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Employability and Social Capital: An Exploration of the
Missing Link in the Enhancement of Employability of
Business School Graduates.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of social capital in the development of employability skills and attributes of first generation undergraduate students in a business school.

The research, based on the reflections of graduates, examines the impact of social capital on participation in higher education and investigates the conditions within the learning environment which enhance or inhibit the development of bridging and linking social capital, as students connect with networks within the institution and with the wider business community.

The findings suggest that the ability to recognise and activate bridging and linking social capital is an important determinant of employability. The analysis illustrates that when students have opportunities to connect with and work within a variety of networks, they build a range of employability skills and capabilities, particularly the interpersonal and social skills valued by employers.

Students, who are confident and have the necessary skills to participate in a variety of networks within the immediate environment and with the wider business community, are not only able to access a greater range of resources but are more able to recognise the potential benefits that these activities have to offer. The reflections of the participants

also illustrate that the skills and competencies which enable them to network effectively need to be developed deliberately. By supporting students in recognising the relationship between bridging and linking social capital and employability, and giving them the opportunity to reflect upon the achievement of interpersonal skills and affective capabilities, including the importance of relating to diverse others, their understanding and acknowledgement of employability will be enhanced.

The study also reflects on Quinn's concept of imagined social capital and considers its impact on the development of employability. Building on her work, the analysis identifies two new typologies; unimagined and unimaginable social capital. Both categories are important in understanding how students acknowledge the potential networks and resources available to them.

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I have met some remarkable students during the course of this study. I thank them all for speaking so freely to me, sharing life events and sometimes difficult issues. They gave freely of their time, their emotions, their aspirations and dreams. I learned a lot. To each and every one of them I share the words of the American writer John Gardner (1965)

“There is something I know about you that you may or may not know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped, more talent than has ever been exploited, more strength than has ever been tested, more to give than you have ever given”.

I hope I have done your stories justice!

My husband Martin has offered love, encouragement and space to work, far beyond the reasonable expectations of any marriage. Thank you. Cameron, my son has probably more knowledge about social capital than any other fourteen year old. He is my inspiration. *Nae bother son!*

And finally, Dr. Ralph Catts, my supervisor, who shared his knowledge and wisdom and gave me endless support, guidance, feedback, and listened to me when it got hard, thank you.

Brand New Start

All that is mine I can be

All that I can I can see

All that is mine is in my hands

So to myself I call

There's somewhere else I should be

There's someone else I can see

There something more that I can find

It's only up to me

Paul Weller

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A MATTER OF CONFUSION

This research is an exploration of how connections and networks, made by students during the course of their studies, enhance or inhibit the development of employability skills. The thesis is based on an analysis of interviews with graduates from a business studies degree course. The location was a Business School in a former Higher Education College, which is now part of a post 1992 University. It is an in-depth investigation into how students identify and use connections and how these connections enhance the skills and attributes that make up the personal competencies and transferable skills of employability.

The research was borne out of confusion and concern. My own confusion and concern was about why many of the students with whom I came into contact appeared to lack confidence in their own abilities and their aspirations as to what they could achieve as business graduates. Having spent over fifteen years in higher education, working with post graduate students, undergraduate teaching was a relatively new area for me. I was used to working with confident, demanding students. The undergraduate groups I was now working with were accepting, shy, and did not demonstrate the levels of confidence and

self esteem that we are led to believe young people have today. I was interested in finding out what was happening in their learning environment to impact on their confidence and what were the factors which had a positive or negative effect upon it. I assumed that a positive factor was the support and encouragement that they received from staff and fellow students. But there had to be more to it than that. What did they think the key factors were? Did we ever ask them? Did we ever truly listen?

Explanations from some of my colleagues did not satisfy me. I found it difficult to accept that low levels of confidence and aspiration were purely a result of “less able students” who were less prepared for, or willing to connect with education. I considered this to be an excuse, not an explanation. Nor was I able to fully accept that a new and diverse student group was less motivated than students in the past. Many students appeared to lack the confidence which was necessary for them to have a vision of the potential of their future lives and careers. Even academic success did not appear to raise levels of confidence in relation to a belief in their own ability to make a significant impact on their lives and a contribution to the economic well being of their communities. If they were unable to acknowledge their skills and attributes or demonstrate these confidently to employers, then how successful were we, in higher education, at developing employability?

And so began my adventure into trying to understand what factors were impacting on their confidence and more importantly, what changes were needed in the approach that we, in higher education, adopted to enable students to identify, access and mobilise the resources which would improve their journey into graduate employment. During the course of teaching an entrepreneurship module, I observed that the more students were encouraged to actively participate in class, set their own agenda for learning and take advantage of opportunities to connect with external groups, the more their confidence grew, their self belief improved and their enthusiasm for learning and self development increased. Unintentionally the class was providing opportunities to create social capital.

A SEARCH FOR CLUES

One student's behaviour altered dramatically throughout the time of her studies. She changed from being the one who hid at the back of the class, avoided eye contact and rarely contributed, to one who volunteered to lead group discussions, was able to organise the group, encourage others to contribute and challenge students and staff alike. I was intrigued as to what had happened to change things around.

“What has happened?” I asked her. “It was the way this class run. There was no hiding place. We were all brought into the discussion. We had to work in different groups, we had to speak to people outside the class to get information and I realised that I would have to learn how to connect with other people if I was going to get on.”

My encounter with this student triggered my thinking about the opportunities that we missed in class to develop networking skills, connecting with unfamiliar people and the positive impact that these might have on confidence and employability competencies.

I embarked on a Doctorate of Education Programme to gain the support I needed to explore this area further and this research is the result of that journey.

What I thought I wanted to investigate changed as my knowledge widened. In each area I explored I found more questions than answers. At the end of the journey I believe that my understanding of the conditions which support or detract from the development of valuable social capital and its relationship to employability has deepened. All of this is down to a truly valuable resource; one which has a great deal of knowledge in the area, the students themselves. The backgrounds of the students with whom I was working were diverse, but the majority of them shared one thing in common, a lack of belief in their own potential to contribute to their communities and their low expectation

of success with future careers. They demonstrated that a supportive learning environment, a bit of encouragement and raised expectations from those around them, enabled them to move from being a passive source of information to being collaborative partners in devising their own development and realising their potential. They may speak with a different tongue to the academic researcher but their knowledge and wisdom, often hidden, is nonetheless extensive. They are the conduit between theory and practice. Their stories and reflections are vital in helping us understand their learning environments.

EMPLOYABILITY AND THE BUSINESS GRADUATE

The development of employability skills has been a key feature of academic programmes for a number of years. How these are developed, measured and assessed is often regarded as problematic with claims to the achievement of employability being difficult to define. The research was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of the participants in developing employability skills and attributes and to identify the factors which enhanced or detracted from them achieving this. I started with the premise that employability was dependant on self confidence and the ability and willingness to

communicate and co-operate with a diverse group of people. That meant that if students were to fully develop employability skills and attributes they had to have experience in connecting with a wide range of people and have ability to develop the skills and confidence to do so effectively. That is not to suggest that the other more tangible employability skills such as cognitive skills and technical ability are not relevant or valuable, rather it is to highlight that it is the interpersonal skills and personal capabilities that are often neglected or receive less attention as part of academic programmes. The reasons for this are understandable. These abilities are more difficult to define, more complex to demonstrate, more subjective to assess, and more challenging to develop.

Social capital, with its foundations in connections with others, appeared to be a relevant concept to use to try to make sense of how relationships were formed, developed and expanded to widen student networks, thus giving access to sources of information not always available within the immediate learning environment and which could have a positive impact on the development of employability.

The overall aim of the research was therefore to explore the role of social capital in enhancing the employability of students. The participants chosen had undertaken an optional entrepreneurship module as part of their business degree. This module had been designed to provide a range of opportunities to connect with the local

business community in search of information and support for the development of business start up ideas. As part of the assessment process, students were required to reflect upon their experiences in networking and the development of their skills and competencies in making connections with others. The experiences of the students formed the basis of the research. Using an interpretative case study I sought to examine how students identify, access and mobilise social capital and the implications that their experiences have for learning and teaching approaches.

Specifically the objectives were to:

- Identify the forms of social capital that enhance or limit the development of employability skills and competencies,
- Explore the conditions which enable students to access, activate and mobilise forms of social capital relevant to employability,
- Examine the links between social capital and employability and how these are recognised by students and
- Explore how the environment of higher education supports or inhibits the development of those skills and capabilities necessary to connect with the business environment.

Being confined to an identified group of students within a single area, it was an intensive, holistic case study investigation within a bounded system (Merriam, 1998).

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The research took place in the Business School of a College, which delivered higher education. The College was established by the local Council in 1972, and originally provided a range of higher national certificates and diploma programmes. In 2001, it was granted higher education status and began offering a range of degree level programmes in partnership with a number of local universities and the Open University. In 2007 the College merged with a post-1992 university and became part of the largest university in Scotland with over 18,000 students. Although the merger presented major challenges and opportunities for staff and students in areas such as the design, delivery and range of programmes offered, the target markets for the campus remained primarily the same, as did the strategic objective of offering inclusive vocational higher education to the population. The primary data collection commenced just prior to the merger and the participants graduated from the College rather than the new University.

In the interviews, participants refer to the place of study as the College and therefore that terminology has been retained throughout the thesis.

Attracting students in sufficient numbers from the local area had been a challenge for many years. As well as covering areas of significant social deprivation, several other established higher education providers were a short distance from the campus. Perhaps the most challenging issue was the fact that the College was located within a community which had areas of population regarded as having low participation in non-compulsory education. Indeed it had been reported by Tysome (2007) in the Times Higher Educational Supplement, that 50.3% of students attending the College were from low participation neighbourhoods, the highest level in Scotland and the fourth highest in the United Kingdom.

Having over half of the student population coming from low participation neighbourhoods brought particular challenges in making the design and delivery of programmes attractive. The recruitment and retention of students had been a particular concern for College managers for over a decade. While efforts had been put into attracting students and reducing attrition, less attention had been paid to the outcomes of the educational experience of those who had successfully completed their studies in terms of graduate employment, confidence and aspirations.

MY POSITION AS THE RESEARCHER.

I began this study with the belief that higher education was more than getting a degree and that the educational experience should have a positive impact on self confidence and aspirations. This research will demonstrate that where the learning environment encourages and enables students to recognise and mobilise those networks and resources which can support them in the development of knowledge, skills and attributes relevant to employability, self-confidence, self-esteem and aspirations will rise. I suggest that the learning environment needs to make provision for students to actively engage with the external environment in which they will pursue their careers, enabling students to enhance their ability to mobilise valuable social capital, linking into sources they might not have considered or regarded as available to them. I also argue that there is a need for students to have time and space to reflect upon the development of skills and attitudes which enable this to happen and that greater attention has to be paid to encouraging students to recognise the value of these skills and attributes when they are required to demonstrate employability.

What influences the ways in which students develop attitudes and dispositions and their engagement in practices? A major challenge may be in addressing the social and cultural differences that widening access to higher education brings and how these impact upon attainment.

Consideration of social and cultural differences and their impact on educational achievement have been recognised over the years and brought to the fore by such prominent writers as Bourdieu (1986, 1992). Renowned for his views on power structures and their impact on working class students within the French education system in the 60's, some of his views are still as relevant in today's Scotland. The ability of the individual to recognise and build on cultural and social capital still has importance in the increasingly diverse student population who now participate in higher education. Do we serve them well, increasing their opportunities to widen horizons or do we bring them into an environment which concentrates on accentuating the differences of experience? Does higher education have a role to play in widening horizons, building confidence and raising expectations, or do we simply expect it to be a by product of participating in the system. Is social capital a relevant and useful concept in addressing these issues?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.

The thesis is presented in eight chapters. Chapter two reviews the themes and issues arising from widening participation and employability. It highlights some of the difficulties that face graduates

as they seek employment and the controversy that still surrounds employability in the curriculum. Chapter three explores the widening use of social capital as a theoretical concept and seeks to establish its value as a framework for examining the development of employability with business students. Chapter four describes the approach taken in the research, the methods employed and the limitations of the research. The reflections of the participants in terms of their existing and developing social capital are reported in chapter five followed by a discussion of the analysis of the themes which emerged in chapter six. The implications of these themes for learning and teaching are discussed in chapter seven. Finally, chapter eight reviews the process, highlights the key messages and suggests areas for further exploration.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

INTRODUCTION

Widening access to higher education has been a focus of government attention for a number of years. A range of policy documents have sought to put processes in place to make higher education available to an increasing proportion of the population. Government sponsored reports and consultative documents have considered how access to higher education can be widened to include groups identified as under represented and how a system of mass higher education can be fashioned (Kennedy Report, 1997; Fryer Report, 1997; Garrick Report, 1997; DfEE, Widening Participation in Higher Education, 2003; DfEE, The Learning Age:, 2003). In line with these policies, higher education institutions have found themselves under increasing pressure to attract students with non-traditional backgrounds into educational programmes.

Considerable interest has focused on the particular problems that non-traditional students face in either completing their studies or in attracting graduate employment. Are these problems related to a lack

of engagement of these groups within higher education, a lack of ability on the part of the student, or has the curriculum failed to change sufficiently to meet the needs of a more diverse student group in preparing them for graduate employment? Is failure to gain graduate employment related to the lack of suitable employment opportunities or does higher education fail, in some way, to prepare a diverse student population to meet the expectations that employers have of graduate employees? These are largely unanswered questions, although a number of reasons have been suggested for each, with gender, age, ethnic status and socio-economic background being the focus for an ever increasing research base.

What success means in terms of participation in higher education is also a matter for debate. Should success be measured in terms of numbers participating, retention rates, graduations or graduate level employment? Thomas and Quinn (2007, p47) believed that access, without the opportunity to succeed, made claims of widening participation insincere, and called for more exploration of how access to financial, cultural and social capital related to success and the extent to which higher education systems and institutions were able to facilitate the success of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Given the changing student population in some institutions, including the site of the study, I question whether it is relevant to categorise students as coming from non-traditional backgrounds and suggest that

we should now refer to non traditional institutions and change our approaches accordingly to ensure that we embrace and cater for the diversity of the student group.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

Widening access and widening participation are terms often used interchangeably in higher education yet there are subtle differences in the picture they portray of the student; access implies admission, and participation implies involvement. Claims have been made that the vocabularies of widening access and participation have a tendency to disguise divisions and conceal contradictions (Parry, 1996, 1997). Woodrow (2002) believed that the use of the term access was limited as it focused on the numbers of those initially participating in higher education with little thought being given to retention or progression post entry. She suggested that participation was a more helpful term because of its association with particular targeted groups. Thomas & Quinn (2007, p2) agreed with that view, claiming that access suggested that success was measured on increasing numbers whereas widening participation implied broadening diversity and facilitating student success, enhancing the experience of those who participated. Regardless of the terminology used, the important, but often

overlooked issue in making higher education available to a wider range of people, is the outcome of that education in terms of achieving success, in knowledge acquisition, well being, improved confidence and self belief and ultimately in graduate employment.

Initiatives to enable or encourage participation have not been embraced by all communities however. A range of studies have highlighted the difficulties faced by students who enter higher education through widening participation initiatives. Difficulties range from feeling excluded from their immediate communities, to financial difficulties and a lack of support and encouragement from families and friends (Edwards 2003, Preece and Houghton 2000, Thomas 2001, Burke 2002, Thomas and Quinn 2007).

There is little doubt that students' experiences vary across the sector and that not all student groups have an equal path to graduate employment.

Opportunities or brick walls?

A number of studies have shown that students who access higher education through the widening participation agenda face greater

difficulties than 'traditional' students in terms of success in appropriate employment.

Layer (2004, p2) claimed that

“Employability is becoming recognised as an increasingly important facet of widening participation (and) alongside this cultural shift is recognition that a more generally diverse student population challenges the traditional notion of preparing a student to move into and through employment.”

Concerns have previously been raised about the employment prospects of widening participation students. Kenton and Harrison (2004) claimed that the people that the government was trying to attract into higher education were the very people that faced most difficulties in obtaining suitable graduate employment, as they benefited less than their traditional entrant peers from the achievement of a degree. This worry has been shared by a number of other writers. The authors of the *Access to What* report (Blasko, Brennan, Little, & Shah, 2002), stated that many of the students (entering via widening participation) were from backgrounds which were first generation to attend or aspire to attend higher education, and that these were the groups facing the greatest disadvantage in the labour market. Their report provided a detailed analysis, based on a survey of over 4000 students alongside Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, of the factors

determining graduate employability and how these affected the employment prospects of students from lower socio economic groups, ethnic minorities and mature students. Their findings indicated that social background and age, with mature students facing additional problems, had significant effects on employment success as measured by unemployment rates, income level, graduate level employment and prospects for promotion and job satisfaction.

Thomas and Quinn (2007, p51) described first generation entrants as those *“for whom the responsible older generation (not necessarily the birth parents) have not had any opportunities to study at a university at any stage in their lives.”* From the evidence gathered in their international study, Thomas and Quinn stated that first generation entrants were likely to come from families who were in occupations which did not permit university study or where they did not have the disposable income to pay for it. They claimed that being a first generation entrant was bound up in considerations of what it was to be working class, and, although they acknowledged that a class focus did not completely encompass the experiences of this group of students, they regarded it as an important issue suggesting that *“first generation entry was culturally specific and degrees studied for were likely to be an ‘inferior’ brand: not an elite subject and not in an elite institution”* (p59). Other studies have also drawn attention to this claim. Forsyth & Furlong (2003), in their investigation into socio-economic disadvantage

and access to higher education, indicated that cultural barriers were implicated at every stage of the decision making process; from the decision to participate in post compulsory education through to the institution at which to study. Reay, David, & Ball (2001) claimed that working class students excluded themselves from the traditional universities, selecting institutions where they thought they could 'fit in'. These findings are consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) writings on cultural capital as an explanation for social inequalities and his concern with its continual transmission and accumulation in ways that perpetuate these inequalities.

These restrictions also impact on employment prospects. Blasko et al. (2002) indicated that a relative advantage of graduating from established 'old' universities, compared to the newer establishments created post 1992, still existed. Using earnings as a key measure, their report confirmed that 'old' university graduates earned considerably more than those from 'new' universities. The difference in earnings was even starker when comparing salaries with college graduates. The study supported previous research findings which established that employers still preferred 'old' universities to new (Purcell and Hogarth 1999, Brown & Scase 1994).

The findings of these studies suggest that although higher education is accessible to more people, either the courses studied, preparation for employment or engagement with potential employers is still not

effective for some groups of students. There would still appear to be discriminatory practice on behalf of employers in favour of 'old' universities.

According to Hugh Smith (2003), the apparent lack of success of many students in graduate employment from under-represented groups is because they do not have the cultural or social (personal) capital to enter the workplace on the same footing as more traditional graduates, and the transition to work for these groups is complicated further when they do not know how to demonstrate the skills, qualities and achievements that employers seek. Similar findings had been reported by Glover, Law, & Youngman (2002). Reporting on the outcomes of interviews and questionnaires from 408 students at the beginning of their studies and 452 students at the end of their university course, they argued that the distinction between employability (a package of skills) and gradueness (a set of qualities developed under the auspices of nationally monitored quality assurance systems), was poorly recognised by students and that gradueness alone was insufficient as a basis for successful employment, with students unable to demonstrate their employability skills and attributes. Their assertion that continued employability was dependant on lifelong learning was not seen as an important area within education with only 16% of respondents claiming that they felt well prepared for continuing learning following university.

Part of the problem facing some students may be the lack of suitable employment opportunities. However, Brown et al. (2002) claimed that widening participation students had even greater disadvantages in the job market, as the rapid expansion of higher education was not reflected in an increase in the demand for high skilled jobs, and that the best jobs would still go to those from higher social backgrounds who followed traditional routes through university. Brown also raised the concern that, because of the growth in entrants to higher education over the last decade, many graduates found themselves surplus to requirements ending up in jobs offering less than they expected. Redmond (2006) made similar claims, arguing that the link between the supply of graduates and the demand by 'graduate' employers had rarely been questioned. Reporting on his study, which explored the extent to which higher education sought to change the social positioning of widening participation students in an attempt to improve employability, he argued that such students benefited less from the traditional social and cultural benefits bestowed by higher education and left them less prepared for employment.

The claims made by these writers raise areas of concern for those involved with such student groups. We are presented with evidence from a wide range of studies that particular groups of students face additional problems in seeking graduate employment, yet little effort has gone into changing attitudes toward the learning and teaching

methods which are most likely to be effective in enhancing their employability.

Many of these studies have focused on the analyses of structured questionnaires conducted immediately after graduation but they fail to make suggestions about instigating the changes needed in curriculum design, and learning and teaching approaches which would address the deficiencies. Are we adopting the most effective approaches in seeking to enhance students' employability? Are the interpersonal skills, so valued by employers (see below) being developed systematically and deliberately or do we leave students with gaps in their skills and competence base which restrict access to, and success in, the graduate workplace? Do we raise expectations that will not be fulfilled, no matter what we do, or are there areas which have yet to be addressed? Do we understand what developing employability means with non standard groups of students and are the approaches that we take the most effective in enhancing employability? Only when we fully understand these issues can we begin to develop programmes which are effective in preparing students in terms of employability. Perhaps the key to addressing these issues is to come to a common understanding of the skills set that is needed to demonstrate employability.

DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Numerous definitions and approaches have been suggested by the education sector over the years, yet employability is still a contested concept and seen by some as beyond the realms of academic responsibility. Considering how employability was regarded within academia, Hillage & Pollard (1998, p5) referred to Pascale's (1995) changing view of employability as being that *"Employability envisions an arrangement in which both parties accept that work is unlikely to be the long-term proposition that it once was. In exchange for the employees' dedicated effort in the shorter-term relationship, the company pays higher wages and invests in employees' development. This makes them more marketable when it is time to move on"*.

A year later, according to the same authors, Pascale was arguing that employability was *"wishful thinking masquerading as a concept"*.

On an even more sceptical note, Rajan et al. (2000, p23) stated of employability,

"It is one of the few words that has gone from cliché to jargon without the intermediate stage of meaning".

Harvey (2003) acknowledged that there had been a cultural shift in higher education and a growing awareness among academics of the need to develop students' employability (Mason et al., 2002) but also

raised concerns about how academics viewed developing employability stating

“Some academics think that embracing employability could infringe academic autonomy, undermine critique and result in a shift in the balance from ‘education’ to ‘training’”.

Honeybone (2002,p9) also broached the issue of the employability agenda being viewed by academics as an *“unwelcome addition to the purposes of higher education and a diversion from the disciplines”*. He contended that the interpersonal aspects of employability *“may serve to remind us that continuing work is required if higher education is to be a properly balanced system with a plurality of aims”*.

These views illustrate the problematic nature of understanding what employability is and the concerns from academics regarding its place in education, while providing no clues as to what students think would be beneficial to them and how they would like to see it developed.

In an attempt to clarify what employability means for higher education, Yorke (2004, p7) defined it as

“A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce and the community “.

This definition was arrived at as a result of the *Skills plus* project which worked with 16 targeted departments in 4 North-West of England universities to build curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment practices to enhance students' employability.

Prior to this, Knight & Yorke (2002) suggested that a distinction should be made between subject specific skills and the promotion of generic achievements. Subject specific skills were regarded as being more easily defined and often subject to the requirements of professional bodies such as accountancy, law and nursing. The spectrum of generic attainments covers areas such as numeracy, communication skills, team working, self-efficacy and metacognition. The emphasis on transferable skills in the Dearing Report (1997) specifically mentioned communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn when preparing students for employment. Knight and Yorke disagreed with this emphasis. Whilst describing the role that higher education had to play in contributing to students' employability, they contended that consideration had to be given to personal aspects of employability, the self-belief and self-theories of the student. They believed that employability was dependant on a synergic blend of personal qualities, skills of various kinds and disciplinary understanding. The model they developed through the *Skills plus* project was referred to as the USEM model – **U**nderstanding, **S**kills (subject specific and generic), **E**fficacy beliefs and self-theories and **M**etacognition (including

reflection), and was aimed at enhancing the capabilities which needed to be developed in higher education to prepare students for employment. As a result of the project, the researchers raised concerns that many higher education institutions focused on the subject understanding and skills, at the expense of efficacy beliefs and metacognition, and that curricula paid little attention to the development of personal qualities relevant to employment – the aspects that many academics believed to be outside the remit of academia.

Knight and Yorke acknowledged the work of Pintrich & Shunk (1996), Bandura (1995, 1997) and the self-theories described by Dweck (1999) in the design of the model. Dweck had suggested that, given the appropriate environment, students' beliefs about themselves, their abilities and their self-confidence could alter. In a similar vein, Zimmerman (1999, p203), building on the work of Bandura, defined perceived academic self-efficacy as the personal judgements of one's own capabilities to organise and execute courses of action that were needed to attain particular types of educational performance. Knight and Yorke's model encompassed this view and adopted the stance that self-theories and therefore by extension, personal qualities, would colour everything the student did. Reich (1991, 2002) claimed that advanced economies needed two sorts of high-level expertise, one emphasising discovery and the other focusing on exploiting the

discoveries of others through market related intelligence and the application of interpersonal skills. The USEM model was one which would support that claim. Yorke (2004, p4) claimed that in terms of employability, higher education should concern itself with four key areas

- abstraction (theorising and/or relating empirical data to theory)
- system thinking (seeing the part in the context of the wider whole)
- experimentation (intuitively or analytically); and
- collaboration(involving communication and team working skills)

He acknowledged that the major challenges were in getting these principles accepted by some academic communities, and in demonstrating their relevance to the student body in terms of employability.

I share his concerns. Although many in higher education have embraced the challenge of embedding employability into the curriculum, for others it is still an area that is viewed with confusion or contempt or disregarded as a relevant academic activity, regardless of the evidence presented by investigations into employers' expectations. Yorke's suggestion that there remains a significant challenge embedding employability is still real in higher education.

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

The emphasis on communication and interpersonal skills appears to be supported by studies which have investigated what employers are seeking in graduates. A number of reports have suggested that employers are less concerned with the subject of the degree, taking the achievement of the degree as evidence of a level of knowledge and achievement. They are more concerned with the graduate's ability to demonstrate interpersonal skills. Over ten years ago, a report by Harvey et al. (1997) showed that employers were happy with the disciplinary skills of graduates, but less happy with the development of generic skills - communication, teamworking and time management. Similarly, Purcell & Pitcher (1998) claimed that many employers were indifferent to the subject of study but concerned with the general dispositions, qualities and personal skills and attributes of graduates.

A survey by the London Times and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (Kelly, 2002) reported that the country's top graduate employers cited interpersonal skills as the most important factor in career success with the type of degree coming sixth. Archer & Davidson (2008) reporting for the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) stated that almost a third of employers were dissatisfied with graduates' generic employability skills such as teamworking, communication and problem solving. The report, based on a survey by

the International Employer Barometer, stated that employers viewed 'soft' skills and personality as more important than the degree qualification, listing the top ten qualities desired in a graduate as:-

- communication
- team working
- integrity
- intellectual ability
- confidence
- character/personality
- planning/ organisation
- literacy (good writing skills)
- numeracy (good with numbers)

These findings support the importance of building 'soft' skills development into the curriculum. Yet even with studies of employers' views over the years reporting the crucial nature of 'soft' skills, we, in higher education still appear to be neglecting their development.

Although some studies (Kelly, 2002, Archer and Davidson, 2008) have challenged the assertion that employers prefer graduates from 'old' universities, they are still highlighting the importance of interpersonal skills as the most important factor in gaining employment. The fact remains that *"employers are still expressing that there is a problem with*

graduate generic transferable skills such as communication, team work and problem solving” (Archer and Davidson 2008, p6).

Given the raft of evidence on what employers seek in the graduate, it is concerning that there is still a degree of dissatisfaction with the attainment of these skills and the questions remain: are we adopting the most effective means of developing relevant employability skills with students, and do we really listen to employers and students and understand the environment in which our students will spend their working lives?

APPROACHING EMPLOYABILITY – THE ACADEMIC RESPONSE

Employability, as an integral part of the academic programme, is still viewed with a mixture of enthusiasm, confusion, suspicion or derision, resulting in a variety of approaches for its development being undertaken throughout the sector. A series of guidelines from the Learning and Teaching Support Network and the Higher Education Academy, Learning and Employability Series (2004, 2007) have addressed issues relating to the development of employability of students, with some guidelines specifically suggesting ways in which employability skills of non-traditional groups can be raised. The

Embedding Employability in the Context of Widening Participation series (Thomas & Jones, 2008, p9) reiterated the additional problems that graduates from non traditional backgrounds face, claiming that in addition to a lack of information and poor advice and guidance, *“further disadvantage may arise in relation to their comparatively low reserves of cultural capital (i.e. knowledge relating to higher education and graduate employment) that can be called upon from family, schools and other spheres”*. They also suggested that students from non-traditional backgrounds may also *“lack social capital – i.e. networks of contacts to provide “hot knowledge” about higher education and the labour market and to assist them to adjust to higher education and secure suitable graduate employment”*.

Their suggestions are supported by a number of studies which illustrate how graduates view employability. For example, Hills et al. (2002), reporting on the HEFCE funded Graduate Employability (GEM) project, commented on research undertaken with 52 stakeholders of graduate employability including careers staff, lecturers, employers and final year students at a post 1992 university. Unlike Kelly (2002) and Archer and Davidson (2008), they stated that employers still favoured ‘traditional’ students from prestigious institutions. However, in common with other studies, they claimed that students were not confident in contextualising skills development, or making claims to be an employable graduate; and that they lacked awareness of structured

information gathering when exploring careers. The report concluded with the claim that *“if students are not equipped with a level of self confidence and self awareness on entering university to acquire the interpersonal skills that will increase their employability, then it has to be addressed through their university years”* (p12).

That is not to deny that a number of innovative approaches have been taken in embedding employability. Examples of creative curricular design abound from developing work related and work based experience to embedding personal development planning (Bowers-Brown et al, 2004, Graves, 2007, Thomas et al, 2008)

Higher education institutions need to recognise that students (particularly from low participation areas), may well bring different experiences and possess a different cultural and social capital than traditional students and that teaching and learning approaches, and indeed learning outcomes, will have to change in order to ensure that the most effective and productive educational experience is considered and applied when preparing the student for employment.

Much of the work that has been carried out on developing employability in higher education appears to focus on the range of approaches that can be adopted in developing skills. Knight and Yorke (2003, p7) expressed concerns about the skills based account of employability and proposed that the word ‘skills’ was not sufficient to

capture the diverse social practices that employers identified with employability although recognised that pragmatism suggested keeping the language provided that there was an awareness of its limitations. The emphasis on skills, in my view, is an excuse to avoid addressing the development of the personal qualities and interpersonal attributes that employers' rate highly as a core function in business education.

Fugate et al. (2004), put forward the theoretical proposition that employability was dependant on the interrelationship between career identity, adaptable behaviour and human and social capital. This suggests that higher education, needs to place a greater emphasis on providing opportunities for students to examine their identity as a student and the various constructs of behaviour that are expected of a graduate adapting to the world of employment. Preparing for employability tends to focus on the attainment of a qualification and on developing those skills which can be readily measured, rather than on the more complex interpersonal skills and attributes that are necessary to engage with the business world and the personal capabilities which enable adaptable behaviour and engagement with social capital.

The Scottish Funding Council (2004, p9) stated that

“Employability is about an individual's chances of progressing through the labour market successfully, according to what they choose to do. A person's employability at any one time depends on a combination of

their own skills, understandings and attributes and external factors and circumstances.”

Describing which behaviours demonstrate achievement of these skills, understanding and attributes is problematic as evidenced in the views of employers above. Hinchcliffe (2002) argued against the behaviourist view of skills in favour of ‘situational transfer’ of skills, which focused on the conceptualisation, understanding and application of a range of skills relevant to the situation. He suggested that many of the skills relevant to employability should be viewed as an “art” – the deployment of a set of techniques (or attributes) that can be combined in different ways and in different circumstances, and it is the action of this deployment that is important rather than the achievement of skills in a single context. Is he offering an excuse for not assessing the development of skills – the argument put forward by many academics for their reluctance to participate in developing interpersonal skills? I consider that an important, yet neglected part of developing these skills lies in the personal reflections of the student. Unless the student is able to recognise the attainment of these skills and attributes and appreciate their relevance in demonstrating employability employers will continue to raise concerns about the graduates’ preparedness to work. Students need to be given the time and space to develop and practice employability skills and attributes and be supported with appropriate feedback.

Layer (2004) rightly claimed that the most challenging aspect of widening participation is securing the curriculum change that is required to ensure that preparation for employment is embedded within courses for all students. He raised the problem of whether the development of employability skills should be taught on a stand-alone basis, or integrated into subjects. More importantly, he highlighted that the content of employability development in programmes is often based on programme providers' views, sometimes incorporating employers' views, but is seldom based on the views and needs of a diverse student body. This point is worthy of further consideration. Are the views likely to be similar? Do programme designers really understand the requirements of a changing workplace? Do teaching staff have the skills, attributes and indeed experience to deliver programmes which incorporate the development of employability relevant to a changing business environment? What processes are in place to determine what students believe their own development needs to be? Are we making assumptions about requirements, which are unrealistic, too low or too high? Without assessing their development, or providing feedback and support for development, how will students recognise their achievement and value in terms of demonstrating employability? Hinchliffe suggested many of the skills should be viewed as an 'art', but then how do we fairly and realistically assess them and under what circumstances?

CONCLUSION.

The need to develop employability with students has been well established and subject benchmarks have been developed within all disciplines taught within higher education, although it still appears that work needs to be done to ensure that the concept is widely and properly understood. More importantly, however, is having employability embedded within the curriculum in ways which ensures that its relevance is recognised by the students and its importance acknowledged and acted upon by staff. We still appear to have a missing piece of the jigsaw, the one which links the development of skills and attributes with the learning environment and results in students being prepared and confident to engage with graduate employment in the business environment.

The generic skills and competencies and the personal capabilities, which the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), (2006), (Appendix one) deem transferable, are those which depend on the self-efficacy of the student; their confidence and self-belief in their abilities. All rely on highly developed interpersonal skills, being able to relate to others and participating in social structures.

Could social capital be a concept useful in the investigation of how these are developed? Is the real missing part of the puzzle that we fail to recognise that a wide range of networks is necessary to give access

to resources otherwise unavailable in the immediate environment and that it is important to develop the interpersonal skills and capabilities of students to confidently connect with these as a key component of employability?

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EMPLOYABILITY

INTRODUCTION

Social capital has become an increasingly popular concept in recent years in academic theories and research and as a framework for policy making. Social capital theories seek to provide explanations for the effects of social change from its connection to social cohesion and economic growth to the impact of social networks on economic performance. Put succinctly, theories of social capital centre on the proposition that people's social networks are a valuable resource (Field, 2003).

Within business it has been suggested that social capital improves performance; indeed some writers have suggested that it is the ability of the organisation to build social capital as a distinctive organisational competence that will, in a changing global environment, secure success (Baker, 2000). Wood et al. (2002) proffered a similar view when they claimed that excellent performance in organisations was dependant on the organisation having healthy social capital. Lesser (2000) argued that the rise of the knowledge-based organisation and the rise of the

networked economy have led business organisations to become increasingly interested in the impact of social capital and its effect on economic growth and organisational success.

In a broader social context Serageldin & Grootaert (2000) claimed that there was an increasing body of evidence to suggest that enhanced social capital had a positive impact on development outcomes, including growth, equity and poverty elimination and that without it, economic growth, sustainability and human well-being would be compromised. With examples from East Asia, India, Northern Italy and Somalia to illustrate how social capital contributed more effectively than produced and natural capital to economic growth, they claimed that without a degree of common cultural coherence and shared values and beliefs, environmental sustainability, human well being and economic growth were unattainable.

Given that social capital is becoming an increasingly popular concept for assessing community cohesion, well-being, economic growth and organisational success, how relevant is it that business students are competent in identifying, accessing and activating it?

Defining social capital.

Working with different understandings, three key writers have figured in the development of the concept; Coleman, Putman and Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's (1977, p. 503) perspective explained issues of inequality and social justice and the link of social and cultural capital with economic capital. He described cultural capital as a possession of the individual, existing in the embodied state in dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state in the form of cultural goods such as pictures and books and in the institutionalized state through the acquisition of educational qualifications. Social capital, he defined as a *"capital of social relationships which will provide, if necessary, useful 'supports': a capital of honourability and respectability which is often indispensable if one desires to attract clients in socially important positions"*. Coleman (1990, p302) defined social capital by its function. *"It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities, having two characteristics in common: they all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure"*. Putman's (1993, p35) views focused on recipient trust and co-operation; as he put it *"features of social organisations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and co-operation for mutual benefit"*.

Holland (2007, p163) described the three approaches as falling into two major sociological traditions: *the “integrative” or consensus tradition in the work of Coleman and Putman and the critical or conflict tradition of Bourdieu”*.

While Putman (1995, 2000) regarded social capital as the driver for social cohesion and civic participation and thus a societal public good, a central starting point for both Bourdieu and Coleman was the rejection of the notion that educational attainment and achievement was a product solely of the individual’s natural talents. Although they applied different theoretical frameworks, aspects of their explanations were similar. Coleman (1990, 1998) regarded social capital as a property of the individual, mitigating effects of disadvantage in the development of human capital. Bourdieu (1986, p248-9) shared Coleman’s interest in individuals as members of groups but viewed social capital as resources or assets derived from social connections which perpetuated social inequalities.

Building on his reflections on the acquisition of various forms of capital, Bourdieu described cultural capital existing in three forms: the embodied state referring to as Social capital referred to the resources that people could obtain from a network of relationships,

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to memberships in a group – which provides each of its members with backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word”.

Three major themes of contemporary studies of social capital emerged from the above passage. The first of these regarded social capital as a type of resource embedded in a network of relationships. Being embedded in relationships suggested that it differed from both economic and cultural capital because of its dependence on the interaction between individuals and groups rather than by an individual acting alone. According to Bourdieu (1986, p.249) social capital *“depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of social (economic, cultural or symbolic) resources possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected”*. The second theme regarded social capital by its nature, as a form of public good and as such it was *“collectively-owned capital”*, that is owned by members of a network with strong relationship bonds and available for use by members of the network. The third theme considered that group membership was crucial for the formation and fulfilment of social capital. As social capital represents resources derived from a network of relationships, participation in group and

community activities that facilitate networking among group members can all have an impact on the development of social capital, and thereby help the group to achieve greater effectiveness. Bourdieu's definition of social capital has set the basic tone of contemporary social capital research investigating the influence of networks on achievement.

Subsequent social capital research, however, has witnessed some conceptual differences with the concept being extended to include features of "social organisation" or "social life", although unlike Bourdieu, many fail to address the influence of cultural capital on individual opportunity to embrace the benefits of social capital.

Following the footsteps of Putnam, other writers such as Gittel & Vidal (1998) have added "shared vision" and "institutional structure" as additional dimensions of social capital. Such expansions, however, may be contributing to making the concept too broad and confusing. Portes (1998) and Baron, Field, & Schuller (2000) warned against the tendency to turn the concept of social capital into an umbrella term that is a mixture of too many different concepts. Similarly, Dasgupta (2000, p326) warned of the temptation to use social capital as *"a peg to hang all those informal engagements that we like, care for and approve of on to"*.

That social capital is regarded with some scepticism is understandable. Edwards, Franklin, & Holland (2003) claimed that building and enhancing social capital was seen as a magic bullet for difficult policy issues including the consequences of individualisation and globalisation, changes in family forms, declining, alienated and socially excluded communities and a lack of political and civic involvement. Barron, Field and Schuller (2000, p38) raised further concerns when they warned against *“applauding social capital purely for its heuristic value”* stating that *“we should avoid overblown claims for the concept as one which can override conflicts of perspective or interest and address all issues under one framework.”* However, they balance this warning with the suggestion that *“we should avoid premature dismissal of it as an empty vessel, or a shiny new bottle filled with non-vintage wine”*.

Adler & Kwon (2002, p92,) broke down the concept of social capital into those who saw social capital as resource facilitating action by a focal actor to other actors; those who regarded social capital as the external linkages of a focal actor and; those who focused on social capital as internal linkages that characterised the structures of collective actors giving them cohesiveness and its associated benefits.

For the business student, all of these are important constructs as they seek to build employability. Internal linkages should provide a supportive learning environment to acquire the knowledge and skills of their discipline. External linkages are required if the students are to be

able to connect with those in the business community who will give them access to additional resources and provide experiences in dealing with the wider environment.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE BUSINESS STUDENT

Social capital theory has received increased attention as a way of thinking about the importance of networking, trust and norms on the education of young people. The concept has developed considerably since Coleman (1988) asserted that the amount and quality of family based social capital had an impact on the levels of academic achievement generated amongst students. Its application in education and learning has since been widened and used to examine the relationship between social capital and issues such as academic achievement (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, Morgan & Sorenson, 1999); drop out rates (Croninger & Lee, 2001); aspirations (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001); and lifelong learning, (Field, 2005). Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch's study of young Mexican immigrants also highlighted that the formation of ties to significant others, such as teachers and guidance staff, was as important as socio-economic status

in student achievement suggesting that the presence of a role model and engaging with that role model, was significant in shaping identity. This finding has been confirmed by Catts (2009) who, when examining the role of social capital and youths, suggested that the presence of significant others was an important factor in shaping young people's identity in the transition to the workplace.

Preece & Houghton (1996) used a social capital framework as a means of analysing the successful involvement of previously excluded groups in community learning programmes. They also claimed that fostering role models could have a positive impact on those who had previously not engaged with education, increasing the community capacity in learning and development. Based on an action research study which investigated the impact of a community access programme, they argued that there was a role for universities in engaging those who had previously been excluded from higher education, if barriers were removed and more flexible provision was made available. This, they suggested, would impact on social capital as well as human capital as certain forms of behaviour were nurtured thereby increasing the individuals' ability to participate in a range of networks.

Other studies have illustrated the 'dark' side of social capital. Thomson, Henderson, & Holland (2003) for example, illustrated that in some communities, the bonding nature of social capital could have a negative impact on young women and their career aspirations, suggesting that

notions of 'success' within their communities did not readily include staying on at school or participating in non compulsory education. Morrow (2001) provided evidence of children recognising that positive and negative forms of social capital occurred through schools. On a positive note, friendships were established and maintained and the school was the vehicle for attaining academic qualifications. On a negative note, those who did not achieve academically were marginalized.

If we are to realise the aspirations of the Widening Participation Review Group (2005) in the Learning for All report, whose authors called for a shift in focus from widening participation to optimal participation, can we afford to ignore the networks and access to valuable resources which are being missed by many of our students because of a lack of confidence and support in identifying and mobilising social capital?

Dika & Singh (2002) examined the relationship with social capital and educational achievement and established a positive association. However, the studies they reviewed focused largely on parental influence in the education of students. Less work has been done in examining the impact of the student's own connections. Indeed Dika and Singh expressed a need for further research into the influences in education in accessing and mobilising social capital.

Thomas (2002, p12) explored the potential for higher education to impact positively on social capital. She suggested a number of ways in which building social capital could improve student success. These included the development of friendships, work experience, student union activities and participation in governance. She raised concerns that institutions often ignored the value of social capital and that the socialisation of “non-traditional” students was often seen as unimportant, *“with a lack of opportunities for students with non-traditional tastes”*. I would argue that it is not just taste, but lack of experience, confidence and indeed a different cultural capital which prevents or discourages students from participating in such activities and that more effort has to be made to both encourage students in a way that captures their interests and enables them to see the relevance of developing the skills of “getting on” and “getting around” to future employment.

The above studies indicate that social capital as a concept is increasingly used in examining not only how confidence and aspirations are influenced by our immediate communities, but also the conditions under which people make connections with others, within and outside their immediate environment and in recognising the benefits and drawbacks associated with it.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Social capital is viewed as an important yet often unrecognised feature of business success. Baker (2002) argued that the long held view that success was an individual enterprise was a myth, citing Coleman's (1990, p300) comment that individualism is a "*....broadly perpetrated fiction in modern society. This fiction is that society consists of a set of independent individuals, each of whom acts to achieve goals that are independently arrived at, and the functioning of the social system consists of the combination of these actions of independent individual*". Baker supported this comment by proposing that success in organisations was due to the way the individuals behaved and managed networks rather, than their individual attributes.

Halpern (2006 p43) also recognised the benefits of connections when he suggested that there were strong theoretical reasons to expect social capital to affect economic performance in that efficient markets required effective flows of information to connect buyers to sellers, and that strong networks were conducive to innovation and entrepreneurialism, risk taking and investment, claiming that, "*information flows are affected by the size and characteristics of social networks*".

Szreter (2000 p57), in discussing the role of social capital and the economy, claimed that "*social capital flows from the endowment of*

mutually respecting and trusting relationships which would enable a group to pursue its shared goals more effectively than would otherwise be possible". He further suggested that *"true and extensive social capital is built from practical lessons and experience and dialogue with as wide a variety of others as possible"*. He cautioned that successful economies depended not only on highly educated and trained individuals but on those who could develop effective social relationships which would accelerate the transmission of information around the economy.

Svendson & Svendson (2004) viewed social capital as the missing link in the debate around economic growth, seeing it as an important production factor which is often ignored. This view is supported by those concerned with entrepreneurial behaviour (Baker 2000, Kim & Aldrich, 2005, Carter, 2006) who stressed that social networks were a significant component of the entrepreneur's capital. Carter (2006), in discussing the features of successful women entrepreneurs, cited Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998, p107) view of social capital as *"the resource individuals obtained from knowing others, being part of a network with them or merely being known to them and having a good reputation"*. She proposed that *"who you know was as important as what you know"*.

The interest in using social capital to explain aspects of successful entrepreneurial behaviour is increasing. From an acknowledgement of

the work of Becker (1964) and the importance of human capital in entrepreneurship, the focus has shifted to the relationship of social capital as an influence in the success in business ownership (Boden & Nucci, 2000, Shaw & Carter, 2004, Carter et al., 2006). For entrepreneurs, Firkin (2003) suggested that their capital was the total capital that they possess, including social capital, and the challenge lay in how they converted it to support their business. He suggested that a significant component of an entrepreneur's capital was their networks and the access that these gave to the resources required to establish and build businesses. Similarly, Silversides (2001) claimed that in some businesses such as the creative industries and professional services, social capital enhanced reputation and standing within the community.

Kim et al. (2005, p7) made three observations in relation to social capital and entrepreneurship. Firstly, they suggested that relationships were often based on people with similar characteristics, which result in a lack of diversity and limited access to opportunities. Secondly, they observed that not all relationships were valued in the same way and that some could create restrictions on success. Their third observation was that some people were more sought out than others. These observations are as relevant to students as they are to entrepreneurs. Where students lack opportunities to access diverse others, particularly those within the communities in which they will eventually seek employment, they lack exposure to new ideas and ways of behaving,

restricting the awareness of and the potential to develop the characteristics which are valued by employers. This suggests that there is a role for higher education in providing active intervention to expose students to a wider range of resources in order to increase their ability to mobilise social capital. Kim et al. further suggested that while ascribed characteristics such as demographic background, were likely to be influential in bringing people together in a range of networks, of more importance were those characteristics which individuals obtained or achieved and therefore were variable and open to change. These characteristics included education, work experience and occupation. They proposed that where individuals pro-actively made strategic choices which pushed them across social boundaries, they were putting themselves in a position to network with dissimilar others thereby gaining access to new behaviours.

The notion of social capital as a network is supported by Burt (2005), who described the importance of structural holes in accessing social capital. These, he suggested were crucial in accessing information, in the creation of good ideas and in learning and achieving advantage in business success. Structural holes he defined as the empty spaces in a social structure. Burt (p16) claimed that those *“people on either side of a structural hole circulate in different flows of information”*. Exposure to structural holes, according to Burt, was the foundation for network models of social capital. He hypothesised that those who stood near

structural holes were at high risk of 'good ideas'. This hypothesis is applicable for students, in that those who connect with others (students, lecturers, external resources and organisations) are more likely to be exposed to new ideas and behaviours and the potential to achieve new characteristics. If students are to access a wider range of resources, develop and participate in networks which will support the development of employability and graduate careers, they have to develop the skills and capabilities which enable them to identify such networks and the confidence and skills to access and utilise them.

EMPLOYABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT

Craig's (2003) study of the role of networks in developing social capital and empowering young people tells a powerful tale of personal and educational progress when they are given knowledge, skills and other resources to pursue their education and careers. Describing a programme delivered in Melbourne which connected role models in the community with young people at risk from leaving school, she claimed that access to positive social capital played a fundamental part in raising levels of participation and successful outcomes in education, employment and training. The benefits of accessing loose connections,

such as those described by Craig are not new. Over four decades ago, Granovetter (1973), argued that people benefited from having a wide range of weak and scattered ties which offered access to a greater range of resources than was available through strong ties and closed networks.

Research has continually demonstrated that people occupying positions associated with educational success and employment in professional occupations will tend to belong to different social networks from people occupying positions associated with poor educational attainment and unemployment, or employment in poorly paid, unskilled occupations (Putnam 2000, Burt 2005). These networks are likely to be potential sources of social capital. The social capital associated with the networks of those with lower levels of educational achievement and the underemployed tend not to be valued by those outside their networks.

Two key issues link social capital with employment opportunities. Regular and constant interactions with others (particularly those from different backgrounds) aids in the transfer of information and the build up of knowledge. This process is also valuable in the development of key transferable employability skills. The second issue which links social capital to employment is access to information regarding current (or future) job vacancies (Granovetter 1973, 1974; Seibert, Kraimer, & Linder, 2001), that is, friends and colleagues who can act as a resource

for finding out the areas of employment where recruitment is possible, and who to contact regarding such appointments. It is common practice for individuals to be recommended to companies by current employees, and for employers to seek out potential recruitment through their own social and professional networks. Stone, Gray, & Hughes (2003) examined the impact of social capital on labour market outcomes. From an analysis of data from the Families, Social Capital and Citizenship (FSAC) 2001 survey in Australia, they presented evidence that professional contacts were an important means of finding employment, but that those with limited social capital were more likely to be reliant on the 'close ties' of families and friends. In some cases, they suggested that lack of access to a wide range of contacts led to a mirroring of social inequalities and emphasised the differences between people from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds in accessing employment. They claimed, for example, that those with fewer connections would have fewer opportunities; and those with diverse ties, created through linking social capital, would have access to more resources and professional contacts.

Forret & Dougherty (2001, p248) stressed the importance of networking behaviour in the "protean career". Networking behaviour, they suggested, was an *"individual's attempt to develop and maintain relationships with others who have the potential to help them in work or career"*. They presented evidence illustrating how successful careers

and promotions were strongly linked to those most able at networking thereby supporting the importance of networking relationships in accessing and building careers. The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), 2006 employability competencies would appear to support the protean career – preparation for a changing workplace with an emphasis on the proactive graduate rather than an expectation that employing organisations would be responsible for the individual's development.

What however, of the student whose connections through family and friends do not enable access to such networks? How do they access appropriate resources and how do they develop the skills and confidence which enables them to access them? Being able to utilise and mobilise social capital is clearly an important area. Creating these linkages and recognising the benefits to be gained from them is the foundation of social capital.

Networks are not only important in job seeking. A changing work environment has led to investigations about the benefits of networks once in employment (Portes 1998, Cross and Parker, 2004). Business organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the power of networks. Cross and Parker for example, claimed that networks were essential for organisational effectiveness and innovation. Working with a wide range of organisations in America, they evaluated the impact of networks on innovation and effective working practices within

organisations. Like previous writers they concluded that those who were well connected had access to a range of resources and information which had a significant impact on not only the organisation but on individual lives and success.

Being able to identify and access valuable resources is a key skill required in employment, as are the communication and interpersonal skills that are required to activate social capital. These are the skills that have already been identified by employers as being deficient in many graduates as outlined in the previous chapter.

An increasing number of studies show that social capital impacts on everything from health and well being, educational achievement and participation in learning to accessing and managing careers. Yet little has been done to investigate the skills and personal capabilities that encourage or prevent engagement with forms of social capital and we are still unclear about the practices and conditions that encourage business students to 'get on' and 'get around' in terms of developing employability.

CONCLUSION

Field (2003, p68) recognised that there was a major deficit in the social capital literature relating to skills development which enabled people to

utilise social capital and it is that observation that is the focus for this study. I suggest that unless we equip students with the skills and confidence to identify and access useful resources then 'getting on' and 'getting around' will not happen. This view is supported by Barron & Markham (2000) who, whilst acknowledging the importance of social capital in entrepreneurial success, proposed that social skills were as important as social capital, and indeed made the point that where social capital led to an increase in resources and information through networks and personal ties, unless the individual possessed effective social skills such as social perception, impression management, persuasion, influence and social adaptability then they were unlikely to be able to access and engage effectively in the networks which would provide these resources.

The literature indicates that there is merit in exploring the role of social capital in developing and applying employability skills. Its value is recognised in enhancing careers and lifelong learning. The skills required to activate and utilise social capital have yet to be defined. The circumstances that support its development in higher education are largely unexplored, particularly with the diverse student group that accesses higher education in the 21 century.

THE RESEARCH ISSUE

This chapter describes the approaches taken in the research. It sets out the methodology, the research process and considers the ethical issues associated with the study.

From a review of the literature there was clearly merit in exploring the benefits that accessing and utilising social capital may have in terms of the development of employability, particularly as various studies had reported concerns expressed by employers regarding a deficit in the interpersonal skills of graduates. Investigating the factors which enhanced or inhibited the willingness and ability of students to identify and access new networks and resources may be the key to improving employability and increasing self confidence by expanding the range of contacts and potential resources available to students. In order to establish this I needed to understand how and why students connected with others within and beyond their immediate environment and the extent to which they recognised the benefits that making these connections had in developing employability. This involved exploring, with the students, their pre-existing social capital and its influence on decision making regarding participating in higher education, how they

developed new networks and the related skills development. By identifying the conditions which support or inhibit the development of skills and attributes which enable students to identify, access and mobilise social capital, I would be able to explore the factors in the learning environment which encourage students to reach out to new resources.

CLARIFYING MEANINGS

Prior to commencing the data collection I had to be clear about the definitions of key concepts in the study. From the literature explored in the previous two chapters Yorke's (2004, p7) definition of employability as

"A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes - that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce and the community"

appeared to include all aspects of employability and therefore was a good starting point. It is also the definition used in the employability strategy of the institution and indeed is in wide use throughout the sector as it is promoted by the Higher Education Academy. As stated in

chapter two (p32), I recognised the limitations of the use of the word skills in describing employability and therefore use it with the understanding that, in employability terms, it describes a wider range of social practices and behaviours.

The descriptions of the key areas of employability, as defined by the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) framework (Appendix 1) were used. Because I was concerned with how students accessed resources, I decided to concentrate on the generic competencies and personal capabilities as listed below. These are the areas that were highlighted as most valued by employers and reported by them as least likely to be to be demonstrated by graduates. They are also the skills and capabilities most closely related to creating and using social capital.

Generic Competencies

Personal Capabilities

Planning and Organisation

Personal Development

Influencing

Creativity

Written Communication

Decisiveness

Questioning

Initiative

Listening

Adaptability / Flexibility

Team Working

Achievement / Orientation

Interpersonal Sensitivity

Tolerance for Stress

Lifelong Learning and Development

Leadership

By concentrating on these aspects was not to minimise the relevance of other employability competencies detailed in the framework, but reflected my view that others such as cognitive skills, technical ability, business and organisational awareness and practical and professional elements were more likely to be covered within regular academic courses of study.

Providing a workable definition of social capital proved more complex. Although definitions and understandings of social capital vary amongst writers and different perspectives are assumed by different disciplines, all share the common theme of recognising the importance of social relationships in achieving success. I was interested in looking at achieving success in the development of employability competences and the development of interpersonal skills required in achieving that. For the purpose of this study therefore, instead of using any particular definition, I followed John Field's (2003) view that social capital theories centred on the proposition that people's social networks were a valuable resource. I was seeking to explore the relevance of these networks as a resource in developing employability.

In order to examine where and how social capital was used or created I adapted the dimensions of social capital as described by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998):-

Structural dimension referring to the network structure, ties and configuration

Cognitive dimension referring to the shared codes, language and the narratives

Relational dimension referring to the trust, norms, obligations and identification; the personal relationships that people develop through interactions.

Similarly I used the levels of social capital as defined by Woolcock (2001) and Catts & Ozga (2005):-

bonding social capital describing the ties between people in similar situations such as family and friends (getting by),

bridging social capital relating to more distant ties of like persons such as workmates and loose friendships (getting on),

linking social capital referring to reaching out to unlike people and dissimilar people who are entirely outside the community thus engaging a greater range of resources than are available within the community (getting around).

THE RESEARCH METHODS

In designing this study, I was mindful of the view of Griffiths (1998, p111)

“...the role of an educational researcher is always to work in specific circumstances with, rather than on, or even for, the people who inhabit them.... Such a way of working is also a way of dealing with some of the arrogance presupposed in some forms of knowledge, and their implications in structures of dominance and oppression”.

Working with a group of former business school students, the intention of the research was to generate data which would inform my understanding of how students recognise and utilise social capital. This would improve understanding of the role that social capital has in enhancing the employability of students, particularly for those who, according to the literature, face most difficulty in accessing graduate employment. For the study I decided to focus on students who had participated in a particular optional module, Entrepreneurship and Organisational Development, on the Business Degree course. There were sound reasons for this choice. I was module leader for this course and therefore had an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the course content and its design and delivery. The module had been

specifically designed to be particularly interactive, giving students the opportunity to work in self-selecting groups to devise a business plan. Activities in the module had been created to encourage students to access resources outside the institution. These activities included undertaking market research, seeking advice from funding sources and contacting sector experts. They were also required, as part of the assessment, to reflect on their experiences including the development of learning and the acquisition of employability skills. Students from this module would therefore have experience of making external connections and reflecting upon their own development. As such, participating in interviews would not place an onerous burden on them.

It was also these students who had stimulated my interest in the research. It was they who held the answers to my questions about their confidence and aspirations. They had experienced the educational input and, having successfully completed their studies, were better positioned to reflect upon the experience. The location was also my place of employment and therefore I would be in a position to influence teaching and learning approaches during and after the research.

My approach was that of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983, 1987). As a matter of course, I employed 'reflection in action' in my teaching practice and I was keen to continue this approach in carrying out the study. Schön (1983, p14) argued that *"Professionals are called upon to perform tasks for which they have not been educated and the*

'niche no longer fits the education or the education no longer fits the niche'". Reflection in action, in developing employability with students was particularly relevant given that it was an area regarded by many colleagues as being outwith the traditional remit of academic responsibility. Being able to reflect on my own approaches and consider the stories of the participants would increase my knowledge and improve awareness of the conditions within the learning environment which inhibited or enhanced the student experience in connecting with others. For the research, I wanted to provide an opportunity for the participants to *"recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it"* (Boud, et al. 1995, p19).

Originally it was my intention to undertake action research as my personal stance on education is that of facilitating learning, regarding the student as the expert in their own development (Sternberg, 2003). I was keen to involve them in the design of the research and the interpretation of the findings. This also would cater for my desire to ensure that a participatory approach was taken. However, on a practical level, undertaking action research was going to prove a difficult task given the timescales and the need for involvement of colleagues, at a time where the merger of the institution was resulting in a wide range of new activities for some staff, and for others, uncertainty of their future role or voluntary severance.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

I was still keen, however, to hear the voice of the student in a way which was constructive and empowering without identifying them as different (Lincoln, 1993, chapter 2). I was uncomfortable with using many of the labels attached to students who were seen as 'non traditional' and needed to ensure that the experience of participating in my research did not add to their lack of confidence, or identify them in any way as different. It was much more important that participating in the research offered them an opportunity to reflect on their own skills, knowledge and potential contribution and that I, as a facilitator of learning, better understood how these could be enhanced through different approaches to learning and teaching in the widest sense.

These thoughts inevitably led to an examination of the power relationships within the research process and indeed to consideration of power in changing learning environments. I was aware of the words of Gore (1990) that empowerment was not just a discourse or a state of mind but required the acquisition of the property of power and its exercise in the accomplishment of some vision or desired future state. I therefore decided to concentrate on collecting rich data which I could then share with the students involved, testing themes and understandings with students from different cohorts. Although I had never considered myself to be in a position of power over students, that

was, perhaps, naivety on my part and had to be addressed when considering the ethical implications of the research.

Having rejected action research as a method I decided to explore the potential for developing a case study. The attraction of this method was obvious in the circumstances. My research was focused on a single site within boundaries determined by the location and experiences of the participants in that environment. It was concentrating on an identified issue relating to that environment although the expectation was that the lessons learned from studying the issue would contribute to a greater understanding of the issue in a wider sense. The lessons learned from an analysis of the research could inform approaches taken with future generations of students, in other settings and in other institutions.

Stake (1995) described an instrumental case study as one where the focus was on a specific issue (in this case the impact of social capital on students' confidence and capabilities in developing employability competencies and skills) and a vehicle to understanding the issue. As an interpretive case study, the research sought emic meanings held by the students involved in the study. I was, as Stake suggested, following the path of interpreting my view of coming to know the case and describing the major components.

Having been involved with the students in the delivery of their education, I had observed their reactions to teaching and learning and noted their development over the years; I was in a privileged position. I was able to refer to incidents which would 'jog' the memory of the participant to illustrate examples of the development of social capital which would have been unknown to an 'outside' researcher. However, this position of knowledge could also be used to guide the participant into areas which they regarded as unimportant or uneventful and therefore I had to use my knowledge with care, being prepared to disregard my own interpretation of events in favour of eliciting the participants' view. That is not to say that my own interpretation of events should be regarded as less important, rather that awareness of the potential to influence the outcomes should be at the forefront of my questioning. However, I was able to guide the student to specific events and elucidate their interpretation and reflection of these. Interestingly, participants often recalled occasions relating to my input, on which they placed far greater significance than I did, raising again the issue of unrecognised or unacknowledged power on my part.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE APPROACH

Merriam (1998, p41) claimed that the case study offered a means of investigating complex social issues which consist of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon because *“it is anchored in a real-life situation, it results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon”*.

Similarly, Simons (1996, p225) claimed that one of the advantages of case study research was its *“uniqueness, its capacity for understanding complexity in particular circumstances”*.

However, Guba & Lincoln (1981, p378) warned that case studies could *“oversimplify or exaggerate a situation, leading the reader to erroneous conclusions about the actual state of affairs”* and that readers may mistake the account for the whole when a case study is in fact *“but a part – a slice of life”*. I regarded the slice of life which I was investigating to hold some clues as to how we could better understand how students connect with one another and the external environment. Only by understanding these issues could we adopt more effective learning and teaching approaches to enhance employability.

Hodkinson & Hodkinson (2001) suggested that the drawbacks of a case study approach were the generation of too much data for easy analysis, expense, difficulties in representing complex data, and the lack of

generalisability in conventional terms. They also raised concerns with problems of objectivity.

I considered generalisability in this case to be less of an issue, given that the intention was not to produce research which could be replicated to verify results but that the interpretation of events would stimulate debate and produce new knowledge which would inform approaches that could be adopted in a business school to increase opportunities for students to enhance employability. I would be making assertions, in Stake's words (1995, p9) *petite generalisations*, located within the case study, rather than the *grande generalisations* which refer to wider populations.

Stake (1995, p12) very eloquently warned against researchers overstating their claims from case study research,

"It is not uncommon for case study researchers to make assertions on a relatively small data base, invoking the privilege and responsibility of interpretation. To draw so much attention to interpretation, may be a mistake, suggesting that case study work hastens to draw conclusions. Good case study is patient, reflective, willing to see another view of the case. An ethic of caution is not contradictory to an ethic of interpretation".

Simons (1996, p 237-8) addressed these concerns claiming

“we need to embrace the paradoxes inherent in the people, events and sites we study and explore rather than try to resolve the tensions embedded in them.....Paradox for me is the point of case study. Living with paradox is crucial to understanding. The tension between the study of the unique and the need to generalise is necessary to reveal both the unique and the universal and the unity of that understanding. To live with ambiguity, to challenge uncertainty, to creatively encounter, is to arrive, eventually, at ‘seeing’ new”.

For me, the study of the ‘unique’, having an opportunity to engage in an in-depth investigation with a small number of participants, seeking their views would be far more likely to help me arrive eventually at ‘seeing new’ than a large scale study which focused on breadth rather than depth.

Objectivity was also clearly an issue that I had to consider. Could I be objective when it had been me responsible for delivering much of the input upon which I was asking the participants to reflect? Given that the work was being carried out as part of a professional doctoral programme which was concerned with professional practice, reflecting on my practice was justified and part of that reflection should be to consider the views of the students. However, this research was about their interpretation of their experiences and I needed to create an environment which encouraged the student to feel confident in responding honestly. I believed that the relationship I had with the

students involved would enable that to happen but I was aware that I had to frame the questions in a way that focused on their experiences rather than on addressing my input to their studies.

I was aware that interpreting the data was going to be challenging. I needed to ensure that my understanding of the participants' reflections were accurate. Holliday (2002, p100) suggested when discussing issues relating to qualitative data analysis, "*the melange of social life is so complex, research is already one step away from reality*". I wanted to ensure that I related the issues raised by the participants fairly and accurately and so had to take steps to check that the themes I identified were consistent with the participants' issues.

For this investigation the case study offered an in-depth analysis of a single site, the data coming primarily from the interviews of the participants. However, other sources were used, such as student assessment documents, to clarify events raised or seek further information which would shed more light on events described by the participants.

THE PILOT STUDY

An initial interview schedule (appendix two) was devised and a pilot study was undertaken to check the relevance of the questions and to ensure that the responses given were in the area that I wanted to explore with students. Key areas covered were

- Previous educational experience and reasons for choosing the location of study
- The development of friendships and study groups
- The development of contacts within and external to institution as part of their studies
- How the learning environment supported or inhibited the development of contacts and networks
- Recognition of skills development
- Current employment/ study or future plans

The pilot study also offered an opportunity to test and develop my skills as an interviewer, the time requirements of the interview and to identify any contentious issues that might arise through the questions.

Two students were identified, one from each cohort, to be included in the research. Although gender and age were not a main focus of the study, the students invited to participate in the pilot were purposefully selected to cover age difference, gender and educational backgrounds.

ISSUES FROM THE PILOT STUDY

My own knowledge of the students and their personal circumstances was identified as a strength as well as a potential weakness. I had to be conscious of the extent to which it would influence the interview. For example, when asking Mary how she chose which students to work with in a study group, I was aware that she had worked primarily with the same group throughout her time at college. Knowing this I was able to explore in more depth, her reasons for choosing to do this. This however, raised issues for me about taking what I thought I knew about the students for granted, and, when Mary revealed that she had worked with these people not purely out of friendship but because she lacked confidence in working with others, I was able to rethink how I asked participants about the role of friendships in enabling or inhibiting bridging social capital. It also made me reflect on the need to spend more time with participants in asking them to identify the skills and attributes that they viewed as important when choosing to work with others.

Another issue identified as worthy of further exploration was that of reflection on personal development and the need to spend more time getting participants to identify the range of contacts that they had made as a result of participating in the entrepreneurship module. This was an area that Craig found particularly easy in the pilot interview, but

which Mary struggled with, and, as a result, I reviewed at what stage of the interview I asked them to devise a network map.

A third area that led to much discussion with my supervisor was the need for me to review my role when a participant raised an issue in terms of access to resources or when they identified a development need which I could respond to. Should I intervene or was this an area which was separate from the research? I decided that given my longstanding relationship with the students and because of my duty of care, I would, should the need arise, arrange to meet with the participant after the interview and pass on any relevant materials or direct them to appropriate resources. In the event, these related mainly in referrals to the College Careers Service, which many of the participants were not aware was still available to them after graduation.

The pilot study was particularly helpful in clarifying the language which should be used in the interviews. Whilst the research focused on confidence and the development of social capital I needed to be clear about how these terms were understood by the participants. Social capital was not a term that the participants would necessarily be familiar with and therefore I avoided its use in the interviews, referring to influence of families and friends, contacts made, networks established and behaviour in groups for example. Confidence on the other hand, is a commonly used term but means different things to different people. I had to ensure that the language used was one which

participants were comfortable with and that we shared common understandings. When participants referred to a boost in confidence or lacking confidence I asked them to give me an example of when that had happened and how they responded.

On a practical level I had gained the services of a professional typist to transcribe the pilot interviews. Although this saved considerable time on my part, I quickly realised that by not undertaking the transcriptions myself immediately after the interview, I lost a valuable opportunity to reflect on what was said and how it was said and note my reaction. Although the interviews were retained on CD and could be listened to time and time again, I believed that the initial transcription time was unique, given that it was undertaken immediately after the interview when responses and reactions were fresh in my mind. I therefore decided to undertake all future transcriptions myself in order to capture my initial reflections in note form alongside the transcriptions.

The responses of the participants in the pilot also reinforced the need for the research sample to be purposefully selected. I knew the student group well and wanted to ensure that the twelve participants, out of a potential forty nine, reflected the characteristics of the group. The final selection was chosen to reflect age, gender, educational background and participation in the class; those who were active and had recounted valuable experiences in their reflective diaries, and those who had been less engaged.

CHOOSING PARTICIPANTS

Radnor (2002, p49) suggested that if we wanted to understand what makes people do what they do, then we need to ask them, and, asking them takes us in to the “*realms of meanings*”. In terms of interpretive research, the meanings that people attribute to the social situations that they find themselves in are an important source of data. The interview is an interactive human encounter in which someone seeking information asks for it and it is, in most cases, supplied by the other. By asking for information through a semi structured interview, and observing responses and reactions I would be able to engage in the act of interpretation.

Participants were chosen for a specific purpose; they had enrolled on the module, had worked in groups and had reflected on the success or otherwise of expanding networks and access to new resources as part of the assessment of the module. Miles & Huberman’s (1994) typology of sampling strategies referred to this as stratified purposeful selection in that it illustrated subgroups and facilitated comparisons. Whilst the purpose was not specifically to compare different experiences, purposeful selection ensured that the students approached to participate in the research reflected the diverse student population of the business school and would produce information rich cases of

interest for study (Patton, 1990) which would offer positive and negative experiences.

This approach satisfied the needs of the research although it may be criticised as being deliberately and unashamedly selective and biased (Cohen et al. 2000). Whilst accepting this criticism, I defend the choice on the basis that the sample chosen reflects, to a large extent the student population undertaking the module in terms of age, educational background and work experiences. The information gleaned from the research was intended to stimulate debate rather than produce information which was replicable or representative of student groups. Rather, it was about capturing unique stories in an attempt to raise awareness of issues which would inform professional practice.

All participants were either recent graduates or were about to graduate. They had therefore completed the modules which I was responsible for assessing, ensuring that I was no longer in a position which could directly affect academic results. I was, however, mindful of the fact that I could be a potential referee for any of the participants and was sensitive to the fact that I could still have a positive or indeed negative impact upon their lives.

One participant was one of only two students who had left the module from either cohort before completion. I was interested to find out why

this had happened and if her experience of connecting with the business environment was significantly different. The reason she gave for withdrawing from the module at the time was her fear of doing a presentation. I was keen to find out if that was the only reason or if the requirements to work in different groups and access external sources were influencing factors in her decision.

A valuable but unintentional outcome of the purposeful selection was that all participants were first generation entrants to higher education as defined by Thomas and Quinn (2005). Given the overall student population of the College, this was not particularly surprising. It did however; present an opportunity to focus the literature review in chapter two on this group and compare the experiences of the group with the evidence reported by others.

A profile of the participants can be found in appendix three.

The research process

Following the pilot interviews, twelve interviews took place, six students from each cohort. As in the pilot study, the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and, following my reflections from the pilot interviews, I transcribed the interviews myself. The interview

questions had been revised to incorporate the issues raised previously (appendix four). The initial individual interviews were followed up with second interviews six months later, after the initial data analysis had been undertaken (appendix five). At this stage, the identified themes were presented to the participants and further information was sought regarding the themes. They were also given another opportunity to raise any further issues that they had considered following the first interview. The questions were designed to prompt not only answers to the questions but to stimulate reflections from the participants about their views and feelings. The interview structure covered five basic areas:-

- Motivations and influences on decision making regarding choices of college and course
- Making connections in the early stages of study
- Developing connections in college and with external resources
- Benefits and difficulties in connecting with different groups
- Developing employability skills and capabilities.

At the end of the first interview, the participants were asked to devise a network map showing the contacts that they had made during their course and to identify what resources could be available through these contacts in the future.

Because of my position, I could, if necessary, access a range of other relevant sources of data such as assessments and other lecturers

involved with the students, but as I was interested in listening to the students' voices rather than seeking verification of their claims, assessment material and other relevant documents and sources were only used to trigger discussion with the participants or look for further information regarding their views.

In the follow up interviews, the themes identified from the first interviews were presented to the participants and clarification sought on the accuracy of the issues raised and further insights sought.

These themes covered five key areas:-

- the learning environment
- characteristics of the student identity
- working in groups, formally and informally
- dealing with external contacts
- application of the skills and capabilities in a wider context

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis required a close examination of the information collected. Schostak (2002, p92) drew attention to the problems of analysing data when he observed that

“Getting close to others means grappling with the complexity of their lives, as members of groups, as participants in the cultures and social and material structures that frame their lives. It means becoming accustomed to never being able to know all, never being certain about the status of interpretations, ‘findings’, ‘knowledge’”.

I never expected to be able to understand and be able to represent all the complex factors that go into making up the connections made in the learning environment from a series of interviews, but I was keen to ensure that I represented the truth of their stories. Atkinson (2006) questioned if stories should be used in research. He raised the problems of stories not being true; stories being true; stories being manipulated and stories being distracting. Through the interviews, I was obtaining student’s stories, listening to their voices and so had to take particular care to ensure that I represented them as truth in the eyes of the participants. Although I would manipulate the stories to extract information which would form the themes of the analysis, I had to ensure that the meanings were not manipulated to illustrate my views, rather that my views may have to change to accommodate their stories.

In an attempt to apply a systematic process to the data analysis I used the NVivo (7) software package to code themes which emerged from the interviews. Initially the themes emerged from the topics covered in the interview schedules. This was certainly of benefit in terms of

ensuring that the data was treated in an organised fashion. However, as I became more familiar with the data, I moved to a more intuitive analysis. This decision was largely influenced by my preference to listen to the voices of the students rather than simply rely on reading and rereading texts. As the interviews had been retained on CD's I was able to listen repeatedly and pick up nuances from the spoken words. This revealed much more in terms of underlying meanings and considered responses as I reflected upon the silences and pauses as well as the spoken words. I was also able to reflect on when the participants became excited and enthusiastic when relating their experiences and when they became angry or frustrated when recalling events. Merriam (1998, p179) claimed that constructing categories was largely an intuitive process whilst being systemic and informed by the purpose of the research, the investigators orientation and knowledge and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves.

The data management process began thus with the category construction reflecting the purpose of the research.

Given the volume of the data it was difficult to reduce the information down to a manageable numbers of categories. Guba and Lincoln (1981, p95) suggested four guidelines for developing categories; the frequency of times that a topic was mentioned; those topics that participants viewed as important; those categories that stood out because of their

uniqueness and those areas which were areas of inquiry that had not otherwise been recognised.

On that basis the themes were identified which provided a structure for the analysis which is presented in Chapter Six.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The British Educational Research Association (BERA), (2004) guidelines underpinned the approach taken with the research. The importance of responsibilities to the participants, obtaining voluntary informed consent, the right to withdraw, the consideration of privacy and confidentiality and employing a methodology that was fit for purpose were crucial if the study was to be valid and insightful. I also had to consider the benefits to be gained by the institution since they had supported me throughout the course of my study.

As with most qualitative research, case studies involve delving into peoples' lives, personal views and circumstances. That inevitably creates risks for those involved. I was conscious of the ethical issues that this raised. The School of Business is a small community and the identified cohorts of students even smaller. Could I fully guarantee anonymity? Would a description of participants' profiles be enough to identify a student? It certainly would be for staff and other students

within these cohorts. Care therefore had to be taken in describing them. Elliot (2006) argued that if we gave people a chance to tell their stories, have their voices heard within the context of research, we needed to be able to attribute these stories. Even if the students were happy that their participation was acknowledged, care and sensitivity had to be employed both in describing them and in the reporting of their contribution to ensure that distress, although not anticipated because of the nature of the research, was avoided. This was particularly true of those who had negative experiences to relate.

I was aware of the need to treat the insights given by the participants with dignity and respect. Concealing their identity, even with name changes, would be problematic given that it was a single site case study and the purposeful selection meant that participants had been chosen from a specific module. Identification would be less likely as all had now graduated and left the College. In order to protect identity as much as possible I changed the names of the participants and where sensitive issues were raised, I have been careful to disguise these to prevent comments being attributed to any individual. I have been impressed by the honesty and openness shown by the participants. It has reinforced my belief that they really are the experts in their own development and that, given the right conditions; students can contribute to a far greater extent in devising strategies to improve their learning environment. I have taken care not to abuse the trust they

placed in me by participating in the research, by ensuring that I have been as honest in my deliberations as they were in sharing their stories.

Students, especially those who have been recruited as part of the widening participation agenda can often be regarded as lacking in voice because their points of view are believed to be unimportant or they have difficulty in accessing those in power (Le Compte, 1993). My intention was to elicit these students' viewpoints and present them in a way that was accessible to academics and policy makers, making their voices stronger and more influential. I had worked with these students for at least two years; a trusting relationship and mutual respect had developed and been nurtured over that time. My knowledge of their skills, attributes and achievements would ensure that a supportive and encouraging environment for them to share their rich and unique stories was provided.

CARE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Randor (2002) suggested that a principle of interpretative research was ethics in action, highlighting the need for dignity and respect for participants. This implies responsibility towards the participants in terms of providing information regarding the aims of the research and

the need to obtain informed consent. She stressed the need for the research process to develop a relationship which was honest and open and allowed participants to withdraw at any stage. These matters were covered by the information contained in the participant information sheet and consent form (appendices six and seven) and by my own conduct during the course of interviews. Although it was not anticipated that the research questions would raise sensitive issues for participants, I did need to ensure that a caring and responsive environment was created. Participants were asked prior to interview if they preferred the interview to take place within the College or if they would prefer a neutral meeting place. In the event all agreed that the College was acceptable. Interview rooms were booked and 'Do Not Disturb' notices placed on doors. No telephones were in the room to ensure that there was no avoidable disturbance. During the interviews, participants were reminded, when they referred to individual members of staff or other students that the information would remain confidential and non attributable and that, should the information be used, identities would be changed to protect anonymity. I also stressed the importance of finding out their experiences, ensuring that the participants were clear that there were no right and wrong answers, rather it was their stories and thoughts that I wanted to hear.

Prior to the commencement of the research I discussed access to the Student Services Counsellor with the Head of Student Services in the

event that interviews prompted any areas of anxiety which I could not comfortably deal with, and specialised support was required. This service was made available to all participants. However, no one needed to avail themselves of this service.

IMPACT OF THE RESEARCH ON PARTICIPANTS

It was necessary for me to consider the impact that telling their story might have on the participants. Elliott (2006) suggested that ethical issues are those that relate to the relationship between the researcher and the research subject and the political issues as the potential implications that the research has on the wider society. Whilst the intention of the research was to understand the connections between social capital and employability, I was aware of the potential dilemmas that participants may face as they reflected on their experiences and the potential dilemma that I might face if the reaction from colleagues was not what I expected or desired. However, in the event, all the participants indicated that they valued the opportunity the interviews gave them as a space to reflect on their achievements, many of which had gone unnoticed. They also appreciated the fact that their opinions were being listened to. The reaction from my colleagues to the

research has, to date, been largely what I expected; enthusiasm and support from some, scepticism and indifference from others.

MY ROLE AS RESEARCHER

I regard my self as a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher in a superior/subordinate relationship with students and that stance inevitably influences the views that I have of the students and the students have of me. As such I have tried to develop my relationship with students as one of mutual respect. The default position of the students, however, comes from their previous experience and is likely to exhibit a different stance. This is particularly true for those students who have had little experience of facilitated learning. Given that they had all completed their studies, my perceived authority was likely to be less influential than had I chosen to include current students.

Although the research was designed to give participants an opportunity to take part in shaping the research agenda, offering opinions and influence findings, I was aware of the need to ensure that participants felt comfortable taking part in the study and felt at ease in sharing their experiences. This meant that I had to ensure that they were clear that their views were important and I that I took time to check that my

understanding of their stories was accurate. Constant checking of my understanding during the interview, asking questions such as “do you mean”, “are you saying that” or seeking examples to illustrate points that they were making helped to clarify issues in my mind.

Just as I had to consider the impact of the research on the participants, I had to consider the impact that having me as a character in their stories would have. Could the portrayal of me as a character raise questions about retelling the story? Would their story change because I had played a part in it? How could I ensure that the portrayal was accurate and that the participants would be truthful rather than telling me what they thought I wanted to hear? Would I retell the story as it was told to me or would the temptation be to make sure that my professional practice was portrayed in a favourable light? During the course of the interviews I did have to remind myself of this fact when I was tempted to clarify a situation recounted by a participant where the memory of it differed from my own or where criticism was made of a teaching approach or of a demand placed upon a student. An example of this was where Karen had difficulty identifying contacts and networks accessed as part of undertaking the module. She stated she had made no contacts and the temptation was to tell her the contacts I was aware of having read and assessed her business plan and reflective diary. Instead I had to look at prompting her in a way that was less directive, encouraging her memories of the action undertaken by her group

rather than presenting her with my understanding of the situation. Situations such as this also raised my awareness of feeding examples to students of their development since I was trying to elicit their understanding of their experiences.

I was continually aware of my strong views on the need to develop student confidence and aspirations and needed to ensure that I was the listener, the facilitator of the interview and allowed the direction of the interview to be shared between myself and the student. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to introduce areas of interest which they regarded as important, and, by checking my identifications of the key themes with them, I offered the participants the power to use their initiative in influencing the themes identified and engaged them in a discourse in their own terms as recommended by Radnor (2002). I believed that I achieved this by inviting them to raise any other issues that they regarded as being relevant to the discussion. In the event, some themes which were introduced by individuals were incorporated into the second interview schedule and the views of other participants sought.

Clandinin & Connelly (1999, p172) reflected that *“when I summarise and interpret, I express my own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to capture the participants’ experiences and represent their voices”*.

This view raised my awareness of the impact of my interpretation of their stories.

I was in a privileged position and had to take care that I represented their voices with truth and respect (Elliot, 2006, p. 149). Geertz (1988) suggested that one of the most difficult dilemmas for the researcher is sorting out how to be in the text. Too weak a signature and the researcher runs the risk of deception that the text speaks from the point of view of the participant. Too vivid a signature runs the risk of obscuring the field and its participants. This was clearly an issue for consideration. How could I enable the participants to have their voice whilst putting my own stamp on my work without abuse of subjectivity? Although I have attempted to reduce this by constantly supporting my interpretation with examples provided by the participants, the reality is that my view will have relatively higher influence than the participants.

I was conscious that the way in which the interviews were interpreted would have an effect on the participants. Smythe & Murray (2000, p321) argued that

“The problem is that once the researcher’s account is taken as the authoritative interpretation of an individual’s experience, the individual’s own understanding of their experience inevitably is compromised...research in this way can become intrusive and subtly damaging, even when participants respond positively to the researcher’s account”.

Rather than being intrusive and subtly damaging, the interviews offered the participants an opportunity to reflect on their own development and helped them understand a range of factors which influenced them, supported them, and restricted them. There were many 'ah ha' moments when a participant reflected on their development and began to acknowledge the array of skills they had developed and the range of resources available to them. For the participant who had had less success than the others in recognising benefits and development, I had to take particular care to focus on her experiences rather than share themes which had emerged from the analysis of interviews with others, which would have emphasised her lack of experiences.

Inevitably I remained the most influential participant in the process. However, I was constantly aware that the purpose of the interviews was to understand the participants' experiences rather than impose my views on them. In order to mitigate against any undue influence, the interview questions were designed to encourage participants to describe and reflect on their experiences. I acknowledged that the language used was important and that careful consideration had to be given to any prompting that I gave, for example, to remind students of events that I consider being important illustrations.

OWNERSHIP OF THE RESEARCH

Consideration had to be given to ownership of the research. The stories are theirs. The interpretations are shared. The award and reward is mine. Yet I was mindful of the fact that it was the stories of the participants that provided the raw data for the research. If by participating in the research and reflecting and recognising their own development, the enhancement of social capital, networks and resources, and acknowledgment of their future benefits, then the participants and I will have positive outcomes.

THE STUDENTS' STORIES

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the considerations and reflections of the participants. In order to explore the conditions which enabled students to access and activate social capital relevant to employability, I was interested in finding out who and what influenced them in terms of choosing courses and locations, how they established and extended relationships with staff and students, and the conditions, activities and events which enhanced their ability to develop social capital relevant to employability. At all stages in the interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on their personal development.

The first theme explored the initial stages of life as a student, examining the influences of family and friends in choosing courses and the location of study.

THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

FAMILY INFLUENCES

Inevitably, people come to higher education with a range of networks and resources which have had an influence on their decision to participate in higher education. For the participants in this study, the close relationships that they had with their families provided a supportive environment, where encouragement was given to achieve potential rather than parents being able to guide them in realising their potential. Although the selection of participants did not specifically target first generation entrants to higher education, all fell into that category as described by Thomas and Quinn (2007) (see chapter two). Most participants thought that their parents were relieved that they were staying close by to pursue their studies but did not believe that they had tried to exert undue influence to choose the local provision.

Molly spoke of her Mum's relief that she was not travelling far from home, even though she had been offered places in Stirling and Glasgow. Linda, who had been offered places at two Glasgow universities thought that her parents were happy that she had chosen the local College rather than making the journey into Glasgow.

"I was only seventeen and my mum was worried about me getting a bus into Glasgow every day".

She commented that because of their lack of experience, her parents were not in a position to guide her regarding her choice of course.

“My parents’ generation did not get the chance to go to college. Even by the end of primary, my mum was struggling to keep up with me because things had changed from her days”.

She recognised the encouragement that her parents had given her.

“They (her parents) always said to me oh you are clever and maybe you should go to university, they never pressured me in to doing anything but that is the thing as well, if your mum and dad never went to university, well, my mum and dad could never have guided me, they could never have helped me to decide what I wanted to do”.

Robert considered that his family would have been supportive whatever his decision was relating to his career

“They just wanted me to be happy, support me in what I wanted to do”.

Claire, who was caring for her father as well as her family when she embarked on her degree course, spoke of his encouragement and support.

“I spoke to my husband about it, and I was looking after my Dad, because I lost my Mum when I was 12 and Dad only stayed round the corner and I was there every day. But he was good with me, looked

after the kids, and he said you have always wanted to do it so go and do it now. You've nothing stopping you; I am here with the kids".

Being the first in the family to participate in higher education created considerable pride for the families. Megan said of her Mum

"She is dead proud of me. She always thought I could do it. She supported me with money and that and always said when I was struggling, you can do it".

Paula also spoke of her Mother's pride.

"She will probably be crying when I graduate. I am the first to get a degree, the first grandchild as well".

Elaine had been offered a place at a Glasgow University to study Risk Management but changed her mind just before the course was due to start. Rather than interrupting her education and working for a year as she reconsidered what she wanted to study, she applied for a place on the Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Retail Management. She transferred on to the business degree programme in her second year.

"My Mum and Dad did not want me to take a year out because they thought that I would not go back (to education). I thought I would come here for a year and do the HNC but then I really enjoyed it and transferred to the business degree course".

Molly commented that she wanted a good job, a career, not like her Mum who *“moved about from job to job”*,

“She hates the fact that she doesn’t have a profession or career”.

Sam investigated the options available to study himself, attending an open information evening. His parents, whilst being supportive, exerted little influence. For him, it was a much more considered process. He discussed undertaking a business degree with managers at his part time job. Having been inspired by a business teacher at school he was clear about the path he wanted to take. He also chose the local college because it was more convenient for him than travelling into Glasgow. He explored a range of options and chose the course which suited his needs.

“I basically made the decision on my own. The business teacher at school was brilliant, an inspiration, great and he made you feel really confident about what you were doing and he made it seem easy. My Mum and Dad backed me when I had made my decision but they basically said well it is your life, you know what you want to do”.

Support and encouragement from families was clear and that support lasted throughout their studies. Families wanted their sons and daughters to participate in higher education. *‘Make something of their lives’* was a term used by several of the participants. Access to social capital outside the immediate family, which could provide additional

resources to inform decision making, was not evident and the participants managed the process, from choosing the course and applying for a place, largely on their own, attending information sessions and open events to apply for courses on offer. Only Susan attended these events with her parents.

Not only were strong supportive families important in encouraging participation in higher education but the social capital that existed through families and friends was, for some a route to obtaining access to part time employment, providing valuable connections into the employment market. Several participants provided examples of how family connections provided part time jobs which helped to support them financially through their studies. Megan's dad provided a contact within a call centre for her part time employment and Elaine's mum suggested her name for a receptionist post at the beauty salon she visited. Claire's sister-in-law, a school cleaner, was instrumental in Claire securing employment as a cleaner in the same school. For others, using family connections did not have a positive result. Although Paula had been given several leads to employment through a number of family members, and these leads resulted in employment for others in the family, she was unsuccessful in gaining employment through her connections. Her lack of confidence and low expectations of life were a feature throughout her interview. She was the only participant in the study who struggled to recognise the value of the

development of her skills and the opportunities created as a result of participating in education.

However, the resources available through the social capital of families and friends were ineffective in providing connections when students' sought graduate employment. Linda spoke of her mother's concern as she unsuccessfully applied for jobs after graduation.

"My mum used to say that she hated seeing me that down because she knew that if anybody took the time to see me, that I would be great for the job. It is soul destroying. It is really difficult to get a job".

Those participants who went on to employment were more inclined to turn part time employment into full time posts, such as Jane who took up a graduate training scheme and Robert who became an assistant manager in the retail store in which he had worked part time during his studies.

THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOLS

Sam was the only participant who acknowledged a positive influence from the school in choosing his course. Others were less enthusiastic

when reflecting upon the advice and guidance they received from the schools they had attended.

For those with limited access to resources which could inform study and career options within their immediate families, the school career service would appear to be an obvious source of support and guidance in making study and career decisions. In this study the majority of participants painted a poor picture of it. Participants reported that there was a general lack of interest and that support and direction given was sparse. It appeared to the students that encounters they had with careers staff were uninspiring and that personal aspirations were not explored to any extent. Advice and encouragement was not recognised positively, with a business degree being deemed by many school careers staff as a broad based degree which would 'do them'. Either time was not available to the participants or there appeared to be a general lack of interest in their future.

Megan was unsure of which options she had when she attended careers meetings.

"I had loads of meetings with the career's advisor but she wasn't very good really. She just looked at my subjects and said well you could look at a computing or business course and I said yes, I'll do that then...I didn't really know what I wanted to do".

Robert's experience was similar.

"It wasn't very helpful to be honest. You would go to them and it was just a quick in /out".

Molly recalled her interview with careers staff.

"They didn't give us any guidance in school. I didn't even know what college or university meant and when I went to my careers adviser at school he said what do you want to be"?

"I said I didn't know because I had never been given any advice and he told me just to do business".

"So it wasn't that he said this is a really good subject, I just thought oh well I will just do that".

Considering this experience she commented,

"I think we should get a lot more guidance in school cos' I know some people had family members who went to uni, so when they were in 5th and 6th year they knew which uni they wanted to go to and what they wanted to do just because of who they had about them in their lives".

Susan left school two days into her sixth year. She was concerned about going straight to university because her teachers told her that there was a high chance she would drop out as she was leaving before she had completed sixth year. As a result, she decided that she would undertake a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in preparation for going to university the following year.

“They weren’t really bothered about you. It was all about the fifth years. I had already got my highers and thought I was just wasting time staying on. I didn’t want to waste a year. Initially my plan, well it was to do law or medicine. I had done my work experience in a lawyers’ office and it just wasn’t me. And then my Gran died and that put me off medicine completely so I was in a bit of limbo and then I started to do a bit of research round about business, cos’ one of the highers I had planned to take in sixth year was business and I had started to get interested in that during the summer, cos’ I wanted then to get into business, do something along these lines”.

Elaine, who had attended a local independent school, thought that the school paid more attention to those who were going to study for the professions.

“They had special interviews for people like my friend, she was going to do medicine and obviously she was constantly at the careers advisor. Obviously because she was interested as well, she was determined, and they were definitely more for that. They helped us with a few things, like UCAS and that but that was about it”.

Molly is now in the third year of a law degree at a traditional university. She believed undertaking her first degree at the local college was a crucial stepping stone for her although she did not realise it at the time.

She reflected on her achievements and her decision to continue with her education.

"I felt much more confident when I started my law degree. I would never have applied for law if I had not done my degree here".

Interviewer

"Why would you not have applied for law"?

Molly

"I just imagined it to be really hard".

Interviewer

"Why couldn't you do it because it was really hard"?

Molly

"I probably could have. I don't know. I think it is just an image you get of something".

Interviewer

"Why wouldn't you fit that image"?

Molly

"I don't know. I really don't know.....I just remember struggling through my highers. I know I got my highers but I really struggled with them but I think it was because I had so many distractions. I wanted to go out

with my pals and then it was totally different here because I would phone Linda and she would be sitting doing a coursework so I didn't think that I was missing out on being out somewhere. We were all in it together. I think maybe if it had been like that in school I would have had a different attitude.

Interviewer

"In school were you encouraged to think, I could be a lawyer, I could be whatever".

Molly

"I was never encouraged in anything".

These experiences, albeit of a few students, are concerning, raising issues of whether the principles and potential of widening participation are being fully embraced by the school sector.

THE INFLUENCE OF FRIENDS

For some, beginning a new chapter of their lives, without familiar faces to offer support, was daunting. Having a friend choosing the same

course or location was, for several participants, a major influence, providing a level of security.

Robert knew a couple of people from his football team who were coming to study at college.

"It made me more comfortable. I was still coming in to new surroundings and but at least I had a stepping stone - it was a safety net, having a familiar face".

Megan was also influenced by the fact that a friend had chosen the College.

"Karen, my best friend, told me that she was coming here so I thought, oh well, I will go there as well".

Karen was also one of the participants. She however, claimed that convenience of travel was the main reason for her choice of location rather than the fact that she had a friend also attending.

The endorsement of the institution by friends influenced Jane, who withdrew from a degree in primary education to study business. She heard about the College from her boyfriend who was studying engineering.

"My boyfriend was at this college and he said that there were business courses and one of my friends had finished a business studies degree that year and enjoyed it so I decided to phone up".

A group of six students had come from a local Further Education (FE) college to join the third year of the degree programme having completed a Higher National Diploma (HND). Although some had been offered places at other institutions, they all decided to come to the College together. Aileen recalled that a few of her friends were not offered places at other institutions.

“The other places did not seem so friendly. If they were not going to offer places to all of us then I was not going to take up my place. We all sort of stuck together”.

For Paula, it was a matter of following the crowd.

“I only started off with my HNC because I needed the experience for a job and then everybody else was staying on to do the HND so I thought oh well it is only another year and it will give me more experience. It was the same about coming to do the degree, everyone else was going to do it so I just came along to”.

Elaine, on the other hand, was not aware that anyone from her school was going to college.

“It was quite exciting to be starting somewhere new. As it turned out I did recognise a few faces”.

Having existing contacts at College could also be a disadvantage as Susan pointed out.

“My Mum and Dad were worried that I had chosen the College because my boyfriend was there and they thought that was the reason that I wanted to go there. It was not true; in fact we broke up because he wanted to go out all the time and I wanted to study”.

In other cases, friends were less than supportive, believing that continuing with education was a waste of time. Linda was determined to undertake a degree course even though her close friends were following other paths. She was not influenced by their attitudes.

“I went to an information evening with my pal. She thought I was mad to keep studying. She was going to be an interior designer – she never did it. She is still working in a call centre”.

Friends and families were an obvious source of support and encouragement even though, as in this study, they did not have ready access to the resources which would be useful in informing decision making about study options or future careers. The social capital that existed within the family was also a useful resource for some in accessing part time employment but this did not follow through to full time graduate jobs. The endorsement of college by peer groups can be a powerful influence, as illustrated by many of the participants. Being influenced by others close by can be a significant force but can be restrictive, particularly where other sources of information and

guidance are not sought or readily available. This is particularly important in the case of those who are first in their immediate network to attend higher education such as the students in this study.

DEVELOPING NEW SOCIAL CAPITAL

FORMING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE EARLY DAYS

Being welcomed to the institution was an important part of the process of encouraging students to engage with others. Staff efforts to make the student feel at ease were appreciated. According to Claire, being welcomed by staff

“made me feel better about starting the course”.

For some, this was a contrast to the experience that they had with other institutions. Aileen told of her decision to attend the College to undertake her degree after the HND programme, rather than at one of the larger institutions.

“The staff seemed much more friendly and welcoming here. It certainly made me feel better about coming.

She rejected the offer of a place at a nearby traditional university having been put off by the attitude of the admissions staff claiming that they were *“not friendly, open or welcoming”*.

“I wasn’t made to feel very welcome by any of the staff even when I had correspondence from them. I felt as if they kind of looked down their nose at us in a manner of speaking”.

Karen was less enthusiastic about her experience of being welcomed. She joined third year having completed an HND at an FE College in the east of the country. She thought that little effort had been made to welcome her and that even basic information such as the location of the toilets or the name of the Head of the Business School were not made known to her. Although this information was detailed within student handbooks, Karen’s experience suggests that in some cases, this is not enough and other approaches to sharing information have to be considered.

Getting to know others was difficult for some students. Lack of confidence and uncertainty about what would be expected of them as students were common themes. For some such as Megan, Robert and Paula, the transition was made more comfortable as they had friends with them; familiar faces to support the transition. Molly knew a “friend of a friend” and arranged to meet up with her indicating that it

was preferable to have a tenuous link than no link at all. Forming relationships initially was easier for some than others. Friendships were struck with those they sat next to in class. Sam for example recalled his first day.

“As you probably know I am quite outgoing anyway so the first time when I was sitting in the class, I sat at a desk myself and they were going to put us into groups and I had noticed Steven, who is one of my good mates now, and he was sitting himself across from me and I just went across and sat with him and said well there is no point in us being put in separate groups and from then I just kept going”.

Claire recalled feeling uncomfortable initially because she was older than most of the other students. Some of her new classmates had been at school with her elder son. She expressed relief at seeing another mature student in class.

“I remember seeing Mary and thinking thank goodness, somebody else my age”.

Susan had a broken arm when she started and saw this as a distinct advantage – *“a prop’ to instigate conversation”.*

“Everyone just came up and asked me about it – it was a real talking point because my arm was in a bright pink cast”.

Some of the participants who were the direct entrants to the third year from the local FE College, felt left out initially, as Aileen recalled.

“We just all stuck together – nobody seemed very friendly. They all (the other students) knew each other, had formed their groups and we were kept as a separate group”.

Megan, the youngest member of the group of six who came from the FE College, appreciated the opportunity to get to know students who were closer to her in age. She felt more comfortable with those who she could regard as her peer group.

“In the second semester we were split up and got to work with different people in groups. They were much younger so it was good. The people from FE kind of well, babied me. I felt more of an equal with others my age”.

Helping students to get to know one another was regarded by them as an important role for staff. Exercises provided as part of the induction programme to help ‘break the ice’ were appreciated although the experience, for some participants, was uncomfortable, as Molly recalled

“Although you hated them at the time, the ice breaking sessions did work because they encouraged you to speak to people”.

Elaine also recognised the benefits of these sessions

"I didn't want to do them at first but it forced us to talk to new people, made it easier".

Megan thought that staff had an important role to play in getting students to circulate. She was shy about speaking to people she did not know.

"It is good if you are forced to speak to people. It breaks the ice and makes it easier. I would not be happy just going up to somebody and saying Hi I am Megan, I would feel stupid".

She was, however, concerned that staff would be too busy to be bothered with her. She compared the differences in relationships with staff between FE and College.

"At the FE College you really only had one person and they would just say, oh go away and do that. Here you had to start thinking for yourself. There were more staff and students around and I was always worried that they would be too busy for me".

Paula, who also joined the third year of the degree course with the group from the FE College, found it hard to make friends with other students, sticking to the people she knew from FE.

"It is not that I don't try but it is easier to stick to the people that you know. To be honest, some of the others were not very nice to us (the group from FE) so I just tried to stay out of their way".

On reflection, Paula thought it would have been better if staff had been more active in splitting the group of students from FE into new work groups, even though she felt more comfortable with the group she knew.

“They are good to talk to and can help you with your work if you get stuck”.

Being able to relate to new groups was important where students needed to access resources and support. Induction programmes, which encouraged students to circulate, were useful in the early days. The skills required to bridge relationships, however, do not come easy to students who lack confidence, such as Megan. Without support it would be all too easy for a student to feel isolated, or indeed to stick to familiar faces, restricting their development and the opportunities that meeting new and dissimilar people bring.

UNDERSTANDING EXPECTATIONS

Although most of the participants felt that they were welcomed into the institution, there was less evidence that efforts were made to help

them understand what was expected of them as a student. Nor did they recall having the opportunity to consider what they could expect from the institution. Staff again had a crucial role to play in helping students become part of their new learning community. This should have been a particularly important function given the high proportion of students who were first in their families to participate in higher education and therefore did not have access to information within their immediate environment which would help them in their preparations for being a student.

Linda provided an example of staff trying to help students understand what was expected of them as a student when, in first year, some second year students were brought in to class to meet them.

“That was a good idea, to let us speak to experienced students, but we were all too shy and the lecturer just introduced us and then left. If he had stayed and started the questions then we might have joined in”.

Reflecting on this experience she suggested that as well as meeting with successful students it would be useful to speak to ones who had not finished the course.

“That might let us know what can go wrong if you don’t keep up with the work”.

Molly agreed that students needed to know more of what was expected of them.

“When I did my honours year (at another institution) we were told if you don’t do this amount of work you will fail. It is as clear as that. Maybe that needs to be made clear to first year students”.

It was clear from the students’ views that the transition into a new learning community could be both exciting and intimidating. Those students who do not have resources to access advice through immediate social networks perhaps need more support from the institution in recognising how networks can be widened and new resources identified and accessed.

Staff have a key role to play. Students do not necessarily know what is expected of them or how staff are available to support them. Much of the support they get at this stage is from the peer group. Problems arise when the group of friends which is initially established, or the networks that the student had prior to college, have different priorities, values or attitudes towards study. There is a danger of such a group creating restrictions for the student and, where an individual lacks the skills and confidence to identify and access other networks which will provide opportunities to support their development, they may well become vulnerable in successful completion of their studies.

ACCESSING NEW STUDENT NETWORKS

As they reflected on the development of relationships when they started College, the participants began to identify the factors which made them feel part of the learning community and those which caused them concern. It is how the individual reacted to these that offer some insights into the students' capability and readiness to access new social capital.

A number of issues played a part in students recognising when it was time to move away from existing networks in order to access new resources. Key triggers for instigating change were non attendance and an apparent lack of commitment to succeed with studies by those in existing networks.

Molly recalled that the group of friends she had in the first year of her studies were more interested in going out than studying. This prompted her to make new connections.

"I was in first year. I had a totally different group of friends, and they all dropped out. And I could see they were all going to leave and that is when I started to hang about with Andrew and then I met others. But it is true, when you hang about with a group like that, they don't pull you down but it does rub off on you. You are not going to go to the library

and leave the. They all gradually left and I had to look for a new group of friends”.

Elaine recounted having to break away from someone she had known from school.

“She was never there. She would phone me up and ask for my notes. It was not fair. Eventually I had to tell her that she could not get them. I felt bad about it but it wasn’t doing her any good”.

Susan was clear in her priorities. She didn’t come to college to make friends; she was there to get a degree which would enable her to develop a career in business.

“I finished with my boyfriend because he wasn’t giving me time for study. My main focus was on getting the degree and I wasn’t really bothered about anything else”.

She chose to become part of a group of mature students although she herself was only seventeen at the time.

“I started working with Mary and Claire. They were much older than me but they were working harder, maybe because they were a bit older, they had to work that bit harder. People my age were more interested in going out and talking about boyfriends”.

Sam had a similar tale to tell.

“For some of them (fellow students) it was like going back to school, just sitting there and just making wee silly comments and that. They didn’t realise that this was affecting my life now, either I am going to do it or I am not going to do it – I could not waste my time with them”.

Jane also made efforts to move from less committed students.

“They were just not interested. The boys in the class were never there. I became a lot closer to Amanda than I was to Alice because Amanda and I both wanted to do well. And Alice didn’t really bother and I found that really difficult. And she had let me down quite a lot in the past and although I had no issues with being friends with her, I could not work with her. I connected more with Amanda because we were in (at College), we turned up; we wanted the same thing”.

Jane, like Sam and Susan, wanted to associate with successful students and recognised that in order to do that they had to align themselves with other students who wanted the same; maintaining friendships was less important than being successful in their studies.

Robert spoke of his deliberate efforts to connect with those he regarded as successful. He was conscious that if he was to pass his degree, he needed to change his behaviour and that included breaking away from his established group of friends. Alongside this was his awareness that he needed to learn new behaviours including increasing his confidence and self esteem.

“Half way through second year, after the exams and I knew then that it was going in the wrong direction. I knew that I would struggle to pass if I kept going the way I was going kind of thing. I wanted to work with a group that were more confident in their abilities, doing presentations and that, speaking up in class. I hoped that if I got in with a group like that it would rub off on me. I wanted more dedication, rather than just turning up. That was it. I knew I was going to struggle more if I just done the same as everybody else kind of thing”.

DESIRED NETWORKS

Participants described the characteristics of students they admired. These included showing commitment to the course; contributing in class; attending classes and attaining good academic results. Students who did not display these characteristics were shunned by those who were striving to achieve as Jane and Elaine illustrated. Individuals whom the students referred to as possessing ‘aspired’ characteristics were regarded as successful and efforts were made, as in Robert’s case, to become part of their network.

Participants who considered the group that they worked with to be successful, were reluctant to let others in, fearing that new group

members would cause disruption, challenging the commitment of the group or affecting the standard of work.

Linda was part of a group which was regarded by other students as hard working and high achieving. Although the group had initially come together to undertake a group assessment, they continued working together and supported each other in the final year of their studies.

"I guess it would have been difficult for anyone to join our group. We got in to class and it was heads down and get on with the assignments. It would have been too difficult for anyone to catch up with us".

Molly was part of the same group.

"I suppose we became quite a closed group. We got to know each other, how we worked and didn't want anyone else to come into it".

Both of these participants recalled difficulties when working with other students in groups at an earlier stage in their studies. They had sought out new people to work with, people who shared their standard of work, work ethic and commitment. Having bridged relationships to other networks, they bonded with the new group to the exclusion of others who may well have been in the position that they were before they established new contacts.

WORKING IN FORMAL GROUPS

Personal choice in working with groups was not always an option and, where students were allocated work groups by staff, managing relationships within these groups could create difficulties which made some students uncomfortable. Difficulties arose when individuals produced work which was deemed by others as being of poor quality or if it was thought that there was a lack of commitment to achieving the group task. All reported feeling unsure of how to challenge these behaviours effectively and being unable or unwilling to take action to remedy problems which arose within the group. The only option available appeared to be an individual taking on additional work to ensure that the desired standard was reached. The participants also reported that they avoided working with those students who were not regarded as contributing fully, in future groups.

Linda recalled a group assignment which caused problems for her.

"I just redid the coursework myself. The stuff they gave me was not good enough. I kept a wee bit of theirs in and redid the rest. It was a lot of work but I could not risk my mark going down".

Sam coped with contributions from some members of his group, which was not up to his standard, in a similar way.

“There are people who aren’t interested in doing the work. We split the work into four or five parts and I tried to take one part, gave somebody else another part and we delegated who would do what. The two who weren’t really bothered ended up doing the smallest pieces which you would have expected. But even when they done their work.....when we had to look through it and check it cos’ we were putting into our document, there was nothing in there at all which was worth taking, and rather than say to them and causing confrontation, it was just, well the group is either going to pass or fail, so we might as well do something about it and make it better as opposed to moaning about it to somebody else. I just had to let them go, and try to get the work done myself rather than rely on them”.

Jane also faced problems when relying on another student’s contribution. When a member of her group did not submit her contribution on time Jane undertook to carry out the work herself.

“I would rather take somebody else’s work on board and just do it rather than not hand that part in. I just made sure I didn’t work with her again”.

Susan had a similar experience where a member of the group she was working with failed to produce the work she promised.

“She tried to blame me for bringing the wrong thing. We had been good friends but not now. I did not want to work with her after that”.

Claire was the only participant who did take action to resolve problems with her group of close friends when they worked on a group assignment.

“There was a problem with time management and some would get the work done and others wouldn’t. They all fell out. I put up with it for so long then I had to deal with it. I called them all to a meeting and laid the rules down. I could not believe that friends would behave that way with one another. I felt very uncomfortable about laying down the law but quite proud of myself”.

These examples highlighted the problems relating to the norms, values and behaviours of group members. Difficulties arose where group members did not set or agree to the expected behaviours of the group. Where trust was expected but not demonstrated, group processes and relationships broke down. Importantly for the participants in this study were their lack of skills, confidence and readiness to deal with the problems.

On reflection, participants believed that it would have been useful if, when groups were formed, rules and codes of behaviour were established. From their perspective, this was a task that should be facilitated by staff in the first instance. On occasions, participants were unforgiving if they were let down, especially if grades were dependant

on group submissions and, as in Susan's case, friendships irretrievably broke down.

The anticipation of working with new groups caused too much stress for Paula and, in order to avoid working with those who were unknown to her, she decided not to continue with the entrepreneurship module. Even though she recognised that being able to present ideas and connect with new people were useful employability skills, the stress caused by having to connect to new groups and undertake a presentation was too difficult for her.

"I just couldn't stand up in front of all these people and do it (the presentation) ... I just panicked. I thought I just can't do it. I just freaked out. It was horrible. I felt ill and it wasn't even the day of the presentation. It was about two weeks before it. I was just panicking so much".

Paula thought that efforts to encourage working with others, such as a business game that had been carried out in class, had been useful in helping her to relate to others but she was still not ready to fully participate in working with new groups of students or to undertake a presentation.

Offers to devise different modes of assessment had no effect on her decision. The level of interaction expected with others in the class and the requirement to connect with external groups raised her anxiety to

an extent which she found too uncomfortable to deal with. Her lack of confidence was evident not just in speaking in front of others but in accessing even very basic reasonable resources stating that she *“used to get her sister to ask for things for her, she was too shy too ask for herself”*. She recognised that lack of self-confidence was a long term problem which she avoided dealing with. Paula offers an extreme example but raises an important issue in relation to making assumptions about levels of self confidence in undertaking apparently reasonable assessment activities.

The experiences of the participants highlight the need for greater attention to be given by staff to the operation of work groups. We recognise that within a business environment people have to be able to work together and indeed that teamworking is a valuable employability competency. But do we do enough to develop the abilities to behave effectively in a team, including how to identify and manage conflict? The role of staff in facilitating group work and team development is discussed in chapter seven.

LEARNING AND DEVELOPING IN GROUPS

Just as participants were able to give examples of the difficulties that could occur when working in groups, they were also able to provide many instances where groups were very successful. They were in agreement that the key to successful work groups was being able to trust other group members. Staff expect students to work in groups, sometimes imposed, sometimes self selecting, without necessarily making explicit the expectations of the group and the norms and behaviours that are necessary to make the group effective. We assume that values will be shared and friends and peer groups will be supportive. However, the trust that is implicit in friendships is not always transferable and, when tasks have to be completed and assessment marks are involved, friendships can be tested. Where the relational dimensions of social capital (trust, norms, expectations and obligations) are not made explicit there is a danger of groups breaking down. When this happens, group members can be vulnerable, either in being excluded from the group, or when they are left with a disproportionate level of responsibility as Claire, Linda and Sam's examples illustrate. Where expectations are not met and trust is broken, managing relationships is problematic and, without the skills and confidence to deal with the issues, students face problems which are difficult to resolve.

Participants frequently used the word trust to describe the expectations they had of their fellow students. Having been let down in the past, some participants were reluctant to work again with particular students as illustrated by Jane and Susan. When new self-selecting groups had to be formed, participants looked for indicators of trust through performance in previous work activities and based their views on levels of commitment on observations of performance in other classes.

Sam recalled his concerns about letting some students work with him.

“Well I wanted people about me that I could trust and I knew would work. If you gave them something to do you knew they could do it. I was very shocked when he (Simon) said he wanted to join our group. I knew he could work to the standard, a bit like myself, on his own. But everything was last minute; last minute and I didn’t think I could trust him as part of the group. Robert on the other hand was brilliant and I knew he would work. As it turned out, he (Simon) was great and worked really hard. We were all committed to the project”.

Elaine based her views on the trustworthiness of group members through their past behaviours.

“Other classes that we were in, they (members of her group) just seemed really committed. And they were so enthusiastic, and none of them ever missed a meeting and never didn’t do what they had to; so I automatically put trust in them”.

Jane spoke of assuming trust, expecting others in the group to show the same level of commitment as she did.

“At the beginning I trusted them because I had no reason not to. They seemed really up for it, to go for it and I thought this is great, it is really going to take off and I was really excited about it and then the next week and the following week they did not turn up and we had the presentation coming up ...so we decided we would just have to do it ourselves. Eventually I had to ask them what was going on. It was awful”.

It was clear from the comments made that, when they were dealing with friends, students were uncomfortable about challenging behaviours or applying sanctions where expectations were not met or trust was broken.

Robert was aware of the importance of his contribution. He trusted his group to fully contribute and wanted to make the same effort himself. When asked how he learned to trust his group his frame of reference was based on previous experience.

“I knew what they had done in the past and everything and they had done it to a high standard and I knew that they had passed and things like that and they weren't going to give up kind of thing”.

Although the support derived from working with friends was recognised, there was acknowledgement that working with those closest could cause problems and that there were benefits to be derived from working with students less well known.

Megan thought that working with friends could create additional obligations to contribute to the group.

“I did not want to let the group down: I would have felt ill. I don’t know I suppose I would have felt like I had let everybody down and they would have thought, oh no, we cannot give her anything to. I would have hated that”.

She did not however, expect others in the group to share these obligations. When asked if she thought other members of her group would be concerned with letting her down she responded,

“There were two people in the group who were quite laid back and they were like oh if you don’t do that it is OK. I suppose everybody is different but personally I don’t want to let them down. That is why you put that as a priority”.

Reflecting at the end of her studies, Claire realised that by always sticking with the same group of friends her personal development had been restricted because she was always expected to undertake the same role within her network. As a mature student, she was assigned the leadership role, organising and managing the group processes,

ensuring that others in the group had class notes and chasing up contributions for group assignments. On reflection she realised the benefits that could have been achieved had she taken the opportunity to work with others.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have worked with the same friends so often. I was made the group leader and that was because of my age but I would say they kind of respected me and well sometimes when you are with friends, I am not saying they didn’t respect me but well, sometimes you are expected to do it; but with another group, they don’t know you so well, they will help you achieve what you are wanting to achieve for the group”.

At the time she regarded loyalty to her friends and the security blanket that working with those she knew as more important, or less disruptive, than brokering new connections.

ACCESSING NEW WAYS OF THINKING

Participants acknowledged the learning that occurred when they worked with new groups as they were exposed to other’s ideas and skills and knowledge was shared.

Molly illustrated this.

“I know that with presentations I never liked them but when I was with like Linda and Shona I just felt as if I could do it because they were there. But then in other groups where they didn’t know me they expected me to do it and I felt that I needed to do it to show them that I could. So it worked out good in both senses. Sometimes if people expect something of you then you maybe try harder just to prove that you can do it”.

For some participants, working with new people and being able to share ideas created a learning culture which was positive and fun as Elaine described.

“We all had ideas and bounced them about. Then we realised that this was going to be good. It was fun to do. It was a fun project, a good project and it wasn’t like anything we had done before. We had a laugh and it didn’t feel like work. They (her group) were always there to help me”.

Megan recalled a similar experience.

“Once we got the idea (group project) it was exciting. We all had ideas and everybody was getting involved. We were aiming for something good and well it was fun and we wanted to put an effort into it as we knew we could do well. I hated doing presentations but it was the fact that somebody was standing next to me and it didn’t feel so bad. It was a kind of nervous excitement. I wanted to show off what I had done”!

Becoming part of a new group was, for some such as Robert an uncomfortable experience, but one which he had to go through if he was to access new skills and attributes. He described it as “moving out of his comfort zone”.

“It was at the start of third year so it was a fresh start so I decided just to go for it and rather than sit back and wait for things to come to me I made the move...I’ve never done that before really”.

One participant, Aileen, found that moving away from friends was complex. She described the difficulties she faced when she had the choice of joining a new group, while her friend was away from College, or waiting for her return to the class and being part of the established group.

“They (the other students in the class) jumped into groups fairly quickly and Christine was not there and I felt obliged not to join a group because she wasn’t there and I didn’t know what she would do”.

Interviewer

“What did you think she might do”?

Aileen

“I did not think that she would come back to College if I was in a different group because she had got really mad when we were not put in the same group in another class”.

Although Aileen demonstrated considerable loyalty to her friend, trust was not something that came easily to her. She recounted several experiences where she believed that studying with her friends had led to negative outcomes for her.

“Sometimes if you study in a group, and you have ideas, sometimes people take your ideas and then they reuse them and that sometimes leaves you out in the cold. You have to go back to the drawing board and rethink or else you will be done for collusion, plagiarism or something, when really the idea originates from you. In addition to that, I wouldn’t advise anyone to share any of their stuff and I certainly wouldn’t share any of my stuff in the future and I certainly wouldn’t let anyone have a look at it”.

Aileen believes that she has lessons to learn about trusting her friends but was unable to think of a time when she had a positive experience.

“In here I did a piece of work. I tried to make sure everyone understood the models and theories. I done all the work, looked up all the websites and was silly enough to give that information thinking, there is no way these people, they are my friends, they are not going to use it, and well, yes they did”.

When asked how she dealt with this problem she replied that she has to look at the bigger picture and that if people keep stealing her work they are not learning and so missing out in the long term.

“I just had to bite the bullet. And as it happened I ended up helping one person again. Because I am that type of person. I just couldn’t say no but I keep getting stung”.

The experiences of the participants provide useful insights into how groups in college are formed, sustained or dissolved. The opportunities for learning and development that occur in formal and informal groups are vast but often neglected. Without adequate preparation, support and reflection, students miss out on, or fail to recognise the preparation and development of valuable employability skills and competencies. This will be further discussed in chapter six and the implications for learning and teaching will be expanded upon in chapter seven.

CONNECTING WITH THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

The experience of the entrepreneurship module was the focus for the second stage of interviews as the module had been designed to encourage students to make contact with a range of people external to the College. In order to complete the assignment of the module, which was the development of a business plan, students were required to test out their business ideas with target markets and approach potential funders to ascertain their views on the business plan. In the interviews the participants were asked to consider the contacts they had made

with people outside the institution as part of their studies and reflect on their feelings before, during and after the contacts had been made.

For some, coming into contact with unknown people created feelings of fear and trepidation. Others embraced the challenge and enjoyed the opportunity to share their business development ideas with influential people. Contacts for students included funding bodies such as the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust (PSYBT), Local Enterprise Agencies and sector experts in the business area.

For Linda and Molly, presenting their idea to Shell LiveWire Funders and Business Gateway was a very positive experience.

"We sat there in the office waiting to go in and it was all men in grey suits and we thought they might be millionaires. But they were really helpful and they could see we believed in our idea. They wanted to help. They were great. We left thinking that we could be millionaires with our idea".

Molly commented,

You would never have imagined in your life that you would be able to go and meet someone like that. It felt really good. It was because our efforts had paid off. Just having somebody to say to you I would go with this. It is a great idea. It was really good. All your hard work paying off. And going into that school to speak to teachers and the head teacher; that was fantastic".

Yet when they presented their idea to education experts in primary mathematics for the local authority, they related a less positive experience, as Linda recalled.

“I was really scared, and they were really snooty. They treated us like daft wee girls and were not really interested. But we were passionate about our idea and were not going to be put off. The teachers we had spoken to in various schools had liked our idea and so did the children we tested it with”.

Their enthusiasm for their project and the positive feedback from Business Gateway enhanced their confidence and self belief. Linda continued in her reflections.

“We kept going on with it anyway. We believed in it. It is definitely good to go and get a different viewpoint. Especially when it takes your project from being a college project to being an actual, real project that could actually work. I would say that we did not believe it could really work until we had done all of that. But a lot of people don’t think of that anyway, you get your mark and that is that. So taking it up in front of people like that makes it realistic – it could happen”! It just gives you that extra bit of confidence”.

Molly also recognised the impact that getting feedback from external sources could have.

“And it gives you a different dimension as well. You are getting somebody else’s viewpoint. It makes you think differently”.

Claire had a similar experience to Linda and Molly when she contacted Business Gateway.

“I went into Business Gateway and he was really fantastic. I found it a great experience”. If I ever did want to set my idea up in practice I would definitely go back to them. I felt really proud, they liked my idea. Setting up my own business is not something I ever thought I could do”.

Sam was inspired by contacts he made at a Business Gateway event. Seeking advice on developing his groups’ business idea, he spoke to several organisations presenting at the event.

“It was looking, listening and learning from all the different people. And it just really inspired you and made you think well that is where I want to be in ten years time”.

He also described his encounter with a local councillor regarding the development of his social enterprise idea,

“I met him by chance in a local pub and I just hit him with it (the idea) and he said that it was really interesting and told me to give him a call or email him. It was as easy as that. I phoned him the next day”.

He recognised that previous work experience and dealing with managers in his part time employment had given him skills which were

useful when making contacts with new resources. From an early age he had been employed in a range of retail outlets and had experienced dealing with difficult managers and taking responsibility for staff and sales.

“Well I was at school and I used to go to ASDA for lunch and there was a big JD Sports opened up 4 or 5 months beforehand and I worked in an ice cream van at the time and getting paid £5 a night. And I never seemed to have money left at the end so I went into JD and handed in a CV and I was quite lucky cos’ they phoned up and said you have got an interview”.

When asked about how he attained these skills he considered that it was just the way he was.

“Don’t know, don’t know. I have always been like that, even at school, they said he does not shut up, the work is fine but he will just not shut up. That was from primary school and at the time it was a bad thing but it had just gone on and on. I think really I just like the sound of my own voice. I just don’t care what anybody thinks. If I go and chap one door and something goes wrong then I will go and chap the next one and the next one until I find out something that I really want to know”.

He also recognised that he too could be a positive influence on fellow students.

“I became a lot more experienced in how to deal with different situations and, from going on from first year and thinking I don’t know if I can trust someone to work with, it just goes to show that the way you work can rub off on somebody else, like the way Martin came into the group and I thought he would not have done as well. So I suppose it is that you can really make a difference on other people by your attitude and stuff because Robert, well he was really quiet and then he tried to get his point across and I think that affected Martin as well”.

Aileen was also very comfortable with contacting external sources to get information for her project.

“I had done all this research and went and done networking with high schools and everything else. I had done my fair share and been down to the Halifax and been in touch with play.com and all these different types of things. I spoke to a bank manager and I spoke to the head of first and second year at St. Margaret’s’ and I spoke to a doctor from the cystic fibrosis (CF) trust and arranged a meeting with him and he was very helpful, but I already had links with CF because I do a lot of charity work and anyway my godson has CF and so that wasn’t really problematic cos’ I knew quite a lot about that and I could see the advantages etc. So unlike the rest of them (referring to the other members of her group) really to be honest, I didn’t have a problem at all. ”

Elaine used contacts that she had through her hobbies to gain access to information relating to her project.

“We had to find out about land prices so I spoke to my riding instructor. She owns land so she was able to tell me what the current market value was. When it came to finding out property prices, Karen got her Dad to phone up for us. Chris also knew a lot of people so he was able to get information from friends who were property developers”.

She also recalled speaking to a representative from PSYBT.

“We spoke to him about it (business idea) in class and he thought it was a great idea. He drew everything out of you. He went round the whole class and if you didn’t speak he picked on you. He picked on me at one point. It sort of put you under pressure and you had to speak out. That gave me the confidence to speak out and share my ideas”.

Jane also used personal contacts to access resources for her project. She gained access to sector experts through her boyfriend’s immediate and extended family.

“I contacted my boyfriend’s Mum who does the Dear Doctor in the local paper because I knew she had experience of dealing with the sorts of questions that we would be asking and obviously she had the knowledge. I also spoke to two other doctors (connected to her boyfriend’s family) just for general information and to see if they would be interested”.

Karen was regarded by others in her group as the leader as she was the one who had come up with the initial business development idea. However, she hid behind those in her group who she regarded as more confident than herself when relating to external contacts. She recalled going to speak to PSYBT

“It was scary. When we went into see them I just pushed somebody else to the front”.

She did, however, recognise an increase in confidence gained from making the contacts.

“I think I got more confident, better social skills”.

Megan spoke of feeling uncomfortable about carrying out market research in the local town centre and her fear of not being taken seriously.

“It was scary and we had to ask people to answer questions. But we dressed up in special T shirts and had balloons and that so it all looked good fun. I hate doing things like that though. Even phoning somebody up is bad. I think that they will just think I am a stupid wee girl”.

Like Karen, she recognised her own development over the course of the module,

“The more you did it the more you knew what to ask for. It did increase your confidence that way. I thought I am just going to phone up and ask, whereas before you would have thought, oh no....”

Robert regarded himself as less well connected than others in his group and lacked confidence in making contacts and speaking to external sources. He depended on other group members to suggest contacts and to lead the way.

“I did not know anyone really but I went along to the schools with Sam. He was confident and I let him do the speaking. It was a kind of daunting prospect cos’ you are trying to tell them something that you want them to listen to and have the same kind of feelings that you have got about it. We also spoke to people when we went to the Business Start Up Conference. We met Business Gateway. We spoke to Alan as well (PSYBT) and everybody that came into the class, the speakers and that. We kept in contact with them. They were helpful”.

He also recognised the value of feedback from external bodies. Of the groups’ experience of speaking to the Social Enterprise contact from Business Gateway, he commented,

“It was another confidence booster. You were coming back from them and they had said it was a good idea and had potential so that made us work a bit harder, get it finished, make it successful”.

He continued in his reflection of the experience.

“We just got more confidence cos’ I would never think of going to speak to somebody that I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have had that confidence if it wasn’t for the attitude in the class. It was just something completely different that no other class had offered. Basically if you didn’t speak you weren’t going to get anywhere. You couldn’t just sit back and, well it gives you a different outlook if you start taking part”.

Robert had clearly made a number of contacts, but because he was taking a back seat, he was less willing to recognise them as his potential future contacts; rather they were the contacts of others in the group.

Paula, who left the module, had no opportunities to explore the potential of new networks as part of her course. Like the others she had undertaken a Live Consultancy Project as part of her Business Degree, which required her to complete a project for an organisation. She choose to go back to the FE College where she had been a student the previous year, developing a project that she had worked on as part of her HND programme. She spoke to a previous lecturer to get the information that she needed. She undertook the work on her own and made no new contacts that she could identify as a result of her studies. This is illustrated in her network map (p161).

The experiences of the students provided important insights into how prior social capital is used to access resources and that the ability and

opportunity to create new social capital impacts on the development and recognition of employability skills and competencies. Other experiences illustrated where the lack of ability to make connections, either in bridging social capital in the internal learning environment or in linking social capital to access more remote groups, impeded success.

The importance of recognising contacts and the potential resources that these provide are illustrated and discussed in the Network Maps below. The overall findings are considered in chapter six with the implications for the learning and teaching environment explored in chapter seven.

THE NETWORK MAPS.

Participants were asked to devise network maps which illustrated those people in their various networks who were able to provide support and resources as they prepared for employment or continued with education. Within the maps they were asked to identify contacts or relationships which offered existing support mechanisms and those which offered access to potential resources which could be useful in the future. For some, there was clear recognition of bridging and linking social capital. Others were less able to see the benefits that even loose ties could offer in the future. The maps are presented according to the categorisations described by the participants and therefore show the same source in different segments, for example, Linda and Claire regarded a few lecturers as now being within their close circle of friends where others regarded them as more remote. Others, such as Elaine and Paula, were initially unable to recognise that they had, in fact, made connections which could provide access to potential resources. Those contacts that were only identified after prompting are highlighted in italics.

SAM

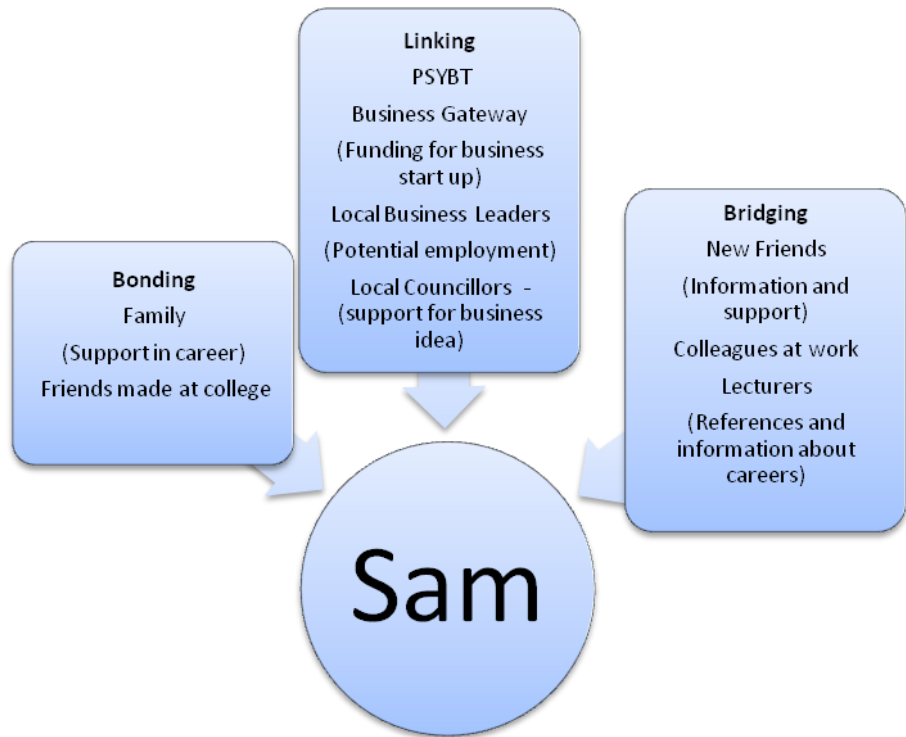
Sam was able to identify a number of new contacts that had been made as a result of participating in the entrepreneurship module. He realised that they could be a useful resource in the future in terms of employment and access to information, stating

“If I was ever going to need help not just with CVs and that but also with business start up then I could get in touch with Alan (PSYBT) as he would help. I suppose well, that was through College”.

He also recognised that some of the businesses he had contacted regarding his project would be potential sources of employment. As he was continuing into his honours year, he was keen to keep his connection with the local councillor as a source of information for further studies.

Sam noted that some contacts had become redundant

“Well I have moved on from school friends. I am only really still in contact with one of them although I still speak to them if I see them. Too many people who were immature and not really interested”.

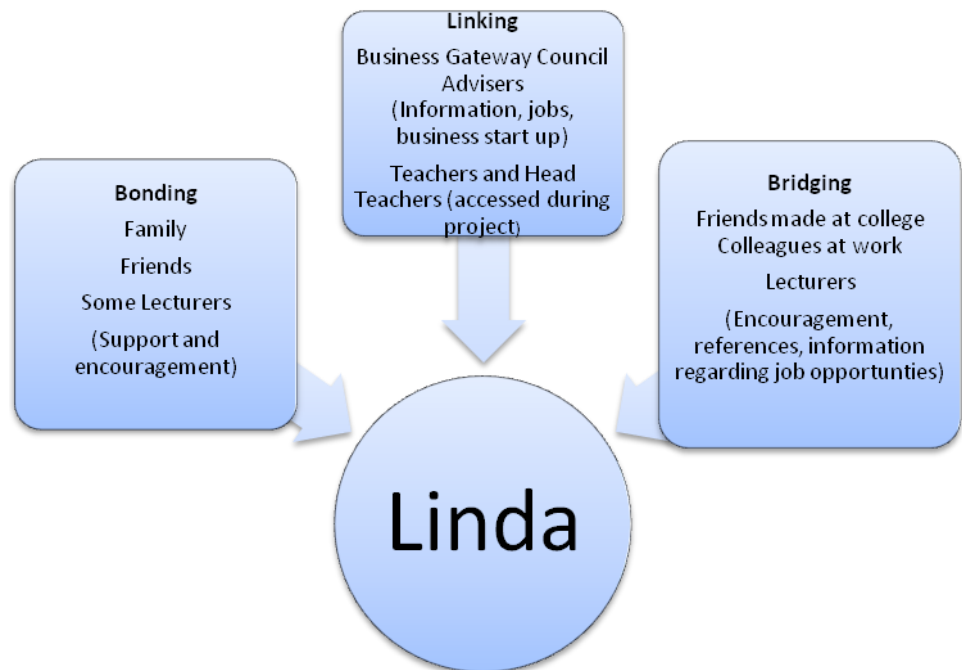


LINDA

By the end of her studies, Linda regarded connections with some lecturers transcending both bridging and bonding social capital. She meets with two regularly for lunch as friends. Other lecturers were viewed as a resource which she could go to for guidance on career options or to provide job references. Because of her positive experiences during the course of the entrepreneurship module, she recognised that the people she came into contact with while undertaking her project were potential sources of information and advice. She is still keen to pursue her business start up idea in the

future and thought she would return to the people she came in contact with during her project. She was also enthusiastic that others had the same experience.

“You should get the students more involved with the outside world. Guest speakers and the like. Make them go out and speak to organisations like Business Gateway. Then they will realise that they are there to help”.



SUSAN

Susan had a large number of friends that she regarded as close friends, who provided her with support. She was able to list another group of friends with whom she had had limited contact but from whom she could seek advice and information.

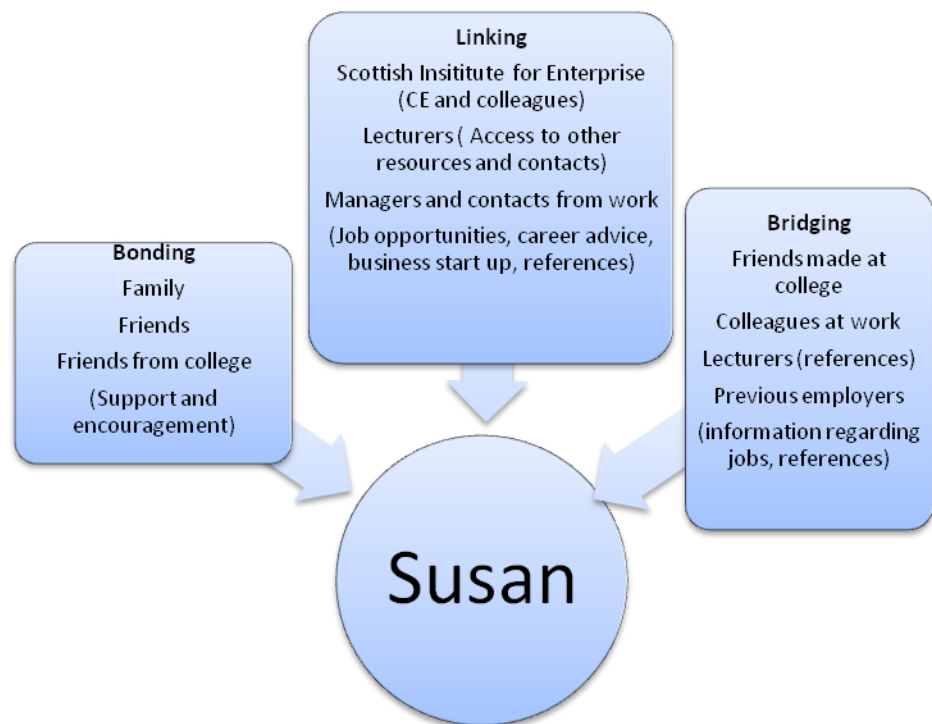
She regarded some friends from College as close friends and others as potential sources of support and information. She was able to name a number of individuals with whom she had some contact and would be comfortable about making further contact with if she thought they would be able to offer resources or advice. Talking about the contacts she made during her time as the Scottish Institute for Enterprise intern she said

"I would definitely be confident about contacting them again for information and stuff, about jobs and things. I think the fact is that my confidence has grown and that I still have a huge amount to learn but just the fact that I acknowledge that and that I want to learn from everybody else".

Susan was also able to recognise herself as a resource, citing a number of people that she worked with who saw her as a source of information and support.

“My friend, he is a designer and I have asked him to design stuff for the gym where I work and the gym has benefited from lots of work that Richie and I have done in terms of marketing cos I was doing marketing at College. He got a free membership at the gym out of it. It was things I was doing at College and wanted to see if it would work so I tried it in the gym. He has got all the software and so he helped and it did work”.

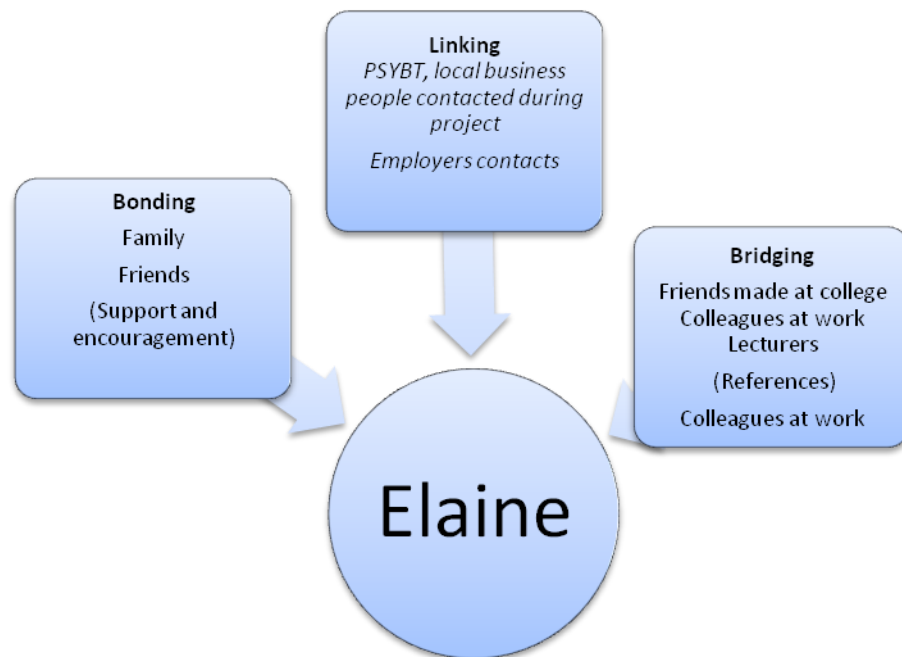
This quote illustrates that Susan is recognising the benefits of reciprocity offered by bridging and linking social capital.



ELAINE

Elaine did not immediately recognise the development of linking social capital as a result of participating in higher education. However, when prompted she was able to identify a number of resources which may offer potential benefits. These included PSYBT and local business people whom she had contacted for her project and who could be potential employers. She was also able to recognise the benefits of making connections with ‘friends of friends’ who had connections within the fashion industry, the sector where she was keen to gain employment.

“My employer’s fiancée is the main buyer in Cruise and he has offered to take me in just to show me what it is all about”.

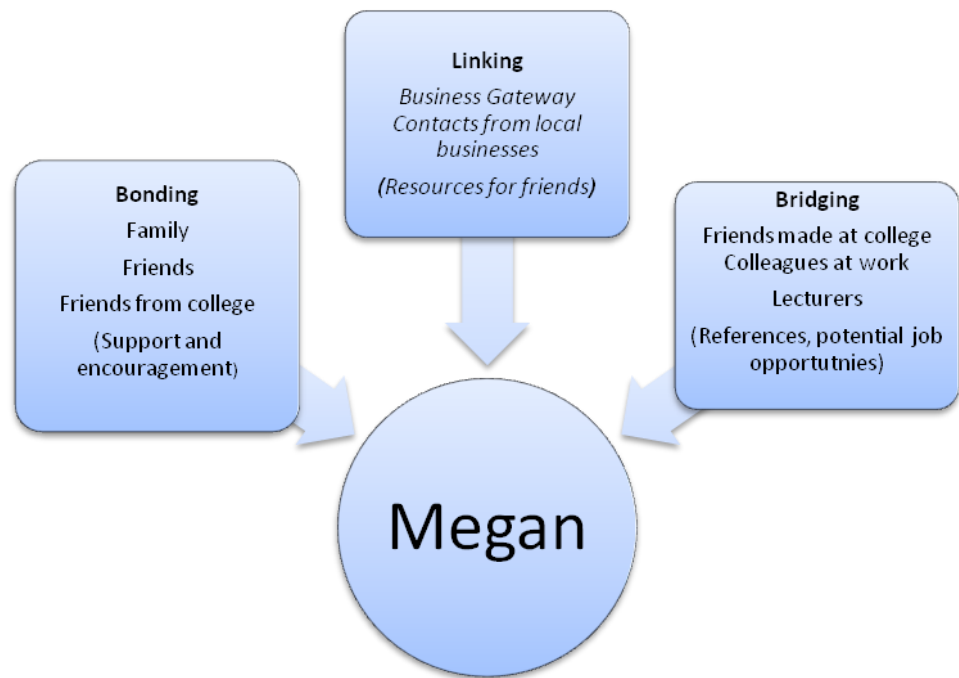


The example of Elaine initially failing to identify anyone as representing linking social capital highlighted the importance of students being able to reflect upon their experiences in order to be able to recognise linking social capital. Until she was in a position to do that she was unaware of the potential resources that she could access.

MEGAN

Megan also had some difficulty identifying contacts other than those in her immediate network. When she was reminded that she had mentioned a number of people that she had to contact regarding her project, she was able to see potential benefits that could come from these contacts. She also realised that she had indeed more to offer others than she initially realised.

“Maybe if one of my friends wanted to start up a business I would be able to tell her where to go and who to speak to. I would also be able to point someone in the right direction for sources of funding. I hadn’t thought about that before”.



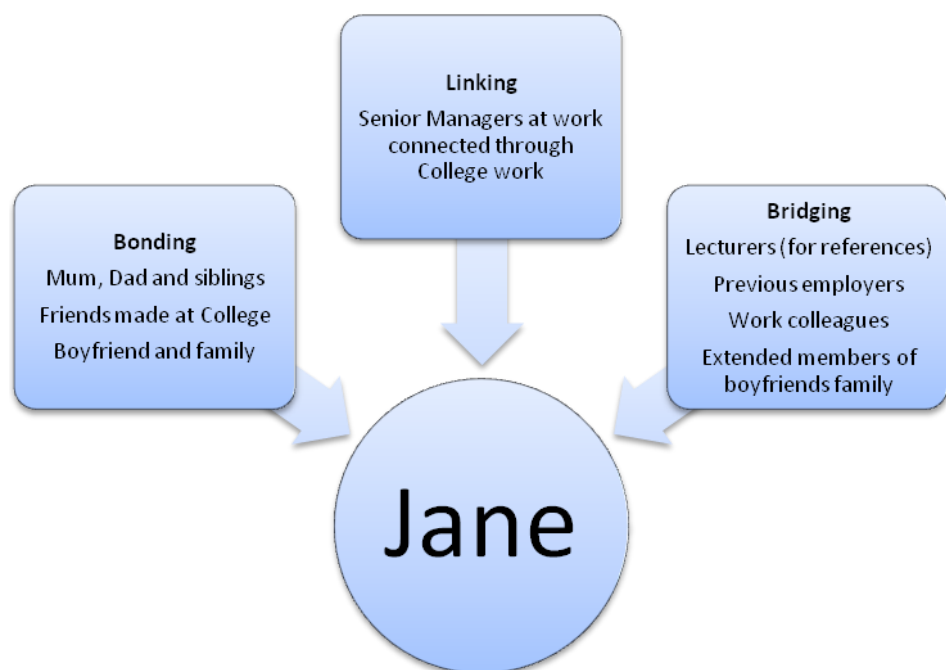
She was able to see herself as a conduit between different networks, being able to share her knowledge of resources with others.

JANE

Jane had been able to make a number of contacts with senior managers in her part time employment gaining access to information regarding projects for her degree studies and thought that these would be useful contacts in the future as she planned her career with the company. Her ambition was to win a place on the graduate management scheme and she deliberately made herself known to managers in a range of

departments who would be in a position of influence regarding her future claiming that

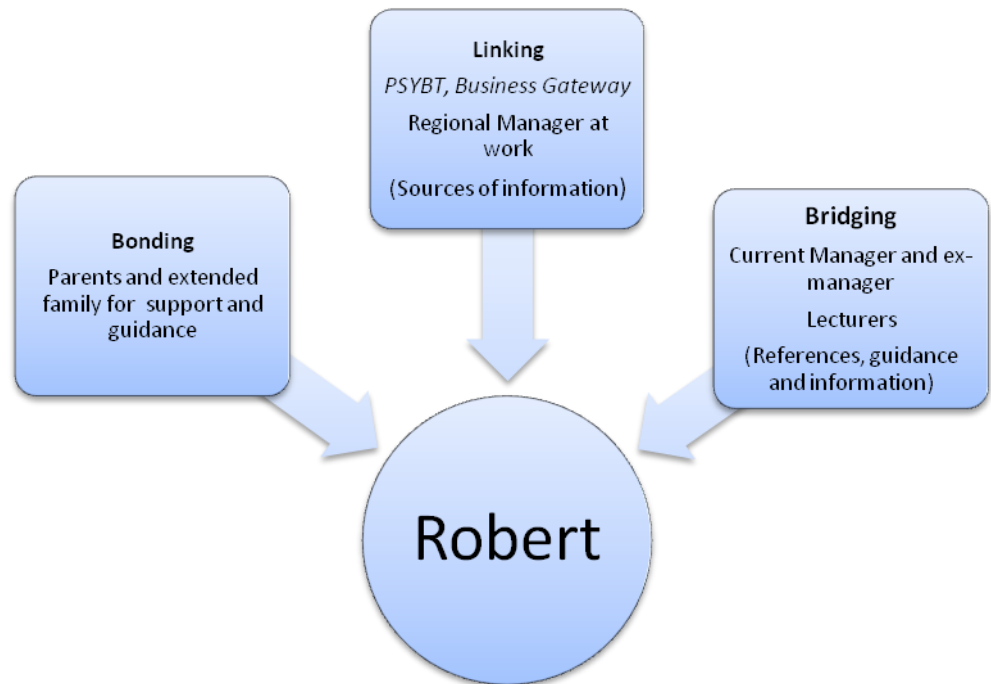
“one of the things that I would say College has had an impact on was my confidence in being able to speak to different people. I spoke to people at work (managers) that I probably would not have spoken to before”.



ROBERT

Robert had already indicated that many of the contacts made were not his but those of others in his group such as Sam. However, when he drew his map he was able to make a tenuous connection with some groups that he had come in contact with. He was, however, fully able

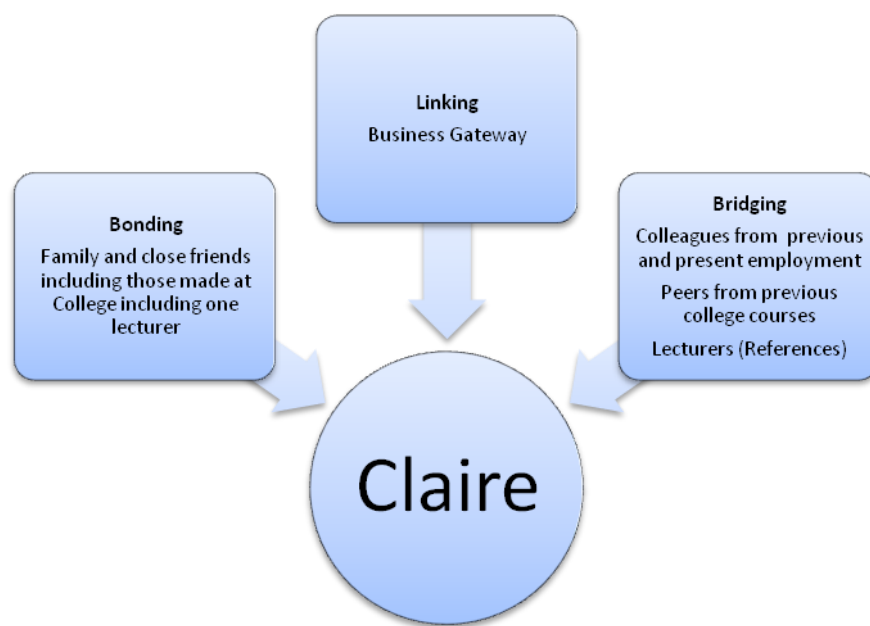
to recognise contacts from his part time employment which in fact, by the end of the study, was his place of full time employment.



CLAIRE

Claire regarded herself as a good and loyal friend and she remained friends with people even though they, or she, had moved away from the natural source of the connection. Although she was able to list a number of contacts, she was less able to recognise the potential benefits that they might offer. She had a long held ambition to work in informatics in the National Health Service, but although she had contact with a number of people who worked in the area, she did not feel able

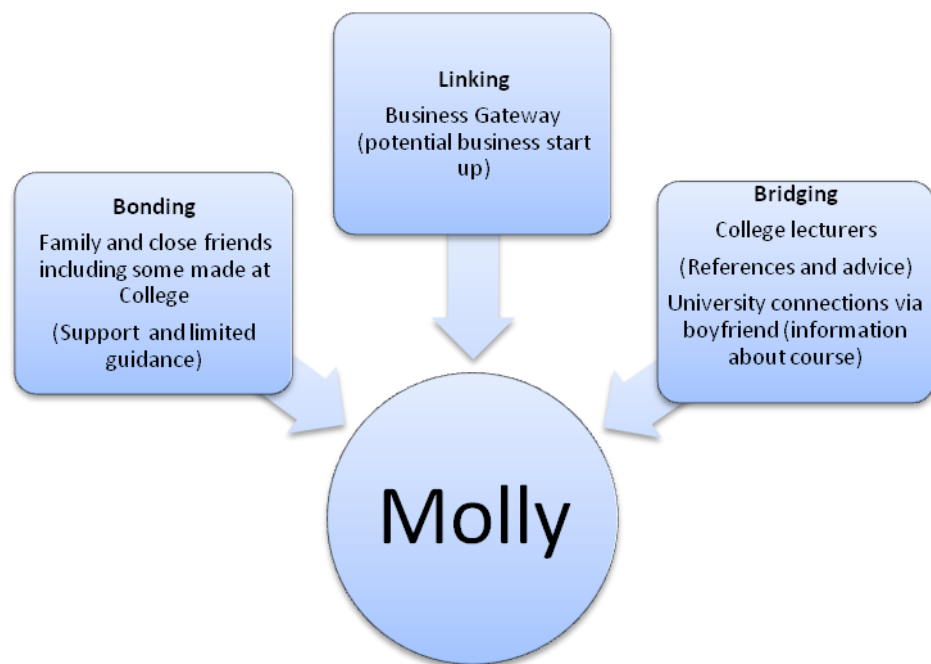
to contact them directly to seek information regarding potential employment. Similarly, when she referred to her lack of ability in demonstrating some key employability competencies she did not consider going back to lecturers, even though she regarded some as close friends, for advice, thinking they were *“busy people with enough to do without worrying about me”*.



MOLLY

Molly recalled that she had contacted a number of people when she was considering undertaking a law degree. Her first source of advice was her step father who was a senior officer in the police force. Although she had not considered that he was a source of information or support when she began her first degree, she recognised that, with his

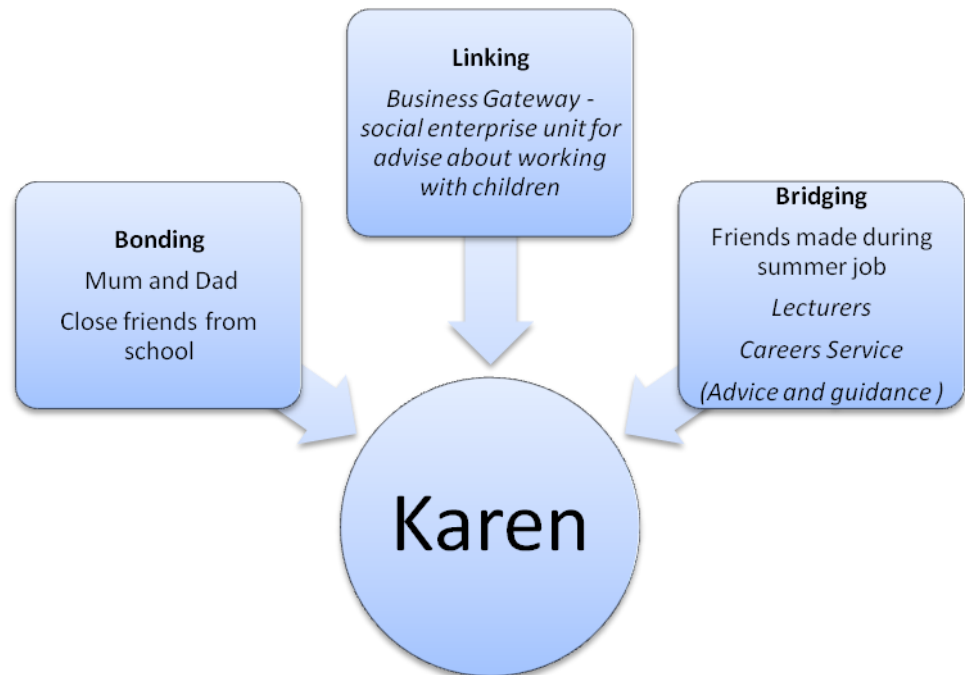
job experience he was able to provide information which helped her make her decision. Molly also indicated that should she consider setting up in professional practice in the future she would seek help from Business Gateway.



KAREN

Karen also had some difficulty identifying contacts she had made throughout the course of her studies. Her ambition was to do a post graduate qualification in primary education but was using the internet

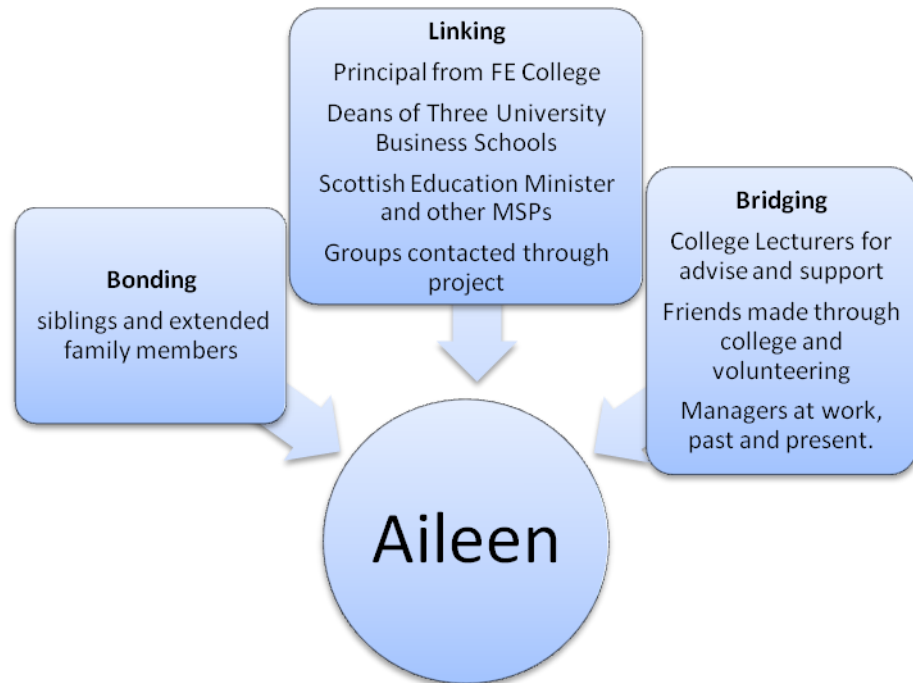
as a source of information rather than speaking to careers advisors. With some prompting she was able to identify key contacts that would be useful in terms of gaining experience in working with children as she pursued her career ambitions.



AILEEN

Aileen presented a very full map which indicated a large number of contacts, some of which were spurious. She envisaged more contacts than any other participant and included those with which she had very tenuous links, for example being within the same room as a speaker or

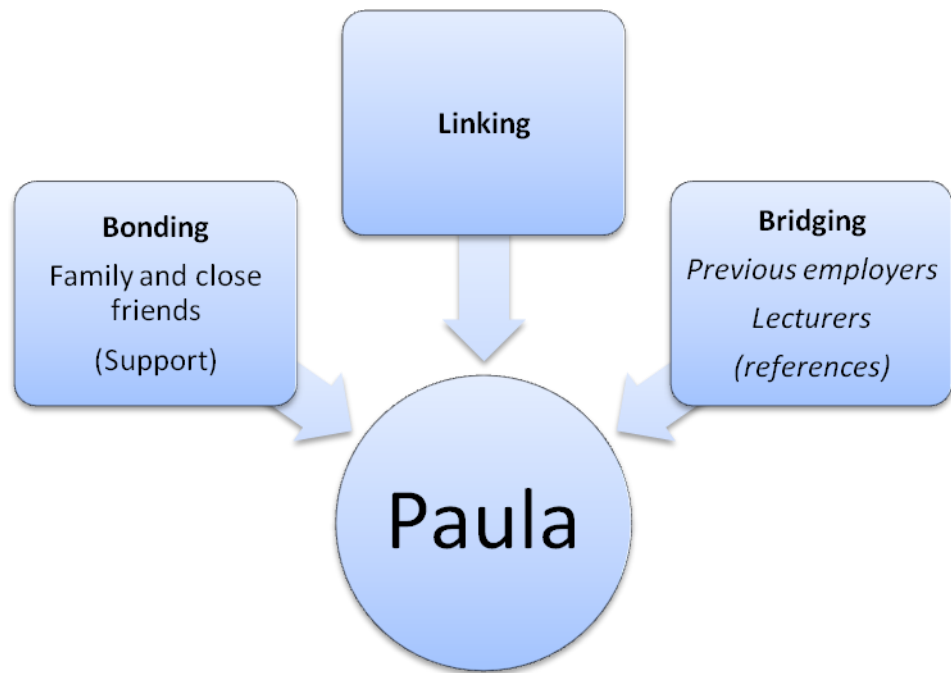
writing a letter to someone was sufficient to feature in her map, indicating that she would be able to use them for advice in the future.



Although Aileen noted significant powerful connections within her map, the extent to which these exist as linking social capital is untested. Whilst she was able to give examples of occasions when these people would be useful as a resource illustrating that she was very aware of who to contact, she was less able to demonstrate that she was confident in how to make the link would be made or that there would be any reciprocal relationship.

PAULA

Paula, who left early on in the module, had difficulty acknowledging any contacts outside of her family who could give her access to resources. Unlike those who had completed the module, she did not have the experience of connecting with external groups as part of the assignment. Nor was she able to provide contacts of her own which could be considered as providing access to remote or resource rich diverse resources. Even though she was struggling to find employment, she had not considered returning to the College careers service, relying on family to provide job leads.



The experiences related by the participants illustrated that linking social capital provided access not only to potentially valuable resources but that the ability to recognise it and activate it also improved self confidence and enhanced the development of a range of significant employability skills. Knowing who to connect with was only one part of the story. Reflecting on their own development, recognising and appreciating their self worth as a result of these contacts were also beneficial outcomes.

REFLECTING ON EMPLOYABILITY

The participants recognised that their knowledge about business had increased as a result of undertaking a business studies degree. More importantly, in terms of the development of employability, they were better able to recognise themselves as self-confident, able individuals, who had more to offer than they had originally considered.

Linda recalled the support that she had given and received from those in her network.

"...we helped each other with assignments, proof read the work. We would be sending each other things on MSN, coursework going back and forwards constantly asking, look at this, look at that. We always worked together, although our work was quite different, we were similar in our approach, our style of writing was quite different so we found each others points of view quite valid".

That support did not end when the group moved on. For those who continued with their studies she commented.

"I was like a wee agency when the dissertations were getting done. They were all using me to proof read. But it is good that we have got each other to go to. I was on MSN one lunchtime at work and Paul came on to tell me he got a 2:1 and he was thanking me for my help and I was

telling him he should be really proud of himself. I think it is good that we sort of grew up together and we can all sort of boost each other”.

Molly thought that her confidence had increased as a result of connecting with different people.

“It is good though to work with different groups to get different ideas. It also helps your confidence if you are working with people you don’t know and you have to get to know them and you might realise different things about yourself as well”.

Linda spoke of learning to work in a team.

“I can remember the debates that we had to do in entrepreneurship. I think it was a good thing and well, I wouldn’t call it a competitive streak but if you are all pulling for one thing then it makes you want to work together and do something. I think that they are good as well. And you fell quite chuffed when you do it well and you are all proud of it.”

She recognised the learning which had taken place dealing with problems within groups much later in the workplace, when she recalled having to work with a ‘difficult individual’.

“And even if there was somebody in the class that you just could not stand, you just had to tolerate them which is good. You are going to go to work and will meet people that you don’t like but you have to learn to

deal with it and have a working relationship with them. I learned that working in groups in College even though I didn't know it at the time".

Susan related a similar learning experience.

"I worked with friends (at college) where you didn't say anything and they didn't hand in their part of the work, and I think the big disadvantage is because they are your friends you don't speak up as much. Also I think at the time I was a bit immature about it, with the fact that you never said anything. I think it is one of those things that now, when you have left studying and can look back. I have worked with people that I have been friends with and been in an actual environment, in the last place I worked I employed a guy that I had been friends with for years and years, and he started to take advantage of it, so it was wait a minute, this is what is going to have to happen and you had to lay down the ground rules and it was a matter of just because we are friends doesn't mean that you can cross the boundaries. I think that it would probably have been beneficial if you had been able to apply that when you were studying".

Jane also provided an example of transferring learning from class to the workplace.

"At work you will get groups that don't work. That thing we did about the team roles is probably helping me just now as I am getting to know

my new group. I am using some of the things we did in class to get to know people, getting to know the team”.

The result of making contacts outside the college had a positive effect on all participants as they recognised that their confidence and ability to connect with previously unknown groups had grown. For some the growth was more marked than others.

Claire recalled her experience of presenting her business idea to Business Gateway.

“I have been to Business Gateway and put forward my ideas. They liked it. They listened to me and gave me help. I am now Claire, BA Business Studies and feel much more confident about putting forward my point of view”.

Molly spoke of starting her post graduate law degree. She could never have imagined either studying law or attending a prestigious university.

“I am with a mixed group of students, some who came to do their degree out of school as well as graduates. And you are sitting there and they ask who are the graduate entrants and you are shouting me, me, I have got a degree. You are you are really proud of it. I would never have applied for law if I had not done my first degree here”.

She thought that the experience she had gained whilst undertaking her first degree underpinned her confidence to continue with her studies.

"I feel much more comfortable standing up in front of people. And it was just obviously because we had experience".

Elaine, who worked part time as a receptionist in a beauty salon during the course of her studies, noted that her employer commented that she was now much more comfortable speaking to customers

"My boss noticed it. Talking to clients. Before I would just say take a seat and get them what they needed but now I can ask them about their day, their holidays and things. Get to know them a bit more".

Interviewer

"Did you make a conscious effort to do that2?"

Elaine

"Before I had been involved in the entrepreneurship class I spoke to them because I had to...to make the salon friendly. But not any more. The chat just flows".

Susan had been very involved with governance issues within the college, being a student representative, attending course boards and events with external audit groups. She recognised the benefits of having this experience in terms of building her confidence in speaking to wider groups and developing the skills of persuasion and negotiation

and behaving in formal groups. Although she had no experience of participating in formal groups or committees prior to coming to college, she realised that the skills that she developed through participation in these groups were clearly beneficial in terms of employability.

“I got experience from doing it. I learned how to interact with people at different levels not just with students. Speaking to lecturers and other members of staff and that. That was quite good. I felt really proud when I got things changed about fire drills. I thought that Jim should be trained in evacuation because he was George’s (disabled student) carer and I brought it up in a course board. The staff should have done that but it was me who got things changed”.

As her confidence grew, Susan got involved with other activities in College, becoming the Scottish Institute for Enterprise Student Intern and a Link Student, speaking to school pupils about higher education. As she became involved in more activities she reflected in the positive impact they had on her self esteem.

“It was really diverse (the people she met) That why it was interesting as well because it was people I had not come in contact with before and you could draw on a lot of different skills. If you came across a problem there was a whole lot of different knowledge to tap into. Sometimes I would get phone calls and it was can you check this or that because it was about business and they were art students, and I was asking other

*people about different things. That was good. Again with the link students, the people were totally different. I felt more confident. People were asking **my** opinion”.*

She reflected upon a meeting she attended at her workplace,

“Because I was used to being in different meetings and things, when I walked into the meeting I wasn’t panicking. Before the meeting started, I was sitting in the board room with the sales girls and then when the directors came in they were totally panicking but I was more confident and relaxed, even though they had worked with them a lot longer. I was able to put my points across and they were just agreeing with everything that was said. I wasn’t prepared to do that. I remember telling them that I was not prepared to sit in the board room while they were smoking. They all put their cigarettes out”.

Susan recognised that her employability skills and attributes had developed as a result of building social capital whilst a student.

“I think that for me that was important because it let me get involved in things where you had to do presentations and you had to be part of a group and you had to speak where you were not comfortable and you felt out of your depth and for me personally that prepared me for what I have been through workwise, because in the last job I was as sales manager and then branch manager and I was thinking Oh God what am I going to do with them (the staff). I thought, well wait a minute, I was

put forward for the Scottish Institute for Enterprise and I didn't know what I was doing with that and I went for the class rep and I didn't know what I was doing with that but you figure it out. I think that knowing that you have done something like that already gives you confidence. You can say well I will deal with it, I will make it work, you just have to get in there and on with it".

Megan recognised the potential of making contacts with a range of organisations.

"Well I think you learn to find out what kind of people want to help you, would be willing to help you in the future, what kind of organisations would help with different things cos' you have phoned them up and they have said, we are interested in that so if you ever needed something in the future you could say, oh I know a person that could help".

Robert spoke of presenting a professional image when 'pitching' his group's business idea to students and to potential funders,

"We wore shirts and ties because it would look more professional and they were professional, and you need to be, well not on the same level but know what you are talking about".

thus providing a clear example of presenting a professional and confident image as listed in the CIHE employability competencies.

The students' reflections on the development of skills and competencies, detailed above, suggest to me that there is another concept of social capital that has been demonstrated, that of imagined social capital.

IMAGINED SOCIAL CAPITAL

Quinn's (2005) research of women's' views on their position within the university structure introduced a new form of social capital; imagined social capital. Her study provided examples of how women imagined their connections and networks to expand as a result of participating in education. The concept of imagined social capital relates to *"liminal spaces for dreaming new possibilities and sharing them with others"* (Quinn, 2005, p14). This form of social capital is about using imagination to explore possibilities about new identities, raising aspirations and expectations. Quinn suggested that imagined social capital is *"potentially creative and liberating, generating new paradigms and visions,.... allowing escape from the expectations set by others"*.

Students in this study employed imagined social capital as a means of visioning new identities and futures. Molly, now in her third year of an LLB course said she could see herself as *"a high powered lawyer, strutting my stuff"*. Susan envisages herself reaching a management

position or running her own business. As they reach their goals, imagined social capital becomes a reality. This is well illustrated by Claire's final thoughts on her educational experience.

She sees herself as more able to connect with a wider range of people confidently and comfortably now that she has graduated. She believes that she has something worth saying to friends in the pub. The limitations she placed on herself have been lifted. Her experiences of relating to a range of different people, particularly those she previously regarded as unavailable to her, have had a significant impact on her self confidence and in raising possibilities for her future.

She explained,

"Years ago I would have just sat back and let everybody else speak whereas now I can join in conversations more confidently and speak about things. I don't feel embarrassed. I used to feel embarrassed when I was speaking to people, not because I was a cleaner but....I will give you an example. Before I had done my degree, I was coming into College and I was working with the police in the surveillance unit, I would not really speak to anybody. Although I was speaking to them through the radio it was different. If anybody came in to see a surveillance tape or anything I would be like, hiding, whereas we had an inspector in the other night and I could speak to him about anything on any level. Years ago I would not have spoken to him other than saying

hello. But the other night when he was in I was talking away to him. I never thought I would feel confident enough to speak to someone on that kind of level.

I know now that if I put my mind to anything I can do it. I look in the future and say if I want to go and do my post graduate then I can. Seven years is a long time to spend at college, I made good friends and even the bad times when I was pulling my hair out I enjoyed it. And I got there in the end. Now I can believe in myself and what I can achieve and what I am going to achieve”.

Claire put these achievements into context when she reflected on the journey she has made.

“I used to get up in the morning, go to work and was cleaning toilets and one day I woke up and I thought I don’t want to do this for the rest of my life. I am fed up. I always thought folk looked at me as if I was, not thick but ---. My sister-in-law always used to say, you are clever and I think it was after that that I thought I am going to do something, I am going to prove to myself that I can do something. Now my friends think I am dead clever and I am the only one who has ever went to university cos’ where I stay, if you go on to some of the websites it will tell you that up my street, this is a poor area and there are not many people go to university so I see myself differently, well I worked hard for the 7 years

of my studies and looking after my Dad and the two houses and a job, children”.

Claire’s reflections illustrate what Quinn describes as imagined social capital, the potential to move away from what is expected to what is possible and turning the imagined into reality.

CONCLUSION

The rich information gleaned from students offered insights into how existing social capital and that developed as part of their experience as a student influenced the development and recognition of the attainment of the generic skills and personal capabilities detailed in the CIHE employability competency framework and indeed in their general well being. Their stories indicate that participation in higher education is influenced by prior social capital, in choosing where and what to study, and that new bridging social capital occurs during the course of study as they connect with new networks. The conditions and triggers for bridging relationships provide insights into the factors involved in intentional change and the role that social capital has in higher education in enhancing abilities to identify and access new resources. Benefits gained from linking with external agencies highlighted the potential for the development and recognition of employability skills

and the increased confidence levels that are associated with this. The following chapters explore these themes further and offer discussions on the implications for learning and teaching.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

“As societies become in some ways more fragmented and also more diverse, it becomes important to manage interpersonal relationships well both for the benefit of the individual and to build new forms of co-operation. The building of social capital is important as existing social bonds weaken and new ones are created by those with the ability to form strong networks. Individuals need to learn, live and work with others”. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1997, p. 12)

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of the participants in the study suggests that not only are there significant benefits to be gained from generating and utilising social capital but that successful development of employability competencies is dependant on the individual being able to recognise and activate bridging and linking social capital and to learn how to

relinquish social capital which is inhibiting or restrictive as suggested by OECD.

The importance for business students to get by, get on and get around has been well illustrated by the participants in the study. The extent to which individuals achieved this was dependant upon them having the confidence, skills and capabilities to form and manage new relationships and to identify, create and take advantage of opportunities in their environments.

OECD (1997, p12) described the skills required to mobilise social capital as the ability to relate to diverse others; the ability to co-operate and work in teams; and the ability to manage and resolve conflicts. These skills are essentially covered within the CIHE Employability Competencies (2004) using a different language. They list questioning, listening, team working, interpersonal sensitivity, adaptability, flexibility, tolerance of stress and managing conflict as key generic competencies and personal capabilities.

Although the ability to utilise social capital is not mentioned within the framework, the students within this study connected with those within and external to their learning environment and developed a range of relationships, and were thus accumulating and applying social capital in its various forms and levels. There are clear associations with employability competencies as students build an accumulation or *stock*

of skills and attributes along with the recognition of potential resources which could be accessed in the future.

This chapter is a discussion of the themes which emerged from an analysis of the interviews. The first theme explores the impact of existing social capital on participation in higher education. The second theme examines how social capital develops and the third theme discusses the impact of connecting with the external business environment that occurred whilst participating in the entrepreneurship module.

From an analysis of the findings, I suggest that developing and applying employability skills and competencies are not only related to the ability to identify and mobilise social capital but that without the opportunity to access networks and resources outside the immediate academic community, the ability to apply these in a wider context, as a business graduate, may be limited.

THE INFLUENCE OF PRE-EXISTING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bonding social capital can be a valuable resource in encouraging participation in higher education although lack of access to relevant bridging and linking social capital can result in restricting the choice of courses and location of study.

The support and encouragement that the participants in the study received from families was crucial in a number of ways, shaping identity as a learner; influencing aspirations; raising expectations and confirming self belief that they had the ability to participate in higher education. However, it is recognised that the positive effects of bonding social capital that were experienced by the participants would not necessarily be the experience of all students who continue with education as reported in chapter two. If the participants had described an unsupportive family background or had they been more influenced by negative peer pressure and norms of non engagement with the education system, then the findings would have been significantly different. In terms of this study, by encouraging their sons and daughters to continue with education, supportive families were making an investment in the development of human, cultural and social capital and ultimately the economic capital of future generations, with expectations of better prospects and opportunities in employment. This supports Coleman's (1990, p349-352) view that the ability of

parents to devote interest and support to their children increases the likelihood of producing human capital in the form of educational achievement. Clearly the families in this study provided that interest and support even though they were not always in a position to offer information and guidance or, through their own social capital, access relevant resources to provide much needed information about courses and careers.

Lack of experience of the higher education system meant that parents were limited in the extent to which they could offer guidance in options available as acknowledged by participants such as Linda and Molly (p96-7). The students in this study did not recount speaking to wider family and friends where immediate family lacked information; rather they relied on conducting their own, albeit narrow research, accessing limited information from schools and seeking the views of friends who were already within the system. This supports Thomas and Quinn's (2007) findings that, on an international level, students from non-traditional backgrounds had access to more limited information from families and friends and made use of a narrower range of information from official sources.

The reluctance of particular student groups to aspire to attend prestigious institutions is well documented. According to Thomas and Quinn (2007) first generation entrants prefer to study near home and this finding is supported by the evidence of several participants in this

study. The impact of bonding social capital and the dependence that it can create, discouraged several of the participants taking up offers of courses from more prestigious universities. This reluctance could be explained in part by the young age of some of the participants. However, it is more likely to be related to a lack of confidence in their ability to move comfortably into an environment which would be unfamiliar and where there would be no familiar faces and little shared cultural capital. They therefore preferred to participate in higher education in a location when friends were going to be attending and where family were close by for support, choosing institutions which they believed that they would 'fit in', sharing the cultural and social capital of those attending and, in the case of Aileen (*p108*), the staff.

Some participants were also influenced by anecdotal evidence of friends who had left traditional universities to complete their degrees at the local college, strengthening their belief that it was 'not for people like us', 'too big and too posh' reinforcing their belief that their decision was a realistic assessment of their aspirations in the absence of cultural and social capital valued by such institutions.

Some, such as Robert did not even consider other institutions, believing that he would not get the results required for entry, even though he left school with five highers. It was more important for him to know that some of his friends were attending the same college than to break away and start alone.

These reflections appear to indicate that a lack of self confidence and self belief is as important as lack of information. Had the participants and their families been able to access additional resources, including access to role models, through linking social capital, choices could have been extended and wider opportunities realised. Molly (*p105*) illustrated this point clearly when she stated that she would not have considered undertaking a law degree had she not had the stepping stone of the local College. Attaining the academic credentials is clearly only one of the hurdles to be overcome in the widening participation agenda.

Social capital available within families, whilst useful in accessing part time employment for some, was not, in this study a resource available for graduate level employment, confirming Stone et al.'s (2003) findings in chapter three. Students who are unable to access connections for graduate employment through families and friends are much more dependant on utilising linking social capital. It is these links, some of which can be developed during their time in higher education which could provide new opportunities. If processes are put in place by educational institutions to offer a range of opportunities to develop the skills to activate linking social capital and students are made aware of networks which could provide potential resources then we are increasing options that may not have been considered.

LIMITING EXPECTATIONS

Making decisions about what and where to study is dependant on access to good information about choices available. Where family experience is limited and information not readily available through existing social capital, the school would appear to have an important role to play in making young people more aware of study and career options. If Government policies are to be successful in raising the numbers of participants from low participation neighbourhoods then the school sector surely has a role in ensuring that not only is adequate information readily available, but that young people are encouraged and enabled to explore and realise their potential. In this study, participants thought that career guidance was sparse and inadequate and that support and encouragement to widen horizons did not necessarily come from school career staff. The picture painted of school career staff was that what ever was available was good enough for them. Thomas and Quinn (2007, p54) warned of the *“limiting expectations of those such as careers advisors”*. This suggests that the experience of the participants was not unique to this study and there is much work still to be done within schools in raising aspirations of young people who do not possess the social capital in other ways which would help inform their choices. Schools are vital in shaping people’s identities as learners (Gambetta, 1987) and encouraging achievement and raising expectations are a vital part of that identity. Schooling not

only impacts on the qualifications which allow progression into higher education but influences whether young people perceive themselves as capable learners who will cope with the demands of higher education (Thomas and Quinn 2007, p75). Many participants arrived in higher education ill prepared for their new role as a degree level student. A business degree was chosen because '*it was general*' or careers staff said '*just do that*'. The location was chosen because it was geographically close or friends, even distant friends, had decided to attend. Lack of access to role models meant that there was little information about student identity and expectations and potential opportunities.

How many opportunities are missed because of lack of encouragement or failure to raise aspirations? How many young people do not realise their potential because they do not know how to gain access to the right information, because they and their families are unable to activate the social capital that would help them appreciate the possibilities? Although the evidence from the participants suggests that bridging and linking social capital was not evident to any extent in helping the participants make decisions regarding their study options, we must recognise that by engaging with higher education, they were themselves, starting to create their own social capital. The very fact that they have, with limited help from others, been able to activate and mobilise bridging and linking social capital in order to connect with and

join a new institution, a college or university, demonstrates that they already possess a range of useful skills relevant to activating and utilising social capital. The challenge for the institution is in recognising the value of these skills and taking steps to help their students widen their application.

CREATING NEW NETWORKS

Bridging social capital is created through formal and informal student networks. Students generated social capital as they developed friendships at College, related to staff and accessed new networks to support their studies or engage in the social life of a student. The skills to identify, activate and mobilise social capital are crucial if students are to be able to demonstrate employability in a range of settings.

Napahiet and Ghoshal (1996, p224) described three separate but closely linked dimensions of social capital; structural, cognitive and relational. These dimensions offer a logical way of examining how social capital is created and accessed in the learning environment.

THE STRUCTURAL DIMENSION

The structural dimension describes the impersonal configuration between people and groups, and the pattern of connections between actors in the structure; that is, who you reach and how you reach them. It includes the density, connectivity and hierarchy of networks contained within and relating to the organisation.

Within the study, a myriad of networks were described by the participants. Some networks were constructed deliberately by staff for work tasks. Others were created by students themselves as friendships were formed for socialisation purposes or as study support groups. Throughout their time in College, participants recognised that some networks became less relevant, for example, where values and priorities changed. Others became more important as new resources were sought. Networks created value in terms of the development of social capital and skills relevant to employability such as being able to work with a wide range of people, develop communication skills, deal with conflict and stress and participate in and manage teams. The reflections of the participants provided examples of seeking opportunities to work alongside those with different skills, knowledge and values.

For most, staying with familiar people or striking up friendships with similar others was the favoured position initially. As they reflected on

their experiences they began to identify the additional benefits which were gained from working with dissimilar others. Connecting with a diversity of networks provided new opportunities to think and behave in ways not previously considered.

In the early days at College, the first challenge for participants was to identify and access new networks which enabled them to become part of the student group. This was easier for some than for others and was dependant on individual levels of confidence and the opportunities provided to make connections. Sam (*p112*), for example, considered himself to be chatty and struck up a friendship with Steven, simply because he was sitting next to him in the first class. For others, initiating contacts was not so easy and they preferred to stick with people they knew. This was particularly obvious in the group who came from the FE College into the third year of the programme, who felt isolated and somewhat overwhelmed in their early days. They believed that because groups were already established it was hard for them to gain access. Their experience was made even more difficult by the fact that they were treated by staff as a separate group of students having, for example, a separate tutorial group in some core subjects. In their interviews, two participants, Megan and Aileen (*p113*), thought that this was unhelpful and believed that it would have been beneficial had their group been split up earlier in the year in an attempt to integrate them into the learning community. There are lessons to be learned

from these reflections for the staff involved. The support that this group could offer each other was of value, but because more efforts were not made to help them mix with others on the programme, they remained a single entity and faced additional problems when demands were placed upon them to work with others less well known at a later stage in their studies. This point raises implications for the design of induction programmes where each year of academic programmes requires to be considered individually and the needs of direct entrants to the programme specifically considered.

The participants recalled looking for people who were similar to themselves in terms of age and gender as illustrated by Claire (p112). When some participants began to recognise that their existing networks were inhibiting their development and restricting their progress they began to take action to align themselves with others who displayed aspired characteristics in terms of commitment, achievement and attendance. Taking this action was uncomfortable for some such as Robert (p121) as he *“moved out of his comfort zone”*. But, by recognising a gap in his development and taking deliberate moves to plug the gap and work with a more confident group of students he was, as Burt (2005) described, identifying a structural hole, and brokering that hole gave access to new resources, ideas and behaviours.

According to Burt (2005, p59) *“brokerage across structural holes provides a vision of options otherwise unused”*. These options offered

new ideas and ways of thinking and behaving. Robert recognised that he needed to develop his self confidence and chose a group to work with that he thought would help him to do that, in his words

“I wanted to work with a more confident group of people. I hoped that some of their confidence would rub off on me”.

Several participants (p118-120) also provided examples of brokering structural holes within the student network. Their existing network appeared to them to have different priorities, being more concerned with socialising than studying. This network may have remained active in terms of social friendships, but, as a work and study resource, it became redundant. They wanted to work with a group of students who shared their values, had a common work ethic and were committed to achieving success. In some cases, participants took deliberate steps to invite someone into their network to provide skills which were regarded as lacking within the existing network. Linda provided an example of this when she recalled inviting a student to join her group who she considered to be particularly skilled in making presentations.

Being able to access resources through new connections was not the case for everyone. Some were unable either to recognise the limiting effects of their network or lacked the confidence to take action to bridge the gap. In other cases, such as Aileen (p134), the tie to the existing group proved to be too strong to break away from.

Network ties, according to Granovetter (1973, p1361) depend on “*a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie*”. He suggested that weak ties often served as a bridge between different networks, providing a source of new information and resources whereas strong ties could restrict access to new resources.

Whether strong, closed networks provide more benefits than the loose connections that happen with weaker ties is debated amongst writers. Coleman and Burt lead the debate with Coleman (1988) arguing that closure of the network structure facilitated the emergence of norms, maintaining the trustworthiness of others, thereby strengthening social capital. Burt (1992) leaned more towards Granovetter’s earlier view, arguing that a sparse network, which had fewer redundant ties, provided more opportunities for the creation of bridging and linking social capital thereby increasing access to resources, ideas and values and presenting opportunities for change. Both viewpoints have merit within the context of this study. Those students who had strong ties and closed networks with those who shared values and behaviours, experienced a supportive learning environment as illustrated by Linda and Sam (p122, 129). Yet those who were tied into a close group of friends who were not performing academically to the desired standard, found it restrictive and inhibiting. Students often lacked the confidence

to instigate change within these networks. To protect their own academic achievement, taking on an additional workload to compensate for others who were not performing in work groups was seen as the only alternative for many.

The limitations imposed by strong ties have been well illustrated by Aileen and Claire (p132, 135) who, on reflection, recognised that staying within their own network had a negative impact on their development. The strength of the strong tie inhibited the development of bridging social capital in making connections with networks which were performing more successfully. Even though she wanted to be part of another group, Aileen found herself unable to break the ties with her long established group of friends. Claire, who found herself continually 'fire fighting' to get her group to perform, stayed with them even though she thought she could do better working with a different group. Jane, who did not consider that she had particular strong friendship ties to her group, still found it difficult to move away commenting that she wished she could have worked in a group like Sam's who she regarded as "*really working together*" whereas within her group, the focus was on trying to avoid arguments.

These experiences illustrate that friendships, and the loyalty they created, can restrict students in developing new skills and accessing new opportunities. That is not to say that strong ties are bad and weak ties are good, rather that both need to exist to ensure that the student

has a balance between the strong support that bonding social capital provides through the encouragement offered by family and close friends and the potential new opportunities offered by connecting with different others through bridging and linking social capital. The tensions need to be balanced against the potential trade offs and students given the opportunities to develop skills and confidence to reap the benefits of both. However, as Aileen, Claire and Jane's experiences show, it is often not easy for students to disrupt friendships in order to access new skills, ideas and behaviours.

It is not my intention here to suggest that we should be taking action to fracture friendships, rather that we should be encouraging students to recognise the benefits of creating weak ties, and provide opportunities for them to develop the skills and attitudes which enable them to access new and beneficial networks. Support needs to be in place to enable students to move around networks, accessing a range of resources which enhance their development rather being restricted because of obligations to existing networks. Encouraging students to access multiple networks would also help in ensuring that those who are not meeting obligations, for example in work groups, are not overly protected by close friends thereby countering Uzzi's (1997, p59) concern that *"feelings of obligations and friendships may be so great between transactors that a firm (in this case a student group) becomes a 'relief organisation' for the others in the network"*.

This has implications for how we structure the learning environment and is further discussed in chapter seven.

Creating a diversity of networks is dependant on the individual having the skills and attributes to identify the sources of new information and resources and the motivation to access them. Where social capital is limited, brokerage of new networks can be eased by those who are more able to identify new resources and act as the broker. That is a role that can be eased by staff, who are in a position not only to facilitate opportunities to gain experience, but in being role models and helping develop the skills necessary to participate successfully in networks. Those who are skilled in networking are viewed as attractive by others (Baker, 2000, Dasgupta, 2000, Wood et al, 2002, Burt, 2005). As well as displaying admired skills and attributes, they bring a range of resources including access to other networks. Within the relatively safe environment of higher education, staff have a role in facilitating access to a range of opportunities which enable students to practice skills and develop the confidence needed to mobilise bridging and linking social capital, thus developing a range of employability skills and attributes deemed as essential by future employers. As well as providing guidance, support and skills development, staff can behave as effective brokers of structural holes, putting students in touch with relevant others within and outside the institution. Staff influence in the development of social capital will be discussed further in chapter seven

when the implications for the learning and teaching environment are addressed.

Staff are vital as role models, demonstrating the behaviours that are necessary to connect with others. Experienced students can also fulfil, at least in part, that role. However, gaining access to them may be difficult for a new student who lacks confidence and more effort has to be made by staff to broker such relationships. The hierarchy which exists between cohorts of students in the minds of new students may not be so obvious to staff who may assume that various cohorts, with little encouragement from staff, will get together to support and guide one another. Buddying and mentoring systems recognise the benefits to be gained from such initiatives but we need to examine what they are put in place to achieve and whether or not they are reaching and supporting, the most vulnerable students.

The generation of bridging social capital which occurs within student groups is often unintentional and the benefits are not recognised. Relationships are expected to be formed simply because one student sits next to another or staff place students in groups to work together, giving little or no thought to group dynamics or the existing range of skills and competencies the student has in terms of connecting with others. Even less forethought is given to the self confidence that is needed to access new networks. The potential benefits of working with new groups of people are not considered or in many cases

acknowledged. Yet the participants in the study could, on reflection identify and appreciate the benefits. Thomas and Quinn (2007, p61) stated *“building bridges depends not only on the will to do it but being structurally able to do it”*. This view has been well supported by the experiences of the students in this study. In order for them to bridge networks, the conditions and opportunities, as well as support, need to be in place.

THE RELATIONAL DIMENSION

The success of the network is dependant upon the relational dimensions of social capital. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1996), citing Granovetter’s (1985) earlier work, described these as the personal relationships that people develop with each other through a history of interaction. The concept focused on respect and friendships that influence the norms of behaviour and include elements such as trust (Putman 1993, Fukuyama 1995) Burt, 1992, 2005), obligations and expectations (Granovetter, 1985, Burt, 1992,) norms and sanctions (Coleman 1992, Putman 1993) and identification (Kramer et al, 1996).

The personal relationships and previous experiences that students have with one another are important factors in deciding who is included in their networks as illustrated in chapter five. On some occasions students may have no choice in which group they have to work with or

little previous knowledge of the group members, for example when staff construct the group. However, putting the structures in place to enable students to network is only the start of the process. How they manage these relationships is dependant on their ability to participate and manage the group process. From the experiences of the participants, ascertaining how able students are in these tasks is rarely investigated by staff prior to embarking on group assignments.

TRUST

Burt (2005, p93) argued that *“you trust someone when you commit to a relationship before you know how the other person will behave”*. Referring to agency relationships, Dasgupta (2000, p330) described trust as *“an individual forming expectations about the actions of others that have a bearing on the individuals choice of action”*. He viewed trust as important because its presence or absence would have a bearing of what we chose to do or indeed what we could do. When students work together either in a study group or an assignment task group there is an implicit trust relationship. They are part of the same community and have a common goal, the successful completion of their studies. Uslander (2002) described this as a moralistic, generalised trust; the expectation that there is a belief of goodwill in the other, treating them as if they were all trustworthy because they were part of

their community. Fukuyama (1995, p27) claimed that the acquisition of social capital required habituation to the moral norms of a community and, in its context, the acquisition of virtues like loyalty, honesty and dependability; *“The community needs to be able to trust one another”*.

Within work groups, the participants interpreted these virtues as being reliable, turning up at class, being committed to the group task and contributing fully to the work of the group. Having a specific task to undertake, they were referring to what Uslaner (2002) called particularised trust. He likened the difference between generalized and particularized trust as comparable to the distinction Putnam (1993, p93) made between “bonding” and “bridging” social capital, that is we trust those close to us in general terms, because they are one of us, connected through bonding social capital, whereas trust in bridging social capital is related to the activities or task that brings together different groups – trust in a particular situation. Students needed to trust other group members to undertake the task in hand. In the case of students working together, their belief was that all would contribute to the group task to the best of their ability. As Jane thought, *“In the beginning I trusted them (the other group members). I had no reason not to”*.

The experience of the participants indicated that the less specified the expectations were of the group, the more its effectiveness depended on trust and anticipated co-operation. Group members expected

certain behaviours and shared values, yet these were not always openly stated or explicitly agreed. For participants, failure to meet commitments to the group without reason was a breach of trust, not to be tolerated. Trust meant that everyone should 'do their best' unless acceptable circumstances prevented it. Breaking any of the indicators was viewed as a breach of trust. Associated with this was a feeling of disappointment, being let down and being cheated. This resulted in anger and frustration.

Yet we do little in education to articulate to students what trust might look like in work groups. Where new networks do not support the development of resources or sharing information; where trust does not develop or is broken; students can be vulnerable in terms of continuing with their studies or succeeding academically. Some cope by working harder on an individual level to achieve the group task as illustrated by some participants (p123-5). This can lead to what Adler & Kwon (2000) described as the 'freeloading problems' of bonding social capital.

OBLIGATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

That is not to say that students were not tolerant of those who could not play a full part in the group because of particular 'acceptable' circumstances. Where students believed that there was a genuine

reason for not contributing they showed concern and support, only seeking the assistance of staff when they could not manage the situation themselves. Claire's group was understanding and supportive when a member of her group missed several meetings because of illness. Similarly, Aileen was aware that some members of her group were struggling with workload and *"did not want to put extra pressure on them"* Jane reported that her group was conscious of the fact that a member of her group was coping with family problems and, in order to support her, she claimed, *"we (the group) tried to take some of the pressure off her"*.

This supportive attitude changed when it was thought that a student was not meeting their obligations without good reason. Where the behaviour of individuals affected personal performance in assessment marks, students felt let down and resentful, sometimes resulting in friendships being irretrievably damaged and decisions made to avoid working with that individual in the future.

Jane expected her group to carry out the agreed tasks. She trusted them until they let her down. Aileen spoke of the 'nightmare' of working with a group who did not work to her standard, failing to submit work on time and not attending group meetings stating

"I was embarrassed with the work of the group. I wish I could have been harder and said, well, do you know what, you are out of my group."

Susan recalled that failure of a group member to complete agreed tasks lead to friendships being damaged.

“It created a kind of atmosphere and after it happened she refused to work with me again so I ended up doing it all myself”.

The perceived breakdown of trust and failure to meet obligations and expectations was difficult and uncomfortable for participants to deal with and they were unsure how to respond effectively, being unaware of sanctions that could be reasonably applied or other courses of action that might be taken.

NORMS AND SANCTIONS

Many of the problems faced by the students when participating in groups related to a failure to keep agreements. Dasgupta (2000, p337) described three situations where agreements were kept: because people were honourable; the presence of an external enforcer and when recourse was taken to mutual enforcement. In the context of the group assignment within the entrepreneurship module, the first situation could be interpreted as the students agreeing that they would all contribute to the best of their abilities, as in the case of the Sam’s group (p129), – *“we all wanted to do well and get a good mark”*; it was

assumed that they would act honourably in order to achieve their goal. The second situation was illustrated by Claire (p125) when she informed her group that unless they sorted their differences out and got on with the project, she would have to refer the problems to the lecturer, the external enforcer. In Claire's case the threat of referring the group difficulties to the lecturer to manage the conflict, an implied sanction, was enough to get the agreement back on track although what the group expected to happen as a result of resorting to the external enforcer was not made explicit in the interview. Mutual enforcement, the third situation, can, for students, be applied through the use of peer assessment where views on individual performance affect marks as was the case in the entrepreneurship module.

In this study, peer assessment was used discriminatingly by students, although for many, an uncomfortable task. Aileen, who was unhappy with the commitment and performance of some of her group members, reflected this in her peer assessment, awarding them less marks, stating *"I did mark them down in their peer assessment but probably not as much as I should have"*.

Claire also expressed discomfort about marking down a disabled student although considered that taking the action that she did was justified.

“The fact that he had been ill for some of the project wasn’t the issue. It was when he didn’t do the work he was supposed to and said he just couldn’t be bothered. That is why he got the lowest mark in the group. It was what he deserved”.

Whilst peer assessment was an open and transparent method of reflecting students’ views of individual performance within the group, participants also provided examples of more covert methods of applying sanctions such as choosing not to work with a student again because of negative experiences in previous groups. The potential for letting other group members down was, for some, stressful as in Megan’s case (p131). This was more significant for her than the implications of peer assessment.

Applying sanctions or dealing with non-compliance with group expectations and the resulting breakdown of trust is a difficult issue to deal with. Students are often unprepared or ill equipped to deal with them. Burt (2005, p105) suggests that within a closed network, i.e. one in which the third party ties are strong, the warning of a breakdown in trust comes early so abusive people can be squeezed out of the network. The experience of the participants in the case study suggests that in a closed network such as that of the work groups, dealing with a breakdown in trust of the group will only happen if the skills and confidence to deal with it are present in the network and students have knowledge of the processes which could, and should, be instigated.

Otherwise, difficulties will occur and exploitative relationships will happen with students 'riding on the coat tails' of others. This is particularly true where students are unwilling to apply sanctions or do not know which sanctions they can effectively apply. Where agreements are not kept, staff interventions are often not sought until relationships are significantly damaged. This reinforces the need for greater preparation of students for group work and the need to establish expectations, obligations and norms of behaviour on the part of staff and students.

Conflicts appear in all aspects of life and are an inherent part of human relationships. Dealing with conflict in a constructive way is also an important employability skill. In the study there was a reluctance to involve staff to help deal with conflict. They were only approached when situations became unmanageable for an individual member of the group or when several members of the group had difficulty dealing with one or more members. Apart from Claire who was able to consider the issues from both sides, prioritise the needs of the group and identify areas of agreement, others avoided the issue. Little preparation had been given to the students in managing group behaviour. Although some time had been spent within classes on working within groups, reflective practice had not the norm throughout their studies and there was an assumption that students would somehow instinctively know what to do. Successful teamwork is a valued employability skill and is

much more than just putting students into groups to achieve a task. It involves the development of interpersonal skills, team roles, leadership and managing conflict. The recognition of these skills is often unnoticed by the students and it would appear, from the experiences of these students, neither is it developed nor managed successfully by staff.

These experiences highlight the need for greater preparation of students for working in groups and conflict resolution. Expecting students to 'just get on with it' is short sighted and a missed opportunity to provide a valuable learning experience.

IDENTIFICATION

Nahapiet and Goshal (p256) describe identification as the process whereby individuals see themselves as one with another person or group of people, where they take the values or standards as their frame of reference. This, according to Kramer & Goldman (1995) enhanced collective processes, outcomes and exchanges, including shared learning.

Within this study, even though many problems were encountered, participants were able to recognise the rewards to be had by working effectively with others. Burt (2005, p59) discussed the creativity and

learning which occurs as a result of working with loose ties, connecting across different networks. The subdivisions he offered were vision advantage; creation of good ideas; corroboration; contagious ideas and adaptive implementation. All of these were recognised by the participants to a greater or lesser extent. Burt proposed the hypothesis that *“those standing near to the holes in the social structure are at high risk of catching good ideas”*.

Standing near to structural holes involves an element of risk. A question that needs to be addressed is whether the environment of higher education is risk taking or risk averse. To what extent will students who take risks by moving to new networks be supported when they make the move; will they be penalised should the new groups be unsuccessful or will it be regarded as a valuable learning experience? There were many examples of the learning, often unintentional, that occurred through working with new networks of students. These ranged from being exposed to different ways of thinking about things and accessing new ideas to sharing skills such as making presentations and CV writing. Importantly, students needed the space to reflect, even when groups had been less than successful, to fully recognise the learning and development that had occurred during the process. Less apparent was recognition of the opportunities to practice in a relatively safe environment those skills and competencies required to access and

mobilise linking social capital, relating to very dissimilar and more powerful groups.

Those who successfully made connections with new networks recognised that their own behaviours changed, reflecting Smith's (2006) views on social capital and intentional change. He observed that new relationships can facilitate individual change by identifying the ideal and real self, creating a learning agenda, experimenting with and practicing new behaviours. New relationships provided opportunities for informal learning. The participants recognised that value was to be gained from working with others as illustrated by Robert who thought that his new work group would offer support, stating

"I knew they were confident and if I wasn't as confident they would help me out. If they seen me struggling they would step in".

Claire found it useful working with students who were doing different courses in that they looked at issues from a different perspective, citing the example of being in a group with an accountancy student.

Others spoke of the increase in confidence gained through working with others and highlighted the value of the informal learning that occurred. This informal learning has been acknowledged by others (Field, 1999, 2005, Gopee, 2002, Schuller et al., 2004). Like the benefits reported from these writers, the students recognised that sharing skills and

information led to personal growth, enhancing their own learning and others' learning.

Molly (p118) recalled her initial group of friends gradually attending lectures less often, but was able to see the advantages of trying out new approaches. She reflected on her experience,

“So I think that it has a lot to do with the groups. If no-one in the group cares then these are the people who will end up sitting together and failing together whereas people who want to do something will come together. Maybe that is why it is good putting different groups together because then if someone maybe feels like that then they might look at someone else and think well I want to be like that maybe”.

Molly is illustrating the 'darker side' of social capital. If students who are not achieving stick together, then they are limiting their access to ways of developing new behaviours and attitudes which are more conducive to learning. There is a role for staff to intervene where a student group has a negative frame of reference in order to enable access to a positive learning environment thus exposing members of the network to new ways of thinking and behaving.

THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION

The cognitive dimension refers to those resources which provide shared meanings and interpretations, codes, languages and narratives amongst parties; in other words, knowing how to behave and communicate within the network. There was evidence in the study that not all students were able to display the characteristics that supported shared meanings and understandings about group tasks. Where this happened, they were deemed by others as not to be fully contributing group members. For some, this meant that they were restricted in joining new groups because of past performance or reputation thus limiting opportunities for change. Hechter (1987) raised the issue of social capital being excludable; where some can be barred from a given network. Molly (*p122*) believed that it would have been difficult for someone to join her very successful group. Although the group was restricted by the numbers allowed to participate in the assessment, they employed their own restrictions by applying their standards and expectations of group members. Those whom they did not consider to be 'up to the task' were excluded. Sam (*p129*) also applied conditions when forming his group – he only wanted to work with those who he thought would be reliable, that he could trust and would produce a high standard of work. These qualities were judged on previous experiences and observations of performance of others in class. Having created bridging social capital, seeking out like minded people to work with to

create the best combination in terms of delivering a good assignment, they were reluctant to let anyone else become part of it. This provides an example of shifting from bridging to bonding social capital. Svendsen & Svendsen (2004, p2) considered that benefits could be destroyed when bridging social capital gave way to bonding social capital, creating inward looking networks which enforced distance between groups and lost the 'lubricator' for co-operation with more distant ties. When this occurs within student groups it raises questions of when (or if) intervention is required on the part of staff to ensure that students, who are not regarded by others as displaying admired characteristics, are at least made aware of the consequences of their behaviours. This might be to offer development opportunities to support changes in behaviours which would enhance their ability and confidence to broker new connections, especially when these are required to achieve tasks set as part of their studies. This scenario also raises issues for the group who is either rejecting members or not allowing new people to join their group. They need to be made aware of the impact of their decisions and the potential loss of resources to their group. Again there is a role for staff in helping students to understand the implications of such decisions and in working with students who do not have ready access to groups because of judgements made by their peer group based on previous performance.

Field (2005, p73) highlighted the limitations that close groups could have where bonding connections were with others who had low levels of human capital, claiming they were likely to be limited in ways of acquiring and generating new skills and knowledge. This is just as true for those students whose connections are with disengaged or disinterested students. They are also likely to be limited in ways of acquiring and generating new skills and knowledge.

Intervening when students are not engaging with work groups or when student networks become unavailable to them because of past behaviours may be problematic, but there are consequences if we do not take steps to address their development needs and enable them to see the capacity for change. We then fail to provide a learning environment that enables students to fully realise their potential and access the resources which could enhance their development. Failure to explore these options is likely to have a significant impact on students' self confidence and self belief.

Without the right conditions, joining a new network will become even more difficult, with students being unable to recognise or value the benefits. Students are often unaware of what is expected of them in groups or lack the experience of working effectively with others. Participants such as Linda and Sam (*p123-4*) recalled negative experiences resulting from being forced to work with a group of students who did not share their standards of achievement or

commitment to the group task. On reflection, they were able to identify the learning which had occurred from this experience and its transferability to the workplace when dealing with difficult colleagues. This learning would have been more effective, and the experience less distressing, had they been supported in reflecting on their learning and development at the time.

Participating successfully within a network depends on the students' ability to fit into that environment. Academic success of the group depends on displaying the language and behaviours valued by academic staff. Being accepted and valued as a group member is dependant on the individual being able to share the codes, languages and values of the peer group and to be able to form and manage relationships.

Knowing how to behave and communicate in a group is often assumed. Yet the reflections of the participants would indicate that this is not always the case. Alder and Kwon (2002) discussed the ability of working within networks to be dependant on the competencies and resources at the nodes of networks, located within key players. The development of these competencies and resources are not always considered with student groups. Social capital competencies are those which enable an individual to interact in heterogeneous groups. They are closely related to employability competencies but are often neglected within higher education, not thought by some to be the province of the academic learning environment (Yorke, 2004a).

What happens when students are unable or unwilling to demonstrate the norms of behaviour expected within groups? The study provided examples of students being shunned by fellow students, where work was no longer shared (*Elaine, p119*), and students were either isolated (*Jane, p120*) or forced to make new connections (*Molly, p118*). The area that was not investigated, but worthy of future research, was what happened to those left behind. There is some evidence that those who did not display the admired characteristics left the course as Molly recalled. Yet the warning signs were there and recognised by fellow students, but not always acted upon successfully by staff. Had more specific action been taken by staff as students began to show signs of having problems engaging with fellow students in the learning environment, and different approaches taken to address these behaviours, then not only would retention likely improve but individual experiences been more valuable in terms of recognising learning and managing conflict.

Moran & Ghoshal (1996) identified three conditions for the exchange of resources in value creation; that the **opportunity** exists for the exchange to take place; that parties must expect the exchange to **create value** and; that the parties must be **motivated** to participate in the exchange; they expect that the exchange will be worth their while. These conditions appear to have the same relevance in reviewing the benefits to be gained as students to identify and mobilise social capital.

The following section discusses the students' experiences as they engaged with the business community and were required to apply the skills and competencies attained through bridging networks within the College to more remote and resource rich networks.

CONNECTING WITH THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Linking social capital increases confidence and offers opportunities to develop and practice employability skills in situations not available within the internal learning environment.

Where bridging social capital gave students access to different groups within the internal learning environment, linking social capital gave them access to people and resources outside that environment. The skills and self confidence required to make these connections, are however, significant, and we should not assume that even after helping students identify potential resources, they will necessarily feel comfortable about following the connection through.

The students in this study all took part in a module which was specifically designed to encourage accessing external agencies and

groups thereby providing opportunities to mobilise linking social capital. Some participants had not previously imagined themselves to be in a position to access these resources, considering that they had little to contribute to a relationship with people who were in influential positions regarding funding opportunities, had access to resources and information, and, as members of the local business community, were potential future employers. Each encounter provided an opportunity to practice skills and even a negative response, such as that experienced by Linda and Molly (*p138*) resulted in a learning experience, making them more determined to succeed. Positive feedback from external groups, on the whole, increased confidence and self-belief.

For linking social capital to have positive benefits, students need to have an awareness of the networks in the business community, how to access them and have the skills and confidence to approach these groups. Linking with these individuals and groups enabled the participants to leverage a far wider range of resources than were available in the immediate learning environment.

For those who embraced the opportunity, the impact on their confidence was significant. This was illustrated by Linda, Molly, Sam and Claire (*p137-140*). Even those participants who regarded themselves as lacking in confidence recognised that being given the opportunity to practice the skills needed to identify and activate social

capital was beneficial. The more opportunities they had to practice skills, the more confident they felt.

Making contacts with external agencies was for some, quite intimidating. They lacked the confidence to approach such groups and there were occasions where it was more comfortable to rely on resources which could be accessed through existing social capital. This was illustrated by Karen (p142) whose dad telephoned land agents regarding the availability of property for her groups' project and Jane (p142) who used her boyfriend's family connections to access resources. Yet knowing how to behave in making these contacts was not always easy. The participants used their groups to practice what to say, working out action plans which would better prepare them. They recognised the benefits to be had from practicing these skills in the safe environment of the classroom and receiving feedback from other students within the group or from staff and external guest speakers.

Previously unknown contacts became part of their network, another resource to call on for information and advice. Each contact developed their confidence and skills in identifying and mobilising social capital. Where information was not forthcoming some participants sought guidance from other sources.

Field (2005, p32) claimed that bridging and linking social capital offered alternative and potentially *"more reliable ways of gaining access to new*

ideas, information and skills” and that linking social capital was more likely to be *“associated with exposure to a multiplicity of information and knowledge”*.

The experience of the participants in this study support that view in that they recalled the very positive outcomes that they had from accessing new ideas and information and exposure to role models who demonstrated the behaviours which are valued in the business community such as Sam who referred to being inspired by talking to sector experts (p139). Another key benefit identified by the participants was getting feedback on their business ideas from those ‘in the know’ (p136-140). This was important to them in assuring them of the relevance of their contribution and contributed significantly to their self-confidence.

The participants were clearly able to recognise their personal development in terms of knowledge and acquisition of skills and confidence. This had begun in the classroom but was turned into reality as they connected with the business environment. Those classes where students were expected to participate, voice opinions and where they felt that they had a valuable contribution to make, helped to raise their confidence and cement their identity as a student. Where access to external sources was encouraged, confidence was raised even higher

and students began to see themselves as valuable contributing individuals who could, and were, listened to seriously by those they regarded as powerful, knowledgeable and resource rich. They were identifying Bourdieu's (1992, p119) potential resources, actual or virtual by possessing relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition which could be accessed through social capital.

DEVELOPING THEIR OWN SOCIAL CAPITAL

Participants recognised that they were now generating their own sets of skills and capabilities which would be useful resources to their friends in the future. Some believed that they had made close friends at College and envisaged that these friendships would continue throughout adult life. This new bonding social capital provided sources of support and access to additional resources. Bridging social capital became bonding social capital as the relationships between students strengthened and links made with more remote resources developed into bridging social capital as the status of the student changed to that of graduate employee. They were able to acknowledge the benefits that bonding social capital offered in terms of a trusting and supportive network whilst recognising that they had developed the skills and

confidence necessary to activate and mobilize bridging and linking social capital where they required to access resources outside their immediate networks. Some, such as Linda and Claire, now regarded individual lecturers as friends as illustrated in the network maps. This belief was shared by those staff, including myself, who consider several past students now to be friends and others as valuable resources in providing access to information and resources within the business environment and who support the learning environment providing, for example, work placements within their organisations. One participant, Susan, who is now contemplating setting up her own business, has returned to the College and PSYBT for advice. A student from the pilot study also followed up his intention to set up in business, seeking advice from the contacts he made in undertaking the project for the entrepreneurship module, namely Business Gateway and PSYBT.

Others continue to use contacts made with lecturing staff for references when applying for further educational courses or employment or in seeking advice on issues within their workplace, demonstrating that valuable bridging social capital has been developed.

The opportunities to develop the skills necessary to identify and activate social capital have been well illustrated by the participants. Their experiences confirm the benefits of relating to diverse others and the confidence and skills that need to be developed to allow them to do that comfortably. They have also illustrated that the ability to co-

operate and work in teams and manage and resolve conflicts is challenging and beneficial and, within the learning environment, requires considerably more preparation before we expect students to be competent and confident in achieving the group tasks we set them. For me, as the module leader, the students' stories raised several important learning points. Firstly, a lack of confidence is often related to a lack of connections with the higher education sector and inadequate knowledge of what is expected of being a student within higher education or indeed what the student can expect from the institution. Secondly, students need to know what is expected of them when working in groups to achieve tasks and that creating groups and the structures to enable networking is less effective and potentially damaging if we do not equip students with the skills to perform comfortably within these networks. Thus Thomas and Quinn (2007, p61) are correct in their view that building bridges is dependant on having the will to do so and being structurally able to do it. But it is more than having motivation and structures. It is also dependant on having the skills and confidence to make the connections and being able to perform within them and seek out new bridges where networks are faulty or inadequate. Thirdly, we underestimate the benefits to be gained from brokering connections with a range of resources available within the local business communities and further afield which give students access to a range of resources and information which are not

present within their immediate learning environment. In order for students to benefit fully from the advantages that linking social capital has to offer, we need to offer opportunities to enable them to develop the skills and confidence which will enhance their ability to identify and activate linking social capital.

There is also merit in examining the benefits of imagined social capital. Whilst there are some difficulties in promoting this concept, primarily in raising expectations which cannot be met, there is no doubt that it is worthy of further exploration. There were indicators from the students (*p136-145*) that success and increased confidence raised aspirations, creating imagined social capital, enabling them to envision previously unexplored potential. I would also suggest that another two typologies should be added; unimagined and unimaginable social capital

UNIMAGINED SOCIAL CAPITAL

Unimagined social capital is where the advantages to be gained through widening connections and networks are not recognised, where people are unable to see the benefits of connecting to others. Megan, as illustrated in her network map (*p154*), was unable to see potential sources of leads for employment through some of the connections that

she had made during her studies. Karen (p159) was in a similar position; when asked about whom she could contact regarding references or information regarding undertaking a post graduate qualification in primary teaching, she was unable to identify anyone she had met during her studies who could help *"I don't know anyone who could help really"*. When she was asked if she would consider going to the careers adviser for the College she realised that this would be a potential source of information. Therefore unimagined social capital is where people have access to resources and information but do not recognise the benefits that these connections may provide or indeed realise that they can, and have a right to access them. Lack of willingness or motivation to access this social capital could be related to self worth, the value that they believe they add to the relationship as illustrated by participants who made comments such as *"I thought they would think I was a silly wee girl; I did not think they would take us seriously; I did not think somebody like that would take the time to speak to me"*. Another explanation might be the lack of interpersonal skills and confidence in accessing such contacts.

There is a role for higher education to provide the space and support to turn unimagined social capital into imagined and then to put in place, the resources to enable students to turn imagined into reality.

UNIMAGINABLE SOCIAL CAPITAL

I describe unimaginable social capital as that which is undreamt of, beyond current belief and unthinkable. Just as Quinn describes imagined social capital as liberating and creative, that which is unimaginable is inhibiting and restrictive. Low expectations restrict the individual in imagining potential sources of benefit and support. Examples of the unimaginable came from various participants who could not see the potential benefits that having loose ties with others might offer. Some of this could be explained by a lack of experience in recognising that connections had been made. When students were guided in their reflection in detailing the contacts that had been made as a result of their studies, surprise and in many cases, delight was shown that they did indeed have access to a number of unacknowledged resources. For others however, unimaginable social capital needs another explanation and evidence outside the realms of this study, but worthy of further investigation. Paula provided a number of examples which illustrated this concept such as not being successful when family members provided contacts for employment (p100). She was unaware that she could ask for feedback on her interviews, and lacked the confidence to do so, even though she recognised that feedback could be useful stating,

"I would never ask them why I didn't get the job. I don't want to know what they think of me".

She was also reluctant to access resources that lecturers and careers staff could provide (p162) in job searching, preparation for interviews and providing references explaining her reticence with phrases such as

"I don't know who I would go to for a reference, maybe my old work"

"When I filled in a careers thing on the computer it came up with things like admin assistant and secretary but I want to do better than that but I cannot think how I would do that".

"I suppose I could go to my sister for advice but I don't really know".

Even Claire (p173), who was rightly proud of achievements and was in fact able to recognise the development of her self worth and confidence, was reluctant to acknowledge that the contacts she had made would be willing to offer support.

"I just think they would be too busy for me. I don't like to ask because they had busy jobs and would not have time".

All of the above quotations illustrate not only a lack of confidence but unimaginable social capital. Paula finds difficulty imagining her future, the contacts and networks she has which offer potential resources. Her expectations are low and it would appear that participating in higher education has done little to extend these expectations. Her identity as

a student and a graduate will continue to be restricted unless the unimaginable becomes imagined and the support and development is put in place to turn that into reality. The question for those involved in her education has to be whether more could have been done to encourage her to imagine more possibilities and the processes were put in place to develop the interpersonal skills and social competencies which would enable her to identify and activate social capital.

CONCLUSION

“Social capital should not be thought of as a measurable skill but a set of processes and practices that are integral to the acquisition of other forms of capital such as human and cultural”. (Morrow, 1999, p744) .

The value of developing the skills to identify and activate social capital has, to date, been under acknowledged in addressing the employability skills and competencies of business graduates. Whilst the ability to communicate effectively and work in a team is well recognised by the relevant bodies, providing the skills to network, develop trust and work with diverse individuals is worthy of further research. This is particularly true for those students whose social capital, because of their experience, is limited and in some cases restrictive. Low self

esteem and lack of confidence are barriers for students in acknowledging the value of linking in to others who have access to resources and information not readily available to the students. This lack of confidence is often linked to their own lack of awareness of the value that they create in being part of the network. The reflections of the participants would suggest that much could be done in the higher education setting to develop skills and confidence and provide opportunities to identify develop and practice the skills necessary to activate social capital. The next chapter addresses the implications for learning and teaching.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

This chapter revisits the original aim of the research – to explore the role of social capital in enhancing the employability of the students within the business school, and looks at the implications of the research for the learning environment. Is the social capital framework useful in examining how students are prepared for the world of work? At the end of this study, I would argue that it is a useful concept to consider in the development of employability and that the attainment of generic skills and personal competencies are not only enhanced when social capital is increased, but that the full range of employability skills and competencies are only achieved when the individual is skilled in identifying and activating social capital. The ‘missing link’ in terms of employability is not just social capital, but the development of the skills, capabilities and confidence that are needed to engage and operate social capital.

The recollections of the participants reflect this clearly. Their experiences illustrate that the more the students work with others and deal with the issues that arise from that, the more confident and able

they become in accessing and working with more remote others, thus developing the generic competencies and personal capabilities, particularly the interpersonal skills, valued by employers. The effects of this are even more powerful when students are given the time and space to reflect upon personal development, growth and improved self-confidence. This chapter responds to the research objectives (p7) in terms of the learning environment.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EMPLOYABILITY

The first objective of the research was to identify the forms of social capital that enhanced or limited the development of employability skills and competencies.

The analysis of the interviews suggests that bonding, bridging and linking social capital can add value and social capital constructs are useful in enabling staff and students to recognise the benefits derived from networks. Where bonding social capital can provide support and encouragement for the participants to engage with higher education, it is the skills and competencies associated with the development of bridging and linking social capital that impact most on the attainment of employability skills and competencies. These are only realised when students are exposed to a range of situations, and connect with

resources both inside the institution and in the external environment. The implications of each level are discussed below in terms of the learning environment.

BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bonding social capital, created through family and close friends can provide much needed support and encouragement in deciding to participate and progress in higher education. A supportive family helps shape the identity of the learner, promoting confidence in their abilities. However, for many, especially those who come from families who have little or no experience of the higher education system, the dependency created through bonding social capital and the lack of access to resources can constrain choices and limit options. If the experiences of the students are indicative of the information flow (or lack of it) that exists for first generation entrants and those from low participation neighbourhoods, then greater efforts have to be made to ensure that the right information is available and accessible. This means that potential students need to have access to information regarding career and study options and that the right levels of support and encouragement are in place to raise awareness of options which may increase aspirations and expectations. There are examples of social institutions, such as schools that continue to restrict the individual's

expectations of participating and succeeding, even when they have the relevant academic attainment. In such cases, those who lack the social capital to access resources, or lack the self belief that they are able to successfully attend 'prestigious' universities, will continue to be let down by such institutions failing effectively to widening participation. This indicates that there needs to be more 'joined up' thinking between all agencies, schools and community organisations such as youth and sports clubs where young people attend, and higher education providers, to ensure that resources are available in other locations which are easily accessible. The significance of relevant networks outside the home and school settings in helping young people make choices and identifying opportunities has already been identified by others (Stanton-Salazar, 1995; Holland, 2007 and Catts, 2009). If we are to make information readily available in an accessible fashion, then universities and colleges need to become far more connected with their local communities than they are at present, reducing the dependence on the school sector as the primary source of information for participation in non-compulsory education. Such engagement would result not only in more accessible information, but would also give access to role models and provide templates for creating identities as students of higher education. This view is supported by Preece and Houghton (2000, p177) who concluded that a holistic approach to curriculum and participation that was truly inclusive was dependant on

higher education providers becoming more engaged with a range of groups within the community, interacting with the social networks of these groups to build up trust and extend communication structures and information channels. They further claimed that if higher education was to connect and interact effectively with different groups of learners then the conventional patterns of university communication needed to be carefully reviewed to ensure that information was filtering through networks at a local level. That approach, they believed would make it easier to *“value social capital which is grounded in peoples’ lives”*.

That is not to ignore all the very imaginative initiatives that occur at present which involve the university and college sector connecting with schools and communities, but to suggest that more needs to be done to reach groups who are not effectively connected, ensuring that information and support is available in a more extensive variety of community situations. I suggest that current initiatives need to be widened and continually rejuvenated to ensure that more people are reached in a way that is attractive to them.

The experiences of the participants suggest that there are still some schools, and staff within schools, that need to be reached. Specifically, more work needs to be done with career guidance staff to help them understand the options that are available through widening participation and the structures that are available to support young

people who have the potential to continue with post compulsory education. Greater awareness of opportunities may encourage them to raise awareness of available options, thereby increasing aspirations and expectations. Widening the appeal of higher education also means that recruitment campaigns have to be exciting and accessible, reaching out and connecting with all communities including those which have low participation rates.

Greater awareness of options does not, however, address the issue of those who place restrictions on themselves because they feel more comfortable attending the local institution than breaking away from strong social bonds, thus allowing them to widen choices. Ease of access to information will only be of use if it is supported by a great deal of effort to raise the confidence levels of those who have the necessary academic qualifications but do not regard themselves as 'fitting in' to larger, more established institutions.

Awareness of the fact that significant numbers of the local population are first generation entrants and that research indicates that this group tend to prefer a college or university in the locality, should be regarded by providers as a positive factor; they have a largely captive target market. In order to engage with this market and serve it well, they have to work towards raising the image of the local provision, ensuring that programmes offered are relevant and attractive to the local economy

and further afield, and are delivered in a way that supports the creation of confident and highly able graduates.

BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bridging social capital occurs in higher education when the student begins connecting with other students and staff. How successful it is depends upon the individual having the interpersonal skills and confidence to be able to make connections. They are more likely to be inclined to make new connections if they recognise the benefits that are to be gained from joining in a range of networks which will provide access to a variety of additional resources. In the case of students, this means they have to be able to relate to new peer groups and widen their circle of contacts. Bridging social capital also occurs as they relate to staff within the institution. This may well be difficult for the students who are unsure of their role and the expectations that are placed upon them. Although the foundations for bridging social capital are put in place when staff organise induction events, these can be uncomfortable for some and participants are not always aware of the intended learning outcomes.

The skills and capabilities attained from engaging with others form the basis of widely acknowledged employability capabilities, such as being able to work in teams, planning and organising activities, influencing others as well as developing interpersonal skills such as effective questioning, listening and appreciating the perspectives of others. The development of these capabilities is dependant on the structures being in place for students to create and access connections with a range of different people. There is a need to create opportunities throughout courses of study to continue to build capacity to bridge social capital. Most importantly, if the outcomes of bridging social capital are to be fully realised, then the student needs to be aware of their relevance to employability.

We must not assume, however, that the skills, capabilities and confidence to make new connections already exist. Some students will need support and guidance, not just structures, to identify and activate bridging social capital. The skills that are used to connect with new networks in the student community are the foundation of those required to connect with more powerful, resource rich groups. These skills and capabilities become more effective with practice in a range of situations. Students often develop them without recognising their value or their usefulness in terms of employability. This highlights the need to develop the ability to reflect on the attainment of these skills and how they are transferable into other situations.

The analysis of the interviews suggests that more could be done to enable students to capitalise on the attainment of skills and capabilities gained through bridging social capital.

LINKING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Linking social capital has clear connections with employability. Burt (2005, p90-91) argued that there were four distinct advantages to be gained from connecting with those outwith the immediate environment. Firstly that there was exposure to new ideas; secondly, that there was access to alternative ways of thinking and behaving; thirdly, that ideas became contagious through discussion and fourthly, that the brokerage that occurred through connecting with dissimilar others could facilitate adaptive behaviour, becoming responsive to uncertain and changing circumstances. These advantages were illustrated in the study by participants such as Linda, Molly and Sam (p137-140) who all recalled the changes in their thinking and behaviour that occurred as a result of meeting with people such as Business Gateway. Linking social capital can not only provide access to resources, business expertise and business behaviours in the 'real'

world, but gives exposure to role models which could provide the impetus to raise aspirations and expectations.

Just as the skills and capabilities necessary to access and utilise bridging social capital are developed in the internal learning environment, they need to be expanded to enable students to apply them in the less familiar circumstances of the wider business environment. It is important, however, to recognise that linking social capital will only be created successfully if students have the skills, capabilities and confidence to activate and participate with these connections. This is more likely to happen if students are provided with a range of situations to practice skills, receive feedback and are supported in further development. They also need to be guided on the various networks that they can potentially access. Furthermore, if they are not exposed to a range of experiences, their employability skills and capacity to interact with a diverse range of people will be limited, and, without the growth of self-confidence and self-assurance they will be unable to take full advantage of the benefits that linking with these resources has to offer.

IMAGINED, UNIMAGINED AND UNIMAGINABLE SOCIAL CAPITAL

Are these relevant forms of social capital and do they have a role to play in facilitating or inhibiting the development of employability skills?

Imagined social capital provides a space for dreaming of the possibilities that could occur through connecting with the learning environment (Quinn 2005). It provides a tool for the student to envisage moving away from what is expected of them, often as a consequence of bonding social capital, to a place that they want to be; raising aspirations and expectations. Without that space, new social capital will remain unimagined and ambitions and aspirations will be constrained. It is my view that there is a responsibility on the behalf of higher education to provide that space and facilitate access to role models and behaviours that will provide a vision of possibilities. When business students gain access to successful others, either in terms of academic or business success, we are widening their horizons of possibilities, turning the unimagined into imagined and taking steps towards creating bridging and linking social capital which will support them in realising their potential. Dealing with unimagined social capital would mean that more time had to be devoted to reflecting on skills and capabilities developed, contacts made and raising self belief and confidence. Only when you regard yourself as someone who has a

worthwhile contribution to make, will you fully acknowledge the other resources that are available to you.

It is much more complex to deal with the unimaginable. This involves adjusting previous conceptions of self value, raising confidence and discovering potential. Is there a role for higher education in achieving this? I consider that not only is there a role in facilitating this, but an obligation to address these issues as part of providing care to the student population. I would also propose that there may be positive benefits in terms of student retention and suggest that this is an area for further research. Addressing self value and confidence as part of the general well being of the student would mean a change in attitude – truly putting the student at the centre of their learning and creating many more opportunities for students to reflect and envision potential futures. That would involve staff facilitating access to external as well as internal networks, through which the student will be able to experience ideas, behaviours and ways of thinking as they develop new social capital. To maximise the benefits from participation in these networks, they need to be regarded by staff and students as a valuable learning experience, part of self development and growth, and an important part of enhancing employability. The experiences need to be used as a trigger for space to learn, reflect and envision. Yorke and Knight (2004b), proposed a four-fold typology of teacher and student self-theorising which they suggested could have a significant impact on

how teachers' beliefs about students impacted upon their learning. They suggested that where both teacher and student regarded the student's ability as fixed, little development would occur; where the teacher's views were fixed but the student views were malleable, then there was the possibility that the student's self-belief would transcend the fixedness of the teachers and change would be possible in spite of the teacher. Where the student's views were fixed but the teacher's were malleable, there were considerable challenges for the teacher in moving the student towards more effective self-belief. The ideal position, according to the authors, was when the views of both teacher and student were malleable as this would enable development through supportive feedback. Effective reflection spaces are dependant on staff regarding all students as malleable and open to change rather than fixed and being prepared to put time and effort in to providing opportunities to widen access to valuable social capital.

CREATING A ENABLING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The second research objective set out to explore the conditions which enabled students to access, activate and mobilise forms of social capital relevant to employability. From the study I would suggest that unless steps are taken to support individuals in establishing their identity as

confident, contributing students, with the potential to become capable graduates, then efforts made to develop their capabilities in utilising social capital will have limitations. This means that deliberate steps need to be taken to develop the interpersonal skills and capabilities that are needed to connect effectively with others.

CREATING CONFIDENT STUDENTS

Connecting with a new learning environment successfully is an important factor in shaping student identity. Fitting into a new set of circumstances is difficult for anyone and becomes even more challenging when the person lacks confidence and is unsure what is required or how they are expected to behave. Where there is a lack of role models in the immediate family, as in the case of first generation entrants, there is an added responsibility on staff to ensure that not only are students made to feel welcome, but that assistance is given to help understand what is expected of them and support provided to help shape their identity as a successful student. Many of the participants recalled the major change from being at school to becoming a student, in an environment which expected them take more responsibility for their own learning and development, undertake independent study,

and participate and contribute in class. Indeed, these were the very areas that some recalled as being actively discouraged in school - Sam (p140) remembered that voicing his opinions was viewed as a problem at school. Is enough guidance and support given to enable students to make the transition to higher education successfully and confidently or does more effort have to be made in understanding the student's needs and expectation of higher education and in enabling the student to understand the demands and expectations that higher education places on them? The experiences from the students in this study would suggest that more work has to be undertaken to make the student comfortable and confident in their learning environment and to ensure that learning is designed around their needs. This means that we have to take account of their existing cultural and social capital and ensure that the learning environment, and staff who operate within that environment, take cognisance of it, build upon it and develop it in preparation for employability rather than dismiss it as irrelevant or not productive.

Optimum participation in higher education, as suggested by the authors of the Learning for All report (Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, 2005), implies that institutions have a responsibility to ensure that students are given the right conditions to achieve success and that success should encompass personal development and growth as well as

academic achievement. This can be challenging for those students who are unsure of what is expected of them.

How the student perceives themselves is an important factor in their ability to connect with their environment. Connecting with others can involve risk and create feelings of discomfort. For some the preferred position is staying with an existing group of friends even though that can restrict personal development. Côté (1997, p578) highlighted the importance of identity capital resources which were available to the individual in making the transition from late adolescent to university student. His study detailed the tangible and intangible resources which impact on the success of students in the acquisition of new identity capital.

The participants in this study indicated that events occurred which made them rethink their identity as a student. Some took action to acquire what Côté described as the intangible attributes of identity capital; exploration of commitments, ego strength, internal locus of control, self monitoring and self esteem, a sense of purpose in life, reviewing their social perspective and developing critical thinking and moral reasoning abilities. Students who struggle with adapting to the student identity are at risk of failure, not through lack of ability but through lack of support and progression to the new identity of being a student and their lack of capacity to develop these attributes.

Shuller et al (2004, p21) believed that learning experiences were an interplay of three capitals, identity capital, human capital and social capital. They developed a triangular framework which illustrated the interconnections between the three concepts when investigating the impact of education on health, family life and social capital. This framework, they believed, covered three disciplines, identity capital representing the psychological pole, human capital representing the economic pole and social capital representing the political pole, each with a 'socio' tag pre-fixed. Interestingly, they made no reference to cultural capital in their model unlike other studies which do acknowledge the role of cultural capital on identity and learning (Reay, 2004; Sullivan, 2001). From the evidence from this study I suggest that cultural capital has such an impact on the individual's ability to recognise and utilise identity, human and social capital, that the model would better reflect influences on learning experiences if cultural capital had been recognised as the fourth interplay on learning experiences.

Providing support and creating space for students to develop their identity is crucial to success. It is influenced by their existing cultural and social capital which is not necessarily valued by higher education or employers. I contend that the personal growth and maturity that is expected from students needs careful nurturing, particularly with those who lack self-confidence and whose motivation is fragile. The

introduction of Personal Development Planning has a role in this area but to ensure that maximum benefit is achieved; students need to be given the skills of reflection and self evaluation. They also need to be encouraged to recognise and celebrate achievement.

CONFIDENCE COMES THROUGH CONNECTING WITH OTHERS.

Being welcoming and encouraging at the start of the course is a small part of shaping a learning environment and establishing the student identity. Staff need to be aware that students have to be given opportunities to mix with one another in a range of circumstances. Particular attention has to be paid to those who lack the interpersonal skills and confidence to connect with other groups and, as a result, miss out on, or avoid opportunities, to network. These are valuable occasions to develop employability skills that engagement with others brings.

It is also clearly important that students are given opportunities to 'move around' and 'move away' to prevent established friendships restricting development opportunities. The participants provided a number of examples where they were able to recognise this after the event. Clearly this is a difficult area for staff to intervene. Rather than

disrupt friendships, the focus has to be on expanding opportunities to experience new networks, enabling the students to recognise the benefits that are to be had from working with others. Those who do not engage in working with others will fail to develop bridging social capital and the skills and capabilities, including confidence, that are required to access and utilise linking social capital.

Staff need to recognise that self selecting work groups can be problematic, particularly where these are likely to reinforce behaviour and attitudes which restrict development. Even successful groups would benefit in terms of developing employability skills when they are exposed to, and learn from, working with diverse others as illustrated by the reflections of the students. Staff have a role in facilitating and supporting opportunities which encourage students to work with those not so well known to them. This point leads to a key feature of the findings of the study - students can often feel uncomfortable and unprepared for working in groups, even though group work is a common feature of many aspects of a business degree. That lack of awareness and preparation will result in many benefits not being recognised or realised. More attention has to be paid to preparing students for working in groups, ensuring that students are aware of the expected learning outcomes and the relationship between developing group and team working skills with employability. Preparation skills have to be included in the curriculum and more thought has to be given

to assessing the development of group skills and processes as well as outputs.

STUDENT NETWORKS AS NEW LEARNING SPACES

Student networks are important for a number of reasons. They can offer collaboration in study, access to new behaviours and information, as well as being the foundation for support and encouragement available through friendships. The participants provided many examples of where informal networks were rich sources of support, guidance and resources which were transferable to their working lives even though they did not necessarily acknowledge them as they occurred. Much more could be done within higher education to recognise and capitalise on the huge amount of informal learning which occurs within these networks. It is in this learning space that students have a safe and familiar environment, free of the pressures of assessed tasks, to experiment with applying knowledge and practising skills. If we were to encourage students to reflect on the skills and capabilities that are developed and enhanced through these informal networks, and their transferability and relevance to employability, then the advantages would be greatly increased.

Not all networks however, are positive learning spaces. Where peer pressure or expectations restrict development, some will struggle to find the personal resources to break away from them.

Both scenarios present challenges for those who help shape the learning environment. We need to consider the opportunities which we provide which encourage and facilitate students to move around between different networks, gaining access and enabling students to reach out comfortably and confidently to valuable resources and informal support systems. In order to do that we need to ensure that students are equipped with the skills and capabilities which enable them to function with more confidence in a range of informal and formal networks, creating new bridging social capital.

BEING PREPARED – FORMAL WORKING GROUPS.

When students are allocated groups for work or assessment purposes, the preparation for effectively working within these groups needs to be undertaken as part of the curriculum and not left to chance.

It is these groups where staff have considerable control; in the formation of groups; facilitating the functioning of groups in class, and aiding in the management of difficulties and conflicts when the groups

are under performing. From the reflections of the participants, I suggest that much more has to be done in helping students to know how to behave in groups. This means that we, as staff, have to be clear about why we are asking students to undertake work in groups and have identified the additional benefits to be gained from doing this. If we decide that it is important that students work in groups, then we have a responsibility to ensure that they have the relevant skills and capabilities to be able to do this competently. We also have a responsibility to ensure that students know how to deal with difficulties and apply sanctions where necessary. We have a duty of care to ensure that those who do not contribute in group tasks are aware of the consequences and that intervention, which should focus primarily on addressing development needs, is well timed. The picture painted by the participants was that there was considerable reluctance on the part of students to challenge those who failed to contribute adequately to group tasks. There was also reluctance to involve staff until there were no other options open to the group. That was often at a stage where work was near completion or indeed, in some cases, after the event. A solution to this would be for staff to have more involvement with groups in the early stages, helping them to set out expectations and group rules and making explicit the consequences for non- contribution. Were this to happen, and students were given more opportunities to reflect on group performance, then the skills and capabilities learned

would be transferable into and out of the informal and formal networks and provide valuable experience in developing the skills and capabilities needed to utilise linking social capital.

As students work towards group goals they develop, practice and become adept in a range of skills and enhance a number of affective capabilities, particularly self confidence and self belief. Working with others also helps develop a number of other very important employability skills such as communication skills, planning, organising, dealing with conflict and leadership. I question whether the development of such skills and capabilities is always deliberately or fully considered when we set group tasks, rather that staff accept that group working is a relevant activity for students and that by simply participating in groups, team working skills will be developed, without due thought being given to what is being achieved or how students can most effectively be prepared to participate. We expect that the student will have learned the skills of socialisation as part of their earlier education. However, participating in learning in post compulsory education continues to influence how people relate to one another, to fellow students and others (Schuller et al, 2004, p182). Lack of preparation for involvement in groups results in confusion for students who can often be uncertain of what is expected of them. This can be stressful if the student is unsure of what constitutes effective group behaviours and processes, and how these processes should be

managed. Failing to reflect on the process means that development needed is not addressed. A negative experience of working in groups could become a positive learning outcome if reflection on processes and experiences was considered to be as important a part of participating in groups as the outcome of a report for assessment purposes.

The argument from some academic colleagues might be that the development of these capabilities is beyond their remit. They may feel that engaging with such activities detract from teaching their discipline (Yorke & Knight, 2004b) or indeed that they are not sufficiently skilled in these matters. However, I contend that unless we make space to develop interpersonal skills and affective capabilities, including confidence and self value, we are not embedding employability into the curriculum but playing with it round the edges. I do accept, nonetheless, that it is difficult to achieve this within a curriculum that is delivered in a traditional fashion.

If the design of the curriculum was to change to incorporate opportunities for students to develop these skills and reflect on their development then we could substantially increase the emphasis on the skills necessary to mobilise social capital and these skills are strongly connected to employability. That would mean rethinking the purpose of higher education and measuring its success on more than academic achievement, but on creating a learning environment which is rich in

possibilities for learning and which recognises and embraces the challenge of developing student potential in more than knowledge acquisition.

Personal Development Planning, by its very nature, relates to individual development. How much more powerful would it be if more of a focus was also placed on group development, group roles and the individual skills and capabilities to function effectively within a range of networks? I would argue for such expansion incorporating those capabilities which influence the individual's ability to connect with and engage fruitfully with others and that groups collectively reflected upon their functioning and processes. This means far more attention being paid to reflective practice.

However, working within the internal learning environment is not enough. If we are to truly prepare students to work in the business environment then we also need to equip them with the employability skills and attributes that enable them to connect with the external environment and for the student to be able to do that with confidence.

CONNECTING WITH THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

The third research objective sought to explore how the environment of higher education supports or inhibits the development of linking social capital which is necessary for the student to connect with the business environment.

Creating opportunities for students to connect with the world of work is already being undertaken in most universities through initiatives such as work placements and work based learning projects. It is outwith the realms of this study to examine the benefits that work placements and the like produce. This study was concerned with how the ability to participate in a range of networks impacted on the development of employability skills and attributes. I suggest that the number of occasions when a student has opportunities to connect with unknown others could be increased and that connecting with the business environment should not be confined to work placements but expanded to embrace more creative experiences. An expansion of the occasions when students interact with business is dependant on staff using their own connections more effectively and imaginatively and accepting that the development of employability is the responsibility of all staff and not just the remit of those whose role is the organisation of work based

placements. It also assumes that staff have the necessary skills and abilities to facilitate such practices.

The benefits to be gained from connecting with others are significant in terms of developing confidence and self-esteem and in applying employability in a 'real' business situation. Unless students are able to apply the skills developed within the institution in the external environment, then the attainment of employability skills and capabilities will be restricted.

Social literacy concerns itself with the development of social skills, knowledge and positive human values that engender the desire and ability in human beings to act positively and responsibly in a range of complex social settings – the foundations of successful employability and the underpinning of effective social capital. Field (2005, p150) argued that *“people who acquire their social literacy from their bonding ties will find that they lack critical capabilities – including affective ones such as confidence – when they move beyond their existing community of practice”*.

Students who acquire their social literacy only from within the institution may also find difficulty in demonstrating their critical capabilities to employers if they have had limited or no contact with them. They are also likely to lack confidence in articulating these achievements or indeed have difficulty recognising the relevance of

them when assessing their own capabilities. By connecting with those in business practice, students are not only getting the opportunity to practise skills, but to observe the behaviours that constitute employability. This point was clearly demonstrated by the participants who also highlighted another benefit of connecting with external bodies; receiving feedback, encouragement and support from *'those in the know'*. Confidence grows with success and feedback.

Students need to be prepared to connect with the business environment. The preparation includes having relevant knowledge and having the interpersonal skills to be able to communicate confidently and comfortably. They need to know who to connect with, why they are making the connection and how to make and sustain the connection. Unless they have acquired the social literacy to achieve this then demonstrating employability competencies will be limited. It is not only important that students have these opportunities but that they are aware of their own accomplishments and the transferability of these to the world of work.

RETHINKING EMPLOYABILITY

The fourth research objective was to examine how the links between social capital and employability were recognised by students.

A key question for all institutions is the extent to which employability is embedded within the curriculum. This has to be followed by another key question. How do students recognise the development of employability and are they able to transfer the skills and capabilities developed in a range of situations?

Robinson (2001) proposed that education needed to be rebalanced to conform to three principles; a balance across the curriculum; a balance between the teaching of disciplines; and a balance between education and the wider world. Although he was referring to the school sector, his arguments have a place in the higher education sector.

Using these principles in relation to embedding employability, I suggest that higher education needs to rebalance the curriculum to provide more effective space for the development of employability skills and competencies. This would involve greater recognition being given to the value of what are widely referred to as the non academic skills, the transferable generic skills and personal competencies of employability. This involves a move away from the dominant way of thinking – the verbal, mathematical, deductive and propositional, to one which

recognises that knowledge can be generated in ways other than words and numbers and that there is a valid place to experiment, practice and reflect on the acquisition of interpersonal skills and social literacy that cannot be judged or assessed in a traditional manner.

This leads to Robinson's second challenge; to rebalance the teaching of disciplines. This is particularly relevant in business education where the successful business graduate needs to be able to integrate knowledge and skills and have the ability to respond in a changing business environment. This is not an easy challenge but the failure to address it will be substantially damaging in the long term. The teaching of disciplines in the field of business will only produce successful business graduates when the student is able to apply their knowledge in a range of situations and do that with confidence. Discipline specific knowledge and the ability to demonstrate that knowledge in an academic assessment is not, on its own, enough. Knowledge has to be supported by the personal competencies and transferable skills that employers seek to enable the graduate to demonstrate and apply employability.

Robison's third challenge was to rethink the balance between education and the wider world. This raises two areas for business education; the need to ensure that we are teaching the right knowledge and skills for the future workforce and that the curriculum is based on the requirements of a changing global business environment. We also need

to make sure that graduates' knowledge is supported by the skills and capabilities that enable them to apply these in the work place. If we do not develop the skills, capabilities and confidence within the curriculum, and give students opportunities to practice, with feedback, then where will they be developed? Leaving their development to chance leaves the student vulnerable in terms of recognising their value and relevance in terms of demonstrating employability.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

In order to successfully create business graduates who understand the needs of the business community, education programmes need to ensure that the skills and capabilities that are developed during the course of study are those which are valued by employers. Successfully developing employability means that there has to be far greater involvement with employers in programme design and delivery. Improved connections with the business community would go some way to ensuring that there is greater awareness of the knowledge, skills and capabilities that are expected from graduates. Whilst we cannot control matters such as economic downturn, we have a duty to ensure that we take account of employers' views and ensure that we develop

students with the skills and capabilities that they value and that these can be demonstrated by students confidently. More opportunities to connect with the business community would also raise students' (and staffs') awareness of what employers expect and value. Providing space for students to practice, reflect and learn about self and self in relation to others increases capacity for action. Contextual and collective learning increases individual competencies and agency. A challenge for higher education is in valuing collective learning as well as individual experience and providing opportunities for students to learn about themselves in relation to the business community.

The experiences of the participants in the study indicated that the more experience they have in connecting with others, particularly those out with their immediate environment, the greater are their levels of self-confidence. They reported increased self belief, pride and also raised expectations regarding their own ability. Of course, these experiences are unique to the participants of the research but are there lessons to be learned? If other students were exposed to similar situations would they also experience a rise in confidence and the development of the skills and attributes so desired by employers?

RECOGNISING THE LINKS

The skills and capabilities that the participants recognised as being developed or increasing are well matched to the personal capabilities and competencies desired by employers. The development of these occurred as the student connected with a range of people, from the support offered from family and friends to the feedback offered from external agencies. It is difficult to imagine how the development of any of these would have occurred in isolation. With very few exceptions, work is largely a social activity, and unless students are competent in forming and managing relationships it is hard to see how employability can be achieved. Having the skills and capacity to connect with diverse others is important for employability. Indeed, there are few employability competencies and skills that are not dependant on the ability to make these connections.

Figure 7.1 illustrates the connections between generic skills and personal competencies and the skills and capabilities that the participants indicated that had been developed during the course of their studies. Whilst there may be some tenuous connections in the development of the skills, capabilities and competencies through bonding social capital, the development becomes much stronger when the student is engaged in bridging social capital and stronger still when they engage with external resources through linking social capital.

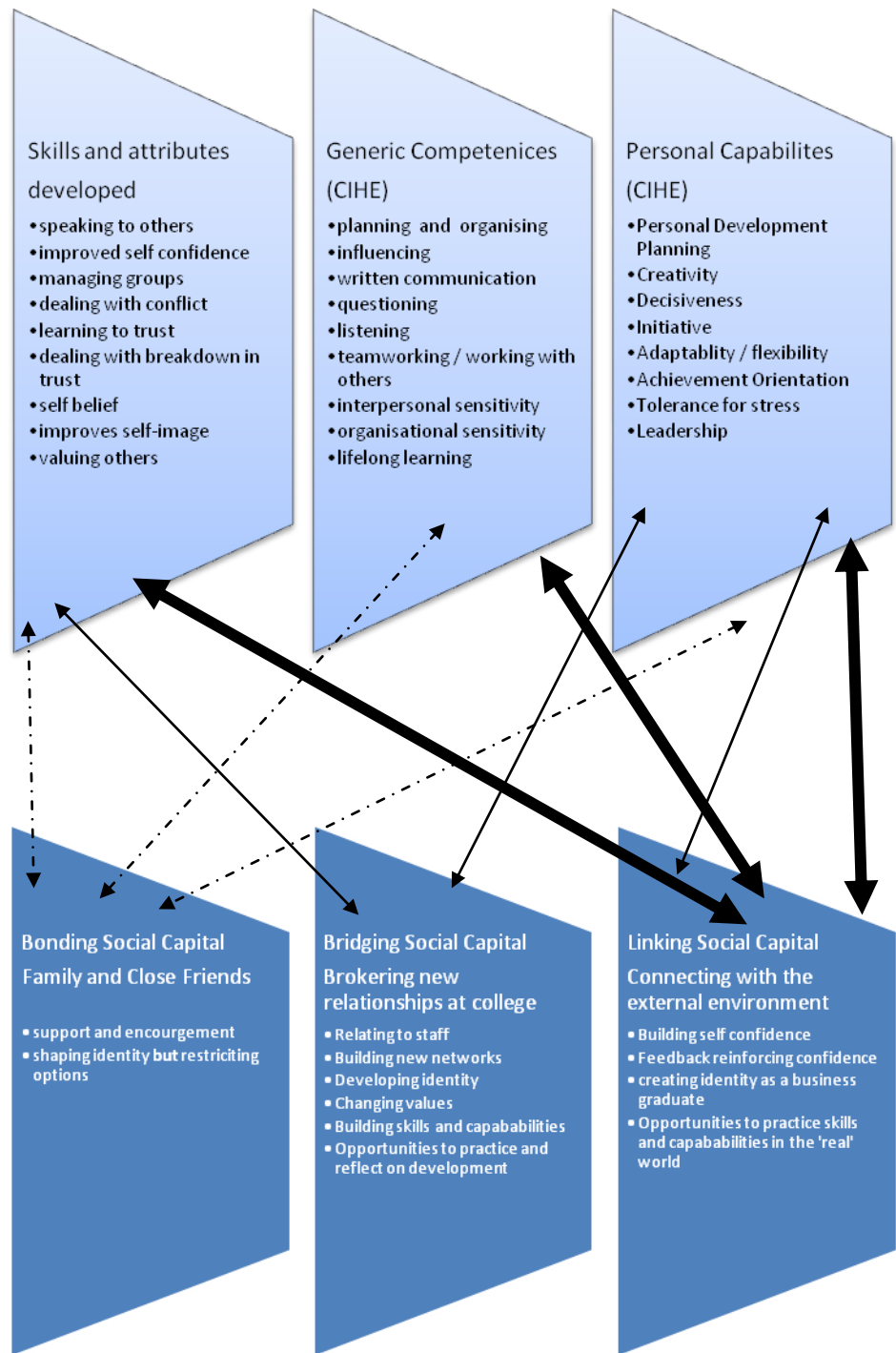


FIGURE 7.1: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EMPLOYABILITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Clearly an important outcome for the participants was the significant improvement in levels of confidence. Having opportunities to connect

with a diverse group of other people resulted in a change in attitudes towards others and the recognition of the benefits of working with a wide range of people. Other key employability skills and capabilities gained through developing social capital included self knowledge, awareness and self management; the development of values, including trust and respect for others, personal and work ethics and care and empathy towards other group members and tolerance for different approaches. These attributes are all valuable in terms of employability and are highly valued by employers and contribute to improved interpersonal and social skills such as observing, listening, interacting, planning, experimenting, problem solving, negotiating and appraising self and others. By interacting with others, students were able to develop resilience and adapt to changing circumstances as they managed, and indeed on some occasions, struggled to manage the group task, demonstrating yet more valuable employability skills.

There is little doubt that engaging with others improves communication skills, and if those others are dissimilar, then there are new opportunities to access different ideas, to trigger creativity, to learn new skills and to develop and share new values as well as opening out new possibilities in terms of employment and access to resources.

What can we learn from their experiences? Are there lessons to be learned which could inform programme design? Does the culture of the institution need to change to include the development of social capital as a valid and important experience for students? And perhaps the most important question of all – is it worth investing in developing social capital - are the benefits worth the efforts?

I suggest that the evidence in this study indicates that not only is it worth investing in social capital but that failing to make that investment is doing the students an injustice in terms of their well being and will limit or constrain the development of their employability. The opportunities to enhance social capital throughout their time as students are vast. However, many opportunities are missed. Creating and exploiting the opportunities are reliant on staff and their own levels of effectiveness in utilising social capital.

STAFF AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Like students, staff members also have to be proficient in social literacy. Those staff who network with others in their discipline, within the education sector and with the business community will have access to current information which can inform teaching methods and curriculum

content, ensuring that students are well prepared for successful graduate careers. Those who are well connected to a variety of networks are also more likely to be in a position to identify an array of opportunities for students to develop social capital.

Staff members need to be able and willing to identify potential resources within business communities. Connecting with the business environment is dependant upon them having, and making use of, contacts external to the institution in creative and imaginative ways. As well as being instrumental in providing space and support to develop skills, personal competencies and capabilities and putting the structures in place to enable bridging social capital, they are key nodes at the hub of activating linking social capital.

Some organisations, such as the enterprise agencies, have a remit for engaging with the education sector. For those such as PSYBT, many of the students are potential customers and there is an obvious benefit in being able to gain access to a 'captive' audience. Others may find potential employees or get pieces of work undertaken as part of the student learning process. There will always be the business who wants to give something back, the philanthropic approach. Regardless of the motivations, my experience is that the business sector is willing to help.

CONCLUSION

The development of valuable social capital as a result of participating in higher education is dependant on a number of factors. We need to create a learning environment which is encouraging, supportive, challenging and enabling and which exposes students to a wide range of opportunities to connect and work with individuals and groups both within and outside the immediate boundaries of that learning environment. Much of this depends on staff providing opportunities to develop skills and capabilities and to practice these in a number of different situations. The learning environment also needs to provide space for the student to reflect on their development and receive feedback, thereby improving their confidence in being able to participate in the full range of activities which develop the skills and capabilities that constitute employability. It is action learning, under constant review and continual practice as illustrated in figure 7.2.



FIGURE 7.2: DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EMPLOYABILITY

The achievement of the personal competencies and generic skills are dependant upon the individual having well developed interpersonal skills and generic competencies which enable them to make connections and communicate with a diverse range of individuals, in peer groups and with those in more remote and powerful positions. Only when the students are able to undertake these tasks comfortably and with confidence are they truly able to make claims to having achieved employability.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINAL THOUGHTS.

The study has produced rich insights into the participants views of their experiences of connecting with others as a result of their time spent in higher education. Their stories are important. They offer us new ways of understanding how and why students make connections and the factors which enable or inhibit them in identifying, accessing and creating new social capital. They have illustrated that the learning environment is an important space for the creation of networks and that the development of skills, capabilities and confidence associated with this are necessary if they are to be able to access and participate in more remote, resource rich networks effectively. Their reflections suggest that social capital is an insightful concept to consider when exploring how employability can be developed successfully within higher education.

The study has limitations in terms of the methods, my experience as a researcher and the transferability of the findings to a wider audience. However, it has value in providing food for thought in terms of how we design and deliver business programmes which embrace the development of employability with a diverse student group.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research was limited in the number of students who participated and because the study contextualised in terms of the site, but the purposeful selection ensured that a wide range of first generation students' views were sought. The lack of breadth of the study was compensated by the depth of experiences explored. On reflection, and had time and resources allowed, it would have been useful to compare the experiences of students who participated in the entrepreneurship module, which deliberately created opportunities to connect with the business environment, with those students who did not have that opportunity. This would have enabled me to make judgements about the extent to which the module, rather than other factors, was influential. I recognise that the personalities and previous experiences of the students involved in the study will have had an impact on their responses, but believe that there have been enough examples provided to show the positive impact on the development of skills and capabilities when students are encouraged to engage with wider connections and when they are given the space and support to reflect on the attainment and application of these.

As mentioned in the chapter on research methods, my initial leaning was towards action research. Having completed the study I believe that action research would be a useful methodology in which staff and

students could be involved in developing more effective reflective practice and reflective learning. A major challenge will be in getting colleagues to accept that changes in practice need to happen if we are to more effectively embed employability by creating opportunities for students to develop valuable social capital and in providing space and support for meaningful reflection on the development of skills and attributes which include interpersonal skills and affective capabilities. These are areas which I can follow up as part of my professional and personal development.

REFLECTIONS ON MY ROLE AS THE RESEARCHER

This has been a long and arduous journey. There have been many occasions where I have felt lost and unsure of where the research was taking me. At the end, I have been able to reflect on, and acknowledge my personal development. I am more experienced and confident as a researcher. I am also more aware of the impact of my personal opinions and the need to seek information and to listen to the views of others perhaps more than I did in the past. I have had to, on occasions, review my personal long held views, especially when the findings of the interviews did not produce what I expected.

I always believed that the students were far more capable than they thought and had a more significant role to play in shaping and influencing their learning environment. My interaction with these students during the study has confirmed that belief.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

I now speak confidently about employability and how I think it should be addressed with our students. I am convinced that the ability to activate and mobilise social capital plays a vital role in achieving and demonstrating employability. If theories of social capital centre on the proposition that people's social networks are a valuable resource then it is difficult to see how employability skills and capabilities can be effectively achieved without recognising the role that social capital has to play. This is particularly important for those students whose existing social capital, and lack of confidence, limits their opportunities to bridge to and link with new resources. Embedding the development of social capital within the curriculum is likely to be problematic and convincing some colleagues of its value and relevance is going to be challenging, not least in trying to explain what social capital is in terms of employability. Is it simply the practices employed and the interpersonal skills that individuals use as they participate in networks? Solow (2002,

p7) proposed that when we referred to social capital we were really only referring to a set of behaviours and asked “*what instructions we would give to a search party seeking social capital*”? I am still not sure that I could offer instructions but could now suggest a range of practices and behaviours which enabled students to identify, access and participate in a range of networks which would provide them with opportunities to enhance their employability. This approach supports Allan’s (2008) suggestion that instead of regarding social capital as fixed and possessed by individuals in varying amounts, it would be beneficial to consider the practices that make up social capital and account for the effects of these both socially and spatially. Baerenholdt and Aarsaether (2002, p162) recognised that bridging social capital practices were based on interpersonal relationships. This is equally true for other forms of social capital. Indeed without interpersonal relationships, social capital will not happen. If we seek to investigate evidence of social capital, as Solow suggested, then perhaps it would be more realistic to define the practices that represent social capital as a way of better understanding its implications on employability.

Figure 8.1 illustrates the component parts of the missing link. If we create a learning environment which enables and encourages students to connect with diverse others, provides space for them to reflect on the interpersonal skills and capabilities that are needed to access and manage new networks, and helps them to recognise and appreciate the

relationship that this has with gaining access to external resources, then we are setting in place the right conditions to develop employability.

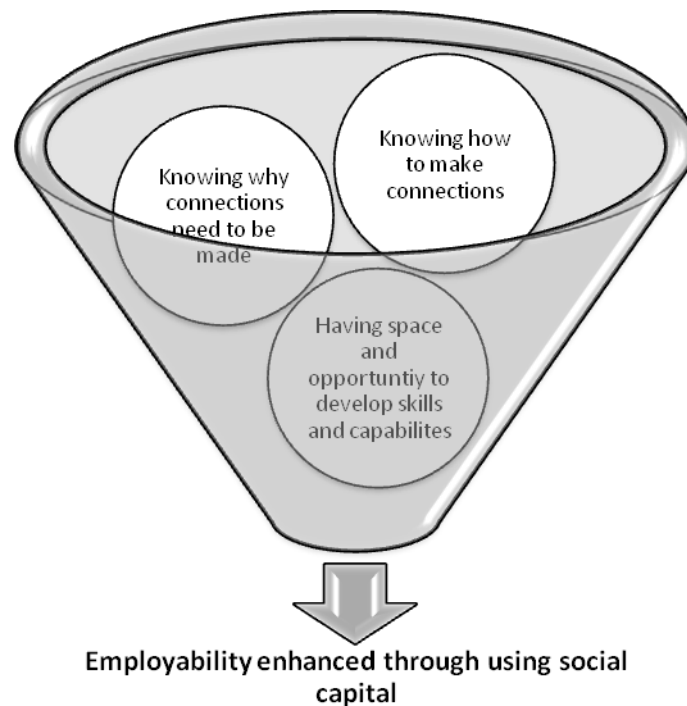


Figure 8.1: Building capacity in social capital builds capacity in employability

Addressing the development of social capital in all its forms, challenges long held views about what constitutes success within academia and requires a shift in what we teach, and what and how we assess. Perhaps the time has come to rethink the inputs, reassess the outcomes and how they are assessed and pay heed to the previously considered 'unassessable'. We need also to question the extent to which employability and the development of its constituent parts are treated

as equal partners with knowledge acquisition by the higher education community.

This implies that new approaches have to be taken to ensure that students, as individuals, have access to the learning environment that is right for them. We can only ever know that if we ask them and do not assume that we know best. Staff have to become the 'guide on the side' rather than the 'sage on the stage' (Frاند, 2000). Only then can we truly say that we are meeting our obligations in terms of the well-being of our students.

AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

The study has highlighted a number of areas that are worthy of further investigation.

- There would be benefit in looking at the experiences of the students who did not complete their studies to explore whether their progress with higher education was impeded at all by not having or taking up opportunities to widen their networks.
- A longitudinal view of the students from this study would offer insights into whether, and if so, how they continued to make use of the connections made as a student as they embark on their careers.

- There needs to be further work done with staff in helping them to appreciate how their own social capital can be used to create an enriched and enabling learning environment for business students. As staff teach various disciplines in the field of business, they have to have greater awareness of the changing nature of the environment in which they are preparing students to work. Greater engagement with the business community will not just produce benefits for students but would enable staff to be kept abreast of changes and requirements which can inform teaching content and methods. There are benefits to be had from developing linking social capital for staff as well as students.
- I believe that there is merit in further examining the constructs of imagined, unimagined and unimaginable social capital to understand the impact that these might have on student success, in academic terms and in self development. This research was triggered by my concerns about lack of confidence in a large proportion of the students with whom I was working and I suggest that these are constructs which may help us better understand the factors which constrain aspiration and expectations and how the learning environment might change to further encourage students to dream new possibilities and to develop the skills and capabilities to make these happen.

CONCLUSION

And now this journey ends and a new one begins. Undertaking the research has at times been exciting; at other times frustrating. I began the process wanting to understand and more importantly, change my professional practice to improve the confidence of students and to widen their opportunities and horizons. Naively, I thought that I would discover a recipe for success which could be widely adopted throughout the Business School and beyond. I wanted to come up with a solution, a new way of working and thinking about how we design and deliver business education, one which would be widely embraced by business educators. Instead I have come to the conclusion that it is just common sense; practical methods of preparing students for working life. There is no great discovery. Perhaps I have to accept Slavin's (2002, p16) view of educational practice.

"Education practice does change over time but the change process resembles the pendulum swings of taste characteristic of art or fashion (think hemlines) rather than the impressive improvement characteristics of science and technology....If Rip Van Winkle had been a physician, a farmer or engineer he would be unemployable if he awoke today. If he had been a good elementary school teacher in the 19th century, he would probably be a good elementary school teacher today".

However, if it is just common sense then why is it ignored in so many areas? Perhaps the experiences of the students in this study will trigger debate amongst colleagues and the evidence presented will result in changing practices in developing employability. I believe that the value of developing the skills to identify and activate social capital has to date been under acknowledged in addressing employability skills of business graduates. Whilst the ability to communicate effectively and work in a team is well recognised by relevant bodies, providing the skills to network, trust and work with diverse individuals is not and therefore worthy of further research. This is particularly true for those students whose social capital, because of their experience and backgrounds is limited, and, in some cases, restricting. Low self esteem and lack of confidence is a barrier for students in acknowledging the value of linking in to others who have access to resources and information not readily available. This lack of confidence is often linked to self identity and lack of experience of communication with people outside of their immediate environment. It will prove to be a barrier in the development of employability if we fail to address it within programmes.

Until our students are to be able to move around a changing work environment, one which clearly values interpersonal skills, and are going to be able to relate to a diverse group of people, including those who are resource rich, then they need support to develop these

capabilities and to identify and take advantage of the benefits which relevant social capital has to offer.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE - CIHE EMPLOYABILITY COMPETENCIES

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| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Cognitive Skills | |
| Analysis | Relates and compares data from different sources, identifying issues, securing relevant information and identifying relationships |
| Judgement | Determines the most appropriate course of action and draws conclusions that are based on logical assumptions that reflect factual information |
| Attention to detail | Accomplishes tasks through a concern for all areas involved, no matter how small |
| Generic Competencies | |
| Planning and Organisation | Establishes a course of action for self/ and or others to accomplish a specific goal. Plan proper assignments and appropriate allocation of resources |
| Influencing | Influences others by expressing self effectively in a group and in one-to-one situations |
| Written Communication | Expresses ideas effectively and conveys information, appropriately and accurately |
| Questioning | Uses an appropriate approach to questioning in order to gain information from which to draw conclusions and / or assist in the making of decisions |
| Listening | Shows by a range of verbal and non verbal signals that the information is being received and is understood |
| Teamworking | Builds and develops appropriate relationships with academic staff, peers, colleagues and people within the organisation |
| Interpersonal Sensitivity | Recognises and respects different perspectives and appreciates the benefits of being open to the ideas and views of others. |
| Organisational | Is sensitive to the effect of his or her actions on other |

| | |
|---|---|
| Sensitivity | parts of the organisation and adopts a mature, direct, up-front style in dealing with conflict |
| Lifelong Learning and Development | Develops the skills and competencies of self, peers and colleagues through learning and development activities relating to current and future roles |
| Personal Capabilities | |
| PDP | Maintains an up-to date personal development plan and takes action to make sure that personal development takes place |
| Decisiveness | Makes decisions and takes action |
| Initiative | Identifies opportunities and is proactive in putting forward ideas and potential solutions |
| Adaptability / flexibility | Maintains effectiveness in a changing environment |
| Achievement Orientation | Maintains and inspires a results driven approach, focuses on results and critical performance |
| Tolerance for Stress | Maintains performance under pressure |
| Leadership | Takes responsibility for the directions and actions of a team |
| Technical Knowledge | |
| Technical Ability | Develops and maintains a knowledge of key trends in technology |
| Technical Application | Has experience of using modern technology |
| Business and / or Organisational Awareness | |
| Organisational Understanding | Understands the organisation's work environment, internal politics, business objectives and strategy |
| Commercial Awareness | Understands the economics of the business. Understands the business benefits and commercial realities from both the organisation and customer's perspective |

| | |
|--|---|
| Financial Awareness | Understands basic financial terms used in organisations and is able to construct and maintain simple financial records |
| Organisational Sensitivity | Is sensitive to the effect of his or her actions on other parts of the organisation and adopts a mature, direct and up front style in dealing with conflict |
| Practical and Professional Elements | |
| Professional Expertise | Keeps up to date with developments in own areas of professional specialisation. Applies a breadth/depth of professional knowledge |
| Process Operation | Begins, controls and concludes a complete process or procedure |
| Image | Presents a strong, professional positive image to others at all times, consistent with all people (colleagues, management, peers and customers) |

APPENDIX TWO - PILOT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thanks to participant. Introduction to the research topic and describe how interview will happen.

The purpose of this interview is to explore the different contacts you made during your time at College and particularly during the Entrepreneurship Module. I am going to ask you some questions about the contacts, how and why they developed and what benefits they brought or indeed difficulties they caused for you. If you don't want to answer any question then please just say so and we will pass on to the next topic. Remind participant that they can withdraw at any time.

| Question | Notes | Looking for |
|---|--|--|
| Tell me about how you came to study at college | Prompt for why this college and not other institution. Role of parents, partners or other important influence. | Background of participant and motivation for study |
| Initial Contacts at College | | |
| Can you describe the contacts and friends you made early on in the course, for example how did you get to know them | Check if friends were already there/ started with them. What did they do to make new friends? Did induction help and how? | Bonding SC |
| How were they different from the friendships you had at school/ work? | Were you put into groups as part of the course? Did you go for lunch with them, form study groups? Seek examples of trust and reciprocity and mutual benefit | Examples of bonding and bridging social capital |
| How would you describe the contacts you had with your lecturers | Check if participants saw the benefits from making contacts or if they happened accidentally – sitting next to them in class for example How did you feel about approaching them? Probe for feelings or anxiety, fear, treated as | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | a grown up e.g. using first names | |
| What were the important features about these relationships | Look for shared interests, taking the same subjects, living in the same area. Sharing experiences and supporting study/ personal support. | Examples of development of norms, trust, confiding, caring, support |
| How did you they help in your study | Prompt for who supported in study and how. Ask how it happened examples | Examples of trust and reciprocity |
| Were there any problems with them | Did relationships breakdown and why. Check this for formal (group assessments for example) and informal relationships. | Examples of sanctions |
| How did they change over time | Did you grow out of the relationship, meet new people, develop new interests etc. | Examples of growth and widening of social networks – bridging social capital |
| Network Map | | |
| Could you draw a map of the contacts you have made so far? | Show sample to start participant off. Discuss who is on their map and why. Ask participants to imagine who else could help and how. | Look for strong and weak ties, bonding and bridging social capital |
| Contacts in Entrepreneurship | | |
| In Entrepreneurship, did you know everyone in the class? Had you worked with them in the past? | Did you have to work with students outwith your usual group? Did you have any concerns doing that? How did you join the group you did your assignment with? Probe feelings about working with new contacts. | Examples of bonding and bridging social capital Fear and confidence |
| Who did you have to make contact with outside the class? For example funding groups, sector experts. | Why were the contacts made? How were the contacts made? Who instigated the contact? What did you do Can you give examples? How did you feel? Probe for recognition of power differences and the impact (feelings) this had on participants. | Examples of benefits of widening networks Skills development Confidence, overcoming fear etc. Recognition (or lack of recognition) of development of networks. |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | | Recognition of power differences and impact these have on participant Examples of linking social capital. |
| Can you describe anything about the class that helped you in identifying and making these contacts? | Probe for support from other students, staff, guest speakers etc. How did structure of module help or inhibit? | Conditions for development/ Learning and teaching approaches |
| How was this different from making contacts within the student group and the college? | Explore feelings in making contacts and power balances, recognition of benefits | Confidence, skills, benefits. |
| How did this contact help you | What were the immediate outcomes for you of meeting these people? Have there been any subsequent outcomes – either in terms of ideas for your future or in terms of follow up contacts? | Recognition of growth |
| Did anything get in the way or inhibit you? | Did you feel confident about meeting these people? Were you nervous? How did you prepare for the meeting? | Confidence, skills, knowledge |
| What do you think you got from meeting them? | Probe for recognition of benefits, potential future benefits and skills development | Reflection of experiences |
| What could have prepared you better | Ask about College support | Identification of skills needs |
| How would you describe changes that have happened to you as a result of your experiences | Are you more confident about recognising sources of support and information and using these. | Reflection on growth |
| Network Map | | |
| Could you draw a map of the contacts you have now made | Discuss who is on their map and why. Probe around linking particularly | Look for strong and weak ties, bonding and bridging and linking social capital |
| Employment | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Do you/did you have a job whilst you were at college? | If yes, ask how they got it, through family / friends contacts etc. Describe the process. Were there any benefits for your study from work? e.g. live consultancy projects are often based in student's workplace. Were you able to use anything from college at work | Bonding linking social capital. Use of networks. Development of employability skills and transferability of skills |
| Have you contacted people in your search for employment or in pursuing your studies/ career advise? | If so, how did you hear of them and how have you approached them? (Probe to distinguish between immediate circle of family and friends; college based staff and students; work placement contacts; and new contacts.) | Skills development, confidence, use of networks |
| What have you learned that helps you make contacts now? | How do you use these skills now? Can you give examples? Have you changed the way you approach people since you started at College? In what ways and why? Can you give examples? | Reflection on personal development. Identification of transferability of development |
| Network Map | | |
| Can you now think of where you would like to be in 2 years time and draw a map of the people you think might be able to help you get there. | Stress they do not need to know names here – positions may be more relevant. Ask how they imagine making these contacts. What benefits they might bring, what they will need to do to nurture them. What development and or information they might need to allow them to access new networks. | Reflection on their own development of social capital and perceived benefits/ drawbacks. Reflection on potential skills needs. End on a positive look into the future |

Thanks and information regarding the next stage of the research.

APPENDIX THREE - INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS.

Claire is a mature student, a mother of three teenagers who was in her late thirties at the time of the interviews. She worked for 17 years as a cleaner before waking up one morning and deciding she wanted something more out of life. Her journey through education began with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) at a local Further Education (FE) college and ended seven years later with a BA Business Degree. Throughout her studies she has continued to work part time, raise her family and, for a number of years, cared for her father. She also faced a number of health problems during the course of her studies which involved several admissions to hospital.

Susan left school a few weeks into her sixth year as she "just didn't like it" and felt that she would be wasting her time staying at school for another year. Because her school had warned her of the "high chance of dropping out" if she went to university at the end of fifth year, she attended an information evening with the intention of enrolling on an HNC. Because of her higher results, she was persuaded to join the BA Business Degree. She lives at home with her mother, step father and younger sister during her course.

Linda also came after finishing her fifth year at school. Although she had been offered places at two other Scottish Universities she chose the college because it was close to home. She also lives at home with

her parents during her degree programme. She has an older brother in work who has left the family home.

Molly was also offered a place to study in two other institutions at the end of her sixth year but choose the local college because of its closeness to home. She also lives at home with her mother, stepfather and younger sister.

Sam came from fifth year to college to undertake the business degree having been inspired by a Business Education teacher at school. He lives at home with his parents and younger sister.

Elaine attended a local independent school. Although she was offered a place on two courses at a Glasgow University she was unsure that she had chosen the courses wisely and changed direction, registering on an HNC course in Retailing. She later transferred to the BA Business Studies. She lives at home with her parents and younger brother.

Robert achieved better higher results than he anticipated. Even though he gained five highers, he still embarked on an HNC course before transferring to the BA Business Degree. He lives at home with his parents and a younger sister.

Megan completed a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Business Information at a local Further Education (FE) College before transferring to the degree programme at this college. She left school after fifth

year, unsure of what to do. She has an older brother and lives at home with her parents.

Jane joined the Business Information Management degree after she withdrew from a primary teachers degree programme at a Glasgow University at the end of her second year. Her sister had previously studies Business and withdrew to study primary teaching. She lives at home with her family.

Aileen is a mature, student in her mid thirties. A single parent, she had left school at 16 and undertook a HNC in Care. After her son started school, she returned to the local FE College to undertake a HND in Business but left after the first year as she was pregnant with her daughter. She returned, finished the course and transferred to the third year of the Business degree programme.

Karen joined the third year of the degree programme having completed an HND at an FE College in Edinburgh. Originally from the local area she moved with her mother to Edinburgh because of her mother's work commitments. She returned to live in the locality with her Mum at the end of the HND and enrolled on the third year of the Business Degree.

Paula undertook highers at an FE College after leaving school. She then continued at college and after completing an HND at the same local FE College she transferred to the BA Business degree. Paula withdrew for the Entrepreneurship module three weeks into the course because the

assessment required her, in a group, to make a presentation. She lives with her partner and his parents.

APPENDIX FOUR - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

| |
|--|
| Question |
| Tell me about how you came to study at College? |
| Initial Contacts at College |
| Can you describe the contacts and friends you made early on in the course, for example how did you get to know them |
| How were they different from the friendships you had at school/ work? How would you describe the contacts you had with your lecturers |
| What were the important features about these relationships |
| How did you they help in your study |
| Were there any problems with them |
| How did they change over time |
| Contacts in Entrepreneurship |
| In Entrepreneurship, did you know everyone in the class? Had you worked with them in the past? Who emerged as group leader and why? How did you learn to trust your group? How did you know how to behave? How did you deal with problems in your group? |
| Who did you have to make contact with outside the class? For example funding groups, sector experts. |
| Can you describe anything about the class that helped you in identifying and making these contacts? |
| How was this different from making contacts within the student group and the college? |
| How did this contact help you |
| Did anything get in the way or inhibit you? |
| What benefits did you get from meeting them? |
| What could have prepared you better for meeting them? |

How would you describe changes that have happened to you as a result of your experiences

Employment

Do you/did you have a job whilst you were at college?

Have you contacted people in your search for employment or in pursuing your studies/ career advise?

What have you learned that helps you make contacts now?

Network Map

Could you draw a map of the contacts you have made

Can you now think of where you would like to be in 2 years time and draw a map of the people you think might be able to help you get there.

Thinking of your job plans can you draw a map of the contacts you have made so far that will help?

Which of these people were made through family and friends and which ones come through your college experiences?

APPENDIX FIVE - SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Issues from the interviews

The Learning Environment

Students indicated that the environment was vital in encouraging students in achievement. There was evidence that it impacted on aspiration and expectation and achievements.

- What role do staff play in this and how?
- Should the role of staff be expanded?
- How does the environment help you to relate to staff and students and external people?
- How does recognising your own development through feedback from students and staff help your confidence?
- Thinking of reflection – how does being encouraged to reflect on your development impact on your confidence?

Trust

Trust amongst peers is crucial in developing relationships.

- What helps or hinders trust amongst students?
- What helps or hinders trust with staff?
- What can we do to help establish trust?
- Do students need to be helped to developing trusting work relationships? For example within groups?
- Can you think of examples of how this did happen or how it might happen?

The behaviour of students has a large influence on who students want to work with formally and informally. Characteristics mentioned in the interviews include

- **Attendance**
- **Contribution in class**
- **Achievement of results**
- **Showing commitment**
- **Demonstrating knowledge and understanding**
- *What should we do to help students recognise behaviour which is valued?*
- *Should we intervene when students do not show these characteristics?*

Students indicated that they were unable or unwilling to apply sanctions to students who did not contribute to groups.

What could be done to empower students in this respect?

Social Capital

Close friendships were important but could also get in the way.

- Do teaching and learning approaches reinforce bonding social capital by encouraging existing friendships, close groups, high achieving / low achieving groups,
- Does the emphasis on sticking to unwritten rules, need to approve all actions, support existing traits and characteristics stop students being able to develop new social capital by offering new opportunities?
- Do teaching and learning approaches lead to the enhancement of bridging social capital by encouraging risk, trust, working with one another.
- Can you think of occasions when you were encouraged to take risks?
- How could we encourage students to widen their networks?

- What do you imagine would be the benefits of working with wider groups of people?
- What stops students wanting to work with other people?

Bridging Social Capital

Some students indicated that it was difficult to move away from friends and that this could have an effect on their achievement and aspirations.

- What could we do to enable students to widen their groups and access more resources?
- How much is getting around about having confidence?
- Sometimes relationships broke down and expected benefits did not occur. Can you think of examples and the impact that this had and the consequences?
- Could we do more to support students in this event? When should staff intervene

Most students recognised when they needed to move on. That might be because of information needs, new support mechanisms, new challenges.

- What are the triggers for students to identify new resources needed and what encourages them to access them?
- What stops them getting on?
- When are they self motivated or instigated by lecturer?
- What do you see as the benefits of working with others?
- What are the drawbacks?

Linking social capital

There were identified benefits of accessing resources outwith the HE environment. Some issues around this were the identification of new opportunities in the short and long term

- Who should instigate these new contacts and how can it best be done?
- Can the college play a bigger role in preparing you for making these external links and managing them with confidence? This area covers the imagined benefits that student have from a variety of resources.
- From your time at college, what did you imagine would happen and what was the reality in terms of meeting new contacts.

Confidence

Lots of students mentioned confidence as an issue and also growing because they participated in a range of activities.

- Can you think back and tell me what had the greatest impact on your confidence and how it has affected your life now?
- How have you changed as a result of achieving your degree?
- Can you give examples?

Can you give me examples from your work / study now that illustrates how you have been using these skills.

APPENDIX SIX – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1. Title of Project: Identifying social capital growth in higher education

2. Invitation paragraph

I am currently undertaking a research project as part of a Doctor of Education programme at Stirling University. Before you decide whether you want to be involved, please read the rest of this information sheet and ask any questions you may have.

3. What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this research is to explore students' views on how connections are created and used between individuals and groups during the course of their studies.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you undertook the Entrepreneurship module in the School of Business and, as this module had a focus on linking with others; participants have been invited from this group.

5. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm this. You will still be free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to take part in two interviews about your experiences of creating connections with a range of people as part of your studies. The first interview will last around 90 minutes. The follow up interview is to further explore the issues raised and check that the transcription is accurate. It will last around 45 minutes. Both interviews will take place at College, Hamilton or a venue suitable to yourself. You will then be invited to a group discussion with the other participants to review my findings and offer your views on the findings.

7. What do I have to do?

Come along to the interview and give your views on the topics being discussed.

8. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Permission will be sought to tape record the interview. The contents of the tape will then be transcribed. In the summary of the discussions no individual will be identified. All information will be anonymised. No participant names or addresses will be kept on any project databases. Only myself and my supervisors and examiners will have access to the transcriptions of the interviews. All data from the interviews will be kept in locked filing cabinets.

9. What will happen to the results?

The findings of the interview will be used to inform the rest of the research and written up as part of the thesis required to be completed for the doctoral award. The material may be used to inform teaching and learning approaches used and shared with students to help them in the choices they make while in higher education. No participants will be identified in the findings of any presentation or publication resulting from the research.

10. What can I do if I am unhappy about any part of the process?

If you are unhappy about any aspect of your involvement in the research process you should contact

Professor Richard Edwards

Head of the Institute of Education

Room 31
Airthrey Castle
Institute of Education
University of Stirling
Stirling
Scotland

FK9 4LA

Tel: + 44 (0) 1786 466264

Email: <mailto:j.e.allan@stir.ac.uk> g.edwards@stir.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this research

Sandra Hill

Contact for further information:

APPENDIX – SEVEN.-.CONSENT FORM

Logo

Research Title: Identifying Social Capital Growth in Higher Education

Name of Researcher: Sandra Hill, School of Business

Please initial box

1.I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason

3.I agree to take part in the above study.

4 I agree to the interview being tape recorded.

Name of participant _____

Date_____

Signature_____

Researcher_____

Date _____

Signature_____