we have to decide ourselves or one that's given to us?

Facilitator- Um, I suppose you have a combination of both, so if you'd like to talk about both really.

Participant 21- If I take the last one, the first task was to find a topic that would make a good essay, um, what if we had a deadline, was there something like a fast essay, the one for 105, remember that one (directed at participant 22)?

Participant 22-That was for [...]

Participant 21- [...] we still had to race it to finish it. Yes we had to make a choice, the first thing was a choice of topic. We had to make our own title, of our own choices [...]do you remember that.

Participant 22-Yes [...]

Participant 21- I chose mine because I thought that it would be a nice simple subject. It turned out to be the biggest mistake of my life.

Facilitator- Does that make a difference, when you actually have autonomy in choice in an essay? Does it make a difference in the process? Do you go about the essay in a different way? Do you feel differently about the essay?

Participant 21- Well I think there is a difference - one, because when you are given a choice or given even a list to pick from, the people who have given you the list, have from their own experience decided in a sense how much information someone is going to be able to get from, in a certain amount of time. When I did this Spiders essay I read five books, reading and reading and I actually had to cut myself off from enjoying as it was one of the most interesting subjects I'd ever come across, and I couldn't believe it.....

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- And I had the problem of condensing this into something that I could submit.

Participant 22- [...]

Participant 21- 1200 words. And I started off at 3000 words, and there was still a lot more information to go in.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 22-I think it makes a difference if you can chose the subject because your interested in it, therefore you.....

Participant 21-No, I.....

Participant 22-know what to read.

Participant 21- No, Well, um, I wasn't interested in it in that particular sense, I just thought that it would be something that would, you could, um, make an interesting essay, but without having to do really to much research. Although it was a fascinating topic, fascinating topic and that was the problem because 1200 words, no matter how you plan it, you're going to leave things out, or cut things short and your messing around, especially if using a word processor, you're messing everything around.

Participant 22- Ummm.

Participant 21- And this means that, the more you do it, the less you are liable to notice mistakes, and even a machine with it's spell check can't pick out all the mistakes. I mean I made a couple there, spell and I would argue that the computer was wrong, but it's a temptation. But yes it does make a big difference. If a lecturer has given you a subject to

chose then he knows from past experience that, he knows, that you can do such and such, so much research in such a time. There's more or less a limit to what research you can do. But it's not so interesting, because if you are given something to do then it's a chore. Having said that the title that the tutor supplied us was a mistake in that it turned out to be one of the most interesting subjects I've ever come across, as I've already said. But it, um, it was quite good because the coverage of the idea was very good.

Facilitator- How do you think when you chose an essay it's reflected in the product? Do you think that the actual essay is better or worse?

Participant 21- Well I would have thought, said that it should be better, but then in my case I got ONLY 67, but then I think a lot of that was because of the amount of information I had, which was relevant to the subject that I had to.....

Facilitator-uh huh.....

Participant 21-which had to be condensed into 1200 words. To be perfectly honest you couldn't do it.

Facilitator- Uh huh.

Participant 22- [...] you do not do that many essays....

Participant 21-....well....

Participant 22- to compare a given subject to one that we were able to chose ourselves.

Participant 21- That is true, but having said that if you've got a subject that... something is such a varied subject.....

Participant 22-....yeah.....

Participant 21-....that it seems daft.

Participant 22- It's only because, we are um out of practice at writing essays. We came in as mature students, and it is a skill in a way, in how you um... you know, put together an um you know, a cohesive um.... and come to a conclusion at the end [...] For years I just had to write reports not essays and suddenly to be given an essay of any length um was a task for me.

Facilitator- Do you think that your process of doing essays is different to the other students because of that?

Participant 22- Well I didn't read anybody else's, but I would imagine yes.

Facilitator- How do you actually.... If you can both take turns, and um, go through what you do from the moment you know that you've got the title. So you have the title in front of you, what do you do, step by step from having that title to creating the essay?

Participant 22- Ummm, go to the library, um, go to a libertas machine, um, get various journals, um....

Facilitator- How do you know which journals are going to be relevant? Which one's to take out? Which areas to look for?

Participant 22- I usually go by key words.

Facilitator- So keywords from the title?

Participant 22- Yes. CD-ROM I use sometimes, when doing biology and that's very useful. (*Addressing participant 21*) and what was the system you went through?

Participant 21- That was the...um... I'm trying to remember the name of it, the um...

Participant 22- We got quite a few good articles from that that... BIDS

Participant 21- BIDS, that's it.

Participant 22- BIDS, that's it, yeah.

Participant 21- Yeah, Yes.

Participant 22- Um, then photocopy from the journals, then get the print-outs, various books and then start piecing it all together.

Facilitator- Right, what do you mean by piecing it all together?

Participant 22- Taking it out all the relevant bits of information, what you think are relevant bits of information, um. I think it helps to keep reminding yourself of the title because it's easy when you've got so much information to go off the track a bit. Um....

Facilitator- How do you extract the information? Do you just read it and remember it? Or....?

Participant 22- Usually, if it's printouts I just photocopy it and then mark it.

Facilitator- Um huh.

Participant 22- With a highlighter or... so I know that's a piece I want to use.

Facilitator- So you get to the stage where you have lots of journal articles with highlighted bits in and where do you go from there to actually assimilate all that information into one written text.

Participant 22- I start putting it in my own words.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 22- Remembering it.

Facilitator- What I'm very interested in, is how the structure.... how it evolves, so how you go from notes to an ordered essay? Um, (participant 21's name) do you... have your notes the same as (participant 22's name) does, or do you....

Participant 21-my notes are slightly different, although naturally I use the same sources. I have.... must admit that I don't actually pay too much attention to the Libertas side of things, as it's very limited, um, especially when it comes to journals. It doesn't even know what's in the library, so I tend to look around some of the journals to see if I can find anything on Spiders. That's what I did in this particular occasion. If I've got all, um... all the reading material that I need, er... I will make a note of the journals. I won't necessarily photocopy them, mainly because it's too expensive. I will then set up a marker system, or a page system. I tend to cut out hundreds of bits of paper and there is anything relevant I will write on top of it what it is and then leave it in the book, and I do that to all my books, and then gradually build up a picture of what I want from those books and then I... use those slips of paper to try and organise a flow for my essay, and... hopefully it does flow, and then I try to see if I can do it in some sense and order, but, obviously... I must admit that's ...um... it's very difficult and the more interesting it is the more difficult it becomes.

Facilitator- So you both do what you've talked about in most essays that you write? Or is it different in any situations?

Participant 21- I think it's different over the year, it's... I mean.... funnily enough, this system I am using - markers for each piece of information of interest, is slightly different to other essays, although it's something I've already done before. I used in last year, and it was fairly successful, although I haven't used it this year until this particular essay.

Although whether it's because I know that I was left with a choice that I read a few books, and finding... I bit off more than I could chew.

Facilitator- Um....

Participant 21- ...in a sense, I needed to be more organised [...] but it is something that I suppose, if I get through this year, that I will definitely use all the time, because I expect the essays to be... I expect they expect a lot more from them.

Facilitator- What method had you used before you used your marker system this year?

Participant 21- Well, I.... just would make.... I would just copy down bits and pieces as I came across them. I would leave it at that. The bad thing about that is that it is slightly [...] because on one occasion I had forgotten to take the name of the person who wrote the article that I had taken the information. And when I went back to the journal, in this particular case, the journal was missing, and in fact it was missing until a couple of months after the deadline. (Laughter) and so... er... it was definitely less organised... but that's because I was given the subject, you see?

Facilitator- Um.

Participant 21- And well, in my case then I invariably think - 'I was given the subject, then they know exactly, more or less, the amount of information that is going to be around', but when you pick a subject then you don't really know what's in front of you, and er you got to be [...] pick up the first book that I hit, or the first journal I see.

Facilitator- Lets talk about... you were talking about time, the amount of time it takes to do each thing in the process, so again the process that you both talked about was writing an essay. Can you give me an idea of the time scale? So at what stage do you do each bit? and how long to you spend on that section?

Participant 22- The last essay I did I chose the subject, a subject that I was quite interested in, so I it took me....

Facilitator- ummm...

Participant 22-three days.

Facilitator- Is that gathering, reading and everything?

Participant 22- Everything, and to type up. The one before that we were given the topic and I wasn't particularly interested and it sort of staggered on. It seemed to go on for ever.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- Well, um with me it's slightly different. The first one's that I did, I did them fairly fast, this particular one I in fact... spent... um... um... quite a long, long time. When I'd got all the information down I used the computer systems here to copy them onto disk, and spent most of my time trying to cut down it down, cut down on the amount of words I had, and at the same time adding some more information, so I was taking... um... it seemed like I was mainly going forward three steps and going back, going back... um... five it seemed to me. So it was very difficult, and I... well I'll tell you I'd be very surprised if I spent less than 40 hours trying to reduce it to the 1200 words, because I had over 3000 and for the life of me. I had so much more stuff to add that I think, that I set myself an impossible task. I should have again, um, again, organised the bits that I was going to put in. Once I realised that there was a lot more to go in than 3000 words on the file. I should have stopped dead then and then decided to restructure the whole essay.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- Instead I did more work from within the essay instead of working from without the essay... so I should have focused on it a bit stronger.

Facilitator- Yeah. What you're talking about there is getting onto sort of planning.

Participant 21- Yeah, that's right.

Facilitator- Structuring and planning. DO either of you actually have a plan or a structure, or plan in mind at any stage of the process? And does that change or do you have a set plan from the beginning and can you talk about how you plan and when that occurs?

Participant 21- Well, yeah. I have a plan. The thing about plans is that you tend to be rigid with plans and I had this plan for this spiders essay....

Facilitator- When did you have that plan?

Participant 21- As soon as I decided I was going to do spiders. I already knew that I was going to have to....

Facilitator- You knew enough about the topic to....?

Participant 21- Well, no, no no no, I wouldn't say that. It's just that.... lets just say I had an outline plan of the way I was going to attack the problem.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- Um, it came unstuck a little bit, in the fact that it was such an interesting subject and that I was reading books. I went through five books, and various journal articles in various journal articles going back to the nineteen eighties, and I found it so interesting, that in a sense I was overlooking my own sort of planning and it swamped me, in actual fact it swamped me. Unfortunately, when you've got a plan you tend to focus on the plan and you often don't always see the wood for the trees.

Facilitator- Uh huh.

Participant 21- That's when.... it wasn't until afterwards that I realised that I had got it all too much to organised, but that bit didn't sort of sink in.

Facilitator- Uh hum....

Participant 21-or it may have sunk in, but it didn't sink in enough for me to actually act on. I should have... I should have stopped. it was such an interesting subject... I should have stopped and altered my plans and.... the thing about plans is that you've got to be flexible. The thing about plans is that....

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- My thing was get it done, get it over with... get it done before Easter strangely enough, before Easter or spend all Easter doing it.

Participant 22-I never have a set plan. It depends on the information available.

Facilitator- Right, do you.... when you've looked at the information do you then have any idea of a plan either in your head or on paper?

Participant 22- Uh, a rough plan, yeah. Sometimes it matures as you go along.

Facilitator- What kind of thing does a plan consist of? Is it a list of notes in order? Or issues not in any order?

Participant 22- Issues in order I think, whatever you think.

Facilitator- And that's a very flexible plan?

Participant 22-Yes.

Facilitator- So, both of you seem to be realising that it has to be flexible... I'm not saying that's the way it has to be, just that's the way your realising it works, both of you. When you've actually got the final product how much revision will you make? Or do you find that because you had a plan that you don't need much revision before you are ready to type up, as it were.

Participant 21- Well, I don't need a lot, in actual fact this is why I was doing it on computer - so that I wouldn't have to do too much fiddling around and I actually set up three different files. I even, actually had a separate file for the title. Er because I was er... going to draw a spiders web and a spider hanging down, which I did do, but didn't have the guts to hand in. Um, but I actually had three files, one, well, four, um because I had the letter, er not the letter the essay itself, I had all the information er my sources of information in one file, and in a lot of cases I had certain excerpts that I wanted to keep handy and see if I could fit in.

Facilitator- So when you say excerpts, things like quotes?

Participant 21- Yeah, something different, because I had all the books out, but because the journals are short loan it's a pain, you've always got to think of the next day, and, well I decided to take excerpts from the journals, rather photocopy them. I put them on computer. It's just as easy and it doesn't cost money. I'm very tight.

Facilitator- So you write your essay from scratch on the word processor?

Participant 21- Yeah, that's right yeah.

Facilitator- How do you think that effects the way you write the essays?

Participant 21- It makes a big difference, you er.... you automatically become fussier, because you can see things, and.... where as if you are handwriting it there is a limited number of times that you will rewrite something. You have to turn around and say that's, that's going to have to be it.

Facilitator- Um....

Participant 21-because it's so time consuming. Whereas using the computer, something... um... if you didn't like something you just either wiped it off or if you thought that it ought to be in a different place you just moved it.

Facilitator- Um.

Participant 21- But that again is difficult, very difficult to do by hand.

Facilitator- So as you go, rather than putting it into an organised sequence you are putting in and then deciding right I want that up here and not there. So you are constantly moving it around as you go?

Participant 21- Yes, because you can actually see it, and because... you've got the ability to move things around. In fact you've.... you can.... I suppose.... slightly.... be slightly slap dash in the way you put it in.

Facilitator- Um.

Participant 21- i.e. you get the information, you put it in without having to worry too much about the basic order. I mean obviously you've got to give some thought to order but you know perfectly well that to move things around is going to be perfectly simple it's a question of just whacking this off and using them then. So it does help, but it makes things hard in the sense if you've got this possibility and you're never really satisfied.

And... er... In actual fact again it emphasises the lack of practice because you are able to have so many chances, to be able to do these things, suggests I suppose that... a lack of practice...to... if you are handwriting it you wouldn't have got half as many.... you wouldn't have had the time to do it.... you'd probably.....

Participant 22- I do things slightly different, partly because I don't like computers, but I [...]

Facilitator- What about.... so you do all this sort of organising and changing around on paper. So what is it, do you have a very final that you.... that you just type up?

Participant 22- Yes.

Facilitator- Do you do any changes at all once you've typed it up?

Participant 22- Um, no, usually once I've done the typing, that's OK.

Facilitator- Um.

Participant 22- And I keep a copy of that, and all the photocopies, and various bits, but usually that's it.

Facilitator- So, as you've taken notes from the journal articles that you've highlighted. When you put those notes down on paper do you put them down as a final essay, in order? Or do you put them down on paper and then revise them a lot as (participant 21's name) does on the word processor?

Participant 22- How do you mean exactly?

Facilitator- Um, lets go back again and talk from when you've got your pieces.... your notes highlighted and you take those and put them onto.... into an essay, does it go from notes into a very ordered essay in the order you want it to be?

Participant 22- Yes.

Facilitator- Right, How do you manage to work that so that it's very ordered, the way you want it to be straight from notes?

Participant 22- Um, it's what I've always done. Once I've done that I usually get a couple of other people to read it, to see what they think of it.

Facilitator- Right, um. I'm interested in the notes, um, I think it's amazing that you can do it. (laughs). Do you just know from reading what order everything's going to be in, or do you have a plan then, like you say you have these... is it these, sorry I'm not saying this very well at all.... having your very flexible, rough plan of issue or topics in order, is that how you manage to get your notes?

Participant 22- Yes.

Facilitator- By looking at them, right - 'So, I need that issue here' so you take out everything....

Participant 22-all the vital points.

Facilitator- Right, right. Excellent.

Facilitator- Do you think it takes you longer, or does it have any effect on your writing to start with or do you find it the only way you can do it? The easiest way?

Participant 22- It is. It is for me because I don't like computers at all.

Participant 21- That's why she's come in today, frankly, we were going to go down onto the computers. That's our original plan [...]

Participant 22- I have a computer phobia, see. (Laughs)

Participant 21- We were going to go downstairs and work on the computers.

Facilitator- Do you think that will change?

Participant 22- Well I hope it does. (Giggles)

Participant 21- Yes, as soon as you start to treat it with contempt it'll change, and that's exactly what you should do.

Facilitator- Yeah. Yeah.

Participant 21- Treat it with contempt.

Facilitator- Yeah. How do you think that will change your essay writing?

Participant 22- Hard to say at this stage.

Facilitator- Yeah....

Participant 22-because I'm.... that's the only way I know, that's what I'm used to doing. (participant 21's name) seems to think it's quicker.

Participant 21- I think so. I think you can get more information. You are able to cope with more information because it gives you more time. You also become a lot fussier and in actual fact you.... like I said earlier become a bit fussier, but that might become a bit more natural next time. It could be that in the first year you should bloody well get a lot more essay writing.

Facilitator- How many essays have you both had to do?

Participant 21- Three, Three, Four or Five.... Three.

Facilitator- Throughout the year?

Participant 21- Four, you had to do two for bio 115 and two for....

Participant 22-....I've done three....

Participant 21- ...Three....

Participant 22- It's about four of five.

Participant 21- Four or five.

Facilitator- OK, can we move on to a more general topic. Of actual essay writing, what are your opinions of essay writing? What do you think you get out of them if anything at all?

Participant 22- I think you do learn from essay writing, as obviously your extracting all this information, and as I said I always keep all mine anyway. What do you....

Facilitator- At what stage do you think you learn in writing? Is it that you learn before you write it and then write what you've learnt? Do you learn during? Or do you learn after when you've done it. Do you see what I mean?

Participant 22-I think the writing helps you log it away more than just reading it. You can read something and put it down and I'm a sieve head anyway and it will go out of my head five minutes..... But actually writing it, that does help to log it away.

Facilitator- (Participant 21's name) what do you think?

Participant 21- Well I think... I think that it's writing it [...] I do tend though, that when I'm on a computer and I've got a load of books the last thing you want to do is to keep referring to them, all of a sudden your trying to focus hard on what you have written before, you're dragging information out and it seems to improve er, you know, your ability to extract.... um. But then yes, I find it.... the research er.... because, er.... the essay writing it depends on whether you were given the title or whether you chose the topic, there's the interest there and it helps you remember it.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- You've taken an interest in the subject, and er because you've taken an interest you're keener to do it, you're keen.

Facilitator- So you learn more from something you've chosen yourself?

Participant 21- That's right.

Facilitator -What about when it's set for you? Does the purpose of the essay change then? Do you learn....

Participant 21- Well, it changes, the purpose then is marks more than anything else. That's when in actual fact I was enjoying it, the spiders essay, I was enjoying the essay, and I was very upset about my marks. In a sense afterwards I realised, well, I was trying to get everything down, and I wasn't that concerned with the marks. I was more interested in getting the information really that I thought ought to be put across in the essay, and..... I don't know, it er....

Facilitator- Right, (participant 22's name) how's it different for you when you haven't chosen the essay yourself?

Participant 22- It takes me longer.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 22- But I still need to write it down to fix it in my head, that's why I don't do it on computer actually.

Facilitator- (Laughs) So the process is the same for you but do you learn as much? or as well?

Participant 22-Probably not as much.

Facilitator- Right....

Participant 22-because as you say if you've not chosen the topic for yourself you're less interested.

Facilitator- Right....

Participant 22- ...but the process is the same.

Facilitator- Right. Um, I've gone blank now. (Pause) Something I'm interested in is how people have an idea of what an essay is, and what the rules of writing an essay are. Where do you get them from? Where do you learn them? Where do you pick them up from? Are they implicit or explicit? How do you know.... Or what do you know of what an essay is?

Participant 21- Explicit - We've been told so many times about what an essay is and the sort of structure that you're supposed to use. Um....

Facilitator- Who told you what it is?

Participant 21- Well, I can actually remember, distantly remember my school days and it was thrashed into me in those days er....but over the last couple of years especially in Higher Education, well no. Years back, doing GCSE in English, we were given a rough idea of what was and wasn't expected in terms of structure. Um... I must admit I think my own idea of... or several ideas have changed slightly as I begin to look at all these essays and journals, and things like that, or what they call reports, or to my mind are reports, summary reports....

Facilitator-Um.....

Participant 21-are more like essays, um, and I've got a feeling about essays from those in a sense.

Facilitator- Um.

Participant 21- Go the same way, then classic books on essays that seem a bit contrary [...] Yeah, I think it is explicit, for me. I'm not to sure, that if someone, say years ago was to give me some write about whether it would turn out to be an essay or a or.... or a tale and I'm not sure I would have known what the difference would be. But yes, we're told, for example the...the... the er use of references. We're told explicitly by the tutor what sort of system and by the books the system to use. I use a slightly different system and I put page numbers as well because if I'm quoting from a book I put page numbers as well to make things easier and that didn't go down very well, and I thought that's nonsense as a lot of books do that these days. So I....

Facilitator- That brings me on to something else actually, do you feel there are anything things that you can do in an essay that aren't part of the explicit rules which may get you better marks?

Participant 21- Now that's difficult.

Participant 22- It depends on the lecturer.

Participant 21- Yes, that's right [...]

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 21- Yes, that's very true.

Participant 22- Like some are strict on [...]

Participant 21- I picked a subject - spiders, and unbeknown to me the lecturer had a bit of an interest in them, which was a mistake. Because as far as I'm concerned he would be automatically more critical on the subject because he knows so much about it.

Facilitator- Uh Hum.

Participant 21- So that's something that actually influences the mark, if you're given an essay or you chose an essay know the lecturer who is going to mark it, and the tutor who's going to mark it.

Participant 22- It would be interesting to know, if that essay went to a different lecturer would you get the same mark.

Participant 21- Yes, that would be a nice, that would be a nice little test actually.

Facilitator- There's been some research on that.

Participant 21- Has there?

Facilitator- Yes, it is interesting. So, (participant 22's name) how have you learnt your explicit rules for essays.

Participant 22- I suppose, the most recent um... tutorial essays was in the Access Course.... study skills... um and they were sort of... tried to help you set out your essays in them. One of the problems that I found was that it was pretty irrelevant in relation, 'coz' the fact that he, you know, found it interesting um... might not be in the context of that essay.

Facilitator- Do you think that they are implicit or are there 'tricks of the trade' lets call them, that people do, that they know will get them better mark, or think will get them a better mark?

Participant 22- I think, again it depends on the lecturer.

Participant 21- You know how he was, is that what you mean?

Participant 22- They all have their own ways, don't they?

Participant 21- In fact most lecturers, or tutors, will tell you what they want done, or I have to admit that I'll listen although I won't necessarily take it all in. As far as I'm concerned things like that should be my own making or that sort of thing, however guided by... by somebody else's. I've got a feeling having said that, reinforced by the... the book that they give us for BIO115, I don't know if you've come across it, is a bit like that. You'd probably appreciate what we're talking about if you'd seen it, as it's supposedly structured way for us to write an essay and the tutor.... who used it explicitly when he was marking, and to my mind used it too rigidly [...] I personally think science is too rigid anyway so it's.... it makes too many rules up, and you have to study the rules. It's a bit bureaucratic in a sense. If there wasn't so much red tape a lot more work would get done and get done faster as well.

Facilitator- If I go through a list of some implicit rules that have come out through research and if you could tell me whether you... you know of their existence, or have followed them yourself, ever? One for example is um citing more references to get more marks. Is that one you've ever come across? Or experienced? Or used yourself?

Participant 21- Well, I've come across that, strangely enough, in one of my.... the first essays that we did for this er 115. Where I did use quite a lot of references.

Participant 22- Did (lecturer's name) do it?

Participant 21- I think he did actually.

Participant 22- I'd have thought that even if you only used two books, but if you got all the information that would be all you need actually.

Participant 21- Um... not really, I think, the point about essay writing is to.... you can read two books and think - 'Oh yeah we've got a load of information there', but until you've read a third book you don't know do you? So you can in actual, read... not necessarily find more stuff to put in, but you never know. That's why I read... read five different books.

Participant 22- But you still have to develop the information. I don't see why they should penalise you on having too few references rather than....

Participant 21- Er...Um....

Participant 22-having a long list of them.

Participant 21- It all depends on.... are you talking something that's been given to you, or something that you've chosen yourself?

Participant 22- Either.

Participant 21- Right, I disagree with you there, the idea is to.... the more you.... for instance taking my last experience; the spider essay, um... I've read five different books on it, never mind the journals, and each book had something that was relevant but wasn't mentioned in the other books, each book had something different that was worthwhile putting down, and I think that's the point about it. Because somebody writes a book and only puts it from their point of view and is not necessarily going to say something interesting. But having said that....

Facilitator- How about the lecturers actual opinion and following their opinion in an essay? Is that something that you've ever heard of? Or something that is the done thing to get a better mark?

Participant 21- Well...Um... Yes, I think a few people if they thought they could actually get away with it would follow a lecturer words to the.... and er.... I'm not to sure.

Facilitator- For example if you had a lecturer who was a feminist would you hold a feminist argument?

Participant 21- Well...Er... I'll tell you.... You'd probably be silly not to, actually. Because you'd have to make sure that it wasn't the other way around. So you'd have to take it into account because otherwise.... I don't think that lecturers or tutors are terribly unbiased. That's why something's they shouldn't have anything to do with the marking. They should go to an outside source. But then [...] their dependent on their own prejudices which [...] But maybe that would get around it, make it more convoluted, two lots of lecturers marking each essay.

Participant 22- I think it would have to depend on the topic whether it would be held against you.

Facilitator- What about from your peers? What do you.... information do you get about essays from your peers.

Participant 21- Well....

Participant 22-to help us?

Facilitator- Um.... first of all is there peer conversation about essays, what you're going to put into them? and the marks? How you felt about an essay? Um, what they feel gets a better mark? and that kind of thing... just general conversation.

Participant 21- Yeah, we had some after um.... this er.... are group for BIO115, well their not actual groups, and I had a discussion about essays, and we were discussing the essays mainly because we were interested in other peoples sort of topics, and we also discussed the marks, and congratulated each other and cursed the lecturer involved. But having said that I think in actual fact when it comes to things like this, it's the timetables that.... sometimes we switch and.... since we.... we were actually quite lucky.... the deadline was the 7th of [...] and we finished much earlier on. We finished sometime after Easter and there was no specific urgency about it, but there was enough for me to.... you know.... he said he wanted it in by such and such a date and then on the day of our presentation I realised that.... no sorry, when he was giving the marks out for the presentation.... we had to go back, people were actually giving their essays in on the day, they had been given

permission to do that, so this was something like a fortnight or more later and I thought that was a bit much, especially as the marks are higher, but that could be because they were actually in agreement the second time, but that could when you've got a pile of essays to mark, you've got to formulate a way of giving marks that.... be fair to the pile of essays that you've got.... when you get essays, sort of handed in to you on the spot, the sort of process, marking that you use goes out of the window. Because you read everything on the same pile, and the same spot, at the same time, so I was a bit miffed about that I thought they'd cheated. I'll tell you who the lecturer was as well....

Facilitator- Um... (rustle of paper) I'll just see what else to ask.... You were talking about (participant 22's name) how you think your approach has changed. Um (participant 21's name) do you think that your approach has changed at all?

Participant 22- No. It's still the same

Facilitator- And I've probably asked this already with regard to the computer, and writing on a computer as you go. But do you think things will change as you go through to the third year?

Participant 21- Yes, I've been.... I've spent.... er... [...] Visual Basic, programming for Excel 5, spreadsheets and I would like to be able to use the access database except they've not got enough memory on the computers downstairs to be able to use it with Excel and with.... er.... Word... which sort of negates the value of the databases.... but yes.... I still envisage using a database, not only on essay writing but for organising information[...]

Facilitator- Do you think you'll change the way you do.... the way you write an essay the order you do things at all?

Participant 21- Yesssss. Oh yes. I will take it for granted, especially if I've chosen the subject that it's going to be a lot more complicated. There is going to be a lot more information for me to work on and I'll probably try and narrow the angle a bit.... when I did the spiders there was such a broad spectrum of things it was ridiculous. Once I'd chosen the topic it was hard to keep track, and I didn't want to, and I found it so interesting, so surprisingly interesting that I thought the whole world ought to know about this.

Participant 22- I hope to become quicker.... not have so much of a fear.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 22- Um and improve my skills in general because we have so many assignments thrown at us, usually at one time... as you probably know yourself that typing slowly doesn't help.

Participant 21- Do you have more assignments than me? [...]

Participant 22- Not a great deal more.

Facilitator- How, um, do you ever actually go to lectures to find out what they want on a specific thing.

Participant 22- I haven't done.

Participant 21- No, in actual fact I haven't taken a lot of notice of the broad hints that a lot of the lecturers have put down as well, which is something I should have learnt last year, and carried on to this year.... no it wasn't last year.... when was it.... yes it was last year when I was on access and it's something I should have done last year and carried on with this first year. If there are clues to be taken then you should take them, as far as I'm concerned, as long as it's legal. You've got to get this degree, you should use every tool, or every bit of fortune that comes your way.

Participant 22- There's one lecturer who [...]tells us what to revise [...]

Participant 21- Well....

Participant 22- There's a bit of a competition to see who gets the most rudest comment of their work (*laughs as she says it*) on their work.

Facilitator- What about what you actually.... what do you think the aim of the tutor is? What do you think they want the essay to be? What do you think.... What are they trying to get out of you when writing an essay?

Participant 21- The fact that we are capable of doing some research. That we are willing to put ourselves out, and that we are willing to use the facilities that they've got here.

Facilitator- What about the actual product? What do you think they want that to be? To display?

Participant 21- I suppose really we ought to be able to interpret the information and actually do it.... and so it's legible to someone else.... not legible but understandable to somebody else. Having said that some of these lecturers, are I think, have an attitude to.... that we can [...] actually lets you have a pretty easy life, and get things out of the way so that we're... slightly over worked. Yeah I think they're looking at what we.... what.... sort of.... how we interpret the research, and they expect us to do research, and that's why I disagree with (participant 22's name) just two books, if there's more books there then you should try and see if there's a different way of looking at the subject, or different information, different boundaries.

Facilitator- (Participant 22's name) what do you think they're looking for? [...]

Participant 22- To show that you've carried out the research, that you can interpret it, and that you can present it in a way that's understandable to someone else.

Participant 21- If someone else was to pick it up then they would probably find it readable and maybe even interesting.... avoiding spelling mistakes and things like.

Facilitator- What do you find the hardest and easiest part of writing an essay? When I talk about part I mean things like the planning, the reading, the structuring, the writing, the interpreting the question, which section do you find the easiest and most fun? and which section the hardest and least fun?

Participant 22- The introduction is difficult to write.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 22- Getting into it, giving it a structure.

Facilitator- What about the order of writing those sections, does introduction come first?

Participant 22- Yes.

Facilitator- Do you think that's why it's the hardest?

Participant 22- Possibly.

Facilitator- Which do you do last?

Participant 22- The discussion.

Facilitator- (Participant 21's name?)

Participant 21- Um, I think the introduction. The research was the most interesting mainly because using the facilities, er, that you found that by using the facilities you actual get a result, you actually get information out the system which is really good. The hardest part, I found was in writing it.... was these maximum words, that to me wasn't very good.

Facilitator- Um.

Participant 21- I spent so much time trying to reduce the words, it was ridiculous, but then again that was part of the plan.... and from [...]

Facilitator- Well I've asked everything that I need to ask, um, if you'd like to just free talk and tell me anything else you want to get out that you haven't had the chance to, things about....

Participant 21- Well with essay writing, these limited.... setting a maximum number of words is all very well, but there are times when I think that it should be able to bring [...] there should be a system where they give an automatic plus or minus so that.... where the information.... the additional information is actually read, not sort of padded it out. I got in a load of trouble trying to get it all condensed so that it made sense, and I was moving things around and about changing things, and the computer causes problems cause all of a

sudden you realised that there's a full stop out of place, or a pair of brackets floating around in the middle of it and you wonder why you didn't see it earlier on, you know?

Facilitator- Do you get to hand in drafts?

Participant 21- Sometimes.

Participant 22- Sometimes, it depends on the lecturer.....

Participant 21-and the time scale, whether it would make a big difference I'm not too sure. Well I think it would have done, he would probably.... if I'd have done a draft with the references as well, he would have told me straight away the way he wanted the references, which is something that I would have disagreed with him. I would have changed it to suit him.

Participant 22- Did you go over on the words? Did you go over the limit?

Participant 21- Did I go over?

Participant 22- Yes.

Participant 21- Yes, one thing about the computer is that it counts them all up and it does it on a regular basis, and it's quite weird, one minute you've gone down fifty and the next you've gone up a hundred, err... I think I was around 1500 words and I reduced it to a third over.

Participant 22- That's acceptable isn't it?

Participant 21- Yeah, I think it was acceptable, but it was er.... you look at some of the examples that you produce, and you know damn well they're well over the top. But they've not bothered with it, but because the essay is informative they've not bothered about the amount of extra words. If it had gone over the top and it had been padded out, then that's something they would have thrown out and it would be marked down.

Facilitator- Something I've forgotten to mention is feedback. What kind of feedback do you get on your essays? Do you get just a mark? Or do you get very good comments?

Participant 22- We get comments.

Participant 21- Very good comments. You don't always agree with them. We do get feedback on them, and we do get comments, with (lecturer's name), he chooses one that he thinks is relevant as an example for us to look at, and compare. Because it's straight forward. We did one on the biosphere, well we had a choice of two, one was on the biosphere and two on [...]. And there was some information there was, that he mentioned, and was picked up by somebody else, which I looked at, and thought was totally irrelevant, so I didn't put it in, out of the New Scientist, and fortunately for me I had made a note of it, he actually highlighted this, and I thought that's wrong, and I didn't query it which I should have, and.... but it wouldn't have made any difference.

Participant 22- He's a lecturer that um.... I think is very biased in what he writes, so therefore many students are trying to please him with what they write. But I think my own tutor is far more open and will accept your comments and your opinion.

Facilitator- Right....

Participant 22- ...and you're free to write what you want.

Facilitator- Do you think that essays work better when you have a tutor who is, lets you do your own thing.

Participant 22- Yes, to a certain extent yes.

Participant 21- You see, when you're doing an essay and say it's the first one, and really and truly I don't think a lecturer or tutor should let his own personal views come into it. He should read it for what it is, and if there's anything wrong with the structure, if there's anything wrong with the planning make a point of it, but people.... they should do it how they want, they shouldn't let it interfere with the marking. It's a personal thing.

Facilitator- Do you feel that it does interfere with the marking, so that an essay mark doesn't actually reflect the essay but the mood or the opinion of the tutor?

Participant 21- Yes.

Participant 22- Sometimes, yes.

Facilitator- Does that actually have an effect when you write the essay? Do you feel a bit lost and that it's all predetermined or....?

Participant 21- Um....

Participant 22-As I said before, it comes down to knowing the lecturer.

Participant 21- Yeah, well I wrote the second one for [...] I just did it thinking well I won't worry about the marks, because no matter what I did he's going to find holes in it, and put some comments down, and when I look at it, and think those comments don't reflect the mark. It's quite strange to get an excellent here, and an excellent there and the marks don't seem to show it. I'm not sure what sort of marking system they actually use, so.... really essay it's slightly different. I must admit I was more interested in getting the information down than getting the marks. I suppose in the background I was thinking that if it's interesting then the marks are going to flow automatically.... you may not take any note of what a lecturer thinks, or the mood he's in, when he's got the pile of essay to do. And I suppose that's a bad sign straight away.

Participant 22-Um....

Participant 21-and he's got a load of stuff there, and a lot of lot probably bores him to tears, because he's seen it a thousand times before, and he got to look at it fresh.

Participant 22-Is there evidence to show that the last few might get a bad mark?

Facilitator- There is research into the order effect, um I can't cite you any results.

Participant 22- What about the time of day that they mark them?

Facilitator- See that depends on the person, some people actually function better late at night....

Participant 22-like biorhythms, but if they're going against them surely that's against your interest as well.

Facilitator- Yeah, I mean most of the research that I know is about how people do it? Not about how people mark it? But I do know a lot of research which shows double marking.... the amount of inconsistency between markers on the same product.

Participant 22- It's a personal feeling, but sometimes you might not be co-operative with the lecturer anyway so if he's marking at a time when it doesn't suit him.

DATA FROM THIS POINT NOT ANALYSED CONVERSATION BECOMES MORE INFORMAL AND FACILITATOR EXPRESSES SUBJECTIVE OPINION AND TELL PARTICIPANTS ABOUT HER RESEARCH.

Facilitator- It's an incredibly subjective process, and at the end of the day I think it's whether the students actually learn anything from it that's important, and what's come through from these focus groups is even though students don't feel too happy that the marks are subjective, that they are happy with doing essays, and that they learn from them, so I think the way forward is to use essays as a learning tool and not as an assessment tool, but lets hope that this research goes some way to addressing the problem and explaining to people what really is going on.

Participant 22- I hope so.

Facilitator- Do you think that you're pretty much talked out?

Participant 21- Well, do you... my ur if I talk went for a further 20 minutes a get it out instead of 10.

Facilitator- If you think that there's anything still relevant and you haven't talked about it, then it is relevant then I haven't got enough.

Participant 22- I think it is a skill to some extent, and something that I need to be polish up on.

Facilitator- Do you think that when you were taught essays it's different now? Not just because your out of practice, but because when you learnt essays were perhaps a very different thing?

Participant 21- Yes, different type of essay. It's difficult to decide whether it's an essay or a report in some circumstances.... you know, whatever essays you do. Now.... they were essays in a sense that they were telling a tale, and had a structure developed to them.... you've asked about something 30 odd years ago.

Facilitator-(Participant 22's name) what do you think?

Participant 22- It's such a long time ago that I went to school that it was different, particularly in what I'm studying now is more scientific and you have to present that as well. It's not just a case of telling a story you have to present the facts and present them as well.

Participant 21- I understand that it's more normal now, over the last 35 years, lets say since the end of the fifties, everything's changed.

Participant 22- Um....

Participant 21-...there's so much more [...]

Participant 22- Does the research show that this is [...]

Facilitator- This is a problem with lots of research, they've actually been criticising undergraduates, this is hard to express, the way they do them, the fact, that what tutors tell them to do isn't being done, um.....things like developing an argument, people seem very preoccupied with getting as much information as possible over. What tutors say they want and what they actually want maybe two different. Saying that they want development of an argument as opposed to lots of information, you can have both, but the most important thing is the development of an argument and showing that you understand an opinion that is backed up. And I'm actually in discussion with one of the key researchers, whose at the University of Sheffield, and I've said to her what is coming through from these focus groups is not the students learning information and putting it into an essay, they learn as their doing the essay, so it shouldn't be an assessment tool it should be considered a tool for learning, and that they are expecting too much from students, because you don't learn information and then write an essay, you learn as you go, because the nature of an undergraduate degree is not that you are spoon fed information and that it's in your head ready to write and essay but that you are given references and you have to go and learn as you write the essay. There isn't enough time to learn it, understand it and then write an essay you have to do it both as you go along. So, yeah this is....

Participant 21-that would all depend actually on the time allowed for the essay, because we were on a special essay, and were told this from the beginning that it would be very very important or we were given a list of subjects that we could chose and were unsure which subject to take and because, I suppose, of um... er... new newness to the education game again, we obviously jumped at the chance of being given a topic, but we had quite a long time to do it.

Facilitator- Right.....

Participant 21-and could therefore, could in actual fact develop an argument. Most of the essays that we we've done have been done within strict timetable and within strict word limits.

Facilitator- Uh hum.

Participant 21- If you're going to put sort off and argument into an essay it you can't have word limits and you can't sort of have a very short time limit because if it's a subject you haven't done before.

Late participant enters room

Facilitator- Carry on.

Participant 22-It's the time factor, sometimes you don't have the time to give it all you want, because you've got so many assignments, and so many chapters to read, and they don't take this into account.

Facilitator- No.

Participant 21- You're supposed to stay up all night girl!

Participant 22-That's what we do.

Participant 21- It's like I said time, if they want an argument, they need more time, er... we were able to develop arguments, some of the stuff that we did do we could develop arguments, but always on a small scale, we did some various tests in biology and we had to put in reasons what would effect these tests, and what would effect these tests, and you could put certain arguments, and suggest certain arguments, you had to be accountable and my argument was that it would be an ideal test for a t-test because how the hell do you get that down. I think you had to do it five or six times a second.... well you can't do that, it's impossible, and the various readings we would get would be an error.

Facilitator- How much time do you get to do an essay?

Participant 21- Usually three weeks

Facilitator- 3 weeks?

Participant 21- That's how much we usually get, we were very lucky in that we got to do it over Easter, and in my case I needed it. Because I spent most of my time restructuring it, and bring down and down.

Facilitator- Do you have other assignments to do at the same time?

Participant 22- Yes.

Participant 21- Yeah, you can guarantee that it'll be coming up to exam time as well, when your supposed to be revising.

Facilitator- So in reality that three weeks isn't for that essay at all.

Participant 21- If you spend a lot of time, I mean I spent a lot of time on mine that should have been spent revising.

Participant 22- Do you think we should have more essays?

Facilitator- I wouldn't actually like to state my opinion on that yet, the research isn't complete and I'm not sure where the research is going. My opinion without knowing is that there should be a mixture of essays for learning and essays for assessments and... when I say essays I mean assimilation of information, so it could be report writing as well which could even entail practicals, but having to add in other information also. Because my experience, has shown, both my own and that from the focus groups is that people are actually learning from them, but when they are used for assessment that people should have a lot longer to do them in. So maybe that whole three weeks should be just for the essay.

Participant 22- I think you learn more for an essay that is set than from exams. Because when you come to an exam your not really understanding.

Participant 23- You have to sort of summarise the information,

Facilitator- It's all to do with short term memory, whereas computing and essay reading are....

Participant 23-and you have to structure it, and know what you are saying....

Facilitator-and understand what you are saying....

Participant 22-maybe if someone asked you about that topic a few weeks on, you can mention some of the points, but if you asked about various chapters that you read in biology.

Participant 21- That's not actually true. I was actually sat outside on the concrete outside the Union, "coz" it was nicer than sitting inside. and I realised I 'm actually watching this spider walking along, because of the essay, and all of a sudden I realised it was jumping, [...] now prior to my doing that essay, that was just a little spider and I would have stamped on it.

Participant 23- But if you were cramming for your exams you would be trying to cram everything in wouldn't you.

Participant 21- That's right yeah.

Participant 23- You wouldn't take notice of things outside.

Participant 21- I look at things in a completely different light now.... so in actual fact not only do you learn, it changes your outlook as well, well I Supposed learning does.

Participant 23- Um.

Participant 21- It changed my perception of spiders and therefore it would change my perception of anything.

Participant 23- You don't stamp on them anymore?

Participant 21- I don't stamp on them, that's one thing I don't turn out of my house their dusters, my fly catchers[...]

Facilitator- I think we'll leave it there.

END OF FOCUS GROUP.

6th Focus Group of the 1st phase of Focus Groups

A 2nd year and a 3rd year (semester two) 1995

Facilitator- This is about writing an essay right from the time you get the title to the end finished product. Talk about what ever you think is relevant.

Participant 24- Normally begin by checking out the references.

Participant 25- Yeah, if there are any references been given for the assignment, then yes that is certainly the best way of doing it.

Participant 24- Take the books out of the library. They are usually in short loan so you take them home, don't get them for long so you take them back and then get them out again.

Participant 25- Yeah.

Participant 24- Then normally I read through the area. This is assuming you have plenty of time. Try to get a general understanding of it and then I'll make a plan.

Facilitator- What if you don't get plenty of time?

Participant 24- Then I just get the books out of the library or use the ones I have at home already and don't even bother reading the area, just make a general plan.

Facilitator- You both said that if you get a list of references you go and get those references. Do you read any further than those references?

Participant 25- Well it would depend on how specific the question was and if the arguments presented in those cited references were one sided or not. If they sort of provided opposing sides to an argument then I would just assume that they were all encompassing and I would leave it at that. If however they were too specific and focused on the one issue either on one side of the argument or even the one issue then I would want to fill in some of the background area about why the work had been done - where it started from and how it fits in with the particular area of psychology in which it is part of. But I must say with one or two exceptions of the third year essays I have done, all of the essays I have been given in the past have never required that amount of research or more focus. Generally it was just a case of a couple of references which present both sides of the argument and basically you have just got to sit down and read them and decide which side you think you are going to argue for.

Facilitator- So you say you get the references and you read them and it is after you read them you make a plan. What form does the plan take?

Participant 24- Depends on how many words the essay has to be. If it is 1000 words it's going to be about 8 or 9 paragraphs and if it's 1500 words then it would be about 12 or 13 paragraphs. So I get about 12 or 13 main points about what the essay is going to be [...] Always start of with an introduction, a definition of what I think and then once I have the main word of each paragraph, then I fill in the topic areas.

Facilitator- OK. Will that change, will you then fit your reading into that plan?

Participant 24- Yes.

Facilitator- Right and will you revise that at all as you are going?

Participant 24- More than likely, yeah. I will probably switch paragraphs as I do it straight onto the computer. So I just do it all and then go back and rehash bits of it and change bits.

Participant 25- Yeah my plan is to just do a plan for the main body because if you do a plan for the main body, the introduction and the conclusion are just basically summaries. After doing a quick read through of the stuff I will sit down and I will list all the points for the argument and all the points against the argument and all the points which haven't decided one way or the other. Then I will decide which one has the most going for it and then I'll balance my argument around there, you know always arguing for the evidence. After I have got that I will go and read specifically with a viewpoint of finding references

and examples to back up the various point I have got in each section - filling in the gaps basically.

Facilitator- At what stage does the plan come, before you start reading to fill in the gaps? Have you done any reading to get an idea of what....

Participant 25- It depends if I have had a lecture on the topic or not or how much I know about it. In the first or second year you could do that before it, but in the third year you have to go and do some reading initially because it is a more concise area that you are looking at. If I am able to write down stuff before doing the reading then I have done that and then gone and read the reading related to that. You tend to find that if you present one point then it will bring up other things which then sort of branches out like a tree and that is sort of how the essay develops. The reading and the plan making are done together at the same time.

Facilitator- When you have your references given to you, does this mean you do not have to interpret the question or do you still interpret them and analyse the key words in the question before you....

Participant 24-if it is critically discuss, focus on the critically discuss, I do try and keep it focused.

Participant 25- No, I go exactly the opposite. I tend to look at the references. Where they have been given for a particular essay. I tend to look at the references because it would appear to me that they want us to look at the references and compare and contrast what is in the references. The question is just a tool for doing that and so I will write my answer on the evidence rather than on the question. Obviously I will bear in mind what the question is specifically asking, but aside from that I would just follow the references.

Facilitator- So you have got your plan and you read to fill those gaps from the plan. Do you do much revision from that stage? Would your plan have an actual structure or would it just be topics? Would there be any order that you would want them to be in?

Participant 25- No. They would just be topics and the general layout of for, against and fence-sitting would remain, but when I would try and flesh it out a bit more. I would actually look and see if there was any pattern in the thing to try and give the essay some grammatical flow and try and make it easier for the reader to read.

Facilitator- Do you do yours straight onto a word processor as well?

Participant 25- Yes.

Facilitator- How do you think that makes a difference from hand-writing? Have both of you had experience from hand-writing essays and things?

Participant 24- I think it is a lot easier to start straight onto the computer.

Participant 25- I did onto the computer in the first and second year and actually went back to doing it hand-writing in the third year because I actually found that typing it onto the computer seemed to me to depersonalise it. I felt by writing it in a way.... I found I was thinking about the individual sentences I was writing, what I was saying and how I was saying it as well. Yes it is a lot of hassle changing it and everything, but that was the way I found I was doing it in the end. I did the project on the computer though as it was just too big to mess around with.

Facilitator- (participant 24's name) do you hand write anything, a plan.

Participant 24- I write a plan and the notes I make.

Facilitator- That is notes from reading?

Participant 24- Yes. And when I about to write I do straight onto the computer as it is so much easier because I can go back as I have the whole thing there and I can omit this bit and edit that bit [...]

Facilitator- What about the time scale of all this? How much time do you get from the time you get the title to the time it has to be handed in?

Participant 25- There has always been plenty of time. I have never felt with any of the course-work that there has ever been a rush to do it. There has always been plenty of time

and any rushes that were created were purely created by me. So that hasn't been a problem. I don't think.

Facilitator- How do you use the time? You get your title, is this something you address straight away? You can be completely honest.

Participant 24- Well I think about it, get the references, forget about for a few weeks, then make notes, but it will depend on what other work I have on at the time. If I know I have some work to do I will get on with it.

Participant 25- If I have an essay that doesn't have to be for a month I tend to work on it for a fortnight and have an almost finished draft of it and then put away until a week before the deadline. Then I'll come back, re-read it and fine tune it and see if it has any glaring omissions or if it still makes sense.

Facilitator- Lets try and separate the reading from the actual writing. It seems to me that you are both reading, planning and then writing. Do they each have equal amounts of time or is that too hard to say?

Participant 24- Depends on how much time I have left myself to do it. Quite a lot of the time it has been deadlines at 12 o'clock and to be quite honest a lot of the times I get up at 5.30 in the morning and then do it straight onto the computer and sometimes I haven't even read the references for them [...] start to finish.

Facilitator- Does enjoyment make a difference, if it is topic you enjoy.

Participant 24- Well this is the way I think about it. When you are actually get the essay title I don't really want to do it because I have a lot more interesting things to do, but when I actually sitting down and doing it I do quite enjoy it. Then I get quite into it and then I always think why didn't I do this last week.

Facilitator- So the big block is actually making yourself sit down to do it. Actually starting.

Participant 24- Yeah that is definitely the hardest thing, actually switching the computer on and switching the television off and the radio and things like that.

Facilitator- What do you think (participant 25's name)?

Participant 25- Well I have always found the essays I have done better on and felt I done better on have been those with titles I have hated and have had to discipline myself to do it. The titles I have had lectures on and I understand more and it is the areas I am interested in have been more difficult in a way, but because I am interested in them I tend to sort of read more and remember what I have read and then it's almost like it has fudged the issue and complicated it because there is all this mass of information. With areas I haven't liked or enjoyed so much I have tended to read with a more sort of predatory view and pick out specific points and embellish those particular points, but I have been more selective and cut out stuff I considered non-essential. So it has been a more work and like a job in that manner and because of that it has been a lot easier and less painful. Now on looking back with hindsight and 20/20 vision, I would always choose the subject I didn't like and I should have chosen something for my project I didn't like. I can say that with hindsight because it would have been better for me personally.

Facilitator- If you have a topic that really grasp you, do you spend too much time reading or whatever?

Participant 24- If something interests me [...] I'll put a bit more effort into it, not a great deal more.

Facilitator- Does that help with the actual final product and with the process.

Participant 24- Definitely although sometimes I might find I get too bogged down with too much information.

Facilitator- Where did you get your idea of what an essay is from? Are you explicitly told what is request of you, what your tutors require of you?

Participant 25- I would say you are never told. I have never been told what has been required of me. There has always been a strong feeling of not being certain of what they

want and even today I am still not really certain what is expected and I have finished the bloody degree. The feedback you get from it is terrible, you haven't got any sort of clear idea. The only.....

Facilitator-it's terrible in what way?

Participant 25- Basically it is poor or non-existent in most cases. You just get ticks or question marks in the margin and at the end of it you might get three lines of sort of 'could do better' or 'this needs more expanding' and you think to yourself - 'now hold on a minute, I've cut you know'.... Firstly in some cases all I have done is to reword what is written in the text books, but they say they want more. I'm sort of thinking - 'now hold on a minute, I don't know what you want' and they never tell you.

Facilitator- When you do get feedback is it easy to understand what they want? Do you understand phrases like 'develop an argument' and things like that?

Participant 25- Not really, no. It's too much of a catch phrase and it's easy and trite to say. You say - 'well how'? and they don't say. The other side of it is I sat down and worked it a few weeks ago with somebody, throughout the whole of my degree I only, aside from exam questions, I only think I wrote 11 essays. There were a lot of practical reports, but I only wrote 11 essays. To be honest that is no practice at all particularly for a mature student whose, you know... it has been a while since I did my A levels and things like that. I only felt I was starting to get some more clearer idea of what was wanted and then it was over. I still do not really know to be honest.

Participant 24- I find the most difficult thing is that there is inconsistency in marking amongst lecturers. They might say you need to develop an argument of this that and the other, but on the other hand if you do that, then you just get a little 'references?', where is your evidence to support it. So how can you develop something with ideas using your own thoughts and what have you unless you have the evidence to back it up, but there isn't always the evidence to back it up.

Participant 25- Several times throughout my degree I asked various lecturers - 'can you give us one of your essays that you have written when you at the same stage' particularly with postgraduates to give us some idea of what is a good essay. Also maybe some notes on how you would improve it if you were writing it today and they have always refused to do this. It has really been so frustrating in a way because they ask you for this thing and they won't give you any guidelines on how to do it and the feedback you get is very little. In my opinion, it is a universal opinion amongst my year that you don't know what going to get and you could write one essay, get a good mark, and you could write another essay in exactly the same style and you would get a terrible mark for it. This is why it is pot-luck it feels like.

Facilitator- What do you think the essay mark is down to? What do you think it represents?

Participant 25- Whether the lecturer got his leg-over the night before to be honest. That is virtually what it comes down to. I mean it is so arbitrary.

Participant 24- PMT with (lecturer's name) isn't it.

Participant 25- Yeah, virtually or whether she has been bollocked recently for giving too good a marks. It is so arbitrary. I have read essays that people have done that have got really good marks and really bad marks and I cannot see a get difference between the two of them and there is nothing in the feedback that represents it. Well the feedback is virtually identical, almost like the same sentences in some cases and just really don't know what they are looking for. But what is funny is that there is this sort of distribution of marks that I just cannot believe exists naturally amongst a group of 100 people. It is very fishy I think.

Participant 24- The feedback is absolutely shocking, with every single aspect of it because you don't get any guidance, not that you should and not that they should sit there and say 'this is how I want my essay done'. But they should give you some idea and some back ground so that you know what sort of structure they are looking for and the points that are

going to get you marks and the points that aren't. It is no good saying to you, like I wrote one essay and I got the comment - 'not enough references'. So the next essay I went to town and got quite a few references and the comment on that was - 'too many references, use your own ideas more'.

Participant 25- Yeah, that's exactly the sort of thing I have heard.

Participant 24- Where do you win? I don't think there is much consistency.

Facilitator- If you are getting this lack of idea of what an essay is from tutors and staff members, how do you know what to do. What do you aim to do? What are you doing to try and get better marks? Are there kind of tricks of the trade that you are using to improve marks?

Participant 24- Well what I always do is to go and get specific references and then I try and get a general, basic psychology book like Gross or something like that as that gives a pretty overall impression of the area and then quite often my essays are quite general and don't particularly focus in. I mean I do focus in on the point that they are asking in the question, but I still tend to keep them quite general. That way I feel I am covered either way.

Participant 25- Just use a deafest apathy is the best way of describing it because basically I sort of feel that my marks will not reflect anything that I put in the essay, I could very well get 58 or 72 for the same essay. So basically I just write what.... well I just try and write it as if I was explaining it to somebody who sat down and said - 'tell me the difference between A and B'. I sort of end up writing it for myself as much as anything and to hell with what they thought of it. At the end of it what they thought of it didn't matter any more to me at the end. It is all very frustrating and annoying in a way. Just sort of felt powerless as far as the marks were concerned.

Facilitator- Do you get any ideas from your peers of what things are good to do in your essays?

Participant 24- Not really, but [...] well back in January I had a really bad back and I was laid up in bed amongst all my exams and I missed a few pieces of course-work and I had to do it sort of a month later and by which time the notes had disappeared this that and the other and my friend had I the mean time had done her essay and handed it in. It was the same essay that I was doing, I didn't copy it, but it was very similar because I just felt too ill to even think about traipsing into the library this that and the other and she got something like 66 for this essay and I know mine, if anything, it was better in a way because [...]

Participant 25- You can refine the points.

Participant 24- Yeah, that's right and I got something like 57.

Participant 25- It's just like banging your head against a wall isn't it? You just sort of think.... well you know, it's almost like what they say about they throw the essays down the stairs and the one that gets there first gets the highest mark. That is what it feels like. There is almost a disregard at the end of the day toward the marks.

Participant 24- They probably think - 'well I can't give everybody a good mark so I'll give this one about 50, then this one looks all right; nicely written and typed so I'll give it a few extra marks'.

Participant 25- If you read the essays of your peers who got better marks, in some cases it is very difficult to see the difference. They have used the same three references as you have and they've sort of taken the main points in the same way as you have. There have been cases obviously when I have been able to look at them and sort of see where yes perhaps they have sort of seen a different angle on that and merited their marks, but I have also seen people who have done that and got worse marks for it. So there are sorts of a strong feeling that developed that the marks were more of a casual amusement than anything else at the end of the day, but there is also an annoyance because it affects your degree class which can effect your life. Basically it just sort of frustration at these people who were sort of irresponsibly doing these things so it felt in a way. I mean I suppose it sounds like I am

expressing a good deal of anger about it, but it's frustration as much as anything and an arbitrary of unfairness about it.

Facilitator- Can I mention to you something called ROG that has started to be cited in the literature now that students use. Now these are implicit rules that they are coming across that they believe will get them better marks. If I tell you a couple of those, could you tell me if A you have used them or B you are aware that other people use them. One of them is- the more references you cite the better the mark-is this something that you have come across or you know is believed in?

Participant 24- I think you have got to have evidence of good background reading, so yeah up to a point, but if you using the references and just bunging them then no [...]but as evidence of background reading and supporting the point that you are making then I think you could get a better mark.

Participant 25- The further you go in the degree, the less applicable it is. In the first year it is very very applicable. You cannot.... You would be criticised very heavily for saying anything that isn't in your essay, that isn't written somewhere. So basically almost what you are doing is like a literature review, but in the third year I think it is less appropriate and if you cite too much they will say this isn't what I want, I want you to say things. So what you do is you tend to write points without citing them, or put just one citation and take a general gist of what Fred Bloggs has said about something or other or that. So it is a changing rule and I really can't give you a yes or no answer to it.

Facilitator- What about following for writing, an opinion that reflects the audience, the lecturer's opinion.

Participant 25- Main point is to find out which side of the fence the lecturer sits on and then depending on their personality you will argue for their point or you will argue against their point of view. I know there are some that sort of like you to argue against their point of view and there are some where you get the feeling you will get penalised for not supporting their point of view.

Facilitator- What about picking a topic that isn't closely related to a lecturer's area as they less likely to know anything about it. Or another one is vice versa, picking one that you know they are interested in because you know they will be interested in your essay.

Participant 25- It's always best with postgraduates, I think, to pick areas they do not know about. With lecturers you find that, particularly as the are more older and experienced ones, they seem to have accumulated various bits of knowledge. If you chose an area that a postgraduate is doing their thesis on or knows a lot about then they are going to be so pedantic about it and such a pain in the ass. Where if you choose a lecturer about it and it is his or her area then they will tend to be less pedantic because - well it is almost like a feeling that lecturers realise that it is not black and white, it is grey. Whereas a lot of the postgraduates have this religious fervour almost them about their particular subject. That's how it comes across and so you deliberately steer away from that because you are treading in a mine-field because they are studying it full time for years and you are just picking up a few review books and writing out of date opinions on it and so you are bound to be shot down in flames.

Facilitator- What do you think the purpose of writing an essay is? What do you get out of writing an essay?

Participant 24- A lot of the time I don't really think that particularly. I often finish it thinking that it could have been a bit better. If I know I have done it right I get a sense of achievement, makes me feel good, but I never get too hopeful about because I don't want to count my chickens before they are hatched because what I might think is right may not be what the lecturer thinks is right.

Facilitator- Why do you think essays are set for you?

Participant 25- Well I would say the benefits I have gained from the essays have been that it has encouraged me to read on a specific point on the syllabus which helps on the exams. I

have been really annoyed when you are set essays which I had for one of my third year options which he said was deliberately nothing to do with what you would be tested on an exam. I thought that was a waste of time, but when I had done it you do the reading and you think about it. In fact it is the thinking about it I gain most from, it's almost like revising, but putting your revision into written words. I found that the further my degree went, I used essay writing as revision tool. I wrote practice essays and would read and write essays as revision instead of just sitting down and reading my notes as revision. So from that point of view essay writing is good. I just wish we had been told how and been given some tuition in our first year when we had that silly communication thing that (lecturer's name) ran where they sit around and talks about wearing the right clothes for presentations and all that sort of nonsense when we could have actually had a period of time where we could have worked on how to write essays a bit more and given us some idea of what this sort of phrases - developing an argument - means. It something that wants to make you grind your teeth when people say it at you, it is so sort of patronising. It is almost like - 'we can develop an argument and you can't'.

Participant 24- It is not constructive at all. They don't say the next time do....

Participant 25-or this point needs expanding. That's something that comes up if you bring up points, but then what is there to expand about it. They don't say how they will expand it. If you summarise something and you got a limited space to fit the points in, you are fighting against the space side of it and if you miss out points, then by the degree class definitions, in our handbooks you cannot possibly get a good mark according to that. So it just doesn't fit together, it is nonsense.

Facilitator- What do you think tutors want from an essay?

Participant 25- I have absolutely no idea to be honest. It is a question I didn't know in the first year and it's question I still don't know in the third year and I have come the conclusion that they don't know either. The essay is the standard tool that is used. For every degree you have to write essays therefore this is a psychology degree and therefore you have to write essays. They get the essays in, a lot of them have probably only written a similar number as me in their degrees, perhaps a few more, perhaps a few less, but they have experience of reading essays, some of them. Some of them a lot, some of them not depending on how experienced a lecturer they are. I have spoken to nobody on my course who knows what they want and it is common phrases amongst my peers in that they don't know what they want. I sort of say - 'well I'm the sort of person who could go onto to be a lecturer and a postgraduate and things like that' but what I'm sort of thinking is - 'if I don't know now after three years of, how am I going to know reading other peoples stuff and is it really fair'. I couldn't mark essays now because I don't know what this phrase develop an argument means and things like that. It is almost like they don't either. So you are poking around in the dark.

Participant 24- It is quite appalling that some of the lecturers can't even speak the English language properly. I don't want to say who that is, but it is absolutely disgusting to be quite honest that she is here and being paid to teach and we hand in essays for her and she doesn't comprehend the grammatical aspect of the language. She will put ridiculous comments on them which don't even make sense and you know that your sentence makes sense, especially within the context. That is just so bad and I don't know how they can justify it to be honest.

Participant 25- I could see that essay writing has it values, but I just feel that it has become as assessment tool rather than the tool that perhaps it once was in years gone by. I mean I could see the benefits of it and when I have written essays and I have had to think about them it and it has come to writing exam questions or to talk to other people about it, then I have actually felt that I understood and I know it.

Participant 24- Yeah, you've got some knowledge of it.

Participant 25- Yeah, but then it is de-valued by this silly marking system that they have in a way. It sort of undermines it.

Facilitator- What do you mean by silly marking system?

Participant 25- Basically this arbitrary marking and lack of feedback and the total lack of comprehension on what is wanted. When you get it what is it you have done that is different from something you done where you didn't get it. You compare the two and that in away devalues it I think, it undermines it's efficiency. I tend to find if it wasn't for the fact that I sort of discovered for me that it was good tool for revision. I would spend less and less time on essay writing throughout the degree and I know a lot of people spent a lot of time in their first and second year on their essays and in their third year because you only had three or four essays to do, because it was such a relative small part, they would do the essays, get it out the way and then get on with all the mass of reading on the course-work it was related to. They saw the essays as a sort of chore rather than something that could be beneficial. That I thought was a great pity.

Participant 24- If it was in the sort of correct context, say it was an assessment and it would benefit you for whatever when you go out in the real world and get a job, but you are not going to be writing essays. You might have to write reports and things then yeah it would be of tremendous benefit and valuable, but as it is now I don't see that serves much purpose as you don't get the feedback.

Participant 25- I don't think you should get marks for our essays I think we should just get feedback because I feel that people focus too much on the marks, the percentage.

Facilitator- When you say people, do you mean staff or students?

Participant 25- Almost both. Certainly from a student's point of view you focus too much. You look at your essay 58, you look at someone else's who got 68 and you feel their essay must be better, but in reality because an essay I believe should be an individualised thing particularly when it comes to something as subjective as some areas of psychology that you work on in the third year, then their feedback is just an expression of their point of view which is good. But then the mark is a judgement on your part of few and that is an annoying thing in a way because it is almost like that you feel that their judgement has no more merit than yours aside from their experience and their greater reading and such like in areas. I had (lecturer's name) for one of my third year options and he admitted to us that there are areas of psychology that we would know more about just because we have read about it, the stuff he hadn't looked at in years and hated.

Facilitator- So you feel that a mark is to do with the lecturers point of view and not their point of view of how you have presented a point of view?

Participant 25- Yes, the mark isn't objective I feel because it isn't justified and I would find it very hard for them to actually realistically justify their marks and their comparisons of marks between people. In other words the mark is a distraction because we all get the marks and we all look at the marks because of the competitive environment the degree is and such like particularly with jobs, where in reality the most important part is the feedback that they don't give us. So if they spent less time worrying about getting their normal distribution so they weren't told off by the head of department and they spent more time giving us realistic feedback, then I would feel at the end of the end of the day you would end up getting a better quality of essay because people would actually think about the feedback rather than - 'oh shit I got 58%' which is the annoying thing.

Facilitator- (Participant 25's name) you said you actually go to lecturers and ask them what they want, have you ever done that (participant 24's name)?

Participant 24- The only time when it was so ambiguous that you could take it any way. I did one for (lecturer's name) and it was such an ambiguous question everybody in the group had a different viewpoint and nobody knew whose was right and whose was wrong and all of us were going up to him and asking what do you want out of this essay. There was a five

minute blast of something and you came out of the room still thinking - 'well I still don't know what he really wanted'.

Participant 25- Yes whenever I did go to lecturers for some sort of direction on it, or other people I knew who reported back to me, they didn't get direction.

Participant 25- Well basically some sort of trite statement along the line - develop an argument - that sort of similar things. If anything I appreciated more the lecturers who would turn, I mean I went to one and he sort of laughed and said I'm not telling you sunshine and that was it. That was his exact words and in a way that was better because at least then I went away and thought sod you I will just look at what I think and just do it. I did that and found that was more beneficial for me personally, but as you say you get lecturers that blast you with a mass of ideas and things like that and it is sort of a muddle and you go away and you think well it doesn't sort of fit together and things like that. But you get more guidance because then they will say they are writing the essay for you. I have had a lecturer say to me - 'I've done my degree already, it is up to you to do yours now'.

Facilitator- Do you think when you go and ask them what they are looking for they understand what you really mean? What are you asking them to tell you? Are you asking them to tell you what developing an argument really means or what structure means? Or are you asking them to give you the issues they are looking for in the essays?

Participant 24- I would say I have done the background reading and there are several approaches I can take to this essay, but I am not really sure what you are asking in the question.

Participant 25- I suppose it is a mixture of the two in a way. It is almost like I'm going to the person and asking what they want from this question and I could see how it might be frustrating for them because it is almost like I haven't got the tools to use what they give me in a way.

Facilitator- Because you don't know how to structure an essay or all of those phrases that are ambiguous?

Participant 25- Well it isn't so much the structure and the grammatical and the mechanical part of writing the essay, that isn't so much of a problem because that is almost a standard format in a way. It is the overall things against.... I can understand they want us to think for ourselves and they want us to think that's fair enough, but then they don't give any assistance in it. It is almost like they put us in a room with a pile of wood and a saw and a hammer and say - now make us a table. It is like that, but in fact it is worse than that in a way because you don't even know what the tools are. It is very hard to come up with an answer to say what it is we want from them. What is it they could give us that would actually allows us to do this. They say to us when you come to us, don't just say I don't understand, say I don't understand A, B, or C which is all right, but that's the smaller point. It isn't a problem the A, B, & C in these cases they are minor things. It's the overall picture and what is happening and the train of thought that is going on. Some would say you have to be tuned in on the right wavelength.

Facilitator- What do you both find is the hardest part of writing an essay e.g. introduction, middle, end?

Participant 24- Conclusion maybe sometimes, winding up all the points because I am never quite sure whether it is my conclusion or the literature's sort of conclusions, well nothing is factual particularly in psychology anyway but it's sort of as factual as you can get it, well is that the sort of conclusion they want or whether it is your point of view, so I always try and incorporate the two if I can.

Participant 25- Well I would actually say that none of them are hard, because the hard bit is before hand this thinking of what is going on and what you are going to write. It is almost like the essay writing is the execution of it. OK you might agonise a bit over the grammar of some sentences and the best way of putting this and the best way of putting that, but that is peripheral. That is just an interesting distraction that sort of thing. It is the

bit before hand that is hard. The writing in itself is almost tedious in a way it gets in the way of thought and there is an anxiety that you are not actually clearly communicating your level of understanding in the essay. You know that is more sort of tedious than anything else.

Does that avoid the question nicely?

Facilitator- You should be a politician (participant 25's name). Is there anything else that you think is relevant that you would like to talk about?

Participant 24- I think that not going to be particularly much use in the real world, like I am doing this part-time job, it's not particularly wonderful, but it's... but they have said they want to promote me to a red coat and this basically involves being a motivator and the next thing he said I want a two page report on being motivator by Friday and I started at 6 or 7 in the morning, gets home and I am thinking what the hell I am I going to write about it. Because now I'm sort of tuned into this psychological essay writing - 'it has been suggested that' - 'evidence suggests'- and all that sort of business and now I am thinking I have actually got to do something real so to speak. In a way all this essay writing should be to an advantage, but in a way I am not sure that it is.

Participant 25- I have found similar things to that. I tell you what you should do, you should read, get some of the broad-sheets, particularly the Guardian and the Observer and read articles and sections that they write about non-current events because they are short essays and if you read these half page leaders or something like that, if you read those articles as essays and you actually try to fit it into the essay plan, the structure and the points they are trying to make, they actually follow the essay structure, they are essays basically. It is very interesting reading them from this point of view and if you read them as essays, you can understand what they are saying a bit more. So from that point of view it has helped me to sort of read newspapers, but so the hell what. And to be honest as well, I just sort of, I mean I am mature student and I had a career before coming here, and I really don't know what overall benefit it would be other than perhaps it has focused my ability to look at the issues involved in an argument [...]the pros and cons of it and it's something I have always done, but I am now a lot more focused on doing it and that I value mostly. It makes it awful when it comes to reading books, novels because you just destroy the text in it, you destroy the plot and things like that in it and you watch these sort of mysteries on the television and the rest of it, it's annoying some of the holes in it, so from that point of view it has destroyed my pleasure. It is hard to say whether they are useful or not because I realise I have sort of developed this skill, if you can call it a skill, but I don't know how much it is going to me to an employer. I mean I can see in certain things perhaps when it comes to business looking at problems things like that, but most of us aren't sort of going to being doing things like that I don't think. Most of us are going to be accountants by the look of the figures of where graduates go.

Participant 24- Helped to make it applicable to what you are going to do after this degree because I find so much of this course is just great, but so what.

Participant 25- It's lost. It is almost like this degree has lost it's way I feel because I sort of got the idea that coming to university would sort of develop these skills I have talked about, sort of thinking, developing the argument and trying to think at a higher level than you thought at before. It is almost like the degree has lost it's way, it has become a battery of assessments and achievements and levels it is almost sort of like.... I did an HND a few years ago and this was very much like this and this is almost like it's like that. It is not what I thought it would be, it is a disappointment from that point of view. It is more sort of - how many graduates can we get through and let's put them through tests and so we can get their marks and decide what degree they will get. It isn't what it should be in a way. It should be higher education, but actually what we have been through is further education almost.

Participant 24- And it ought be applicable to real-life. I am fortunate in a way as I'm 22 now and I have had quite a bit of experience in working in various settings and I have got that experience, but a lot of people here haven't and they are going to have absolutely no

idea when they leave here. They are going to be a few years on which is going to be a disadvantage to everyone else. They are going to be over qualified for a lot of jobs and in a way they are giving you this package and it's like great, but so what. What exactly are you going to do with it and what use will it be? How is this going to apply to a real job, I don't know, on a particular basis. What use is it then?

Participant 25- It is almost like they have lost the notion of what a degree is, that is how it sort of feels to me. It is a conveyor-belt now, it has lost what it should be and it is not satisfactory because I know that as an employer I would be very reluctant to employ any of the 21 year old graduates coming out of here. Because of what you, that is the staff, have done to them in a way. It is really sort of frustrating I suppose and I know that is not what you want to do, you want the graduates to go and get good jobs because it reflects well upon the university and all that sort of thing. It feels in a way three years of my life have been wasted because of this.

Participant 24- I did two year national Btech in science and health studies and to be honest that has stood me in good stead for every single job I have gone for. Even though none of them were particularly from the angle of career sort of jobs, this degree in psychology [...] is almost a hindrance.

Participant 25- We were talking about it before we came in the room.

Facilitator- So do you think that doing the degree, having said that.... I mean my next question was how was your approach to.... OK I'll make it very specific, but we can talk about it more generally if you like, how has your approach to essay writing changed? Do you think the university hasn't even done you a favour in that sense in that it may have destroyed any of those skills that you had.

Participant 24- I think it might possibly have done that, yeah definitely.

Participant 25- Definitely has I would say.

Participant 24- I have lost my individuality to the writing. Honestly I am more worried about writing this bloody two page report on being a red coat than I have been about any particularly of the essays I have done. I'm going find that more difficult I reckon because for a start. I am going to have to go back down to their level because they aren't graduates, they're not sort of [...] What sorts of things are they looking for.

Participant 25- Before coming to university I used to as a hobby write short stories and I had a few published in magazines and things like that and I used to write, you know like (a lecturer's name) write silly articles for the Psychologist, the BPS thing. I sort of used to write things like that for the Trade Journal and Industry and I used to work for. I suppose I have had about 20 pieces published in that way and in different magazines and things like that, you know women's magazines, short stories, that sort of stuff. I can't do it now. It's eaten my creativity. I know it is not really fair to blame the university because there is other things in my life and all that sort of stuff, but it feels like I have been creatively neutered in a way because it is just sort of.... I'm thinking I can't say that because I can't back it up and all that sort of crap. It has annoyed me in a way. I have gained from it, but I have also, lost from it in a way.

Facilitator- What do you think you have gained?

Participant 24- Grammatical skills.

Participant 25- Structuring your arguments. As I was saying about the articles in the Guardian and the Observer and things like that, how you can present this side of the argument to present the fact that it might appear this way, but there is other ways of looking at it. When they write articles about ethical debate and things like that, the Bosnia crisis and all, that sort of stuff, from that point of view it is almost like I have been dragged into this particular class of people, sort of pseudo-academic or whatever. They say that the degree teaches you life skills and all that sort of stuff, but all I feel I have done is learnt how to do research which to be honest most people just aren't going to do and it is a wasted skill that is. Most people are going to go into jobs where the research as is defined on the level here

are never going to be used. A very small proportion go onto postgraduate stuff in even those, a small proportion of those will carry on in psychology. So you actually think well you know they are training us to be something we are not going to be.

END OF FOCUS GROUP.

Appendix B

2nd Phase of Focus Groups - check theories 'ring true'.

The participants in this phase of focus groups were shown diagrams representing each of the essay writing strategies developed using the first stage of focus groups - they were asked to identify which one fitted (best) what they did when writing the majority of their course-work essays. They were also shown a list of free floating concepts related to essay writing. The current participants were asked to comment on these.

Note

The names of some essay strategies and their components were changed between this stage of research and the writing of the thesis. Use the table below as a key.

Name of strategy in the thesis	Referred to here as:
Extensive Processors	Relevant, relevant informers
Research Reliant	Relevant informers
Limited processors	Informers
Editors	Editors

The names of some essay writing components were changed between this stage of research and the writing of the thesis. Use the table below as a key.

Name of component in the thesis	Referred to here as:
Basic research	Pre-research reading
Gathering information	Gathering general information

1st focus group

(Two 1st Years, semester one, 1996)

Facilitator- OK, so then of the categories that I've shown you already and described, are you quite happy that you understand them?

Participant 1- Yeah.

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- If you want any clarifications as we go through, just ask me. If you can't remember what that means, just say I can't remember what that means can you tell me again - I might have forgotten myself - so if I just spread these out so that you can have a good look at them. If both of you would like to think about them, maybe for a couple of seconds - maybe you are already sure which one you fit into, or maybe you don't think that you fit into either, any of them rather. (Pause) Which one do you think that you most fit into?

Participant 1- Um, that one.

Facilitator- This one? OK that's the.... Um, I'll call you subject one, excuse me for being impersonal, subject one has selected 'relevant informers'. I'll just give you that to hold onto.

Participant 2- Err I'll go for that one as well.

Facilitator- OK - if you're not entirely sure, say that you don't fit into....

Participant 2-well I'm not sure if I totally fit into any of them.

Facilitator- OK.

Participant 2-but I think that is probably about the closest.

Facilitator- OK, what we'll do is take that one then, and we'll try and change it according to you.

Participant 1- It's the same as me actually.

Facilitator- OK, I'll get rid of these. OK, so do you want to explain to me - we'll start with you (student's name) um which one.... how you are similar to the relevant informers.

Participant 1- Well I do collect some information, and I do select relevant bits, um, in a way I do sort of plan my essays and.... but I'm not too sure about the first one, I was um, a lot more of the gathering of the information for the first bit.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 1- And I wouldn't say I went to that extent, that would be the closest.

Facilitator- You said when you planned, you sort of planned.

Participant 1- Yeah.

Facilitator- How does your plan.... what structure does it take?

Participant 1- Um, well I tend to arrange the information that I've collected, selected in my essay.

Facilitator- Will that be in note form?

Participant 1- Well I tend to right my notes down, bits of information that I want, arranged in which bits of information go together, which order.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 1- And I'm like that.

Facilitator- Thank you. So does that plan get written down, or is it just in your head?

Participant 1- It's just in my head.

Facilitator- OK, do you actually type up at all, use a word processor or anything like that?

Participant 1- Um, I've done it once since I've been here.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 1- But since I've only handed in one piece of work.

Facilitator- OK, did you actually edit first on paper and then type it up.

Participant 1- Yeah.

Facilitator- OK. In what form did selecting the relevant bits of information come, so lets say that you've got all the notes that you gathered, all the journal articles and books that you've gathered um how do you actually select what is relevant, again is it just reading and remembering what's relevant or do you highlight the text or copy down what you've read?

Participant 1- Um, I'll mark it off.

Facilitator- OK. How do you mean mark it off?

Participant 1- Well I tend to use a number system. If it goes with something else that I'm going to use then, number one, if it's a different subject then number 2 and so on.

Facilitator- Right. OK (participant 2's name) how are you similar to this one?

Participant 2- Um, I think, the thing is I normally, as soon as I've got the question, normally I do a plan straight after that you see.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 2- I normally list the points that have got to be included before I go looking for information, then while I'm looking I look for the points that have got to be in it.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 2- Straight away and then um, so I select the relevant bits before I go looking for it.

Facilitator- Do you then, once you've got you information, do you then take another stage, yourself selecting relevant bits.

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- So you do that twice.

Participant 2- Yeah, I do it twice and then I'd.... I think I.... I normally put it onto the computer and then edit it. I didn't put it on in note form I try and do it rough on paper anyway and then put it onto the computer then edit it from there, because it's easier to move it around.

Facilitator- OK. Can I ask you both, do you have computers at home or do you use the computers here or?

Participant 2- I haven't got one at home, but I should be getting a word processor this week.

Facilitator- Do you use the computers in the library or do you use the computers here?

Participant 2- I haven't done anything yet. I'm just talking about my.... I did English you see and I did it on computers see then, but I haven't used the computers in the library yet, so....

Facilitator- OK.

Participant 1- Have you got a computer?

Participant 2- No, where I'm staying there's two computers and a type writer there so we all just use them.

Facilitator- Um, lets talk a bit more about how you differ. What seems to be coming across, certainly from you (participant 2's name) is that there is no linear progression, you can do some things more than once and there not coming in exactly the order that's in the relevant informers, and the only thing that is different for you (participant 1's name) and tell me if I'm wrong is that there is not quite so much gathering information.

Participant 1- Yeah.

Facilitator- Right so you definitely don't pre-research read? Or do you? That's the one where you get them from the basic texts or your lecture notes?

Participant 1- Um, sometimes I will do it would depend on what the essay was on.

Facilitator- Right OK - what would the essay have to be on?

Participant 1- Um, well if it was on a subject that I had a lot of notes for then I would refer to them, but if it's an essay that I've hardly got any notes for anyway I wouldn't.

Facilitator- What about using a basic text, do you ever do that?

Participant 1- Um..

Facilitator- Something like the introduction to psychology.

Participant 1- When I did a project a-level we basically had one book so you used that book for everything anyway.

Facilitator- What about.... you say you've handed in one piece of work so far, was that an essay.

Participant 1- Yeah.

Facilitator- Did you use a basic text for that.

Participant 1- Um.

Facilitator- Was it the one for communication studies that you had to do?

Participant 1- It was for Applied. I can't even remember how I did it now. I don't think I did actually, I err, I didn't have any information anyway and so it was basically how I was an educational psychologist and how I would go about treating someone and finding out about the problem and I looked through it and I decided myself anyway what thing I would look at. So there wasn't really much to look up.

Facilitator- Right Right. OK UM. How do you feel then that the categories can be improved, so far? How could this category, for you, be improved?

Participant 1- UM. I think under interpreting the question I'd have some sort of plan there I think. I normally list things that I've got to include in the essay, and then when I look up the information I look out for those things.

Facilitator- Would that pre-planning stage before you go and do your research, would that only occur if you knew about the topic beforehand?

Participant 2- I suppose it would have done. I'm thinking about when I did my A-level. If it was on a book or something, then I suppose I knew what had to be included in it. I suppose if I didn't have a clue what the question.... if I'd never done that one before, I suppose I wouldn't do it like that because I wouldn't know would I. Apart from that I think all the rest is OK. I think I'd um.... I edit it more, you normally edit it more than once, two or three times.

Facilitator- Does all the editing come at the end or does the editing come in the middle of the whole process, might you edit here and here and sort of after you've ended.

Participant 2- Yeah I think so because you put things in even if you don't think that you are going to use it and then put it onto the computer and then I'd look through it and think oh no I don't like that one, and I'm likely to include some other things in it.

Facilitator- The gist of this is for me to make this more flexible? So can I assume the right components are in there.

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- People just need to have the option to use them more than once, and have them in different orders?

Participant 2- And I think it also depends on how hard the question is to you as well. I think how many times you would use each bit would make a difference.

Facilitator- That's interesting, do you actually interpret the question?

Participant 2- I look at the.... I've always been taught to look at the key words in it.

Facilitator- Do you interpret the question?

Participant 1- Um, depends on the question. If it's like a complex question, quite difficult then yeah, but if I look at it and it's a basic question then I don't look at it at all, just get on with it.

Facilitator- How would you improve the relevant informers?

Participant 1- I agree with the editing in different places. I do that bit regularly, um, and basically gather information, is all at different levels depending on what you are doing, um I think that's probably about it.

Facilitator- Right, um, what I want to ask you about now is consistency, or dynamism in this process. Do you think that you've always done it this way and do you think that it is quite stable writing your essays like this, does it change from essay to essay or do you think that it's a slow development or do you think that it will always stay that way.

Participant 2- So far it's always stayed that way, but I haven't done any essays here yet so it might change, it depends. I suppose it's more scientific, but you know um that might change it as well, really, what you're talking about. I suppose I've never had to refer to.... I suppose with the work you're doing here you are referring to other people a lot of the time and looking at their work, I don't know. I think at the moment it's realistic that it might change. But like everything you don't know really. Um it depends on the essay, um sometimes I will do the like.... I can't remember what the number two was, do that, it depends on how in depth the question is.

Facilitator- Right, change things to suit the question. Do you agree then that research reading occurs sometimes.

Participant 1- Yeah if you've got a lot of work on it already then it makes sense to use it, but if you've got - you don't understand them then perhaps you would go and do some reading. I think that depends on the question again, how easy or hard it is.

Facilitator- Is there anything else that you want to say? Anything that I've not directly asked you.

Participant 1- No I can't think of anything.

Participant 2- No.

Facilitator- I'm now just going to stop the tape, so that I can mention the constructs, show you the constructs again. Do you feel there are any constructs missing, or a category you believe you are closest to, in your actual process [...]

Participant 1- No.

Facilitator- OK, if you think of anything later on in the discussion don't be afraid to say, 'oh I've thought of something'- Do you think that there are any that shouldn't be there, any that don't exist or make sense?

Participant 2- Maybe, depending on the person, they might not do it in that order, some people do things, you know I don't do it in that exact order.

Participant 1- No.

Facilitator- Are there any there that don't fit reality at all?

Participant 1- Just the order really, that bit about gathering information really.

Facilitator- So making this more flexible might just sort it out, there's just one out from what you do anyway. Are there any other things that you wish to talk about regarding the constructs?

Participant 1- Can't think of anything.

Facilitator- Now we'll move on to the factors, this could be a bit laborious. I have another handout for you. I think you might get a bit bogged down in paper. These are all factors, issues that got brought up in other focus groups, people felt that might either relate to processes or have something that we call loading which basically means for example, if you don't feel that feedback is good, or perhaps if you talk to your peers then they order them this way - that sort of thing - I'm trying to find out from the factors[...] As we've said we'll talk about these factors, we'll start with you. We'll talk about the different courses and the fact that they may relate to the type of process, all the factors here, like the facilities in the library and the number of people on the course they'll be more people doing the same essay, so that may mean that resources are lower, people to talk to and that sort of things, existence of tutorial groups, the amount of time you get to write an essay, when they're set, some courses have them set right at the beginning of term while other get throughout the term, varying workloads, the exam timetable for example the purpose of the essay might change if you know that you are going to have the topic as an exam question you might use it more as a revision tool, course ethos, that's the way the course approaches everything, the attitude, how they make students feel, whether or not you have a choice about the essays, um, whether everybody on the course gets to see the marks, whether the marks get put on a board or not, um, perception of autonomy, do you feel that you have choice over your essay and the different types of essay, for example a sociology essay may be different, you might have to look up things, this is like what you were saying, about science essays, in some courses you do that in others it's much more story telling. or sort of reports, technical reports. OK, so do you feel that any of those are irrelevant or anything's related to the different sorts of essay?

Participant 1- um (pause) irrelevant to me?

Facilitator- Yeah, basically I want to know if any of these have had an effect, have any of these caused you to write like this, or do any of them actually relate to your experiences. Don't worry about time - don't feel under any pressure.

Participant 1- I don't really think that I use the library that much, that's not a major part, um (pause) I'm not sure that the number of people doing it effects me or not. If I understand it then I won't need to ask anyone else. If I'm having difficulties then it's a good thing um, I think tutorial groups are a bit beneficial. This is going to take ages. Um I prefer essays to be set periodically rather than all at once.

Facilitator- If you get things all at the same time, do you feel that you can work on two pieces of work at the same time, or do you have to finish one and then start on the other.

Participant 1- I prefer to finish one and then start on the next. I can do two at the same time, but if it's more, set at the same time, you tend to leave the ones that you don't want to do until last. It puts a lot of pressure on you straight away, two isn't too bad, but I think that any more than three would be a bit much, right.

Facilitator- If you don't feel particularly strongly about any of them just say.

Participant 2- I don't really think that the amount of time has any effect, because I'll do it anyway, get it done. I tend to leave most of mine until the last minute anyway - that's quite good coz then you get some time to relax and then you do it all.

Participant 2- I don't really think about it overlapping the exam topics either.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 2- What did you mean by the course ethos.

Facilitator- The way the course... for example some courses are very assessment oriented where as others are more feedback oriented. Have you actually noticed any differences between courses, in the ways a department feels? No?

Participant 1- I can't really say how they feel, openly how it makes me feel, it makes me feel good, and I'm getting on with it, and doing OK then I suppose I feel OK. I do find that a choice about the essays does help sometimes, but if you can't decide which one to do that can be a bit of a problem. I'm not sure about the everyone seeing marks, because sometimes that bothers me and sometimes it doesn't if I knew that the marks were coming out then at that moment it'll bother me, but afterwards it won't. What did you mean by the overall autonomy?

Facilitator- Do you feel that you have a sense of freedom or that you are told what to do all the time?

Participant 1- Freedom with the essay, or how I go about it?

Facilitator- How you go about it - both really.

Participant 1- You do have freedom in how you go about it, in that your doing it and no one else can really say do it this way.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 1- It doesn't really work, they say plan for your essays and no one ever did, some times they say do it this way, do it that way, but I tend to do it my way anyway.

Facilitator- So you do feel that there's freedom.

Participant 1- Yeah, they can't make you do it their way - some essays are going to be easy and you know a lot about them, when with others you are going to spend a lot of time researching and take a lot longer.

Participant 2- I think the facilities in the library make a difference, like I haven't gone to use a computer yet, but every time I've gone to the bottom of the library, it's chock a block with people and I think that if you want to do it on computer then you are going to be worried that you are not going to get on them. So that makes a difference, because if I couldn't use one then I'd find it awkward to keep doing it on paper um. I don't know if the number of people on the course would make a difference to what I'm doing. I find that if I talk to people on the course then they just confuse me even more and especially if they all look like they know what they're doing, then it just makes me feel worse then or they don't help - haven't got a tutorial group so I don't know. The only difference I think would be if you had a lecturer that you felt that you could talk to. I've got a tutor that I've seen once about the essay and he said I don't even know who you are what have you come to see me for, um. When the essay is set, if they set it and say that it's got to be in four weeks time then it's better than say setting it at the beginning of the semester and then haven't got to be in for three months. It depends how much work you've got really. If you've got loads of work then it will make a difference.

Facilitator- Do you think that it'll change - this process?

Participant 2- Yeah, because you have to um, it will change if you haven't got much time to do it. I think I'd gather less general information, select the relevant points. Um... sometimes you've got loads of work to do, sometimes you haven't so that'll make a difference. Over exam times.

Facilitator- Um, is it part of the exam process. Will that change the way you approach the essay? Your conception of the essay?

Participant 2- You get more information, I think I might gather more information and put it in that essay, and cover more.

Facilitator- Do you feel a difference between departments?

Participant 2- I think a choice for the essays helps if you didn't like... if you've got a few to choose from it's better, you can choose one you like. With the marks, there are 200 people in our place and I don't think that anyone looks at the marks anyway and is that the

one about how much feedback you get back. We've got to do a practical report for Friday, for this Friday and I don't feel that we've had much feedback about how to do it at all.

Participant 2- You've got to write it how they want you to write it and use all the terminology that they want you to use, and I'm quite annoyed about that really and I understand that we will need to do that later on, but I think that it's really tight the way you've got to do it, the way you lose marks if it's not exactly like that.

Facilitator- [...]

Participant 2- I'm not looking forward to it, I just don't want to do it. I think I'm going to - I think when I write it I'll keep thinking it's not how they want it to be, and I'll be.... there's so much information about how to right it and yet it's got to be really short and I'm worried about it being too long and I don't know how much you can put in off your own input.

Facilitator- If we go through the rest of the list, um I'll ask you a quick question. We'll start with (participant 1's name), do you feel that feedback is useful?

Participant 1- If it's relevant to the work yeah, sometimes you get feedback and it just doesn't mean anything. If it's relevant then it'll help you know you went wrong here, you could have improved it here as long as they say. If they tell you it's wrong then no, if they tell you where it's wrong then yes - right.

Facilitator- (Participant 1's name) again, do you have a perception of fairness in the marks, do you feel that they reflect what you've done.

Participant 1- I haven't thought about that, um, well it depends on if you gave an essay to two different lectures that they are both going to mark it differently anyway. So a lot of it could come down to the mood the persons in at the time and I don't know. I haven't really thought about that to be honest.

Participant 2- I hope it doesn't but it's true some people will mark it differently. I haven't had anything marked here yet, as well other essays I've had I know whose marked them and I've gone up to talk to them, so far, at all, um. I hope it wasn't anything to do with them, really it should get near enough the same mark. I haven't thought about that yet though I know when I get something marked.

Facilitator- What about the effect of the mark for the previous essay, if that was good or bad, how would that effect your next essay?

Participant 1- Um, I'd be more confident with the next essay if I got a good mark. If I got a bad mark I'd probably try harder to improve it, help improve it.

Facilitator- What about a middle of the road mark?

Participant 1- Um, I suppose I'd try to improve that. I think.

Participant 2- If it was a bad mark I would want to work harder to get a better mark next time, but I think I'd worry that I wasn't going to. I think if you get a good mark it doesn't make you think that you don't have to work hard at the next one. I think it gives you confidence that you are doing OK and you just work the same again.

Facilitator- What about the range of the marks? Do you feel that lecturers use the full range of the marks.

Participant 2- Well I can't really say from here. I haven't really had much marked, um, what do you mean by that.

Facilitator- Some people complain that the lecturers keep marks in the 55 to 65 range, and don't mark outside of that. So you wouldn't for example get 80, but 70 maybe.

Participant 1- I would hope that they mark within the range, yeah, that would bother me a lot. It would bother me yeah, if you can see.... you'd see if they stuck to that range and that would be really wrong I think, but I don't know what you would do about that really.

Facilitator- I won't cover perception and consistency between marks. I think we've already done that, can you tell when it's written what sort of mark it's going to get?

Participant 1- Not really. I'm very pessimistic anyway, so I convince myself that it's really bad anyway, so that if it is bad then I won't feel so bad about it, so I'm not very good at predicting.

Participant 2- Once you've done a couple of things you'll know, sort of, once you've got one mark back. If you do that sort of work again you might get that mark, but I don't know yet, not from here. I think you know when it's going to be all right. I think that'll be OK, but I don't know if it'll be really good or not, because you don't know what everyone else has done.

Facilitator- What about motivation, you know when you get an essay set you have to find the motivation to do it. What is the motivation for you? Is it, there are several things that it could be, the deadline coming up? Just wanting to do it? Wanting to get it done early? There are many, wanting to get a good mark - what motivates you to sit down and write a good essay?

Participant 1- Mine tends to be the fact that the deadline is coming. I do tend to leave it until the last minute.

Participant 2- I think it depends on whether you like the essay that you've got to do, or not like it, or whether it's going to be difficult like this one that we've got to do, it's not really an essay but, but because I don't want to do it, that doesn't motivate me at all, you just dread it. I don't normally leave it to the last minute but I have this time, and um I think if you think that you can do it, or know what it's on, then that motivates you, and getting a good mark, and getting it out of the way really.

Facilitator- OK, what about um, the way you feel about essays the reason you think you do them, your general perception about essay writing, do you think that'll change at all?

Participant 1- There doesn't seem to be a lot of essays that they want you to write here. It's only two essays or something I think, and that's about it, so there's not going to be as much emphasis on it, where as at college, it was all essays so.... I don't know whether.... I have to.... as we've gone through all these things, like the range of marks and whose marking it, that might change my attitude, when we've got a few back, if it did happen that way, you think what's the point in doing it. I don't know if it'll change.

Facilitator- OK, preferred working conditions. Do you work better at night? In the daytime? With lots of people around? In the library? In your bedroom at home? Hearing noises outside or total silence? With music? Without music? or that type of thing?

Participant 1- I prefer working alone, because if there are other people around then I know I'm going to get distracted and it's not going to get done, but I like music in the background or something so that it's not completely silent, because I can't work with that. That's about it, some noise but not too much.

Participant 2- I think that while I'm getting my notes for an essay I'd rather be by myself, but when I'm putting it onto computer I don't mind being around other people, because you seem to just get on with it and even if you just look around the room it takes your mind off it for a while. While I'm getting it all down on paper I like to be by myself.

Facilitator- Does it change for what stage of the essay process you're in?

Participant 1- I can be with other people as long as they're not trying to talk to me, or try to distract me which most of them do, but if they're doing work, or it's somebody that's going to do the work that would help I would feel that I've got to do it because they're doing it, and they're not going to talk to me, as long as it's someone whose not going to like constantly distract me and keep me away from it, then I'm all right with it.

Facilitator- Stage of Learning - that basically means when do you feel that you've learnt something. Is it before you write something, before the essay do you know the information and then put it into the essay or is it after you've written the essay do you feel that you've learnt or is it during the essay have you learnt from the essay writing process. Or do you feel that you've not learnt at all, as that could be the case.

Participant 1- A lot of that depends on what essay I'm writing. If it's a subject I know then I've learnt before otherwise it would be like during, but if it's.... I'm really not interested in the essay at all then I don't think I'd really learn anything from it.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 2- I think normally once I've read it at the end and it's altogether, that's when you suddenly.... once you've done it you think yeah I've learnt something, but I suppose it depends on whether you know what you're talking about, all the way through it anyway, if it was something that you didn't know when you've got the title. I wouldn't think that I've learnt something until the end it was all written up then, because you don't think about what you are writing half the time, until you've got all the information.

Facilitator- OK, where are we. OK the amount of delay before you start writing, do you have quite a big delay before you start writing or do you manage to get started right away. I know you've already said that you leave it until the last minute so.

Participant 1- Yeah.

Facilitator- There's quite a lot of delay?

Participant 1- Yeah, I think it depends on the question. If you don't like what you are going to be doing then you leave it and just keep putting it back thinking I'll start it tomorrow.

Facilitator- Right, Right.

Participant 1- That's what I'd do anyway. If I don't mind, if I think that it's going to be all right then I just get on with it as soon as I get it normally.

Facilitator- Right, we're on the hour now, so you can either stay on for say an extra half hour and earn yourself an extra two points or it's entirely up to you, you can go now.

Participant 1- It's OK.

Participant 2- Yeah, I'm quite happy to stay.

Facilitator- I think that maybe it'll take too long to carry on going through this one by one, so if we can just round this off. If you can just.... are there any there that really stand out to you as not existing for you or being totally irrelevant, you know you never really.... so for example, you definitely don't do it or do you think there are any missing if you can just give me a general round up.

Participant 2- What does perception of allocated time mean?

Facilitator- Whether you feel that there is enough time, that you are given enough time to write an essay (pause). Sorry they're all quite terminological these things.

Participant 2- I think the number of hours of experience makes a difference and considering the word limit actually. I don't normally consider it if like they say 2000 words, like count the words as I do it. I like do it and then count the words, and if it's too big then I think Oh God and cut words out, but I don't try and fit it in because that makes it a complete nightmare - or something like that, so I ignore that until the end.

Participant 1- Yeah I do it the same way.

Participant 2- Like there's nothing worse than getting to that word limit, because you don't write properly. Terminology comprehensibility - is that like the title? or....

Facilitator-Um, sorry which one was that....

Participant 2-Terminology comprehensibility.

Facilitator- Yeah, in the title, and also when you get feedback and it's like full of terminology, like develop an argument do you understand what those mean or....

Participant 2-sometimes you do, it depends on like, how you developed an argument or you might think what for?

Facilitator- Do you find that the feedback is a bit incomprehensible?

Participant 1- At college they would like sit down with you and go through it, which was lot more helpful so.... you can't tend to read their writing anyway so but....

Participant 2-I think it's different at college and sixth form as well as you are in a lot smaller groups and it's much easier for you to go and talk to the person who has set the

essay than talk to someone who you don't know coz you feel.... I think I'd feel a bit stupid going to talk to somebody they don't know me and I don't know them and they don't know how you write or how capable you are of doing anything so I think it's hard to talk to somebody .

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 2- But I suppose it might get easier. It probably will because we've not been here that long.

Facilitator- Can I just ask you about cue seeking do you do that? Or are you aware of the cues, or are you not aware of the cues or....

Participant 2-yeah, like the report that's got to be in, one of the lecturers went on about, like he's given us information about what shouldn't be in it and um he went through what we should include in each section and things, and I suppose I wrote all that down thinking - 'Oh I'll do that' but um if he had off just given it to us, then I would have gone and asked him what the.... before last week nobody had said what had to go in it and I was thinking well what are we suppose to do, and I would have gone and asked him if he hadn't said so yeah.

Participant 1- I don't really seek for them, but if they are directly given then I might take notes, and write it down and like us it but that's probably about it unless I really don't understand it in which case I will go and ask.

Participant 2- I think I do it so that I don't go off on a completely different tangent.

Facilitator- Is there anything else that you wish to say about.

Participant 2- No.

Facilitator- Sorry that was hard going, did I totally tire you out of those. OK the next thing I want to talk about is something called the ROGs that stands for Rules of the Game there has been a lot of research recently that shows that there are implicit rules that lecturers kind off give out not things that they tell you directly but vague hints, what impression do you get from a lecturer. Now I'll give you an example and then I'm going to show you a list of all the ROGs that people in previous focus groups have said that they have experienced or done themselves or they know off other people doing them now one example is that you get the feeling that if you agree with that lecturer when you write an essay that you'll get a better mark OK. So do you understand the sort of things that I mean by Rules of the Game, not things that people tell you directly like write the references like this but something that you get an impression, you get an idea that if you do a certain thing then you are going to get a better mark. I think they're quite implicit. So here's the list that came out in previous focus groups (quiet period with rustling paper). Have you ever experienced, or known anyone or done any of these?

Participant 1- Um.

Facilitator- Secretly of course, it won't go any further.

Participant 2- I think, I must admit in the class that I was in there was somebody who, a boy, who would disagree with everything that our teacher used to go on about, she would give us all her views on any book, any author, and he used to argue, and if he didn't get a very good mark he would say that it was because he didn't agree with her but she would turn around and say that it was because it wasn't written properly, but then you don't know. I don't think that these.... it says, like here that criticise lecturers to get a better mark, nothing and um, agree with what they say to get a better mark, and that shouldn't happen at all, like you should be able to. It should be marked on how it's written, and what's in it, not whether they agree with it or not.

Facilitator- Do you think that it does happen though?

Participant 2- Yeah, probably but it should not do. It might depend on whether they like you as well it's obvious she didn't like him and you don't know whether it was because of that or not.

Facilitator- Do you think, um that you might find yourself trying to be very amiable to a lecturer for that point?

Participant 2- I don't know um, the thing is at the moment I don't think, at the moment, they don't know anyone in there, it's just a class really. I don't think that I would, I don't really agree. I don't use lots of references to impress, like in this report using a lot of references when they don't mean anything, and um I really.... I don't agree with any of that at all I don't think any of it should make any difference, before..... it shouldn't make any difference but it might do so you do it just in case.

Facilitator- So are you saying that you wouldn't actually do any of those?

Participant 2- No, because um I don't think using lots of references would impress somebody unless you were supposed to, you know um unless you needed to use them all, and then I've never thought about steering clear of a topic that the tutor is interested in because they scrutinise the work more, I've never thought of that, doing that before, and um I don't agree with that either coz it shouldn't go against me doing that because they should just mark it anyway it makes no difference.

Participant 1- I basically agree with what (participant 2's name) said. I um, don't do any of that and I don't actually know anyone who has but yeah I think it probably does exist, and I don't think that it should make a difference anyway.

Facilitator- Right, um what I want to move on to now is something called free floating constructs. These are things that when I devised the categories of essay writing they seemed to exist but they existed in no particular order and they weren't they didn't come across in any pattern, so I left them out. If you can just read this and then let me know whether you actually do, like interpreting questions, like does everyone do that or just some people. So can you let me know whether you do that and whether you do it at a particular stage in the category that you've identified as reflecting your process most, um, or whether it doesn't happen at all you think - I'll stop the tape while you think

(click off)

(click on)

Facilitator- We'll start with you first. Where about in this process here would you do any of these if indeed you do them?

Participant 2- Well I interpret the question and I do all that before I do anything else. I think that you do interpret the information after you've gathered it all and you think what does all that mean.

Facilitator- OK I'll just note that down.

Participant 2- And you do try and understand what it means in relation to other information so that it fits all together.

Facilitator- So would this be before you are selecting the relevant information?

Participant 2- Um I think so yeah, and forming an opinion and I think that happens after, and even if you do have an opinion at the beginning I think that might change as you go through the information.

Facilitator- So you do it at the beginning?

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- Is that after interpreting the question?

Participant 2- Yeah.

Facilitator- What about number 4 gather the information?

Participant 2- Yeah, and after you've got all the information and you've got it in some sort of form, once you start writing it up, once you start typing it into the computer, then you start to think oh it'll go this way.

Facilitator- So that's after your planning, um so you think that you according to this plan you edit and type it up onto the computer or do you type it onto the computer and then edit so this is the one you do. And you think that forming an opinion happens after you've put it onto computer as well?

Participant 2- Um as you've putting it on I think. I plan here after interpreting the question and while you are there you plan it into perspective but sometimes it changes, that's why I so on computer really there's nothing worse than re-writing something about 10 times um, and when I get home, you just think about it and something might come to you, to change it. I think I do that once I've got all my notes on the computer then I go off and think about it and then as I'm writing it I might go off, but I don't think that I mull it over this bit here, no.

Facilitator- You don't ?

Participant 2- No, no um, 'coz' I suppose you do a little bit. I suppose when I'm putting my notes onto computer I do that, and once I've got it into an essay form I'll read it over then, and then that's when you change it around until you get it into the final form that you want it in.

Facilitator- OK, once it's in the final form do you read it again then?

Participant 2- Yeah, at the end.

Facilitator- If you don't like it what will happen?

Participant 2- I think, normally once I've finished it and read it thorough it'll be something, like it doesn't fit and I'll either change it, or you know it's just a few words and you just want to change it so that it sounds a bit better so little things. I don't ever forget anything really.

Facilitator- So there's no stage where you think I don't want to write this so I'll just go and leave it for a while.

Participant 2- No, because I wouldn't be able to think. I'd worry about it, thinking I wasn't going to be able to write it, so I don't do that.

Facilitator- So you do all of these processes at pretty much the same time?

Participant 2- Ummm.

Facilitator- OK, so what sort of time does it take you.

Participant 2- I don't think that it takes very long to interpret the question and as soon as I've done that I do a plan about what I'm going to include in it and that doesn't take, normally that's only a very quick thing and then I'd.... I think that getting the information takes longest, because once you've got it all on the computer it doesn't take very long to put it all in. It doesn't take very long to put it all into..... it doesn't take very long really.

Facilitator- You mean, actually going and getting the information.

Participant 2- It is.

Facilitator- And organising it?

Participant 2- It's going to get the information and trying to understand, it's once you understand it doesn't take very long once you've got the information, but it's.....

Facilitator-right....

Participant 2-trying to get your head around it.

Facilitator- Right, I see, OK. So have you got a general idea about the amount of time the whole thing takes you, or does it differ.

Participant 2- I think it differs. I suppose I've never done it in a constant. I've done a bit each day it was spread out because we had three weeks to hand it in, and the first or second week um, 1st week I'd have had it all planned and the third week, no second week I'd have had it in note form and tried to put it onto the computer and then I would just keep doing it when I had time to go in and do it.

Facilitator- Right.

Participant 2- I think it depends on how long you've been given for the essay, you work it out over that time.

Facilitator- OK, thanks. Where do you fit?

Participant 1- I sometimes interpret the question, but sometimes I don't really bother. It's only really like if it's complicated or it needs interpreting.

Facilitator- OK.

Participant 1- Because sometimes they are very basic and you look at it and you don't really need to think about it anymore, um, I do interpret the information, once I've gathered it, sorted through, re-written it in my own words.

END OF FOCUS GROUP

2nd focus group

(Two 1st Year Students, Semester one, 1996)

Facilitator- OK. Which of these categories then, do you think fits you? Maybe you'd like to start?

Participant 3- Probably this, but sometimes this pre-research reading might come after this, sometimes I go to....

Facilitator-when you say 'this' can you actually say.

Participant 3- Oh number 1 (relevant informers) - because sometimes I find the answer to a question is in a text that might not first think of, certain journal articles that might be nothing to do with it give you ideas. So I would say I do pre-research reading but at what point its' not necessarily....

Facilitator- You pointed out something, was that collecting general information?

Participant 3- Yes.

Facilitator- You said that that could come at another stage, when, in a different order?

Participant 3- Yes maybe before I might go off and read other things that are not necessarily specific to it but I feel might influence or give an edge to a better answer that people won't think of, so I try to put in something that most people won't think of and relate it to it.

Facilitator- How are you similar, do you have all of those components in your essay writing most of the time? You said that pre-research reading sometimes is there, sometimes isn't.

Participant 3- Yes, it depends on the level of question, on how open the question it is perhaps.

Facilitator- So the more open it is....

Participant 3-the more pre research reading I do.

Facilitator- And you plan your essay?

Participant 3- In my mind. I don't tend to write very much of a plan down.

Facilitator- Is that a flexible plan, will that change?

Participant 3- Very, very flexible and I do it straight onto the computer as well.

Facilitator- And is your plan very detailed or very brief?

Participant 3- Very brief.

Facilitator- Is that in order? Does it have a structure or is it just a list of points?

Participant 3- I do a sort of pattern diagram, but often it ends up in a completely different order than the one I started in. So it does sort of have an order. But obviously being on the computer you can swap that around a lot anyway very easily.

Facilitator- When you select your relevant information, how do you do that? Do you just read and remember text? Do you highlight text? Do you copy it down in note form?

Participant 3- Mostly remember it but if there is a specific quote or something in a book I might put that straight on to computer, but again it's not till the latter stage. I try to remember the book and do remember the book that it is in most of the time.

Facilitator- Are there any other ways that you differ from this process a part from the order?

Participant 3- I spend a lot of time interpreting the question. That's a big point to me, that isn't a minor issue, and a lot of time thinking about the question before even making a list here at university. It's a bit different because you've got 100 or so people trying to get the same sources, so you have to go to the library first within an hour or two of the lecture and start reserving the books that are on there but whether I use those at the end of the stage is quite unlikely.

Facilitator- So it's the resources that are available actually determine the way that you write an essay, the process, the order of it?

Participant 3- They do at the moment, yeah but I don't as you go on whether there is less competition for something where as we've got a practical report and we've got set things and you think the lecturers have set them so there must be something in them that is worth reading, and it's a lot of competition to get hold of those and quite often you can't anyway, so you do have to jump to this stage first. I won't necessarily work from those anyway. I might read them and think they are not.

Facilitator - So which one do you think you are most like (participant 4's name)? - participant 3 has selected the relevant informers also, how are you similar?

Participant 4- On the number one, the interpreting of the question it depends how well I know my subject. If it's something obscure if somebody asks you to write 500 words on blah then I would mind map it, and what I get off the mind map... if I had five categories I could make up a couple of words about each and there I would have my essay. If it's something I'm quite confident about writing I just tend to sit down and write. I'm quite a prolific reader anyway so I tend to retain a lot, and then if there is anything I'm not sure about I'll go and find a relevant book that I wanted. It's very rare that it's actually on their reading lists, tend to look for something a bit more obscure that nobody else would look for and would therefore have a better chance of getting the book.

Facilitator- Can you give me an idea of the order that you might do it in then using these components that are here?

Participant 4- Basically the order you've got them, typing is the very last thing for me. I edit everything before I type.

Facilitator- And how do you differ drastically from this or even not drastically?

Participant 4- I think it's all down to what I'm being asked to write about. It depends on my confidence. If I am not at all confident I'll mind map it or do definitions, take out the key words look up the definitions in the dictionary.

Facilitator- This is at the question interpretation stage?

Participant 4- Yes. Then I'll start to find books relevant. If I'm making notes from books than I tend to write down everything, too much. I worry about missing anything out, and then I sift. I sift everything before I put it onto paper.

Facilitator- The pre-research reading then would sometimes occur and sometimes not occur, the more you know?

Participant 4- The less I'll do. It depends on what I know about the subject.

Facilitator- Is your essay plan rigid or flexible?

Participant 4- Very flexible.

Facilitator- And is that brief or detailed?

Participant 4- Again it depends what I'm writing. It can turnout to be extremely detailed.

Facilitator- So when would it be detailed.

Participant 4- If I know quite a bit about the subject.

Facilitator- And would that be the structure or would it be the points that you want to put in it?

Participant 4- I'm always aware that there has got to be a beginning a middle and an end and I've always been told I write in a very terse manner so I'm always aware that I've got to try and make things flow so I do tend to try and structure them that way.

Facilitator- Are there any comment you'd like to make? (Pause) I need to talk to you about consistency, we've talked about how this category changes for you according to how much you know, and that's true for both of you yes?

Participant 3 & 4- Yes.

Facilitator- Do you feel that's the way you generally go about things?

Participant 3 & 4- Yes.

Facilitator- So it's not the case that perhaps you do this category for one essay and maybe go about it in a different way for a different essay, or is it pretty consistent?

Participant 3 & 4- Pretty consistent.

Facilitator- Do you think that the way you write an essay will develop over time, rather than it being very sporadic, it being a gradual development, or are you really not sure about that?

Participant 4- I think I might improve with what I put into an essay, but I think it would be very difficult for the way you structure of an essay to change. I think that is something you are taught from an early age and you just tend to do.

Participant 3- No, I think mine changed a lot from when I was at school to when I did my access, totally different. But I never had a computer before and that made a big difference.

Facilitator- Was that the content of the essay or the process?

Participant 2- The process as well, because I think at A level you tend to have a couple of set text books and just work from those and with Access we were asked university level questions and we just we were because some of our lecturers were university lecturers and it demanded that sort of process. And I don't see how you could not do these stages of pre-research reading and gathering. You couldn't just go to a text book and do it.

Facilitator- So with your A-level it was more just pre-research reading and looking at the basic, the very basic texts?

Participant 2 - Yeah.

Facilitator- Lets talk about computer facilities, um, (participant 3's name) you say that have a computer at home has that changed the process?

Participant 3- Well I couldn't write it straight onto the computer before, but it's made my essays a lot better, a lot better, because I do so much of the editing as it's such a minor step in it. It is very much part of the process of putting it together. I often write a lot more and just end up with a fraction of that in the essay.

Facilitator- So being able to edit, facilitates editing. (participant 4's name) do you have a computer at home?

Participant 4- I've got a word processor and printer but the very last thing I do is put it on the word processor because when I do that it doesn't feel to be mine anymore. I really don't like word processors or computers at all. It seems to take away something personal about the work.

Facilitator- A lot of people say that actually. OK um, is there anything I haven't asked you about these categories that you'd like to mention?

Participant 4- No I don't think so.

Facilitator- What I'm going to move onto now is the constructs. I'm going to move onto these in more detail, now, here I have a handout with the definitions of the constructs that I've already mentioned but what I want to do is to find out if you think.... there are the main ones.... but if we look at this category do you think that there are any constructs missing, stages missing or are there any constructs here that you don't think are that important and shouldn't be there?

Participant 4- It doesn't actually say about interaction with other people.

Facilitator- Right, that's one of what I call related factors that we'll go onto talk about later. Do you think it's more integral to the category than just being a related factor?

Participant 4- In some ways yes, because, for me I can gather a lot of information from talking to other people.

Facilitator- So they are actually part of this pre-research?

Participant 4- Um hum. I also find that if I can find the relevant video rather than the book I can learn more from the video than from the books. I found that last year, when I did biology, and the Christmas lectures were on the brain, which happened to be one of the papers that we did on the access and I got more information out the video than I did from any biology book I found it more helpful. (Silence for a few minutes)

Facilitator- Apart from that do you think that there is anything missing?

Participant 4- No.

Facilitator- No?

Participant 3- What about asking people to read your ideas?

Facilitator- That's part of the..... one of my related factors is called discussion with peers.

Participant 3- I wasn't necessarily thinking of peers but someone who isn't involved with the subject just to read a draft and say does this portray information to someone who is standing outside the question that they haven't been asked.

Facilitator- I'd include that in talking with peers, but I'll probably have to change the terminology a bit there to peers/friends sort of thing.

Participant 3- Yeah.

Facilitator- The next bit is to show you what I call free-floating constructs. These are basically constructs like these ones here. The difference is that when I did my preliminary research they didn't really come out in any pattern, some people did them, some people didn't and there didn't appear to be any structure to it. So what I'd like to do is show you a list of the free-floating constructs and explain to you what they are and then we'll go through them, your categories. I'll do it one by one and we'll fit them in. You can tell me where they fit into your process if at all they do OK. I'll just turn off the tape while you read through those, this is the category of doing it, and I write them down. Would say of those things be in your process and where would you include them.

Participant 4- Yes, the interpreting the question I don't just do that always at the beginning I sometimes have to remind myself what the question is. So it can actually pop up anywhere throughout the sequence. I have been advised before to leave it and forget when I've had a block, but I can't do that it just preys on my mind and I just cannot leave it, go away and forget it. I do tend to mull them over, especially if I'm having difficulty with something, or I'll go and look at it from a different angle. If a specific word had two different definitions in the dictionary, then I would try and take it from both perspectives, find the one that suits me and then write from that perspective. I constantly read over what I do. I tend to do it at the end of each paragraph and change it my the paragraph and then at the end I'll read it as a whole and yes I would change anything, which I do all in long end, and I continually, instead of just adding bits into an essay, I totally re-start the essay and write it all out in long end. (some laughter) I know I can do it all on a computer but I'm so scared of losing it all that it's not unknown for me to write one essay 11 or 12 times until I've got it exactly how I want it and then I put it on the word processor.

Facilitator- My goodness, it must take you ages.

Participant 4- It does.

Facilitator- How long does this entire process take? Do you do the entire process all in one go, or does it get broken up into sections?

Participant 4- Um, we've just been asked to do a case study which was 500 words. I sat down initially and wrote it in about two and a half hours. I then went away and thought about it, more about the question which was asking and I'll rewrite it again and um..... I've thought about it again, and discovered that there were a couple of.... like we were asked to hypothesis and I haven't put that word in, and I think I must remember to put the relevant words in and they're always looking for those, so I'll rewrite it again.

Facilitator- So how long, including the reading, the gathering of the information, and the reading, how long will it take you to write an essay?

Participant 4- It depends on how many words, if it's like a 500 word short essay that could actually take me a couple of days.

Facilitator- So goodness me.....

Participant 4- I think it's a lack of confidence in myself really. I have to be sure about what I'm writing.

Facilitator- OK then Sarah.

Participant 3- Well I'm much too lazy to do all that, which is why I use a computer. I'd like to say that I do read, re-read it, all the time as I'm going through it paragraph, by paragraph constantly reading right from the beginning each time. As it changes, as I'm

adding to it, interpreting the question as well might come into it, as you often find that you've deviated a bit. Although I don't think that's a bad process as that's the way I've learnt and I quite like doing that and thinking - 'OK I've learnt all this, but that was actually what was asked in the question'.

Participant 3- Forming my opinion, I definitely like my essays to have a stance, because it's annoying to read one that doesn't, mostly, so I try to give it something, although it might reserve judgement.

Facilitator- Where about would you take your decision on what stance to take?

Participant 3- Err, while I'm writing it probably, it may come out when I'm writing it even after I might have planned it. It may come up in the plan, it depends on the question, so I might have already decided. I might have had an idea right at the start and.....

Facilitator- Would that be after interpreting the question.

Participant 3- Yeah after interpreting the question but it might well change it the light of evidence that comes up. I try not to take a stance too early on, because you might limit the type of information that you look for, or the type of evidence that you look for, it's better to be open minded as much as possible unless you've already read certain evidence about it. So yeah, again yeah and that's why I like the journals because they put a much better perspective on things than say the text books in fact after you've started reading the journals, reading the textbooks, unless they've been written by someone you respect, and this can also apply to journals. I find them very annoying so that A-level books, when you go back to them after that level you think - 'corrr'. Mulling it over, I probably do a lot of that before I do the research so I might interpret the question and mull it over. I won't leave it, unless I've other work to do, but it's not a stage I choose to do I'd leave it at the end, and then go back to it after a day or two maybe 24 hours.

Facilitator- Where about, sorry?

Participant 3- After I've written it.

Facilitator- After it's gone onto the computer, so about here.

Participant 3- Yeah, after it's pretty well structured, because I tend to write in abstract sentences and then put all the link words in after, to make it flow. I don't worry about whether they're in order until the end .

Facilitator- Is there anything else, any other comments, both of you would like to make about any of those, do you think there is anything missing?

Participant 3- I don't actually do it, but I know other people, at least on the access course who would take it to. I know it's a bit more difficult at University to take it to the actual lecturer concerned and get an opinion from someone they think knows what they want. Which you can't really do, as far as I know, but we used to notice that on our course. Some people would try to get a lot more information out of the person who had set the assignment.

Participant 4- I did it once, and I didn't like what they said, so I didn't change it.

Facilitator- That's actually another one of the related factors, um, something called cue seeking, which is going to people who know, or who are going to be marking it and asking them to give you cues as to where to go and things like that. We're now going to move on to the related factors, and I'll give you a sheet with all of those on and well turn the tape of again.(click)

Participant 3- I think it helps if you can perceive the cues that the markers give, you can get the book out of the library and think hey she wrote it, that's why she referenced it, and I'm sure there is something that they have, that they are looking for that they have a set amount of marks and you might get. I don't know what are marks are going to be here but you might yet 60% for a well written one, but if you really want the edge you've got to put in that bit extra and if you see that, and can perceive that there is something underlying what they are trying to get across, or you've got the important bits out of their lectures that

they're specifically trying to get across then you couldn't get that out of a textbook then it's going to give you lots of marks but I'm not sure it works that way.

Facilitator- You think that cue seeking is quite important then?

Participant 3- Yes, but I wouldn't actually go to the lecturer and specifically ask for it, but I would try to perceive things as I go through their lecture, what sort of person is this and what do they want? (lecturer's name) who marks at Marjons says that people who do that get high marks, and it's obvious that if they think what does this lecturer want and they give it to them then they have a much better chance of suddenly thinking. It doesn't matter how clever something is if the marker doesn't see it as clever then you won't get the extra marks, so it's important to see what they perceive to be correct. Sometimes you can work that way and they might think wow that's good, but you've still got to know their personality a little bit and I think what their interests are, probably the important board is the board downstairs with all the books that they've written I only noticed that the other week and I thought that's probably worth a look so I think it is important, especially if you want high marks. I don't think you need to do it to get through it but, it depends what you want.

Facilitator- To get..... to keep the edge?

Participant 3- If you want to be in the academic world, then you've got to know what the people are looking for, because they're the ones that stand on the gates and let people in and out. (all laugh)

Facilitator- Are there any others there that you think are important?

Participant 3- Um, levels of readership I suppose again you've got to be writing, um, looking how you've done before and seeing how you've improved, right, your mark. I get a lot out of one of the lecturer used to put the highly marked essays into a box and let you read them, so that's the type of essay that would get you 90% or whatever, and I found that really useful. I didn't read the study guide that you were supposed to I just looked at what got a good mark and extract the information from that really.

Facilitator- What about rather than relating to actual marks, what you think is important in effecting this process or maybe changing the process in which you write?

Participant 3- It's got to be something that works for you I've found that the process developed..... I didn't go out and read that process and say that.... read a study guide and say that this is what you should do, so that's what I'll do I just found that that developed over time, naturally came about so, um.....

Facilitator- What factors do you think made you develop into that way of essay writing?

Participant 3- Interest in the subject had a lot to do with it, wanting to answer the questions not just wanting to produce a piece of work but wanting to know the answer to the questions, especially with open questions things like that, to see what was available, and interest in the subject really. I think that if you're not interested then you might very well miss out steps in the process if you just want to hand in a piece of work and get a mark. I talk about getting high marks, because that's career oriented it's not just about getting marks for the sake of marks, it's getting those marks so that you can then do what you want to do in life, so obviously that is an influence, um, wanted to succeed in doing it is quite a motivational factor.

Facilitator- What do you think is important in getting good marks and factors influencing the way you've developed your process?

Participant 4- I'm the opposite to (participant 3's name) on the cue seeking. It's my work and it's my interpretation, and I don't see why I have to do specially or write it in such a way that the lecturer can understand it. He should be able to understand everybody's work and not just an interpretation of his own, so I totally disagree on that side. I think it's very important to enjoy essay writing. I think to produce a good essay you've got to enjoy what you are doing. I find it very difficult if it's a subject I don't enjoy, to write about it. Where as if it's something I do enjoy or am interested in I just sit and carry on writing. I do think

that that's important um, on this 1st one, where you've got about the different courses, you've put in about seeing other peoples exam marks, well last year we were quite a very small course. I think there was about 9 of us and our marks were never published, it was - 'what do you get? What did you get?' some would say and some wouldn't. It always used to bother me, but now that they are actually published on a board I don't seem to bother quite so much. I don't know why, you know, but that doesn't seem to bother me anymore, erm. I don't particularly want to be the top of the class. I just want to be good at what I do and get enjoyment out of what I do I think otherwise you can get too focused on just having the best mark and I think having the best mark doesn't necessarily mean that you wrote the best essay, it's somebody else's interpretation of your essay because individually as long as I feel that I've written a good essay as far as I'm concerned if I get negative feedback I just think they don't know what they're talking about. If they'd asked me I would have explained.

Participant 3- I can never predict how I've done either or tried to.

Facilitator- Is that on essays as well?

Participant 3- On everything, until I get it back I haven't a clue about how I've done. I don't feel confident in myself. It doesn't matter how many good marks I get it won't make me confident for the next one I might hope, but I wouldn't feel confident I wouldn't got to people and say that I think - 'I got a good mark on that one'.

Participant 4- I've never felt particularly confident, but I think again that's all down to your own personality, isn't it.

Participant 3- I don't particularly think that the opinion of peers is important to me. Sometimes it's useful but it's not important I can do without it. I like being at university rather than open university because of the lecturers more than because of the peers because sitting in lectures you get information that you just wouldn't extract from a text or whatever, but the being with peers is nice but it's not important.

Participant 4- I don't think that the number of essays that you have experienced is too important either because I did the access last year, but before that I was 22 years outside of the education system so I left school at 15 with nothing but I just enjoy writing. I enjoy English. I enjoy reading.

Facilitator- So you think that that has more of an effect on the process than the amount of years out?

Participant 4- I just enjoy writing, and I have written short stories and things before, so for me, it's just a fun thing to do, sad person really but....

Facilitator- You get a lot of people saying that essay writing is a love hate relationship you hate it but when you are actually into it, you love it.

Participant 4- Actually I've found it very helpful. I was posted down to the Falklands for 5 months and there were only three females on the island, and I tended to write down everything, whatever had upset me that day, or anything like that because I had nobody to talk to. I could put it all down on paper get it off my chest, go away and forget about it you know. I think it can actually work as a form of therapy for people as well.

Facilitator- So you've got a very positive association with writing?

Participant 4- Ummmm.

Participant 3- When you say usefulness of essay, what do you mean by that?

Facilitator- Do you feel that essays are useful or do you think that they are just an assessment tool?

Participant 3- I think they are very useful, but that might be because of the way I do them. I find that getting all this extra information that may not go into the essay is my way of revising. I don't revise in the standard way, and often I will just use my past essays to answer questions, so I wish we had more of them really, even if we didn't have to hand them in, if we just had to do them as an exercise and they didn't count towards a final mark. I feel we're a bit short on that, especially being combined honours.

Participant 4- I can take 2 pages of notes in a lecture and go home and write another 5 pages. I rewrite all my notes from every single lecture and I can end up with three or four pages more than what I had. I tend to add stories into them to give me a relation.

Facilitator- To help you understand.

Participant 4- I do, to help me understand things, that's why I'm finding the statistics so difficult.

Participant 3- We do feel that by being on combined honours we miss out on quite a lot of the skills that they are being taught. We've not been taught these extra skills. I feel that it's such a shame that they've taken that away.

Participant 4- I think that that's one of the most significant things really about the whole thing. Is the difference for the single and combined honours, in facilities and help that's available.

Facilitator- We've got a couple of minutes left, you were talking earlier about.... well you started to talk about cue seeking, and this kind of relates to something called ROGs - which are rules of the game and this is kind of implicit rules not things that lecturers have directly told you, but implicit rules about.... almost giving you ways in which people believe that they can get better marks. OK, these are some that people have admitted to using, so far, can you briefly tell me if you think there are any more that you get the impression would get you a better mark, but that lecturers don't directly say do this to get a better mark.

Participant 4- I find it difficult to comment on this because I really can't pick out cues very well. I have to go with my own interpretation if it's what I pull out of it happens to go along with what they think then that's fine. I wouldn't go and actively seek out their opinions on anything because they are or should be teaching us to put our own interpretations on things. I don't think that it should necessarily be what they want all the time. They've attained what they want to achieve or whatever, and it's time for us to learn now, and I don't see why we should do it by having someone hoist specific feelings upon us. Something's with lecturers you don't get a broad enough view it's how they have interpreted that particular study, but I don't actively seek out any cues.

Participant 3- I don't think it's necessarily a case of agreeing with them it's just knowing what their view is, so that.... one of them says criticise lecturer's views to get a better mark, because if you can justify it then, whether you are trying to write an essay for your benefit or one that stands out, when they've got a 100 essays to mark I just think for their sake, it's nice for having something interesting, or with humour. It's not just the mark thing, but to write something that is of interest and the they say wow. It's probably difficult to do, but it's nice to try and do that, essay writing for me is to give away information I mean that the point of it is, say you wanted to teach, you've got the knowledge but how can you give that away, and so part of essay writing is to consider the reader but I mean, but if it's their Ph.D. then you've got to at least try and consider their line of thinking. I mean that is to me, what I would do, but having said that I wouldn't criticise someone else for not doing that, but it just makes it interesting for me. It gives me something else to think about while I'm doing it.

Facilitator- Yeah.

Participant 3- It's not just the essay, the point of the essay but trying to develop along with it.

Facilitator- Is there anything you feel that I haven't given you the chance to say from the questions that I've asked that you would like to say?

Participant 4- I don't think so, no.

Participant 3- It's quite interesting because when I went through my school years I struggled with certain things and I was saying to (participant 4's name) that because of the practicals and that I have great difficulty getting marks as high as everything else in the class tests, that other people seem to handle, so I booked in for the dyslexia test and we don't

seem to have covered any specific learning skills and how that might effect ho you extract information.

Facilitator- That's one of the individual differences that I'll be looking at, so it'll be, so far as I know that I am going to use age, and gender, educational background, so from that I hope to glean the skills that people might have, whether they are traditional skills or skills from experience, um, certain work environments and things like that learning difficulties wasn't something that I was going to include merely because I can't include everything, obviously. The more factors I have the more complicated to analyse and the less meaning it has. Because you cant interpret it and your own subjectivity come sin more and more with the interpretation. So that's I'm afraid all we're going to look at.

END OF FOCUS GROUP

4th focus group

(Two 3rd years, Semester one, 1996)

Facilitator- You selected the full process.

Participant 5- Yes, a full process.

Facilitator- And you selected the editing, the editors.

Participant 6- That's right.

Facilitator- We'll start with you (participant 6's name). Perhaps you can tell me how you differ? How your similar to that process? Why you selected that one?

Participant 6- I think because I found it very similar to what I actually do. I mean I do pre- research reading and sort of selecting information, gathering information a lot of that I do sort of.... not necessarily on paper but actually sit down and draw out an essay plan because I find whether it's something you sort of unconsciously start to right the ideas come out in sequence anyway so I don't actually have to plan it. And if somebody say s to me plan it I tend to think ahhh I can't. I cannot sit down and work out a plan. I just don't seem to be able to do it but when I begin to right it begins to flow in logical order and I don't actually ever feel that I've planned it.

Facilitator- Right, you say you start writing straight away from after gathering and selecting relevant information?

Participant 6- Not necessarily straight away. I mean it might take me some background reading over a period of days, it just depends. It's just sort of mulling around up there and when I sit down to write I just start to write it. It's almost a finished essay with a few minor adjustments and then it's finished.

Facilitator- Do you, from the selecting of relevant information having that space over does it go onto computer or paper?

Participant 6- Paper, don't actually use computer, paper to paper.

Facilitator- Editing process happens on paper, then neat version comes out?

Do you interpret the question or not?

Participant 6- Umm. Usually after I've done the reading, read round the subject, then think about the question, not necessarily before.

Facilitator- So the orders are different?

Participant 6- Yeah.

Facilitator- Are there any other differences in your order here?

Participant 6- Umm don't think so. I think it's fairly much as I would do it. But as I said the interpreting of the question is something I would place somewhere else.

Facilitator- In that case as your reading?

Participant 6- Yes because I think I tend to do everything I possibly can before I sit down and write, perhaps out of avoidance of writing. I don't know, but perhaps do them in slightly different order in that I attack the question s best I can without the information, then I'll go gather the information, do no. 4, and having read that, I think I'd probably go back to interpreting the question, then I'd go to pre-research reading then I'd go back to interpreting the question. I think I keep checking and checking.

Facilitator- Right, it's very dynamic.

Participant 5- And that takes quite a bit of mental work and then I'd select the relevant information.

Facilitator- In what form would the information come?

Participant 5- I think I work very hard on doing one two and four in varying orders to actually understand the concept so that when I come to select the information, it's from an understanding rather than from a textbook, although obviously I'll use the textbook as references. Selecting of relevant information is going on sometimes. I'll go and store something down on a piece of paper other times it's a mental process. I tend to rely more on scribbling things on paper now because there's too many other things to remember and

that's my form planning and things will suddenly come up. It gets stuck on all sorts of bits of paper which all come together, so my planning is again is mostly a mental process.

Facilitator- And do you write and edit on paper and then type it up or does it go straight to computer?

Participant 5- Again, I don't have a computer available to me so I would write it first of all. If I had a typewriter, then I'd do it right there. If I had a computer available to me I may put these ideas on scraps of paper onto a computer but as it's not available to me I don't.

Facilitator- (Participant 6's name) if you had a computer do you think it would change?

Participant 6- No, I wouldn't change. I mean the only thing I would do would be to type the very final thing on the computer to present it, but otherwise the process would stay the same. Most of it would be up in thinking, then it would come out on paper. To me, it's easier than on a computer. I don't find it so easy with a computer.

Facilitator- Why is that?

Participant 6- It could be as simple as unfamiliarity, but maybe it is simply that. It feels more comfortable on paper.

Facilitator- When you select your relevant information what form does that come in? Is that in your head, not memory or do you highlight text?

Participant 6- Umm It's almost a selection process as I write the final thing. I don't highlight anything. If I've got a book I don't mark those, but I've pulled things out as they are relevant. I mean I've read it before and it just seems to come together. There's no sort of - 'well I'll underline that and that as sort of point one and two' but at the time I actually sit down with pencil.... the right bits seems to shout at me from the pages and it all seems to fall together.

Participant 5- That's amazing!

Participant 6- It is rather. I don't really understand how it works. If someone were to say to me you've got to do an essay plan it completely throws me. It disturbs the whole process.

Facilitator- One other thing that I wanted to ask you is whether you feel that this way you do it is the way you generally or even always do it. Has it developed? Will it? Or is it quite dynamic depending on different circumstances? Would you for example use one process in one situation and another in another?

Participant 5- Umm I suppose it depends on the subject matter and how confident you are in how you can deal with it. I think mine tends to be more dynamic anyway because we've discussed this before.... because I tend to use stress levels as a way to produce the work. So I build myself into a frenzy beyond which I can't go so I have to sit down and I actually think. That is almost a deliberate move on my part. We've discussed this, sort of working at your best when your at your high stress level. I suppose the format I use has pretty much stayed the same. My attitude behind it might change though according to the subject matter and how good my knowledge is.

Facilitator- Have you changed? Have you always done that since you've been doing essays?

Participant 5- I probably have. It's difficult to tell because I had such a long gap in school to adulthood. But since starting education again as an adult I think I probably have, a lot of the way I do work now has been reinforced. I don't think it's the most efficient way.

Facilitator- What do you think the most efficient way of doing it?

Participant 5- To be more systematic and I think I cover too great wide an area in a quest to understand the meaning of life behind the question and I think that if I spent more time interpreting the question and defining what it means more clearly. Yeah perhaps that's something I've changed. I go back and check I've interpreted the question correctly to try and narrow down my explanation. I can find I can read the whole library and still not know what the question is I'm supposed to be answering.

Facilitator- What about you (participant 6's name)?

Participant 6- I mean the same thing again, the last 2 years I've been back in education, a 20 year gap. I haven't a clue what I did before then, but for the last 3 years it's been exactly the same process, no change.

Facilitator- It's been consistent?

Participant 6- Yeah, it's almost an instinctive process. It just happens. At least I don't struggle with it! It happens without you ever being aware of it. It comes together and out it comes.

Facilitator- Look at the categories you've selected. How would you change them to fit you more? One thing that's coming across is the rather than having a need of any progression of things happening in different orders, and that you can do things more than once.

Participant 6- It's like you say, a linear progression. I mean I've got 1, 2, 4 on the side of the page and 5, instead of putting them down the page, I'd put them horizontally, because they run together until the essay comes out at the end of it.

Participant 5- I think I'd put 1, 2 and 4 in a circle.

Facilitator- And feel they can occur at any stage over and over again?

Participant 5- Yeah, or even a triangle because I keep going back to interpreting the question, perhaps the question is the link to the previous three, gathering general information and keep going back to that.

Facilitator - What do you think of the constructs, do you think there are any missing? Any that you'd do?

Participant 5- You've forgot lots of cups of coffee while your working!

Participant 6- That's ever so important! I'm joking but I do find if I'm sat relaxing it comes out ever such a lot easier, but like (participant 5's name) said at the same time when you've actually got a date set when it's due. I set a date for myself a week earlier so it's got to be ready and mull it around in my head, and a couple days before my deadline I can finish to my deadline, so I know if there is a problem I've still got another week, but I can mull it over sit down and out it comes.

Facilitator- This mulling it over is very interesting. I'll get back to that.

Participant 5- That's the thing I was going to say is that the mental process, putting or planning an essay, the implication is that it is more of a mechanical process, where I think it's much more a dynamic process of going over and over the first steps.

Facilitator- All leads to you being able to construct a plan

Participant 5- Right, yeah.

Facilitator- I've got some things that I call mental processes which are going to be referred to here in 'free floating' constructs. Now the constructs I've discovered from previous focus groups are part of the process, but they aren't included in the integral categories because they are very different for different people so I'll describe what they are.

Participant 5- Yeah, they do occur. The forget and leave, I'd go ahead with the leave bit but not the forgetting bit. The title, interpreting the question I think I do. What takes up too much energy is interpreting the information and how it relates to other factors and I tend to digress from that.... away from the subject. I put off dealing with it, but it's mulling round my head.

Facilitator- It's more a mulling over than a forget and leave it?

Participant 5- Yes.

Facilitator- Where would that occur, are there problem times?

Participant 5- That I leave it?

Facilitator- That you mull it over.

Participant 5- Mulling over stage is actually quite long (laughter) because I find it a problem sitting down and getting it out on paper and again I think because my thought processes become so disorganised. But when I do sit down it comes out quite easily

because I reach a stage where I have to deal with it. The information is there I just have to go look for it.

Facilitator- Is this before or after interpreting the question?

Participant 5- After. The mulling over is usually when I've got all the information. I can try to fit pieces together. It also gets sort of incorporated in other things, like it can happen when I'm washing when I have to leave it but it's still going on in my head... compose the essay in my head.

Facilitator- I find a lot of people do that. What about forming an opinion? Deciding what stance you need to take?

Participant 5- I do that quite early on, reading is probably based on my pre formed opinion. Ooh god I've just realised that! Yeah I think I... yes, early on.

Facilitator- What about you (participant 6's name)?

Participant 6- I'm terrible at it. I just sit on a fence from the beginning until I hand it in. I look at both sides.

Facilitator- The only way is to back up what you say?

Participant 6- I tend to look at a for or against. I can see the sensibility in both sides, and still not know which way I want to go at the end of the essay.

Facilitator- What about interpreting information?

Participant 6- Yeah, it all goes together. I'll read things and if it's something that interests me I'll read it again, or if I need to understand it better. But that's the birthing, the reading and understanding. I'll not actually concentrate on it, but it's always there and then there's times when you reach something because you don't understand it, put it down and return to it when it does make sense again. When I sit down and write it, the impression I've given perhaps that I don't have the information in front of me, but it's all there, although I don't know what to say. I do have to have the books and papers in front of me. That as I'm writing I can go to those bits to get them into the paper. They are there.

Facilitator- Okay, is there anything else you want to say about what we've talked about?

Participant 5 & 6- No.

Facilitator- Moving on. These factors that might be related to the process. I love these sessions I get so much information! This will develop into a questionnaire. I want it to fit people, umm... yeah, there's a list, do ask to confirm what they mean. What I'd really like to know, first of all, do you think any factors are missing? Which are most important in terms of having a relationship with the process of writing?

(Tape is turned off so participants can look and think).

Participant 5- You want to know which are most relevant?

Facilitator- Basically there are too many factors there for me to include in a questionnaire, so I need to know which are most important to be included.

Participant 5- I think enjoyment of module.

Participant 6- Feedback is very important because that's how you gauge your next essay. Preferred working conditions. I work best in certain areas and in a certain way. That is important.

Participant 5- Time that the title is given. I spend so much time thinking about it before I write it.

Participant 6- The downside I find there is you don't understand enough. You panic. The question is a load of... you can't do it.

Facilitator- Are there an awful lot that are relevant, maybe go the other way round, which ones aren't relevant.

Participant 5- Number of people isn't relevant.

Participant 6- They're relevant to me in that I can only do it on my own. It's a one person effort.

Facilitator- It refers to resources.

Participant 5- That's why I like to start early, so I can get the books first.

Facilitator- That's lovely.

Participant 5- The other reason being if there are people doing the same essay, there are more people to talk to.

Participant 6- I don't discuss it until after I've done it.

Participant 5- I probably discuss it more than you do.

Participant 6- I have to be really stuck in order to talk about it before it's done.

Participant 5- Sometimes the choice of essays is relevant. Tutorials.... it's too huge.

Facilitator- Do you find it affects your enjoyment whether you choose or not? First of all there are three factors, one set? choose from any area?....

Participant 5- It affects my security. If I've got a choice of three or a small number then I still have the benefit of deciding which I prefer, but at least I'm secure I'm going in the right direction.

Participant 6- Yeah, I'll agree with that. Because we had that, we were told we could write about anything and everyone panicked. It was too soon to give us such a wide choice. Another thing important is how relevant what you are writing about is to your life. Personal connection equals greater understanding.

Participant 5- Number of essays experienced is also with [...]

Participant 6- Perception of allocated time, you do have a deadline, is important motivation, a panic point.

Participant 5- Yes I do because I'm just relieved I've got over the fear of sitting down and starting. I mess about with it quite a bit, but I enjoy the creativity. What I don't enjoy is starting it. I enjoy all the research, thinking, understanding and learning, but not starting it, have I got it right?

Facilitator- Do you like writing?

Participant 6- I don't mind, at the end of it, having written it down, as I want it, all I've got to write it up. Then I've got a feeling of there it is - 'I've achieved that'. I hate waiting. I wish they'd mark it the same night. I've got to shut it out because I hate the wait to find out.

Facilitator- Any others that strike you?

Participant 5- The computer aspect as before. I don't see it as a tool of essay writing because I'm not used to a computer.

Participant 6- I don't either.

Facilitator- Do you think that will change?

Participant 5- I think it would if I used it more because it would be useful to collate thoughts rather than having bits of paper all over. There is a ritualistic form of essay writing, as (participant 6's name) was saying.

Participant 6- Juggling assignments, for me. I don't do that, if there's a deadline for one, that's the one I do first. I don't have 2 or 3 on the go at once.

Facilitator- Is it confusing?

Participant 6- I panic.

Participant 5- I find it stimulating.

Participant 6- Example of practical report.... until I could separate the two projects, I couldn't get the work done.

Facilitator- Perhaps that relates to how you write an essay?....

Participant 5-and involving process, a hierarchy.

Participant 6- It's not a juggling thing. I've got to do that one then that one etc., the order that they're given in.

Participant 5- I can't work under that kind of discipline. I'd feel totally restricted. I've got to get totally chaotic before it will work.

Facilitator- Rules of the game. There's a lot of research that looks into. They are implicit rules that people follow or are even aware of to get better marks but aren't overt parts of

the curriculum, i.e. agreeing with the lecturer to get a better mark. Are you aware these exist?

Participant 6- As it's been pointed out to us there's been a couple things in social. Marks are being affected by what's being said. I'm aware of it, but I can't honestly say it affects what I do. I don't know if I could.... it's almost impossible to describe how an essay comes out for me, it just comes out.

Participant 5- A shared interest is all I can think of. Which goes back to enjoyment, and if you are really enjoying the module, the lecturer knows it and perhaps enhances the feedback he receives. If it comes across in the essay you like this stuff, then it implies possibly increasing your marks.

Participant 6- If you are actually enjoying, then definitely the essay is easier to do. I really got into it and understood it, resulting in higher marks.

Facilitator- Better tie it up.. we're almost out of time.

Participant 6- [...] tutorial essay.... the first 1500 fast one.

Participant 5- Title can be very inhibiting. No one want to tackle it.

Facilitator- Very small area and no freedom within it?

Participant 5- What we are looking at is how we structure an argument. [...] it was extremely ambiguous. We needed to know what the question was, but that one was unclear and vague.

Facilitator- When you went to the lecturer, did you get more information about it?

Participant 5- Yes, but it was unhelpful as we'd already decided and panicked about it.

Facilitator- Anything else you haven't had the opportunity to talk about?

Participant 6- No, I don't think so.

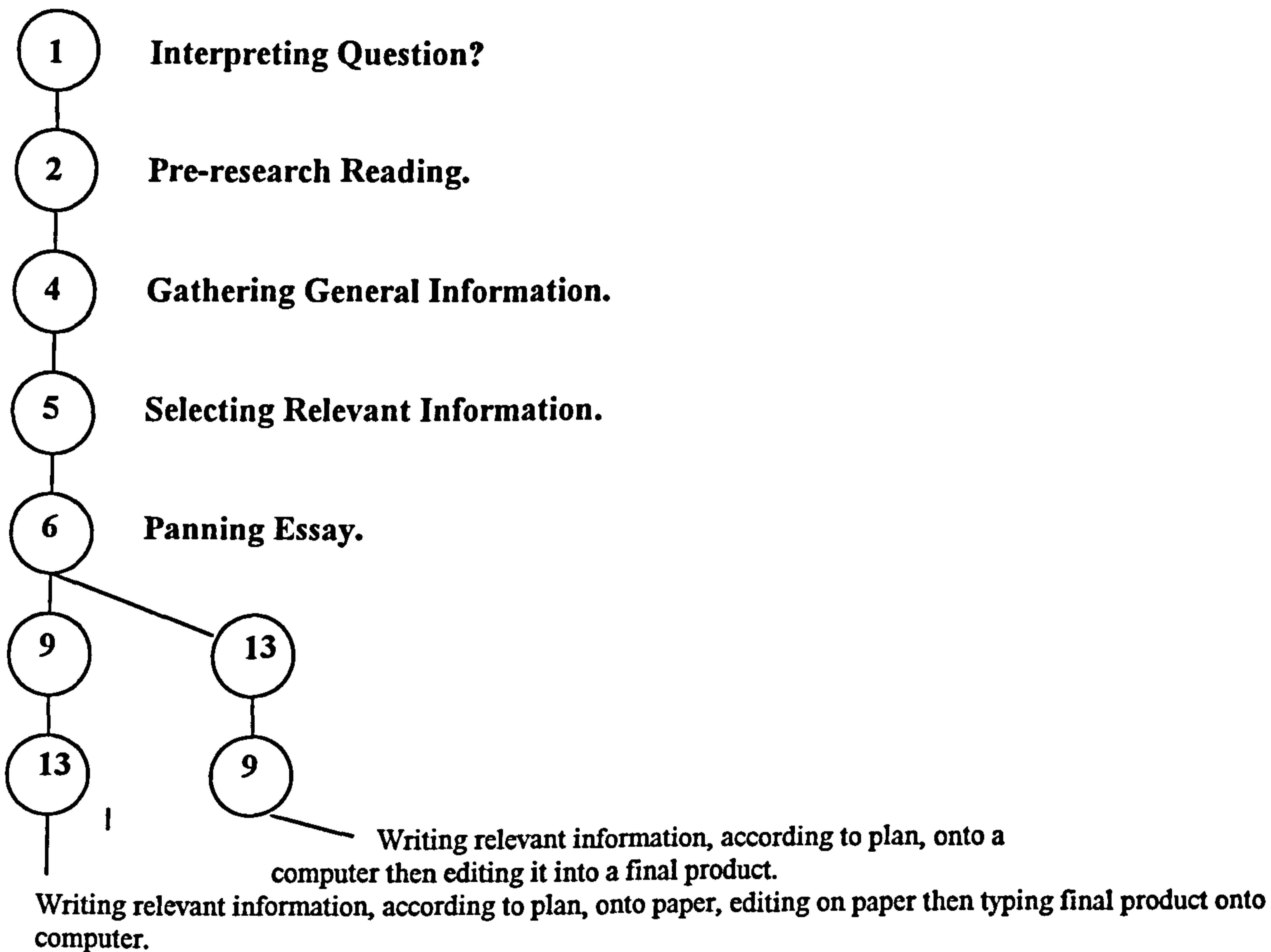
END OF FOCUS GROUP

Appendix C

Essay Writing Strategies and Related Factors Shown To Participants in Phase Two of Focus Groups

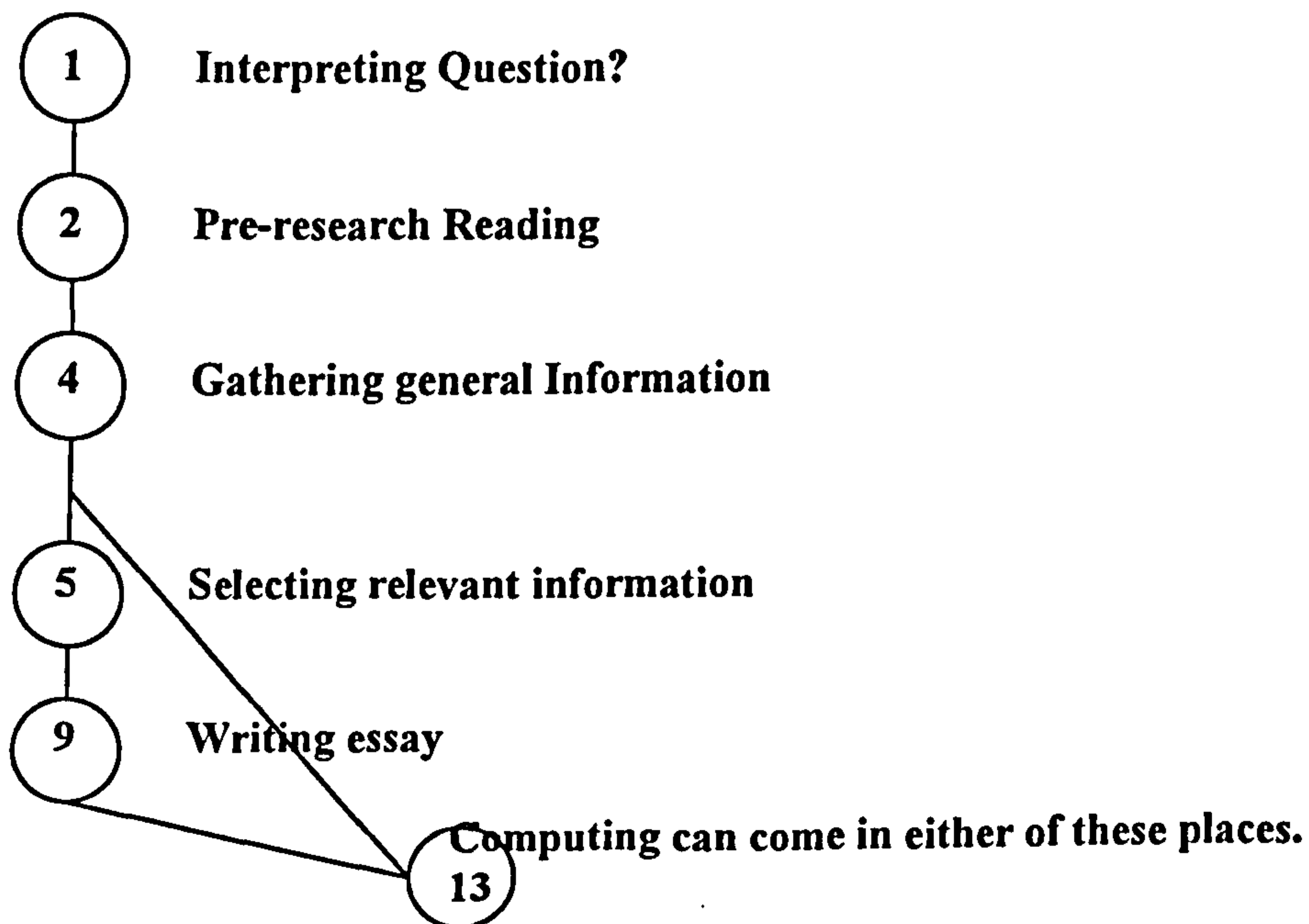
Relevant, Relevant Informers.

Full process including pre-research reading, selecting relevant information and planning.



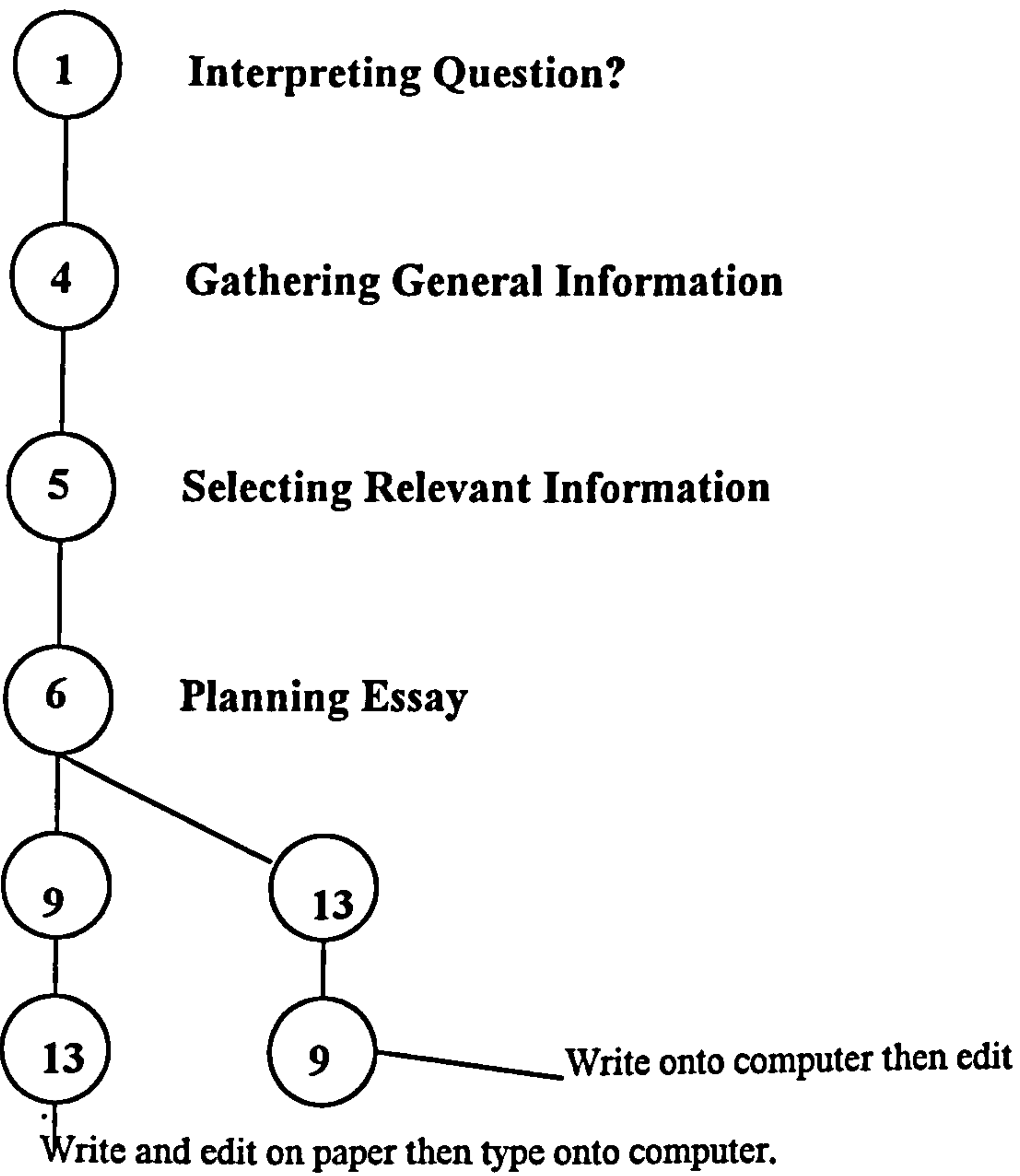
Editors.

Full process with no plan.



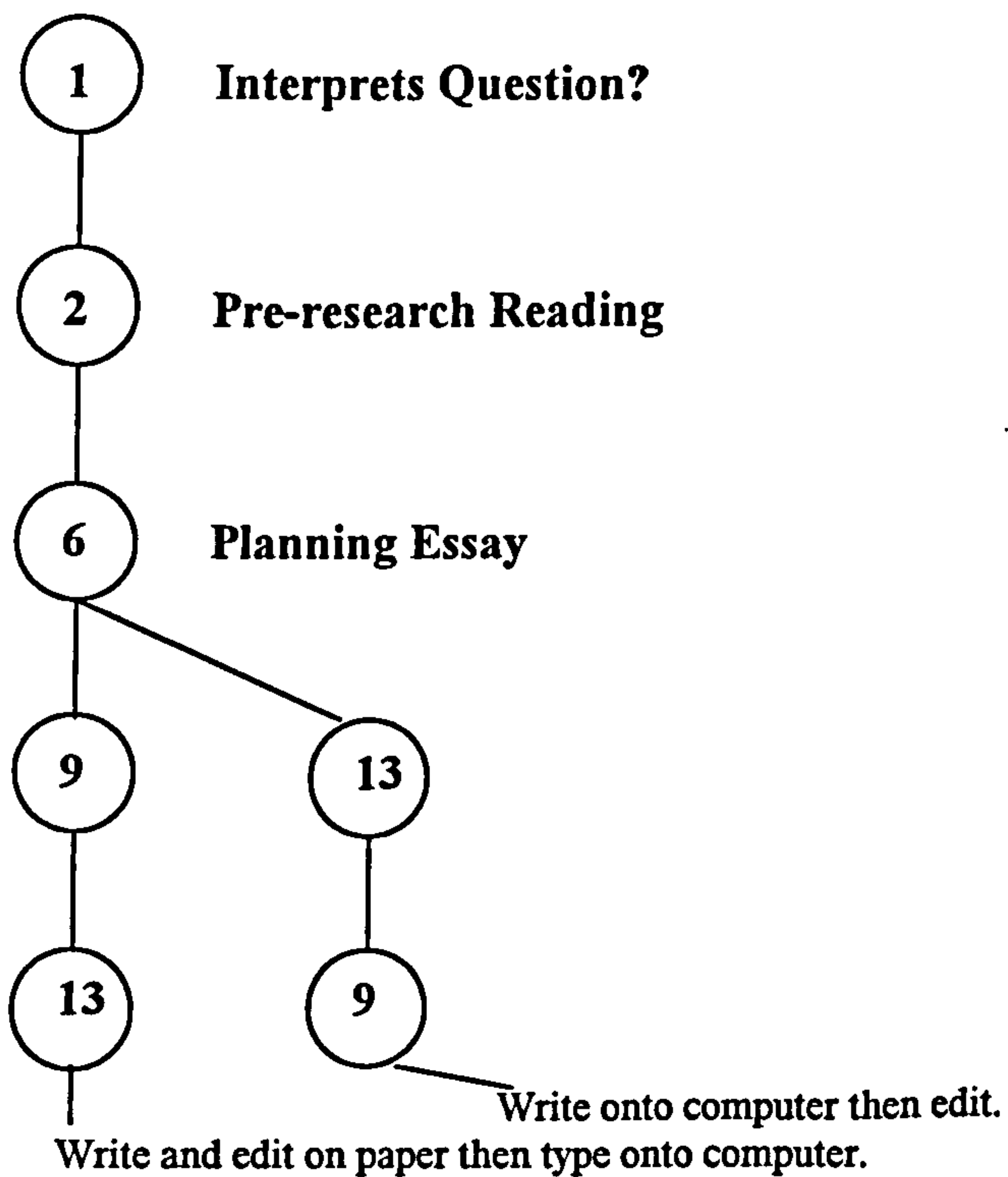
Relevant Informers

Same as Relevant, Relevant, Informers without pre- research reading.



Informers

No selection of relevant material occurs in this process.



Definitions of Constructs and Dimensions in Models

Pre-research reading

This refers to gathering information from a basic text, lecture notes or from general knowledge.

Gathering general information

This entails obtaining set references or references other than those set related to the topic.

Planning Essay

Or organising information. This comes in many forms: pictorial(mind maps, tree diagrams etc.); actual (organising notes into piles etc.); textual (in written format); or in the writer's mind. They can be:

a-points in logical order.

b-points in no order.

c- in detail.

d-brief.

e-flexible.

f-rigid.

Selecting relevant information

This refers to deciding what information is relevant enough to go into an essay. This can be done in many ways:

a-reading and memorising.

b-writing notes from reading

c-reading and copying/plagiarising text.

d-marking text to indicate what is relevant.

Computer

This indicates the stage at which a computer is used - from this stage onwards information is manipulated on a computer.

Free Floating Constructs.

Interpreting the Question

Putting the question into the subjects own words, highlighting key words or any other strategy aimed at working out what the question is asking and understanding it.

Interpreting Information

Trying to understand information that has been gathered as above this includes strategies such as putting information into the students own words or highlighting any of the text to not only understand but discover what it means in relation to other information.

Forming Opinion

Deciding what perspective, 'stance' the essay will take.

Mulling it over

Not actively working on the essay but consciously thinking about what it will contain, the structure or development of an argument for example during the activities of daily life.

Appendix D

Essay Writing Process Questionnaire -Pilot Version.

Overleaf is a questionnaire asking you about the way you normally write course-work essays. Please read the instructions below and follow them carefully. Be as honest and accurate in your responses as possible.

Instructions

Imagine that you are writing a typical course-work essay. read each of the statements overleaf carefully and indicate whether you agree or disagree with that statement by circling the appropriate response. Circle the response that applies to most of your course-work essays.

In order to respond to the statements you will need to understand the following terms:

A draft essay - This is anything that uses full sentences and resembles a whole essay. It contains the type of information that will be used in the final version, but will require changes before it is submitted.

Final version of an essay - This is the essay that will be handed in , it won't go through any changes before it is handed in.

Thank you for your participation.

- | | | |
|---|--------------|-----------------|
| 1. Before writing an essay I think about information regarding the essay topic that I know from memory. | Agree | Disagree |
| 2. I rarely talk to friends to gain information regarding an essay before I write it. | Agree | Disagree |
| 3. Reading relevant lecture notes is not part of my preparation for writing an essay | Agree | Disagree |
| 4. I use book chapters specific to the essay topic when producing an essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| 5. When producing an essay I rarely look at a general/ introductory text to get an overview of the topic. | Agree | Disagree |
| 6. Once I have obtained references I read <u>part</u> of every reference. | Agree | Disagree |
| 7. I obtain some of the references set by a lecturer. | Agree | Disagree |
| 8. When looking for information regarding an essay topic I look for books or journals that the lecturer has <u>not</u> cited. | Agree | Disagree |
| 9. I rarely use journal articles when producing an essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| 10. I do not get any of the references set by the lecturer. | Agree | Disagree |
| The following questions (11, 12, 13 and 14) inquire about your draft essay. If you do not write a draft answer the question as if it is asking about the final version of your essay. (see definitions at the beginning of the questionnaire). | | |
| 11. When writing a draft essay I rarely write it all in one session. I write it a bit at a time. | Agree | Disagree |

12. My draft essay contains most of the information I have gathered, whether it is relevant or not.	Agree	Disagree
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If you disagreed with this statement in question twelve please tell us a little more by completing section one. If you agreed go to question thirteen.

Section One

- | | | |
|---|--------------|-----------------|
| a) When I read information regarding an essay I memorise the information that I think is relevant to the essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| b) When reading material I select information that I want to go into an essay by highlighting that information. | Agree | Disagree |
| c) When reading references I make a record of what material I want to go into my essay by writing that material into my notes. | Agree | Disagree |
| d) If, when reading for an essay, I come across relevant information, I write where it came from so that I can refer back to it when I write the essay. | Agree | Disagree |

13. I organise information I wish to go into a draft essay into groups of related topics.	13. Agree	13. Disagree
---	------------------	---------------------

If you agreed with this statement, please tell us a little more by completing section two. If you disagreed go to question fourteen.

Section Two

- | | | |
|--|--------------|-----------------|
| a) I write down the groupings on paper or onto computer. | Agree | Disagree |
| b) The groupings are brief (i.e. a list of headings, phrases or numbers etc.). | Agree | Disagree |
| c) These groupings rarely change as I write the essay. | Agree | Disagree |

14. Before I write a draft essay I organise the information I wish to use into the order I want it to appear in.

Agree

Disagree

If you agreed with this statement, please tell us a little more by completing section three. If you disagreed do to question fifteen.

Section Three

a) When I put topics into the order in which I wish them to appear I do this for the <u>whole</u> essay, from start to finish.	Agree	Disagree
b) I write down the order topics will appear in on paper or onto computer.	Agree	Disagree
c) The order will not be detailed (i.e. it will only contain headings as opposed to sub-headings and minor information).	Agree	Disagree
d) This order rarely changes as I write the essay.	Agree	Disagree

The next two questions require you to write your own responses in the box provided.

15. What is your average essay mark (percentage) so far this year. If you do not know make an educated guess.

In order to answer the next question you will need to know what constitutes a separate draft.

If you write a first draft onto paper and decide this draft needs to be changed, even if you mark these changes on that draft, it remains the same draft. This only becomes a second draft if you re-write the information from the first draft according to the way you decided it should change and so on. If you write a first draft on to computer and change it on the screen until it becomes a final version of an essay, this too is regarded as one draft.

16. How many drafts of an essay do you write before you write the final version of the essay. (please indicate 0 if you do not write a draft before you write a final version of an essay).

Agree

Disagree

If you did not respond to this question with a 0, please tell us a little more about your drafts by answering the questions in section four.

Section Four

- | | | |
|--|--------------|-----------------|
| a) I change the order of the information in the draft essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| b) I often add information to the draft essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| c) I rarely take information out of a draft essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| d) I rarely check the spelling errors in a draft essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| e) I correct any grammatical errors in a draft essay. | Agree | Disagree |
| f) I rarely fit a draft essay into a word limit. | Agree | Disagree |

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix E

Demographic Questions

1. Name _____

2. Year of Study 1st 2nd 3rd

3. Age (on entry to degree) Years Months

4. Sex Male Female

5. When writing your essays do you use a computer? (not including typing a neat and final copy) Yes No

6. Are you studying a single or combined honours degree? Single Combined

7. Which department/s are you studying in?

8. What formal entry qualifications do you have? A/AS levels Degree Other None

If you answer 'none' to this question go straight to question 11.

9. How many years had you been out of formal education before you gained the entry qualification mentioned above?
(If less than one year write 0)

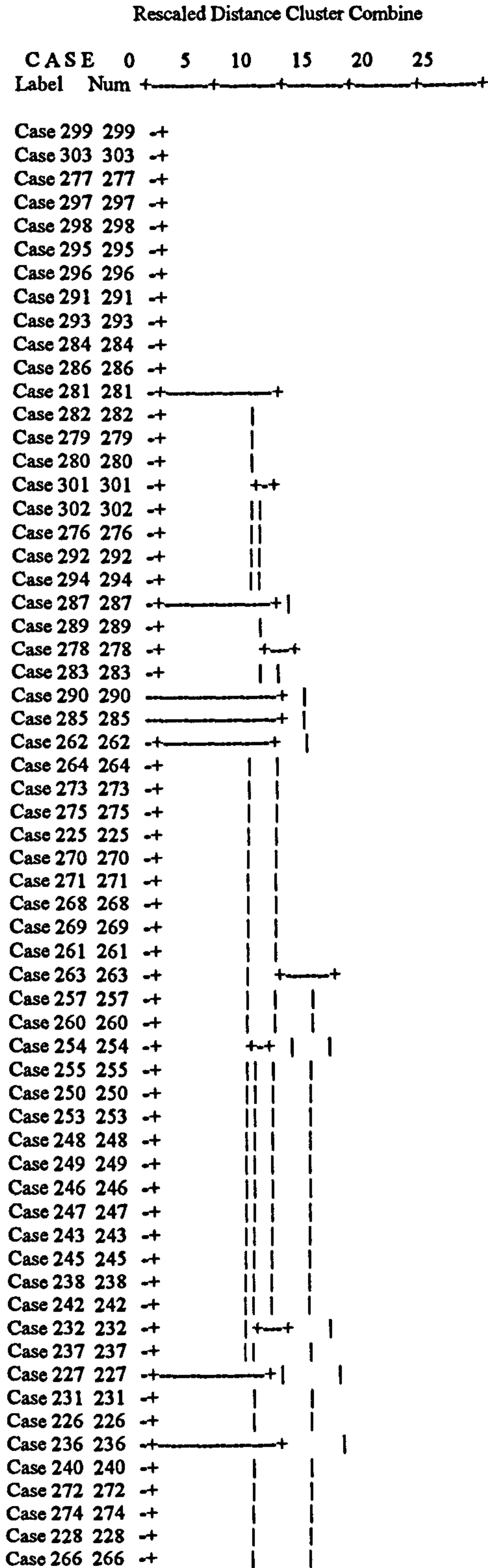
10. How many years had you been out of formal education after you gained the entry qualification mentioned above?
(If less than one year write 0)

11. How many years have you been out of formal education?
(if less than one years write 0)

Appendix F

DENDROGRAM FROM CLUSTER ANALYSIS (BY PARTICIPANT/CASE) OF MAIN COMPONENTS OF ESSAY WRITING - BASIC RESEARCH, GATHERING INFORMATION, PLANNING, SELECTING RELEVANT INFORMATION, AND REVISING.

Dendrogram using Average Linkage (Between Groups)



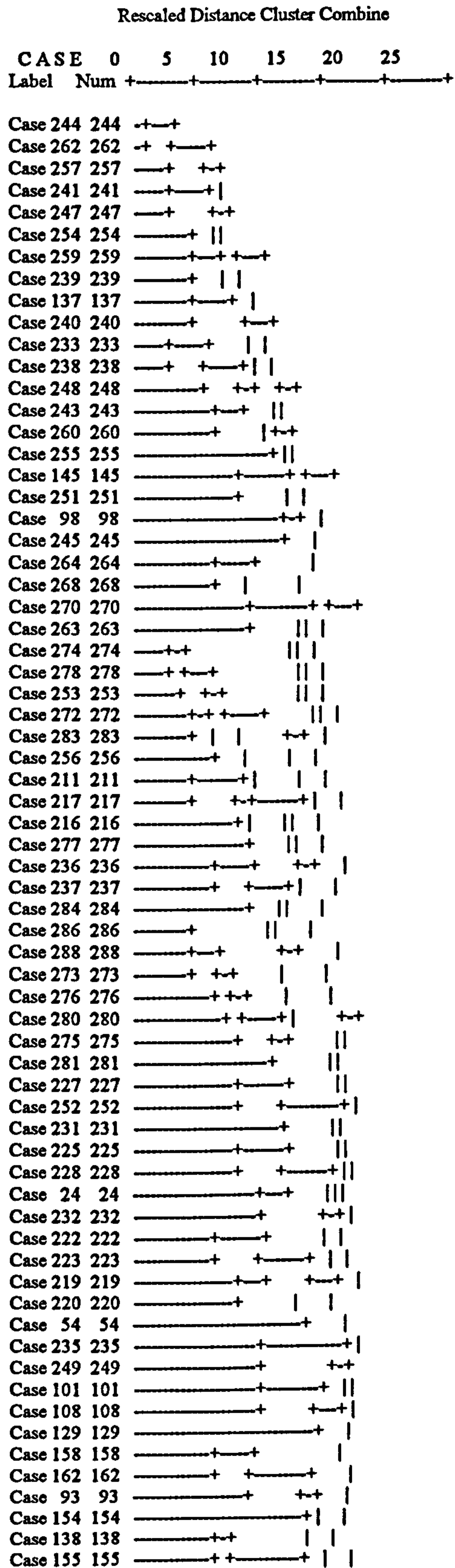
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Case 256	256	+				
Case 258	258	+				
Case 251	251	+				
Case 252	252	+				
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Case 244	244	+				
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Case 239	239	+				
Case 233	233	+	-----+			
Case 234	234	+				
Case 229	229	+				
Case 230	230	+				
Case 192	192	+	-----+			
Case 221	221	+		-----+		
Case 107	107	+				
Case 154	154	+	-----+			
Case 80	80	+		-----+		
Case 102	102	+				
Case 147	147	+	-----+			
Case 32	32	+		-----+		
Case 224	224	+	-----+			
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Case 207	207	+				
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Case 205	205	+				
Case 196	196	+				
Case 198	198	+				
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Case 182	182	+				
Case 187	187	+				
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Case 119	119	+				
Case 113	113	+				
Case 117	117	+				
Case 106	106	+				
Case 112	112	+				
Case 103	103	+				
Case 105	105	+	-----+			
Case 99	99	+				
Case 101	101	+		-----+		
Case 96	96	+				
Case 98	98	+				
Case 94	94	+				
Case 95	95	+				
Case 92	92	+				
Case 93	93	+				

Case 88	88	-+			
Case 89	89	-+			
Case 85	85	-+			
Case 86	86	-+			
Case 82	82	-+			
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Case 22	22	-+			
Case 24	24	-+			
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Case 18	18	-+			
Case 10	10	-+	→		
Case 15	15	-+			
Case 9	9	-+			
Case 218	218	-+			
Case 219	219	-+			
Case 177	177	-+			
Case 216	216	-+			
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Case 204	204	-+			
Case 206	206	-+			
Case 201	201	-+			
Case 203	203	-+			
Case 199	199	-+			
Case 200	200	-+	←		
Case 195	195	-+			
Case 197	197	-+			
Case 193	193	-+			
Case 194	194	-+			
Case 190	190	-+			
Case 191	191	-+			
Case 185	185	-+			
Case 186	186	-+			
Case 183	183	-+			
Case 184	184	-+			
Case 180	180	-+	→		
Case 181	181	-+			
Case 179	179	-+			
Case 174	174	-+			
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Case 159	159	-+			
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Case 146	146	-+			

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Case 11	11	-+		
Case 6	6	-+		
Case 7	7	-+		
Case 4	4	-+	+	+
Case 5	5	-+		
Case 3	3	-+		
Case 288	288	-+	+	+
Case 300	300	-+	+	+

DENDROGRAM FROM CLUSTER ANALYSIS (BY PARTICIPANT/CASE) OF SUB-COMPONENTS OF BASIC RESEARCH, GATHERING INFORMATION, PLANNING, SELECTING RELEVANT INFORMATION, AND REVISING.

Dendrogram using Average Linkage (Between Groups)



Case 134 134 —————+ | | |
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 Case 85 85 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 135 135 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 141 141 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 99 99 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 117 117 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 131 131 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 153 153 ———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 92 92 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 149 149 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 128 128 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 107 107 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 157 157 ———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 127 127 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 82 82 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 114 114 ———+ +———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 88 88 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 113 113 ———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 119 119 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 121 121 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 125 125 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 84 84 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 105 105 ———+ +———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 123 123 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 112 112 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 118 118 ———+ +———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 86 86 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 132 132 ———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 109 109 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 150 150 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 142 142 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 90 90 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 201 201 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 202 202 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 199 199 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 209 209 ———+———+ +———+ +———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 214 214 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 147 147 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 210 210 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 204 204 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 212 212 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |
 Case 215 215 ———+———+ | | | | | |
 Case 205 205 ———+———+ +———+ | | | | | |

Case 20 20 _____+ ||
 Case 187 187 _____+ _____+ ||
 Case 206 206 _____+ _____+ ||
 Case 208 208 _____+ _____+ |
 Case 192 192 _____+ |
 Case 295 295 _____+ _____+ |
 Case 296 296 _____+ _____+ |
 Case 291 291 _____+ _____+ |
 Case 290 290 _____+ | |
 Case 178 178 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 185 185 _____+ _____+ _____+ |
 Case 175 175 _____+ _____+ | | |
 Case 265 265 _____+ | | |
 Case 302 302 _____+ _____+ |
 Case 303 303 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 266 266 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 271 271 _____+ _____+ || |
 Case 299 299 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 173 173 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 182 182 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 218 218 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 221 221 _____+ | |
 Case 292 292 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 298 298 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 297 297 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 293 293 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 167 167 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 246 246 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 301 301 _____+ _____+ | |
 Case 126 126 _____+ | |

Appendix G

Essay Writing Process Questionnaire -Final Version

In order to continue you will need to understand the following terms:

A draft essay - This is anything that uses full sentences and resembles a whole essay. It contains the type of information that will be used in the final version, but will require changes before it is submitted.

Final version of an essay - This is the essay that will be handed in, it won't go through any changes before it is handed in.

1. How many times will you re-draft an essay before it is handed in. (Re-drafting an essay consists of making changes to a draft essay and re-writing the essay including those changes)

Now read each of the statements over leaf and indicate whether you agree or disagree with that statement by circling the appropriate response. Circle the response that applies to most of your course work essays.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. Before writing an essay I think about information regarding the essay topic that I know from memory and/or read relevant lecture notes.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I rarely use journal articles when producing an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
4. My draft essay contains most of the information I have gathered, whether it is relevant or not.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I organise information I wish to go into a draft essay into groups of related topics.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Before I write a draft essay I organise the information I wish to use into the order I want it to appear in.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I re-draft my essay by re-arranging, adding or removing information in it.	1	2	3	4	5

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. I re-draft my essays by checking the spelling or grammar. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. When writing my essays I use a computer? (not including typing a neat and final copy) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Thank you for your participation

Appendix H

Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire - First Pilot.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Even if an essay gets a low mark, writing it would have been useful.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The aim of writing an essay is to get it done as painlessly as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I will submit an essay in as soon as it is finished, even if I am not pleased with it.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Essay writing is not a competition with other people on my course.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I worry that I never show the essay marker what I am capable of producing.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I can't hand in an essay unless I know it is the best it could be.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I aim to get essays done as quickly as possible, even if that means scraping a pass.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I cannot write an essay unless I have understood the topic.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Getting a low mark on an essay is not important, as long as I have learnt something from my mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
10. When handing in an essay I hope to come near the top of the class.	1	2	3	4	5
11. When writing a course-work essay I aim to understand the topic it concerns.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I don't like to know what other students are writing in their essays.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Writing an essay is a laborious chore.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I enjoy discussing essay topics with friends studying the same subject.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
15. I generally write too many words in my essays.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I rarely discuss my essays with friends on the same course.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I will spend as little time as possible producing a course-work essay.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I will pick an option on the basis of the lecturer being an easy marker.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I don't think about the audience when I write an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Writing essays gives me a welcome opportunity to understand a topic.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I will work on an essay for as long as I can to get it right.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I often discuss, with fellow students, the topics that should be included in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
23. If a choice of essay topics is given I will choose a topic that I am familiar with to increase my chance of getting a good mark.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I am often motivated to write by the fact that I am way ahead of the deadline.	1	2	3	4	5
25. Feedback from friends on my course, about the way I am writing an essay, is extremely useful.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I often find myself writing an essay in the early hours of the morning on the day of the deadline.	1	2	3	4	5
27. Essay writers should always sit on the fence when writing an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I generally leave writing my essays until the last minute.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I often find myself in a situation where I have to rush my essays to get them finished in time.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
30. I find talking to other people about particular essays very off-putting.	1	2	3	4	5
31. Essays should argue that one argument in research is more worthy than another.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I find it hard to understand how anyone can write too much for an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I would hate to think a marker was bored by an essay I had written.	1	2	3	4	5
34. Once I have handed in an essay I realise that I actually enjoyed writing it.	1	2	3	4	5
35. I can't believe that some people find themselves with too few words in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
36. It is important to give research on both sides of an argument equal credit	1	2	3	4	5
37. It is not important that the reader of my essay is impressed with it.	1	2	3	4	5
38. I aim to get an essay done as quickly as possible.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I will put in as much effort as I can to get an essay perfect, before it is handed in.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I enjoy the sense of satisfaction I get, when I have finished an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
41. I think essay word limits are unrealistically small.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I get a real buzz out of an essay, when all the information comes together.	1	2	3	4	5
43. I rarely feel that I have to rush an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
44. A bit of competition with my peers, regarding essays, is a good thing.	1	2	3	4	5
45. When producing an essay, I aim to do better than other people on the same course.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
46. I would use essays from an essay pool, just to get my essay written in less time.	1	2	3	4	5
47. What the marker of my essay thinks of me, when reading my essay, concerns me.	1	2	3	4	5
48. Course-work essays are useful because they help me to understand a topic.	1	2	3	4	5
49. I am very aware, when producing an essay, that someone else will be reading it.	1	2	3	4	5
50. It is extremely important to me that I gain a good mark in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
51. Competition between peers, regarding essay writing, is a good motivator.	1	2	3	4	5
52. I like to think that my essay will stand out in the group.	1	2	3	4	5
53. I often write for my own enjoyment, oblivious that my essay will have an audience other than myself.	1	2	3	4	5
54. I find talking to other students in my department a useful way of picking up information about a particular essay.	1	2	3	4	5
55. Getting a good mark for an essay is not everything.	1	2	3	4	5
56. I don't enjoy competing with other people regarding essay writing.	1	2	3	4	5
57. There are many things I wish to gain from writing an essay, other than a high mark.	1	2	3	4	5
58. I would like to think that whoever reads my essay will be impressed.	1	2	3	4	5
59. I often become complacent about writing my next essay, when I have just received a good essay mark.	1	2	3	4	5
60. I wouldn't present one side of an argument as more worthy than the other in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
61. If I get a bad mark in an essay, it makes me feel like there is no point working hard on the next one.	1	2	3	4	5
62. I often put things into my essays to gain the readers attention.	1	2	3	4	5
63. Once I get a bad mark I find I get trapped in a downward slope of bad marks.	1	2	3	4	5
64. Receiving a good essay mark makes me feel that I don't need to work as hard for the next one.	1	2	3	4	5
65. I avoid any competitive behaviour regarding essay writing.	1	2	3	4	5
66. I find it hard to work on an essay when the deadline is only a few days away.	1	2	3	4	5
67. Getting a bad mark helps me to work harder in my next essay.	1	2	3	4	5
68. I find writing an essay an enjoyable challenge.	1	2	3	4	5
69. I make sure I have enough time to write an essay without rushing.	1	2	3	4	5
70. Regardless of how long it takes me to write an essay I would never copy sections from books.	1	2	3	4	5
71. I rarely take sides when writing an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
72. I nearly always find my essays are short of words.	1	2	3	4	5
73. I never talk to peers about the contents of their essays.	1	2	3	4	5
74. I am not sure how to express my own opinion in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
75. There is nothing better than getting a good essay mark to motivate me to write my next essay.	1	2	3	4	5
76. I don't need a deadline to motivate me to write an essay.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
77. If I get a good mark it makes me feel like working hard is worth it.	1	2	3	4	5
78. I often state my position in an essay, then use the relevant evidence to back it up, while criticising any evidence that disagrees with that view point.	1	2	3	4	5
79. It is not wrong to take a stance in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
80. I can only work on an essay when I have to, due to the approaching deadline.	1	2	3	4	5
81. Getting a low mark in an essay is a good motivator to try harder on the next one.	1	2	3	4	5
82. Understanding the topic an essay concerns is useless, if that essay gets a low mark.	1	2	3	4	5
83. If it meant getting a better mark, I would copy from books when writing an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
84. Most of the time I have to cut down the number of words in my essays.	1	2	3	4	5
85. I talk to peers about the way they go about writing essays.	1	2	3	4	5
86. I would never write anything in an essay that I didn't understand.	1	2	3	4	5
87. I will often choose an essay title because it is unfamiliar to me and will enable me to learn about a new topic.	1	2	3	4	5
88. I have never gained any satisfaction from writing a course-work essay.	1	2	3	4	5
89. It is only the essay deadline looming that motivates me to start producing an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
90. It is not the end of the world if I get a low mark on a course-work essay.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
91. If I leave an essay until too late, I get too stressed to write it.	1	2	3	4	5
92. I always have my essays finished before the day of the deadline.	1	2	3	4	5
93. I am not aware of any competition between my peers and myself, regarding essay writing.	1	2	3	4	5
94. Even though I start off with good intentions I never seem to start an essay until the last minute.	1	2	3	4	5
95. I often have to pad out my essays to make them fit the word limit.	1	2	3	4	5
96. I get too stressed to write an essay, if I leave it until a few days before the deadline.	1	2	3	4	5
97. If I could chose what type of course-work I could do, I would never write another essay.	1	2	3	4	5
98. I don't like other people to know what I am including in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
99. Writing essays gives me the freedom to read literature and form my own opinion regarding the issues they raise.	1	2	3	4	5
100. I make sure I convey both sides of an argument in the essays I write.	1	2	3	4	5
101. I prefer to work under the stress of an impending deadline.	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix I

Remaining 20 Items of The Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire

3. I will submit an essay as soon as it is finished, even if I am not pleased with it.
8. I cannot write an essay unless I have understood the topic.
9. Getting a low mark on an essay is not important, as long as I have learnt something from my mistakes
28. I generally leave writing my essays until the last minute.
29. I often find myself in a situation where I have to rush my essays to get them finished in time.
34. Once I have handed in an essay I realise that I actually enjoyed writing it.
37. It is not important that the reader of my essay is impressed with it.
39. I will put in as much effort as I can to get an essay perfect, before it is handed in.
42. I get a real buzz out of an essay, when all the information comes together.
45. When producing an essay, I aim to do better than other people on the same course.
47. What the marker of my essay thinks of me, when reading my essay, concerns me.
54. I find talking to other students in my department a useful way of picking up information about a particular essay.
57. There are many things I wish to gain from writing an essay, other than a high mark.
72. I nearly always find my essays are short of words.
73. I never talk to peers about the contents of their essays.
85. I talk to peers about the way they go about writing essays.
86. I would never write anything in an essay that I didn't understand.
92. I always have my essays finished before the day of the deadline.
94. Even though I start off with good intentions I never seem to start an essay until the last minute.
98. I don't like other people to know what I am including in an essay.

Appendix J

The Essay Process Questionnaire combined with the Essay Writing Orientation Questionnaire (with demographic questions).

Please read the instructions as you go.

1. Name _____

2. Year of study 1st 2nd 3rd/4th

3. Age (on entry to degree) Years

4. Sex Male Female

5. Which department/schools are you studying in?

6. What formal entry qualifications do you have? A/AS levels Other None

If you have ticked boxes 'A/AS levels' and 'other' please indicate which was obtained most recently.

If you have no formal entry qualifications please ignore question 7.

7. How many years, if any, have you had out of formal education since obtaining the most recent of your entry qualifications? years

In order to continue you will need to understand the following terms:

A draft essay - This is anything that uses full sentences and resembles a whole essay. It contains the type of information that will be used in the final version, but will require changes before it is submitted.

Final version of an essay - This is the essay that will be handed in, it won't go through any changes before it is handed in.

8. How many times will you re-draft an essay before it is handed in. (Re-drafting an essay consists of making changes to a draft)

essay and re-writing the essay including those changes)

Now read each of the statements over leaf and indicate whether you agree or disagree with that statement by circling the appropriate response. Circle the response that applies to most of you course work essays.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9. Before writing an essay I think about information regarding the essay topic that I know from memory and/or read relevant lecture notes.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I rarely use journal articles when producing an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
11. My draft essay contains most of the information I have gathered, whether it is relevant or not.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I organise information I wish to go into a draft essay into groups of related topics.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Before I write a draft essay I organise the information I wish to use into the order I want it to appear in.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I re-draft my essay by re-arranging, adding or removing information in it.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I re-draft my essays by checking the spelling or grammar.	1	2	3	4	5
16. When writing my essays I use a computer? (not including typing a neat and final copy)	1	2	3	4	5
17. I would never write anything in an essay that I didn't understand.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I always have my essays finished before the day of the deadline.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19. I nearly always find my essays are short of words.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Once I have handed in an essay I realise that I actually enjoyed writing it.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I often discuss, with fellow students, the topics that should be included in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I will put in as much effort as I can to get an essay perfect, before it is handed in.	1	2	3	4	5
23. There are many things I wish to gain from writing an essay, other than a high mark.	1	2	3	4	5
24. I will submit an essay as soon as it is finished, even if I am not pleased with it.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I never talk to peers about the contents of their essays.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I cannot write an essay unless I have understood the topic.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I get a real buzz out of an essay, when all the information comes together.	1	2	3	4	5
28. Even though I start off with good intentions I never seem to start an essay until the last minute.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I talk to peers about the way they go about writing essays.	1	2	3	4	5
30. I am not aware of any competition between my peers and myself, regarding essay writing.	1	2	3	4	5
31. It is not important that the reader of my essay is impressed with it.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I generally leave writing my essays until the last minute.	1	2	3	4	5

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
33. When producing an essay, I aim to do better than other people on the same course.	1	2	3	4	5
34. I rarely discuss my essays with friends on the same course.	1	2	3	4	5
35. I often find myself in a situation where I have to rush my essays to get them finished in time.	1	2	3	4	5
36. I find talking to other students in my department a useful way of picking up information about a particular essay.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I don't like other people to know what I am including in an essay.	1	2	3	4	5
38. A bit of competition with my peers, regarding essays, is a good thing.	1	2	3	4	5
39. What the marker of my essay thinks of me, when reading my essay, concerns me.	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for your participation

Appendix K

Approaches To Studying Inventory

Please answer every item quickly by giving your immediate response. Circle the appropriate code number to show your general approach to studying.

- 4 (++) means Definitely agree.
3 (+) means Agree with reservations.
2 (?) is only to be used if the item doesn't apply to you or if you find it impossible to give a definite answer.
1 (-) means Disagree with reservations.
0 (--) means Definitely disagree.

	++	+	?	-	--
1. I find it easy to organise my study time effectively.	4	3	2	1	0
2. I like to be told precisely what to do in essays or other set work.	4	3	2	1	0
3. It's important to me to do really well in the course here.	4	3	2	1	0
4. I usually set out to understand thoroughly the meaning of what I am asked to read.	4	3	2	1	0
5. When I'm reading I try to memorise important facts which may come in useful later.	4	3	2	1	0
6. When I'm doing a piece of work, I try to bear in mind exactly what the particular lecturer seems to want.	4	3	2	1	0
7. My main reason for being here is so that I can learn more about the subjects which really interest me.	4	3	2	1	0
8. I suppose I'm more interested in the qualifications I'll get than in the courses I'm taking.	4	3	2	1	0
9. I'm usually prompt in starting work in the evenings.	4	3	2	1	0
10. I generally put a lot of effort into trying to understand things which initially seem difficult.	4	3	2	1	0
11. Often I find I have to read things without having a chance to really understand them.	4	3	2	1	0
12. If conditions aren't right for me to study, I generally manage to do something to change them.	4	3	2	1	0
13. I often find myself questioning things that I hear in lessons or read in books.	4	3	2	1	0
14. I tend to read very little beyond what's required for completing assignments.	4	3	2	1	0
15. It is important to me to do things better than my friends, if I possibly can.	4	3	2	1	0
16. I spend a good deal of my spare time in finding out more about interesting topics which have been discussed in class.	4	3	2	1	0
17. I find academic topics so interesting, I should like to continue with them after I finish this course.	4	3	2	1	0
18. I find I have to concentrate on memorising a good deal of what we have to learn.	4	3	2	1	0

Key for all analysis of variance variables.

YOUT_CT2	Whether time taken out of formal education or not
ENTQ2	Entry qualification which gained student entry to HE (A levels or other)
RECQ2	Most recently obtained qualification (A levels or other)
STUDY_YR	Year of Study (1 st , 2 nd or 3 rd year)
AGE_CAT	Age of entry to higher education (up to 20, 21-25 or over 25)

Appendix L

Univariate Analysis of Covariance of ASI and EWOQ Factors

Achieving Orientation (ASI) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT

with YOUT_CT2

RECQ2

ENTQ2

UNIQUE sums of squares

All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	11.974	3	3.991	.222	.881
YOUT_CT2	.039	1	.039	.002	.963
RECQ2	.444	1	.444	.025	.875
ENTQ2	.559	1	.559	.031	.860
Main Effects	42.725	4	10.681	.595	.666
STUDY_YR	25.703	2	12.852	.716	.489
AGE_CAT	12.869	2	6.434	.359	.699
2-Way Interactions	54.463	4	13.616	.759	.552
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	54.463	4	13.616	.759	.552
Explained	146.930	11	13.357	.745	.696
Residual	9328.431	520	17.939		
Total	9475.361	531	17.844		

Covariate Raw Regression Coefficient

YOUT_CT2 .020

RECQ2 .171

ENTQ2 .190

572 cases were processed.

40 cases (7.0 pct) were missing.

**Meaning Orientation (ASD) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2
RECQ2
ENTQ2**

UNIQUE sums of squares
All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	126.744	3	42.248	2.831	.038
YOUT_CT2	10.947	1	10.947	.734	.392
RECQ2	10.934	1	10.934	.733	.392
ENTQ2	51.098	1	51.098	3.424	.065
Main Effects	282.713	4	70.678	4.736	.001
STUDY_YR	21.179	2	10.590	.710	.492
AGE_CAT	268.248	2	134.124	8.988	.000
2-Way Interactions	74.680	4	18.670	1.251	.288
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	74.680	4	18.670	1.251	.288
Explained	833.356	11	75.760	5.077	.000
Residual	7714.897	517	14.922		
Total	8548.253	528	16.190		

Covariate	Raw Regression Coefficient
YOUT_CT2	-.339
RECQ2	-.851
ENTQ2	1.817

572 cases were processed.
43 cases (7.5 pct) were missing.

Variable	Value Label	Mean	Std Dev
For Entire Population		15.6489	3.9930
AGE_CAT	1.00	14.7963	4.0002
AGE_CAT	2.00	16.0213	3.7759
AGE_CAT	3.00	17.3014	3.5572

**Reproducing Orientation (ASD) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2**

RECQ2
ENTQ2

UNIQUE sums of squares
All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	134.887	3	44.962	2.883	.035
YOUT_CT2	13.160	1	13.160	.844	.359
RECQ2	5.984	1	5.984	.384	.536
ENTQ2	4.654	1	4.654	.298	.585
Main Effects	207.817	4	51.954	3.331	.010
STUDY_YR	51.412	2	25.706	1.648	.193
AGE_CAT	148.774	2	74.387	4.769	.009
2-Way Interactions	15.688	4	3.922	.251	.909
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	15.688	4	3.922	.251	.909
Explained	667.225	11	60.657	3.889	.000
Residual	8048.707	516	15.598		
Total	8715.932	527	16.539		

Covariate Raw Regression Coefficient
 YOUT_CT2 .371
 RECQ2 -.629
 ENTQ2 -.548

572 cases were processed.
44 cases (7.7 pct) were missing.

Variable	Value Label	Mean	Std Dev
For Entire Population			
AGE_CAT	1.00	15.0245	3.8100
AGE_CAT	2.00	13.2872	4.3912
AGE_CAT	3.00	13.3521	4.0286

**Mark Approval (EWOQ) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2
RECQ2
ENTQ2**

UNIQUE sums of squares
All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	16.545	3	5.515	1.216	.303
YOUT_CT2	8.260	1	8.260	1.821	.178
RECQ2	9.020	1	9.020	1.989	.159
ENTQ2	6.044	1	6.044	1.333	.249
Main Effects	30.578	4	7.645	1.686	.152
STUDY_YR	22.419	2	11.210	2.472	.085
AGE_CAT	6.738	2	3.369	.743	.476
2-Way Interactions	14.118	4	3.530	.778	.540
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	14.118	4	3.530	.778	.540
Explained	57.444	11	5.222	1.151	.319
Residual	2371.894	523	4.535		
Total	2429.338	534	4.549		

Covariate	Raw Regression Coefficient
YOUT_CT2	.292
RECQ2	-.772
ENTQ2	.625

572 cases were processed.
37 cases (6.5 pct) were missing.

Deadline Motivation (EWOQ) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2

RECQ2
ENTQ2

UNIQUE sums of squares
All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	16.419	3	5.473	.260	.854
YOUT_CT2	1.929	1	1.929	.092	.762
RECQ2	12.797	1	12.797	.608	.436
ENTQ2	13.519	1	13.519	.642	.423
Main Effects	419.431	4	104.858	4.979	.001
STUDY_YR	.491	2	.246	.012	.988
AGE_CAT	412.360	2	206.180	9.790	.000
2-Way Interactions	48.994	4	12.249	.582	.676
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	48.994	4	12.249	.582	.676
Explained	642.623	11	58.420	2.774	.002
Residual	10951.054	520	21.060		
Total	11593.677	531	21.834		

Covariate Raw Regression Coefficient

YOUT_CT2	-.141
RECQ2	-.921
ENTQ2	.935

572 cases were processed.
40 cases (7.0 pct) were missing.

Variable	Value Label	Mean	Std Dev
For Entire Population		10.8110	4.6485
AGE_CAT	1.00	11.4924	4.6404
AGE_CAT	2.00	11.2553	4.2577
AGE_CAT	3.00	8.9862	4.4488

**Isolation in Writing (EWOQ) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2**

RECQ2

ENTQ2

UNIQUE sums of squares

All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	9.390	3	3.130	.354	.786
YOUT_CT2	2.738	1	2.738	.309	.578
RECQ2	1.084	1	1.084	.123	.726
ENTQ2	3.597	1	3.597	.407	.524
Main Effects	109.269	4	27.317	3.087	.016
STUDY_YR	2.426	2	1.213	.137	.872
AGE_CAT	108.777	2	54.388	6.147	.002
2-Way Interactions	55.276	4	13.819	1.562	.183
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	55.276	4	13.819	1.562	.183
Explained	184.028	11	16.730	1.891	.038
Residual	4609.702	521	8.848		
Total	4793.730	532	9.011		

Covariate Raw Regression Coefficient

YOUT_CT2 -.168

RECQ2 .268

ENTQ2 -.482

572 cases were processed.

39 cases (6.8 pct) were missing.

Variable	Value Label	Mean	Std Dev
For Entire Population		10.0229	3.0348
AGE_CAT	1.00	9.6433	2.8248
AGE_CAT	2.00	10.1383	2.9752
AGE_CAT	3.00	10.8069	3.3774

Understanding Orientation (EWOQ) by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2

RECQ2
ENTQ2

UNIQUE sums of squares
All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	115.655	3	38.552	2.040	.107
YOUT_CT2	.269	1	.269	.014	.905
RECQ2	2.702	1	2.702	.143	.705
ENTQ2	31.956	1	31.956	1.691	.194
Main Effects	379.529	4	94.882	5.022	.001
STUDY_YR	4.993	2	2.497	.132	.876
AGE_CAT	368.767	2	184.384	9.759	.000
2-Way Interactions	82.340	4	20.585	1.090	.361
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	82.340	4	20.585	1.090	.361
Explained	1113.997	11	101.272	5.360	.000
Residual	9862.430	522	18.894		
Total	10976.427	533	20.594		

Covariate Raw Regression Coefficient

YOUT_CT2	-.053
RECQ2	-.434
ENTQ2	1.481

572 cases were processed.
38 cases (6.6 pct) were missing.

Variable	Value Label	Mean	Std Dev
For Entire Population			
AGE_CAT	1.00	23.7052	4.4174
AGE_CAT	2.00	25.6596	4.3787
AGE_CAT	3.00	26.9586	4.1347

Appendix M

Univariate Analysis of Covariance of Understanding Orientation (4 items only) and Disenchantment.

Disenchantment by STUDY_YR, AGE_CAT
with YOUT_CT2
RECQ2
ENTQ2

UNIQUE sums of squares
All effects entered simultaneously

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig of F
Covariates	35.163	3	11.721	2.522	.057
YOUT_CT2	7.723	1	7.723	1.662	.198
RECQ2	.658	1	.658	.142	.707
ENTQ2	1.886	1	1.886	.406	.524
Main Effects	67.976	4	16.994	3.656	.006
STUDY_YR	2.430	2	1.215	.261	.770
AGE_CAT	67.410	2	33.705	7.251	.001
2-Way Interactions	49.684	4	12.421	2.672	.031
STUDY_YR AGE_CAT	49.684	4	12.421	2.672	.031
Explained	229.234	11	20.839	4.483	.000
Residual	2435.594	524	4.648		
Total	2664.828	535	4.981		

Covariate	Raw Regression Coefficient
YOUT_CT2	.282
RECQ2	-.209
ENTQ2	-.349

572 cases were processed.
36 cases (6.3 pct) were missing.

Variable	Value Label	Mean	Std Dev	Cases
For Entire Population		7.3228	2.2272	570
AGE_CAT	1.00	7.7946	2.2061	331
AGE_CAT	2.00	6.8830	2.1445	94
AGE_CAT	3.00	6.5310	2.0516	145

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