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**An investigation into the factors that attract
young students to the Open University and
support their studies to module completion**

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Abstract

The research investigates the reasons why students aged 18–24 come to the Open University and the factors that influence their decision. It also examines their learning experience and the key factors that lead to successful study.

The research population comprised new Open University students with no previous higher education qualification, studying one of four introductory level modules in the Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, Health and Social Care or Science. Data were compared by module and from students aged 18–20 (Group 1) and 21–24 (Group 2). An online survey was administered to 827 students and yielded 231 responses. In addition, 40 students volunteered to participate in semi-structured email interviews. The discussion of the data was focused on the three theoretical concepts of transitions, networks of intimacy and cultural capital.

The findings indicate that students' decisions about higher education study were mainly influenced by family members and friends. They were studying principally to improve their job or career prospects although many were seeking to redress negative educational experiences in the past and to prove to themselves and others that they could study successfully at higher education level. They were attracted to the Open University by its flexibility, cost-effectiveness and open access policy.

Respondents' study experience was largely very positive but students in Group 1 in particular missed face-to-face tutor contact and social integration with other students. The majority of respondents in both groups expressed confidence about their progress on the module although women in particular had underlying doubts about

their academic ability. Successful students had developed a number of coping strategies for managing the conflicting demands of work, study and family.

The research identifies that students aged 18–20 and first generation students need enhanced levels of learning support in their first year. It also highlights the importance of detailed pre-course information, personalised tutor support and early informal feedback on academic progress. Finally, the study warns against over reliance on online delivery and social networking sites in delivering effective student support.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction and rationale for the study

The loneliness of the long-distance learner is hard to bear even for motivated and dedicated adults. It is probable that most 18 year olds would find it intolerable. (Perry, 1976, p. 4)

Having joined the Open University in 1998 after a twenty year career in teaching, I found it hard to disagree with this view from Walter Perry, the first Vice-Chancellor of the Open University. It was difficult to imagine why many of the Year 12/13 students I had taught at school would choose to study part-time with a distance learning institution when they were used to face-to-face teaching and daily social interaction with other students. Yet the number of new Open University undergraduates aged 18–20 has continued to grow steadily in recent years and my wish to understand why was the basis for this research study.

My own experience of supporting Year 12/13 students with their applications to university led to an interest in the choices students make about post-18 education and the factors that influence their decisions. I observed that course content, the university's reputation, its location and the opportunity for social interaction with other students were all important factors in their choices. I was also aware of the difficulties some students experienced with the transition from school to university and was particularly interested in learning how best to support them in adapting to this change. I had concluded that parental experience of higher education and the differences in teaching and learning styles between school and university were

potentially key factors affecting a successful transition but I did not have the opportunity at the time to explore these issues in more detail.

Since joining the Open University, I have taken a keen interest in the study experiences of new entrants but especially the growing number of new undergraduates aged 18–20. I found it surprising that these students were opting for a distance learning institution that requires a high level of independent learning and would provide a very different social experience from a full-time university or local college.

I wanted to investigate whether young students faced particular problems in adapting to part-time distance learning and to examine the factors affecting their study experiences. My primary interest was in students aged 18–20 but I also wanted to explore potential differences between the 18–20 and 21–24 age groups so I included both in my study.

Apart from satisfying my own curiosity, I believed the outcomes of the research would be important for my professional role in the Faculty of Arts where I have a major responsibility for curriculum development and the opportunity to influence key decisions about the future content and structure of courses. The research could also impact on the nature of the study support provided to new entrants and have implications for the growing number of higher education institutions offering courses by distance learning, especially through the recently introduced MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses offered globally and made available free of charge over the internet).

Young students at the Open University: a historical perspective

While the Open University's stated mission is to be 'open to people, places, methods and ideas' (The Open University, 2012a, p. 3), it has not always been open to the idea of admitting students under the age of 21. Although the original University regulations stated that 18 was the normal minimum age for students, the Report of The Open University Planning Committee in 1969 made clear that the University was conceived as an institution for adults i.e. those over 21, and the view was that younger students aged 16–21 years in employment would do better to

attend sandwich courses, block release courses, or part-time day release courses at technical colleges. (Woodley and McIntosh, 1980, p. 2)

Nevertheless, the political and economic circumstances in the early 1970s forced the University to re-evaluate its position on younger students. The situation in 1970 bore remarkable similarities to that of 2010: a new Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, had recently been elected; the newspapers were full of stories about substantial cuts to education funding; and qualified school leavers were finding it harder to secure places at full-time universities. In this climate, the Open University was seen as a potential solution to satisfying the demand for places, just as a more recent White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011, p. 5), acknowledged that part-time distance learning was a viable alternative to full-time study.

In the 1970s, the University initially resisted the Government's request for it to investigate ways of accepting 18–20 year old students, particularly if they were qualified, as this was 'opposed to the principle of open entry' (Ferguson, 1975, p. 28).

It was also believed that admitting 18 year olds in large numbers

would change the character of the university, it would inhibit the older disadvantaged students, it might detract from the serious dedicated spirit of application. (Ferguson, 1975 p. 28)

The general view was that if 18 year olds were admitted, the numbers should be in addition to the normal quota, be funded separately (Ferguson, 1975, p. 28) and admission should be open to all (Ferguson, 1975, p. 153).

In the event, it was agreed that the University would run the Younger Students Pilot Scheme for three years from 1974. The findings of this scheme influenced the University's decision to refrain from actively encouraging applications from students under 21. The one exception to this approach was the Young Applicants in Schools Scheme which was introduced in 1996 to offer academically gifted students in Years 12 and 13 the opportunity to study an Open University module alongside their A- and AS-levels but this scheme only applied to a small number of particularly able students.

While the University continued to focus its marketing activity on students in the older groups (above 25), there was, nevertheless, a gradual increase in the numbers of young students coming to the University. This began in the early 1990s and continued largely unremarked until the end of the twentieth century when the University began to reassess its response to the changing pattern in student recruitment; in particular to question whether younger students had different support needs from the traditional Open University student (average age of 31) and whether these needs were being met.

In 2003 I became a member of the Younger Students Working Group which was established by the Open University Student Policy Board to investigate the reasons behind the growth in the numbers of younger students in the 18–24 age group, their relatively poor pass rates (11% lower than the average for the University) and whether they needed particular forms of learning support (The Open University, 2005, p. 2).

The University began to look more seriously at the trend data for this group and to include the statistics on younger student registrations in its institutional reports, perhaps because the University recognised the potential importance of younger student registrations in meeting Government student number targets. Young students at the Open University were re-defined in these reports as those under 25 at the start of their course (The Open University, 2011c, p. 2) and the proportion of new undergraduate registrations from those under 25 grew from 12.5% in 1996/7 to 27% in 2010/11 (The Open University, 2012b). Within this group, the number of those aged 18–20 with no previous higher education qualification almost doubled between 2001/2 and 2010/11 (The Open University, 2011c, p. 4).

The higher education context

The growth in the numbers of young students coming to the Open University reflected the marked expansion across the whole higher education sector and was closely related to the policy aim of successive governments over the last fifty years to widen access. Tight (2011, p. 662) noted that the Robbins Committee recommended ‘the expansion of existing universities and the creation of new ones’ but pointed out that the latter process was already underway when the report was

published. The following years saw a substantial growth in the number of universities and a steep increase in student numbers (HESA, 2010). The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act led to a further expansion in the number of universities while the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Report, chaired by Ron Dearing (NCIHE, 1997, Summary Report, Rec. 1), took the debate further by recommending that the Government 'should have a long term strategic aim of responding to increased demand for higher education'.

A Government White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, confirmed the target to 'increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of those aged 18–30 by the end of the decade' (DfES, 2003, p. 57). The latest provisional figures from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2013) seem to indicate that the 2011/12 Higher Education Initial Participation Rate for 17–30 year old students new to higher education is now 49%, up from 39% in 1999 (DIUS, 2008), although Ball (2013) challenges the statistical basis on which these figures were calculated and claims that the true figure is anywhere between 27.2% and 40.2%, depending on the dataset used.

The report *World Class Skills* (DIUS, 2007 p. 9) called for four out of ten adults to have a higher education qualification by 2020. This recommendation, together with the predicted fall of 14.5% in the UK numbers of 18–20 year olds between 2009 and 2020 (Ramsden and Brown, 2008, p. 18), led to a greater focus on part-time students, defined in this study as those 'studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks or studying during the evenings only' (HESA, 2013). The Government's framework document *Higher Ambitions*, put part-time students at the centre of its plans. 'The focus will therefore be on a greater diversity of models of learning: part-

time, work-based, foundation degrees, and studying whilst at home' (BIS, 2009, p. 9). In parallel with the Government's new interest in part-time students, there have been a number of reports in the last five years which have focused specifically on the part-time sector (Callender et al., 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Callender et al., 2010).

In line with trends in the full-time sector, the number of registrations at the Open University has increased from around 20,000 in 1971 to 250,000 in 2010/11 (The Open University, 2012b), although it should be pointed out that registrations do not equate directly to numbers of students as people are able to register for more than one course at the same time. While the overall proportion of part-time students in higher education has remained constant at around 37% (Callender and Feldman, 2009 p. 3), there have been variations in the Open University's share of the part-time market. For part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students, it declined between 2001/02 and 2004/05 but the University's market share is now growing at a greater rate than the sector as a whole (The Open University, 2011d, Table A1) and as noted earlier, a substantial proportion of the growth has come from students aged 18–24.

This may relate in part to the volatile situation across the higher education sector and the possible relationship between participation rates and the introduction of higher tuition fees. Adams (2013) claimed, for example, that participation rates in 2011-12 may have been artificially high because students who would have deferred their entry in previous years were opting to go straight to university to avoid paying the higher tuition fees. It is possible that the increases in student tuition fees and concerns about student debt may also be encouraging students to seek part-time or distance learning opportunities in place of full-time study at a conventional institution. (In this study I

use the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA, 2013) definition of full-time, that is 'students who are normally required to attend an institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of study').

Since the introduction of tuition fees in 1998/9, top-up fees in 2006 and the near tripling of tuition fees in 2012, student debt has continued to rise. For students who started studying in 2011, the average predicted debt on leaving university is £26,100 but this rises to £53,400 for 2012 entrants (BBC, 2011). A number of researchers have identified fear of debt as a particular barrier to participation in higher education for students on low incomes (Callender et al., 2006; Purcell et al., 2008, p. 96; Yorke and Longden, 2008). Part-time students have not been immune from these financial pressures. A report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2013, p. 14) noted that part-time students were also affected by fee increases in 2012 and warned that 'students who might have found the money to pay the previous lower levels of fees may simply be unwilling to pay higher fees', despite the fact that the Government eventually agreed to give part-time students the same access to student loans as those studying full-time.

These changes have increased the pressures on universities to recruit students and the Open University is competing with other institutions to maintain its student numbers. It may not have set out to actively recruit younger students to the University but students aged 18–24 may now have an important role to play in securing the future of the institution.

Research questions

My interest in young students at the University led to two main research questions.

1. What reasons do young students (18–24) give for studying with the Open University and what factors influence their decision?

My first question investigated the reasons why young students across four different disciplines chose to undertake higher education study. Were they mainly studying for interest in the subject or to improve their job or career prospects and did the responses differ according to the subject they were studying? Were there marked differences between the 18–20 group (the original focus for my research) and those aged 21–24?

I also wanted to find out why they had opted for part-time, distance learning in preference to a local college or full-time study at a conventional university. Was it a matter of personal preference or had their choice been constrained by their personal circumstances or educational background? The first research question also investigated the factors which might have influenced students' decisions. I was particularly interested in the role that friends and family had had in the students' choice of the University and in supporting them through their study.

2. What are the experiences of young students studying with the Open University and what factors impact on how successful they are?

The second question related to the study experiences of new young students at the University and the factors that had impacted on their success or failure. I wanted to examine their level of confidence in their academic ability, whether they had adapted well to distance learning and the extent to which their educational and personal

biographies may have impacted on their capacity to study successfully. I was also interested in comparing any differences according to the subject studied and between the younger (18-20) and older (21-24) age groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a historical account of the growth in the numbers of young students aged 18–24 at the Open University and has set this within the wider historical context of the expansion of participation in higher education. It has also outlined the main areas for investigation underlying the two main research questions.

I have concluded that the recruitment of younger students to the Open University was a matter for debate as long as 40 years ago but has recently become a live issue once more in response to the recent changes in the funding of higher education and the associated pressure on higher education institutions to compete for students. The fact that 27% of new undergraduate registrations at the Open University now come from those aged under 25 (The Open University, 2012b) has raised questions in the University about pedagogy and the nature of the curriculum. Do younger students have particular support needs that are not currently being met? Does the content of the curriculum need to be adapted to include the experience of a younger audience? Do changes need to be made to the teaching and learning model to better support the preferred learning styles of students aged 18–24?

These are all important questions that might impact on the recruitment and retention of younger students. The research study has provided some evidence to address these questions and to contribute to our understanding of the particular needs of younger

students, both in the context of the Open University and in other higher education institutions offering distance learning courses to students aged 18–24.

The thesis is divided into seven main sections. The introduction is followed by Chapter 2, the literature review. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology and methods and Chapter 4 describes the process of data collection. Chapters 5-7 provide a detailed analysis of the three data sources: the questionnaire; the open questions from the survey; and the email interviews. Chapter 8 discusses the main findings from the data and the final chapter evaluates the research and summarises the implications of the findings. In the next chapter I review the literature that relates to my research questions.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

While there have been studies in the last twenty or so years looking at the motivations and experiences of part-time students (Bourner et al., 1991; Tight, 1991), with the exception of Woodley and McIntosh (1980) who reported on the Younger Students Scheme at the Open University, very little has been written about young students studying on part-time distance learning courses, particularly those aged 18–20. This literature review has therefore drawn on research into both full- and part-time students and different modes of study.

The first part of the review addresses the first research question on the reasons students give for choosing part-time study and the factors affecting their decision.

The second part covers the second research question in examining the experience of students once they start their course and the factors that impact on successful study.

Reasons for entering higher education

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997), otherwise known as the Dearing Committee, was set up to make recommendations about the future size and shape of higher education. In an associated report, Callender (1997) used a postal survey of 1,270 full- and part-time students to investigate students' reasons for entering higher education and the quality of their university experience. She noted that there was little difference in the reasons given by full- and part-time students, nor were there any consistent variations by students' age, sex, social class,

the type of institution they attended or the qualification they were pursuing (Callender, 1997, Report 2, 2.5). The main reason full- and part-time students entered higher education was to help get a job (28%), followed by career reasons (19%) and interest in the subject (16%). In addition, students mainly chose to study part-time because they had a full-time job (59%) or family commitments (10%).

It was notable in Callender's study (1997) that students under 25 were more likely than those over 25 to say that their main reason for studying was to help them get a job (33% compared with 21%) while the older group were more focussed on changing their career (18% compared with 3%). Employment reasons also featured strongly in the study by Jamieson et al. (2009, p. 259) of around 3000 graduate students who had studied part-time at Birkbeck College and the Open University. Here, a third from each institution said they had studied for reasons related to employment.

Very little of the data in Callender's report (1997) was analysed by age group. Only 7% of the part-time sample in her study were aged under 21 and 14% 21–24, so it would be difficult to claim that they were representative of the under 25 part-time population as a whole. Moreover, the study only included students in their second year and above, so did not cover students' early experiences of higher education. Students were being asked to give reasons for actions they had taken more than a year before and the data might therefore have been subject to post-hoc rationalisation.

The same criticism might be applied to the survey carried out by Brennan et al. (1999, p. 33) of nearly 6,000 current or graduate part-time students who were studying first degree or diploma courses at five post-1992 universities and the Open

University. The researchers divided their results into five different age groups and noted that there was a correlation between motivation and age, with older students more likely to be studying for interest and younger students for their career. Nearly 80% of students under 26 were studying for reasons related to their career, compared with 69% for 26–29 group and 57% for those aged 30–39. The under 26 group was not sub-divided further so it is not clear whether there were any differences between the 18–20 and 21–25 groups. The inclusion of existing and past students in the same study also raised questions about the validity of the findings. Students studying at the time might have had very different perceptions of their reasons for study compared with graduates reflecting on their past motivations.

Davies et al. (2002) surveyed 866 full- and part-time mature entrants (aged over 21) to higher education to investigate the reasons behind the decline in mature student entry between 1995/6 and 1998/9. They considered the main factors influencing decisions about entry to higher education and collected data from 220 participants in focus groups and 187 individual interviews. Thirty-six per cent of respondents to the study were part-time students and 31% of these were in the 21–24 group. It was difficult to make direct comparisons with the Callender (1997) study as there were differences in the categorisation used but the main factors influencing application and entry to higher education for the 21–24 group were similar to Callender's findings and the sample as a whole: first to enhance career prospects (28%) and then interest in the subject (26%) (Davies et al., 2002). These findings matched the results of the End of Course Survey in the Open University (The Open University, 2008) which showed that 59% of under 21s and 54% of 21–24 year old students identified benefit to their career as the primary motivation for studying their module as opposed to 34% for the over 25 group.

The study by Davies et al. (2002) indicated some of the reasons why students chose to study at higher education level and the results were compared by part-time/full-time students. However, their study was restricted to students over 21 and they did not provide a breakdown of the part-time population by gender which made comparisons with other studies more difficult.

A later study by Callender et al. (2006) used an online survey to investigate undergraduate attitudes towards part-time study and their reasons for enrolling. The sample included 2,654 part-time students from a mixture of higher education institutions, further education colleges and the Open University; 28% (745) were studying by distance learning. Thirty-two per cent of students were aged between 18 and 29 but this group was not subdivided further to enable direct comparison with Davies (2002) and Callender (1997). Nevertheless, the findings mirrored these earlier studies in that part-time study had to be fitted around work and family commitments. For example, 45% stated that having domestic responsibilities was an important factor in their decision to study part-time (Callender et al., 2006, p.19). However, the main reason 82% of students in this study chose part-time education was that they could not afford to give up their job (p.18). There were similar findings in the Futuretrack longitudinal survey which was tracking students who had applied to university through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in 2005/6. Seventy-two per cent of the 3,704 part-time undergraduate students surveyed said that being unable to afford to give up their job was a very important reason for studying part-time (Callender et al., 2010).

In Callender et al. (2006, p. 19), the main reasons students gave for studying were to gain a qualification (69%) and interest in the subject (61%). Gaining a qualification

was particularly important for younger students. Seventy-six per cent of students under 29 said this was a very important reason compared with 49% of students aged over 50. Conversely, the 50+ group were more likely than those under 29 to cite interest in the subject as a very important reason for studying – 80% compared with 56% (Callender et al., 2006, p. 20).

These findings were consistent with Connor (2001, p. 211) who concluded that the main motivations for recent entrants to higher education were ‘their interest in studying a particular subject and their desire to acquire a higher qualification for a specific job or career’. In their qualitative study of 18 graduates who had studied part-time as mature students (over 21), Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 608) noted some differences by subject and gender in that those studying Arts subjects were motivated principally by enjoyment of learning while carers, who were mostly women, tended to be studying for reasons related to their job or career (although the writers did not explain whether the carers in their research were employed in that role or were informal carers for other family members or friends).

Yorke and Longden (2008) used 2871 responses from a web based survey to investigate the experience of part-time undergraduate and post graduate students at 11 post-1992 universities. They found that students chose part-time study to fit with their other commitments and their principal reason for studying was to improve their capability in their current job. An attempt to compare these findings with the three other studies in this section highlighted some of the methodological problems of using surveys. First, the use of pre-defined categories presented students with a limited choice of responses, none of which may have reflected their view accurately. Second, the researchers and the respondents may have interpreted the categories in

different ways. Third, the variation in wording made it difficult to assess whether the findings were consistent across the various studies. It was possible, for example, that 'gaining a qualification' (Callender, 2006), 'enhancing career prospects' (Davies et al., 2002) 'helping to get a job or better job' (Callender, 1997) and 'improving capability in their current job' (Yorke and Longden, 2008) may all have been variations of the same idea from the students' perspective but it was not possible to assess this from the evidence of the survey.

All the studies in this section provided useful indications to address the first research question as far as it related to the reasons for undertaking higher education study but none specifically addressed the motivations of young students for studying by distance learning, particularly at the Open University which was the focus of this research. The analysis of age groups also differed across all studies.

Influences on decisions to study in higher education

A number of studies (Davies et al., 2002; Purcell et al., 2008) highlighted cost as a key factor in students' decisions about higher education. In the study by Davies et al. (2002, pp. 99-100), 20% of full- and part-time students saw cost as the main barrier to entry with the two younger groups (21–24 and 25–29) particularly influenced by cost consideration (24%). Rose-Adams (2012, p. 41) also noted an increase in the numbers of students at full-time institutions citing financial reasons as the principal cause for leaving university early. The study by Callender et al. (2010) found that cost and fear of debt were the major deterrents for people who applied to but did not enter higher education.

The recommendation of the *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (Browne, 2010) to restrict access to Government loans to students studying a minimum of sixty credits might have exacerbated the financial difficulties for part-time students studying at a lower intensity, but the Government later agreed to reduce the minimum number of credits to thirty.

A strong feature of recent research in higher education has been the concept of barriers to participation. Gorard et al. (2006) pointed out that this concept is an attractive one to policy makers as it implies that action can be taken to remove the barriers and solve the problem of non-participation but as McGivney (1993, p. 21) stated,

reluctance to engage in education may have more to do with attitudes, perceptions and expectations than with any practical barriers.

Gorard et al. (2006, p. 5) developed this idea, stating that ‘the key social determinants predicting lifelong participation in learning’ are long term and involve ‘time, place, gender, family and initial schooling’. Such findings, they claimed,

emphasise the importance of reviewing evidence on participation through the “lifecourse” of each individual, and compromises the analytic utility of the “barriers” metaphor.

Fuller et al. (2008, Tech Summary, p. 8) also rejected the notion of easily identifiable barriers and looked instead at the backgrounds and experience of 24 potential applicants to higher education and the impact of family and friends on their decisions.

Their qualitative study highlighted the influence of 'networks of intimacy' (Heath and Cleaver, 2003, p. 126), a concept which interested me and which I pursued further in my study. They noted that prospective students mostly relied on the advice of family, friends and work colleagues in making decisions about higher education.

Brooks (2003) focused on the importance of friends in influencing higher education choices and the impact of friends on students' educational decisions was a key factor in my own study. Brooks (2003) carried out a two-year case study of the experiences of 15 students between the ages of 16 and 18 at a sixth form college in the south of England. She noted that students differed in the way they made their higher education choices. Some focused on the position of higher education institutions in the league tables, others chose what they perceived to be high status courses such as medicine or law and a number were more concerned with issues such as employability. She stressed the importance of friends in influencing students' choices about their course and institution, particularly in the way students ranked themselves academically in relation to their peers. This process 'played an important role in constructing an individual's sense of "ability" and position relative to peers' (Brooks, 2003, p. 292) and some students amended their choices as a result of their self-assessed ranking, even when there was no objective reason for them to do so.

Moogan and Baron (2003) carried out a survey of 674 prospective higher education students at schools and colleges in the north west of England to investigate how they made decisions about higher education. The pupils were intending to enter higher education in the twelve months following the survey and came from a variety of institutions: single and mixed sex, private and state, in affluent and deprived areas. The survey was carried out at the time when students were in the process of making

their decisions about higher education study and it could therefore be argued that the findings would have given a more accurate account of students' decision making processes than studies undertaken months, or even years after the event. The authors concluded that teachers, friends and especially parents had a role to play in influencing students' decisions about education and employment but the majority of students (58%) considered self-motivation as the greatest influence. There were differences by gender in the importance attached to the course and the institution, with course content being more important to women and the reputation of the institution to men.

Moogan and Baron (2003, p. 283) did not differentiate clearly between age groups. They noted that only two institutions in the sample included mature students but did not give details on the number or a breakdown of the sample by age. They merely stated, somewhat imprecisely, that 'the results are biased towards the traditional age student'.

Fuller et al. (2008) pointed out that students' decisions were made more difficult when there were ambivalent or conflicting views about the value of higher education within their networks. Potential applicants then had to 'negotiate (their) way through some of the uncertainties' (Fuller et al., 2008, p. 13) before making a decision about higher education study. Fuller et al. (2008, p. 6), interviewed sixteen of these 'networks of intimacy' each consisting of five to six people and concluded that

patterns of participation and non-participation in HE are strongly embedded in and explained by people's interwoven social, historical and biographical circumstances and experience.

Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 595) also highlighted the influence of past educational experience and family background in motivating students to learn with 'more positive experiences predicting participation later in life'.

Fuller's work has close links with Bourdieu (1977, p. 78) and his concept of habitus which he summarised as 'history turned into nature'. This was important to my research as it indicated that the way students adapt to new situations (such as higher education study) is determined by the values, dispositions and rules they have internalised unconsciously from their past life experiences. Hodkinson et al. (2006, p. 30) described these dispositions as being 'largely tacit' and 'deeply rooted in a person's habitus' and related to social structures such as gender, class and ethnicity. They had a strong influence on the way students saw and understood the world and the place of education within it. The concept of habitus was not something that could be explored easily through the instrument of a questionnaire but the email interviews in my research provided an opportunity for respondents to describe some of the educational and family experiences that might have contributed to the formation of the habitus.

Aligned to the notion of habitus was Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital. This can be defined as the resources that a person brings with them that join with the habitus in determining how effectively that person can operate in a particular social space or 'field': in this case, an academic institution. Bourdieu (1977) described four types of capital: economic – money and assets; social – people's relationships and support networks; symbolic – prestige or recognition; and cultural. These could all have relevance to a student's ability to function well in a particular 'field', but in this study I have referred most often to cultural capital. This can be described as the

knowledge and experience and values that a person acquires through their life that enables them to adapt more successfully to the values of, for example, an educational institution. Where capital and habitus combine to fit well to the 'field', a student is likely to adapt more readily to the new environment and this in turn is likely to impact on their progress and successful completion.

Leese (2010, p. 242) used the concepts of cultural capital and habitus as a theoretical framework for her investigation into the early experience of 180 new undergraduate students aged 18–45 at a post-1992 university. Data were collected using an online questionnaire and from five small group discussions with 25 volunteer respondents. She claimed that 'a crucial period for any student is the transition into the university, and the success of this is likely to have an impact on the future achievements of the student'. She also noted that some students who came from families without a background in higher education struggled to fit into an 'alien environment' (Bamber and Tett, 2000, p. 74). Leese (2010) concluded that universities, rather than students, should adapt to meet the needs of a more diverse student body, including supporting students more effectively through the process of transition.

Access to clear, detailed and accurate information was seen as important for students faced with higher education choices, particularly when Moogan et al. (1999, p. 222) reported that 72% of the main sample were 'afraid of making the wrong decision'. One question that arose was whether students choosing to take an open entry course would have the same perception of risk.

The study experiences of young students and factors impacting on their success

Ferguson (1975, p. 28) may have been guilty of stereotyping in expressing concerns that younger students might lack ‘the serious dedicated spirit of application’ that characterised older students at the Open University. Nevertheless, an internal review carried out at the Open University (2005, pp. 4–5) concluded that younger students aged 18–24 were less likely than those over 25 to pass their module and to complete a qualification. While the evidence was clear, the reasons behind it were not. The Open University seems to find it as difficult as other higher education institutions to establish the factors that lead to successful student retention and completion. Bennett (2003, p. 128) noted, for example, that while many studies on the factors impacting on student success have been published in the UK in recent years, ‘little consensus exists in the literature ... regarding which combination of elements is paramount’.

Student retention was not the principal focus of my study so I did not explore the retention literature in any detail although I did use some of the studies that were relevant to my research questions. The research on retention has largely focused on three areas: student characteristics; institutional characteristics; and experiential factors. Thomas (2002) and Harrison (2006), for example, noted that school leavers often found it difficult to adapt to being autonomous learners at university and many relied on their social networks to support them through their first year. Harrison (2006, p. 388) claimed that ‘poor preparation, poor or passive decision-making and difficulties with socialization or adapting to the student lifestyle’ had a negative impact on student retention while Thomas (2002) believed that it was universities that had a responsibility to foster an environment which supported students and

consequently aided retention. One of the few conclusions shared by the majority of the studies was that students were most in danger of withdrawing in the first year of study (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1995; Yorke, 2000) and 'the reasons for student drop out are complex and multidimensional' (Bennett, 2003 p. 128).

Recognising this, Assiter and Gibbs (2007, p. 82) took a different approach in their study. Rather than investigating reasons for student withdrawal, they focused instead on 'the experience and biography of those experiencing problems'. They concluded that issues like debt, illness, wrong choice of course or lack of social support networks might all be factors in student withdrawal but 'it is the way that these factors interact in a complex fashion with the student's biography [...] and their identity that matters' (Assiter and Gibbs, 2007, p. 90). In this, they adopted a similar approach to Johnston and Heath (2007) and Fuller et al. (2008).

Various studies have found that the learning experiences of students were often affected by situational, institutional and dispositional factors. In their study of eighty-four students undertaking higher education courses at a further education college in South Wales, Burton et al. (2011, p. 26) claimed that being unprepared for learning at higher education was a dispositional barrier. 'Students encounter difficulties because they lack an understanding of what learning at HE involves'. Davies et al. (2002, p. 43) noted that 34% of the responses about barriers to higher education in their study referred to dispositional factors such as a student's personality or background, with family problems and lack of confidence being cited most often while Fuller et al. (2008, p. 6) claimed that participation in education needed to be considered as a 'socially embedded practice'.

One of the main situational obstacles facing part-time students once they started to study was lack of time arising from the competing demands of work and home (Callender et al., 2006, p. 59). Callender (1997, Report 2, 3.6) noted that part-time students studied for an average of 14 hours a week, in addition to time spent in paid work, although these data were not broken down by age. Arthur and Tait (2004, p. 5) highlighted the time demands of paid work in stating that over two thirds of respondents in their study worked an average of 40-50 hours a week and 10% worked 50-60 hours, often in conjunction with voluntary work. In a later study by Callender et al. (2006, p. 7), 83% reported being too busy at work to study and 77% cited being too busy at home. 13% of students in the study by Davies et al. (2002, p. 42) also ranked lack of time as the principal barrier to study and 54% cited it in the top five barriers as opposed to 5% and 26% respectively for full-time students.

Institutional factors such as administrative information and teaching support often had a major impact on the study experiences of students. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) used the evidence from a postal survey and follow-up telephone interviews to investigate the reasons why full-time students at one campus university did not complete their course. They noted that mature students (over 21) were 'vulnerable to externally produced disruptions of study' and 'may need better institutional support'. They also highlighted the importance of improving the quality of information provided for applicants, especially relating to the student experience and the nature of the teaching and learning styles (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998, p. 332).

Theories of the nature of learning underpinned the key research questions in the study. Jarvis et al. (2003, p. 76) pointed out that the learning process is no longer described in terms of the behavioural changes that take place or as information

processing but as 'making sense of experiences which we have'. They claimed that the role of adult educators is to facilitate self-directed, reflective and critical learning on the part of individual learners (Jarvis et al., 2003, p. 90). The meaning of 'self-directed' in this context is closer to the idea of independent learning and the ability to work autonomously. Brookfield (1985, p. 70), for example, stated that self-directed learning could have connotations of autonomy and independence but he also linked this style of learning to feelings of 'isolation'. This was certainly the experience of the women in Leathwood's (2006, p. 620) longitudinal study of 310 new undergraduates at a post-1992 inner-city university. They had no difficulty about taking responsibility for meeting deadlines and completing the work but struggled with the isolation of studying on their own without the support or academic advice of the teaching staff.

In his 'Profile of the Autonomous Learner', Candy (1991, pp. 459-466) defined self-directed learners in terms of their personal characteristics as: methodical, analytical, reflective, motivated, flexible, interdependent, persistent, creative, confident and independent. The successful students in my study shared many of these characteristics.

One of the limitations of the concept of self-directed learning is the fact that it has no single definition. While some aspects of self-directed learning are explained in terms of internal factors such as learner characteristics and intrinsic motivation, others propose a definition where adults are encouraged by others to take the primary responsibility for planning and implementing their own learning. In the Open University teaching model, students may be able to organise the time and place for their independent study but there is no flexibility on tutorial times, assignment

deadlines and examination dates which are all predetermined. In the area of self-directed learning, the locus of control at the Open University appears to be with the institution rather than the learner.

Several writers (Cook and Leckey, 1999; Lowe and Cook, 2003) have pointed out that the teaching and learning styles most commonly employed in secondary schools are inadequate preparation for the more independent styles of learning in higher education. Cook and Leckey (1999, p. 169) highlighted the problems facing new entrants to a university in Northern Ireland, stating that 'many entrants to higher education will not have been adequately prepared for the types of learning and studying they will encounter'. The 'new entrants' in the study were not defined specifically by age but the implication was that that they were principally 18 year old school leavers and could therefore be compared to the sample Group 1 (aged 18–20) in my own study. The researchers investigated student study methods, preferred learning styles and student expectations of university life compared to their actual experience, and concluded that students found it difficult to adapt to being autonomous learners and would need additional learning support in their first year (see also Fazey and Fazey, 2001). It was not clear whether this was a problem that would be exacerbated for part-time distance learners.

Independent learning was sometimes perceived as learning that took place in isolation but a consistent feature of many of the studies was the importance of learning within a group (Yorke and Thomas, 2003, p. 69; Cartney and Rouse, 2006, p. 82). Nipper stated that 'learning – although a very personal matter – must never be an individual matter – one learns best by and with others' (Nipper, 1989, p. 64). Jarvis et al. (2003, p. 44) accepted that learning in itself was essentially an individual

process but that it took place in a social context; 'knowledge is always constructed and learning is always "situated"'. Similarly, Candy (1991, p. 22) believed that 'learning in its fullest sense is a social activity'. Collaborative teaching and learning practices were seen to promote social networks (Thomas, 2002, p. 436), build up a sense of belonging and enable students to understand and support each other (Kember et al., 2001 p. 330).

This view was reinforced by Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 31) who stated that learning is not an individual activity but involves being engaged in a community of practice. In this theory, engagement in learning is enhanced by working with others on a meaningful activity. Thus, learning is seen as 'an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice'.

Engaging in group activities and developing a sense of belonging could be particularly challenging for part-time (Kember et al., 2001, p. 331) and distance education students (Yorke, 2004, p. 26). Croft et al. (2010, p. 27) claimed, for example, that 'the physical and temporal separation of tutor and student, and between students themselves, can lead to feelings of isolation' and McGivney (2004, p. 41) pointed out that the isolation experienced by open and distance learners who were 'not part of a learning group is likely to have an impact on long-term persistence'.

The development of virtual learning environments has opened up new possibilities of providing group learning activities in real time and developing communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Moore's (1990) definition of distance education as 'planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors' (p. xv) has been overtaken by the introduction of synchronous learning sessions. Yorke (2004, p. 28) and Bray et al. (2007, p. 905) stressed the importance

of providing a supportive and encouraging virtual academic community where distance learning students could engage with tutors and other students. The use of virtual learning environments has meant that the separation of the learner from the teacher and from the learning group has become only 'quasi-permanent' (Keegan, 2002, p. 23). Nevertheless, in his study of 60 learners enrolled in distance education programmes, Selwyn (2011, p. 95) claimed that the process of distance learning was chiefly a 'self-centred, private, solitary' exercise and students were using digital technologies to help them progress through the course rather than to foster relationships with other learners.

Kember et al. (2001, p. 326) believed that cultivating a sense of belonging was a key factor in supporting students and claimed that those who had a sense of affiliation to their class group learned more effectively and were more likely to complete their courses. They interviewed 53 students enrolled in part-time programmes in Hong Kong and concluded that developing a close rapport between students and tutors and fostering a collaborative group atmosphere with strong peer support, were important factors in cultivating a sense of belonging. It was notable that Maslow's hierarchy of needs placed a sense of belonging and the need to affiliate with others as the next most basic need above that for safety (Maslow, 1943, p. 7). Deci et al. (1991, p. 327) also emphasised the concept of relatedness as a psychological need 'inherent in human life'. Kember et al. (2001, p. 328) did not analyse the data by age group but referred to a group of 'novice students' that were included in the sample. It was not clear from the study whether age or inexperience was the more important factor affecting students' successful adaptation to higher education.

In the limited space available in this study, I was not able to investigate the perspective of the tutor in any detail, although in Chapter 9 I do suggest that this might be a possible area for future research. Nevertheless, tutors are seen as having a vital role in developing supportive interactions with students, particularly in building their confidence and providing constructive and supportive feedback on assignments (McGivney, 2004, p. 44; Yorke, 2004, p. 29). Yorke stated that good tutorial support could help students to develop their self-efficacy and 'create a virtuous spiral of growth' whereas poorly managed feedback could discourage persistence. Effective tutor support emerged as a key factor in a survey about the retention of young students at the Open University. Students under 21 who withdrew from their course tended to be less satisfied with the tutor support provided than students aged over 25 (The Open University, 2007, Ques. 5). The important role of the tutor in supporting less experienced young students in tutorials was also highlighted in a recent report commissioned by Student Services at the Open University.

The tutor has a vital role for younger students. There are many examples of OU tutors that really make a difference to the success of their students (Leach, 2010, p. 41).

Conclusion

In this literature review, the reasons students gave for entering higher education and choosing part-time study were consistent across the studies. They undertook higher education study mainly to get a job or improve their career and then for interest in the subject. They chose part-time study because they needed to fit their learning around their work and home commitments. Their family and friends played an

important role in their decisions about participation in higher education and their study experiences could be affected by situational, dispositional or institutional factors.

The studies covered in the literature review highlighted some key areas of importance to my research but were limited in that none dealt specifically with young students (18–24) who were studying part-time through distance learning. Similarly, within the Open University itself, there were internal reports that focused specifically on young students (The Open University, 2011c), surveys which gave a breakdown of data by age group (The Open University, 2007, 2008) and small scale studies focusing on aspects of study support for young students (Allen, 2010; Leach, 2010) but none of these provided answers to my research questions.

Nevertheless, the literature review helped to broaden my thinking and informed the next stage of my study. First, it indicated a number of possible concepts that could be examined as part of my research, any one of which could have become the focus of a research study: motivation; transitions; cultural capital; independent learning; barriers to learning; networks of intimacy; student retention; communities of practice; widening participation; the role of social class or ethnicity in learning. Second, it alerted me to the fact that it was not feasible in the time available to cover every topic and I would need to set clear boundaries for my research.

I therefore decided to exclude any discussion of social class, ethnicity and widening participation in my study, partly because of incomplete data in the University database and partly because these topics have already been widely researched in the field of higher education (Reay et al., 2001; Brooks, 2003; Reay et al., 2010; Crozier and Reay, 2011). Similarly, student retention has been a major topic of interest in the

Open University in recent years and I wanted to bring a new perspective to the institution's research. Finally, I did not set out to examine the role of gender in a student's study experience as it was not a key factor in my research questions, but it did emerge as an important issue in the qualitative study and forms part of the discussion in Chapters 6 and 7.

My principal research interest was the experience of young students in a distance learning context and the literature review had highlighted three areas that seemed to offer new insights about the experience of younger students at the Open University: transitions; networks of intimacy; and cultural capital. These concepts became the main focus of my investigation.

In my discussion of transitions, I draw on the work of Yorke (2000a), Thomas (2002), Burton et al. (2011) and others who highlighted factors that were influential in securing a successful transition to higher education study. As well as practical considerations such as managing the cost (Davies et al., 2002; Purcell et al., 2008; Callender et al., 2010) and coping with the competing demands of work and study (Callender, 1997; Callender et al., 2006), other factors included: careful preparation (Yorke, 2000a; Burton et al., 2011); the opportunity to gain a qualification or improve career prospects (Connor, 2001; Callender, 2006); the ability to be an independent learner (Cook and Leckey, 1999; Harrison, 2006; Leathwood, 2006); academic confidence (Davies et al., 2002); and the support of the student's higher education institution (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Thomas, 2002; Leese, 2010).

Fuller et al. (2008) used the concept of networks of intimacy to highlight the fact that prospective students relied mainly on the advice of family, friends and work colleagues in making decisions about higher education. In discussing the concept of

networks of intimacy, I consider the influence of students' social networks on their educational decisions and their subsequent study experience. In addition to parents and partners (Fuller et al., 2008), the networks of intimacy in my study include friends (Brooks, 2003), fellow students (Thomas, 2002; Harrison, 2006) and tutors (McGivney, 2004; Yorke, 2004; Leathwood, 2006). Yorke (2004) and McGivney (2004), for example, both highlight the importance of tutors in providing constructive feedback and building students' confidence while Thomas (2002) and Harrison (2006) claim that students' social networks have a key role to play in supporting students through their first year of university study.

Finally, I consider the concept of cultural capital in the context of students' past biographical and educational experiences. Bourdieu (1977) claimed that a student's ability to adapt successfully to the values of a particular educational institution was based on the knowledge, experience and values they had acquired through life. While the discussion of cultural capital is focused on the work of Bourdieu (1977), it is also informed by later writers such as Bamber and Tett (2000) who describe the problems some students had in adapting to an 'alien environment' and Leese (2010) who highlighted the difficulties experienced by first generation students in making a successful transition to higher education study.

My discussion of cultural capital is focussed on the findings from the email interviews and is therefore covered in Chapter 7. Transitions and networks are key concepts that arise from both the email interviews and the questionnaire and I discuss these in Chapters 5-7. Chapter 8 provides a summary discussion of all three concepts.

Chapter 3 - Research methodology and methods

Research Methodology

Since my research questions were largely focused on ‘people’s perceptions and attitudes’ and ‘how these are shaped by cultural contexts’ (Hammersley, 2007, p. 82), I initially considered that the research would fit best within the interpretive paradigm and would largely make use of qualitative approaches, although as Bryman (2008, p. 592) pointed out, ‘the notion that qualitative research is more adept at gaining access to the point of view of those being studied than quantitative research is invariably assumed rather than demonstrated’.

Debates over the conceptual boundaries between qualitative and quantitative approaches are not new in educational research. In 1983, Smith (p. 12) claimed that ‘each approach sponsors different procedures and has different epistemological implications’ and are therefore not ‘compatible’. Guba (1990, p. 81) conceived of the two approaches as paradigms where ‘accommodation between paradigms is impossible’ while Hammersley (1996, p. 160) described a spectrum with the paradigm view at one end and at the other, ‘the belief that quantitative and qualitative methods are complementary and should be used as and when appropriate’. In Hammersley’s (1996, p. 164) view, the selection of methods ‘requires judgement according to situation and purpose, rather than judgement based on commitment to one or other competing philosophical view of the world and the nature of enquiry’.

The aim of my research study was to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind students’ decision to study at the Open University and the factors that had

impacted on their successful completion of the course. The focus was on exploring students' feelings and perceptions and therefore seemed best suited to a qualitative study where researchers are 'interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world' (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

Qualitative researchers tend to reject positivism and adopt an interpretive approach which seeks to give an in-depth, narrative account of a particular setting and encompasses 'the use of multiple validities, not a single validity' (Denzin, 2010, p. 271). A qualitative study allowed me to explore and interpret students' personal narratives and the motivations underlying their choice of the Open University.

However, in the first part of my study, the aim was also to gather numerical data from a large number of students which would generate key themes to be pursued in the follow-up study. This part was consequently more suited to a quantitative study (in this case an online questionnaire). I therefore decided to use a mixed-methods approach which allowed me to 'integrate quantitative and qualitative research within a single project' (Bryman, 2008, p. 603). According to Johnson et al. (2007, p. 112), mixed-methods research is recognised as the third major research approach, along with qualitative and quantitative research. In their definition, they interpret the term 'methods' in the broadest sense, and describe the research as that which 'combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study or set of related studies' (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 120).

The use of mixed-methods research in my study had several advantages. First, Plowright (2011, p. 7) claimed that it is not related specifically to any one philosophical approach and therefore encourages 'a more responsive, flexible and

open-minded attitude based on answering one or more research questions'. Second, as Bryman (2012, p. 628) noted, the essential feature of mixed-methods research is that it combines 'research methods that cross the two research strategies' – qualitative and quantitative – and third, Johnson et al. (2007, p. 121) pointed out that it increases the 'likelihood that the sum of the data collected' will be 'richer, more meaningful, and ultimately more useful in answering the research questions'.

Underpinning my selection of a mixed-methods approach was the philosophy of pragmatism which has its roots in the nineteenth century and later in the works of writers such as John Dewey (1948). The pragmatists' approach to philosophical ideas is to consider the practical consequences or in Dewey's words 'in order to discover the meaning of the idea (we must) ask for its consequences' (Dewey, 1948, p.132). For pragmatists, knowledge is based on practical outcomes, with a focus on what works (Denscombe, 2010, p. 148). My decision to base my choice of an appropriate approach on how useful, workable and practical it was in terms of answering my research questions, was essentially following a philosophy of pragmatism. Those who adopt this philosophy reject the concept of absolute truth and the notion that any one scientific method can lead to 'indisputable knowledge' and believe instead that knowledge is a 'product of the historical era and the cultural context within which it is produced' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 149).

Mixed-methods research, also advocated by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and Johnson et al. (2007), offers several advantages. It can answer a broader range of research questions as the researcher is not confined to a single method. Moreover, the strengths of one method can be used to overcome the weaknesses of the other (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 21). It can reduce the risk of researcher bias

(Cohen et al., 2000, p. 112) and make it more likely that the results are not 'due simply to an artefact or invalidity associated with a particular method' (Morgan, 1998, p. 365).

In adopting a mixed-methods approach, I was conscious of Bryman's (2008, p. 624) warning against considering mixed-methods research as a panacea and the difficulties of integrating the findings (Bryman, 2007, p. 21). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 21) also noted the challenges of understanding how to mix methods appropriately and how to 'qualitatively analyse quantitative data'. Nevertheless, as Kelle (in Johnson et al., 2007, p. 120) stated, the strengths of this approach in gaining 'a fuller picture and deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon by relating complementary findings to each other' seem to outweigh these problems.

Morgan's (1998) concept of complementarity was helpful in prioritising and sequencing the methods. Here, one approach (quantitative or qualitative) is selected as the principal method of data collection and the other becomes the complementary method. The aim is to 'select a principal data collection method' that has the 'strengths that are most important to the project's goals' (Morgan, 1998, p. 366). In my case, the focus was on gathering data about students' perspectives and their experiences of study so I chose a qualitative approach as my principal method. A decision is then made about sequencing, to determine whether the complementary method will act as a preliminary or follow-up to the principal method. Researchers are advised to use the two methods in sequence so that 'what is learned from one adds to what is learned from another' (Morgan, 1998, p. 367). These two decisions result in four possible research designs: preliminary qualitative methods in a

quantitative study; preliminary quantitative methods in a qualitative study; follow-up qualitative methods in a quantitative study; follow-up quantitative methods in a qualitative study. Using this Priority-Sequence Model (Morgan, 1998, p. 367), I chose the second of these: a qualitative study as my principal method, preceded by a complementary quantitative study which generated 'purposive samples' (Morgan, 1998, p. 369) for the in-depth qualitative study to follow. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 3), qualitative research involves 'an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world' where 'qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them'. Adopting an interpretive approach within a qualitative study allowed me to investigate the different perspectives of the respondents and to describe their thoughts and feeling through their own narrative accounts.

Research Methods

Pilot and preliminary studies

I carried out a pilot study in the year preceding the main study. Emails were sent to 412 students inviting them to complete the online questionnaire and to participate in follow-up telephone interviews. Only 64 (15.5%) students responded to the questionnaire and there were 55 (13.3%) completed responses. This low response rate had caused problems in the analysis when the numbers in the subdivisions were too low to make statistically significant claims. For the main study, I increased the sample size by including an additional faculty (Health and Social Care) and by

making changes to the survey questions and wording of the invitation email to encourage more students to participate.

Dillman et al. (2009, p. 218) highlighted the importance of pilot studies in identifying non-response problems and testing that individual questions and scales were working effectively. I was able to use the outcomes of the pilot study to amend the wording of particular questions to improve the clarity, add responses to the multiple choice sections and insert additional questions where necessary. I also amended the emails inviting students to participate, making them more personal and friendly in tone and extended the time students were given to complete and return the questionnaire from two to three weeks. These actions appeared to be successful as the response rate to the questionnaire in the main study (27.9%) almost doubled that of the pilot study.

Over 50% (31) of respondents to the pilot questionnaire indicated that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up telephone interview but only three of those I contacted subsequently agreed to do so. The proximity to Christmas may have had a detrimental impact on the numbers willing to take part and I did not email all those who had volunteered so it is possible that the response rate could have been higher. Nevertheless, there was a danger for the main study that a low response rate for the telephone interviews would impact on the validity and reliability of the findings so I planned to reduce this risk by contacting everyone in the main study who had indicated that they would be willing to participate in the interviews.

There were other difficulties about conducting telephone interviews. In practical terms, recording the phone conversation electronically while taking detailed notes was a complex process and the lack of visual clues made it more difficult to establish

a rapport with the interviewee (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 291). The synchronous nature of the exchange also meant that I had to listen to the replies at the same time as formulating spontaneous questions in response to what was said. On the other hand, the process generated rich data within a relatively short timescale and the detached nature of telephone interviews did seem to provide an element of anonymity for some of the respondents who appeared to be very willing to share their thoughts and feelings (Taylor, 2002). Nevertheless, the experience of the pilot study alerted me to the difficulty of administering telephone interviews and of generating a valid sample so I decided to use email interviews for the main study.

Email interviews had not been part of my pilot study in 2010 so I felt it was important to test their use with students before embarking on my main study. I therefore conducted a small preliminary study to test the revised research instrument and used what I had learned to improve the phrasing of the email communications and interview questions. (I called it a preliminary study to distinguish it from the first year pilot study). The preliminary study also provided confirmation that students' preferred mode of contact for the interviews was email. 91.3% of those who took part in the preliminary study chose this option against the alternatives of phone or Skype.

Online questionnaire

The first stage of my research was a quantitative study where I collected and analysed data from a large sample of students by means of an online survey. Quantitative research has a focus on measurement and the statistical relationships between variables, defined by Aliaga and Gunderson (2002) as 'explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically

based methods (in particular statistics)'. My aim in using a self-administered online survey was to investigate any similarities and differences between the two age groups and the subjects studied and to identify themes that could be followed up in more detail in the interviews.

The use of an online survey has particular advantages in a distance learning context, as it can be completed very quickly, and at low cost, by large numbers of people who are dispersed geographically (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 196; Burgess et al., 2006, p. 76; Wright, 2005). As Burgess et al. (2006, p. 61) noted, surveying is an 'appropriate method when systematic and comparable data' are needed, which can be 'obtained directly from a relatively large number of individuals'. In the case of my study, I also believed that an online survey would appeal to young students who were more likely to be comfortable in the online environment. Moreover, Open University students are now expected to have internet access to undertake their studies and the technical difficulties that used to be a barrier to online surveys, such as slow internet speeds, have largely been overcome in the last few years (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 196).

A further advantage of surveys is in minimising the risk of interviewer bias (Bryman, 2008, p. 218) although they do not provide the opportunity to probe responses in more detail and there is a greater risk of missing data if respondents are not actively encouraged by an interviewer to complete the questionnaire (Bryman, 2008, p. 219). There is also the issue of potential bias in a self-selecting sample. First, whether those who chose not to respond to my survey would have given similar replies to those who did and second, whether the respondents answered accurately and honestly. The second point could be tackled partially through the follow-up

interviews; the first was more difficult to address as there was no opportunity to question those who did not respond.

The use of multiple choice and scale questions in the study was intended to generate information that could measure frequency and degree. These had the advantage of being straightforward to complete and easier to code, using the pre-codes associated with each question. They also 'enhance the comparability of answers' (Bryman, 2008, p. 235). I used the Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney U and chi-squared tests to investigate any statistical significance in the findings. Where the questions allowed students to select more than one response, the chi-squared test would have been invalid so in these cases, I separated out the responses and used the chi-squared test to analyse each one individually. In reporting the data, I usually restricted my comments to the results that were statistically significant. The word limits of the thesis prevented detailed comment on results that were not significant.

One of the issues often raised about the use of chi-square is the potential unreliability of the results when they involve small expected values. Haberman (1988, p. 555) claimed, for example, that 'when applied to frequency tables with small expected cell counts, Pearson chi-squared test statistics may be asymptotically inconsistent'. Richardson (1994, p. 128), however, argued that chi-square tests still have an important role in these cases. He advised caution when interpreting non-significant results from contingency tables with small expected frequencies but claimed that researchers should not be 'any less confident about interpreting those outcomes that *do* achieve statistical significance on chi-square tests in such cases'.

Yorke (2009) highlighted the potential pitfalls in using surveys to investigate the student experience, particularly the tendency for respondents to choose the first

option on a list of presented alternatives and ‘acquiescence bias’, the ‘tendency for respondents to select affirming responses’ (Yorke, 2009, p. 723). A further disadvantage of surveys is the potential for respondents to interpret the questions in different ways (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 251) and the fact that they cannot give alternative or spontaneous responses (Bryman, 2008, p. 235). For this reason, I included open questions where I hoped to catch the ‘authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour’ which are normally associated with qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 255).

Open questions have the advantage that they might reveal new issues to be explored and respondents can ‘answer in their own terms’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 232).

Nevertheless, they require more time and energy to complete and respondents need extra motivation to answer them well (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 203) which might make them more reluctant to take part in the research. Moreover, open questions make more demands on the researcher in analysing free text responses (Denscombe, 2010, p. 166).

One of the potential disadvantages of surveys is low response rates (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 269), particularly when the questionnaire includes open questions.

Nonetheless, online surveys appear to be more successful at eliciting responses to open questions than paper versions (Denscombe, 2009, p. 289). Dillman et al. (2009, p. 113) also claimed that the quality of the data collected is enhanced as ‘people provide better open-ended responses containing more information in web-based surveys’ than pen and paper versions.

In analysing the responses to the open questions, I was guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) and the inductive thematic analysis process advocated by Frith and Gleeson

(2004, p. 42) but adapted their approach to suit my particular study. The aim was to identify key themes or 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86) that were related to my research questions and might be followed up in the email interviews. Aware that word-based data are 'not validly susceptible to aggregation' (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 255), I used frequency of a particular category of response only as an indicator of its importance.

Bryman (2012, p. 578) claimed that thematic analysis is not an approach that has an 'identifiable heritage' or one that has been 'outlined in terms of a distinctive cluster of techniques'. As Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 77-78) noted, it is a 'poorly demarcated' and 'yet widely used' approach which 'should be considered a method in its own right'. Its advantage to the researcher is that it is both flexible and can 'be applied *across* a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78, italics in original).

Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 87-93) identified six phases in the process of thematic analysis: familiarization with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. I found these a useful tool and used them as a basis for my own analysis.

Conducting interviews

In the second stage of the research, I used semi-structured e-mail interviews to elicit more detailed responses to specific issues that arose from the questionnaires. As Brannen (2005, p. 182) pointed out, 'an interviewing approach which allows interviewers to probe and the interviewees to give narratives of incidents and experiences is likely to result in a more holistic picture of people's understandings

than a conventional survey analysis would provide'. (Brannen's research involved face-to-face interviews but her point applies equally well to email interviews.)

The role of the interviews was to elicit some rich qualitative data on student experiences and the factors that led to successful study. As Weiss (1968, pp. 344-345) noted, 'qualitative data are apt to be superior to quantitative data in density of information, vividness, and clarity of meaning'.

One of the areas I was interesting in exploring was the influence of students' personal and educational biographies on their decisions about higher education and their study experience. This fitted well with an interpretive approach where people were seen as interpreting 'their environment and themselves in ways that are shaped by the particular cultures in which they live' (Hammersley, 2007, p. 81). The approach was similar to that employed by Denscombe (1999, p. 217) who used data from questionnaires, interviews and focus groups to investigate the attitudes and behaviour of young people towards health issues. For Denscombe, the respondent's perspective was the 'crucial factor in deciding what facets of the incident are important and why', although understanding the perspectives of others raises the issue of potential bias in qualitative interviews. There is the danger that a researcher's prior assumptions can influence the responses of the interviewee and bias the interpretation of the data. As Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 253-4) warned, 'people (researchers included) habitually tend to *overweight* facts they believe in or depend on' and to *ignore or forget* data not going in the direction of their reasoning' (italics in the original).

The other most commonly cited disadvantage of interviews is that they can be time consuming (Bell, 2010, p. 161). Nevertheless, Oppenheim (1992, p. 81-82) advised

that interviews provide an opportunity to explain the background to the research in more detail and are therefore more likely to engage and involve respondents. They are also better suited to open questions. Moreover, qualitative interviews have the advantage of being flexible. The interviewer is able to depart from the interview schedule and respond to unexpected issues that arise or take the discussion in a different direction, if appropriate. 'Going off at tangents is often encouraged' in qualitative interviews as 'it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important' (Bryman, 2008, p. 437).

My original plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews as I believed they might generate richer data. Their main advantage over phone and email interviews is in enabling the researcher to observe non-verbal communication which might alert them, for example, to an adverse reaction to a question or to a possible disjunction between what is being said and what participants actually believe. However, in a distance education setting, there are substantial logistical problems about conducting face-to-face interviews such as the practical difficulties of arranging meetings with students spread across nine Open University Regions in England and the related travel costs. As Woodley and McIntosh (1980, p. i) stated, 'an institution which uses distance teaching is frequently forced to use distance research methods!'

I was then faced with a decision between telephone or email interviews. My concerns that telephone interviews would not produce the same rich data as face-to-face interviews were partly allayed by Sturges and Hanrahan (2004, p. 115) whose study concluded that face-to-face and telephone interviews yielded similar information. Nevertheless, my eventual choice of email interviews was based on the difficult experience of conducting phone interviews in the pilot study.

Email interviews

Email interviews cost much less to administer than telephone or face-to-face interviews and data are produced in an electronic format without the need for note taking or transcription (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006; Meho, 2006; Hunt and McHale, 2007). The use of email also 'eliminates the need for synchronous interview times' (Meho, 2006, p. 1288) and allows researchers to interview more than one person at a time, irrespective of their geographical location. As Hunt and McHale (2007, pp. 1417-1418) noted, this enables data to be collected more quickly and the researcher to use new topics raised in one interview to refine the questions for subsequent interviewees, although the difficulties of keeping track of a number of interviews running simultaneously are also acknowledged.

The asynchronous nature of the interaction means that respondents have time to reflect on their responses and may therefore give more detailed and considered responses (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006, p. 403). Similarly, respondents might be prepared to share personal information in an email interview that they would not communicate in a face-to-face or telephone interview (Bowker and Tuffin, 2004, p. 230; Hunt and McHale, 2007, p. 1416). Joinson (2001) claimed that computer mediated communication results in much higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face discussions while McCoyd and Kerson (2006, p. 397) stated that the sense of privacy or safety engendered by email interviews allows 'greater disclosure of intimate and stigmatizing information'.

The extended nature of email interviews allows researchers to follow up on questions and build information over a number of interactions (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006, p. 398) but Hodgson (2004, p. 169) warned of the dangers of fatigue and

disengagement by participants when interviews stretch over more than a month and Hunt and McHale, 2007, p. 1419 advised that time limits should be set at the outset. The anonymous nature of emails may make people more willing to participate but as Hodgson (2004, p. 169) noted, 'they may also be more willing to stop participating, not respond in a timely fashion, embellish more, or be less friendly to the interviewer because there is no in-person contact, and thus little accountability'.

Hunt and McHale (2007, p. 1418) and Meho (2006, p. 1289) pointed to the problems that can arise from missing non-verbal clues. The lack of facial expression, voice inflection or body language in email interviews has been addressed in some studies by the use of emoticons (Hodgson, 2004, p. 169; McCoyd and Kerson, 2006, p. 401) or acronyms such as LOL (laughing out loud). Meho (2006, p. 1290) stated that using such devices can reduce the impact of the loss of visual clues and increase the depth of data collected although Opdenakker (2006) urged caution in the use of emoticons as they might have culturally specific meanings.

Meho (2006, p. 1290) pointed out the dangers of miscommunication and misinterpretation in email interviews and advised that email questions should be much more self-explanatory than those posed face-to-face, with a clear indication given of the response required. Dommeyer and Moriarty (2000, p. 48) claimed that embedding questions in the email message results in much higher response rates than sending an attachment, mainly because an attachment presents too many obstacles to a potential respondent.

Ethical issues

The research study was approved by the Open University Student Research Project Panel (SRPP) which has to authorise all projects which collect information directly from the University's students, graduates and alumni. Approval was also given by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the Data Protection Office which advises staff on compliance with the 1998 Data Protection Act. (Copies of the formal approval emails are contained in Appendix 1).

I designed the questionnaire and specified the participant sample and it was administered by the Student Statistics Team within the Survey Office of the Institute of Educational Technology (IET). This ensured compliance with data protection and with the University restrictions on the number of times any one student can be asked to participate in research surveys. Further information about how the survey was administered is given in the next chapter.

There were a number of ethical issues I had to consider when planning my research: my dual role as a student and a member of Open University staff; my responsibilities for protecting University internal data and the personal data of the respondents.

My position as a member of staff at the University raised some data protection issues. As a staff member, I had access to student records and information but as a student, I was not able to view the personal data of other students. I had to ensure that student personal data for my research was handled through the Institute of Educational Technology and that I could only view the data of students in my study once they had agreed to participate.

I was aware that my research involved asking students to divulge personal information about their family and educational background and I tried to ensure that they knew at each stage that participation in the study was entirely optional.

I made a deliberate decision to use unforced answers in the online questionnaire so that students could opt out of answering particular questions but still complete the survey. I also thought very carefully about the content and tone of the questions I posed in the email interviews so that students did not feel uncomfortable about answering them.

Those who took part in the email interviews shared sensitive and personal information and I had to consider carefully how much of this I could include in the final report of my research study. This was not an easy decision.

Although I was a member of staff at the Open University, I was, in one sense, an objective outsider as I was not involved in teaching any of the courses and did not know any of the students. Therefore I was not 'a priori familiar with the setting and people' I was researching (Hellowell, 2006, p. 485).

However, my status as an 'insider' had advantages. My background in Student Services gave me a good understanding of the student support systems and the assessment process. I also had a supportive network of contacts that were very helpful in setting up the research. My knowledge of the institutional culture enabled me to share a common language with the students in the study. We were able to discuss TMAs (tutor-marked assignments) and Student Home (the main reference page for students on the Open University intranet) without reference to a glossary of terms and this shared understanding may have led to more open and candid conversations. However, as a reflexive practitioner, I had to be aware of the potential

dangers of being an insider –the difficulties of stepping outside and scrutinising the familiar systems and the possibility that students may be less willing to express their views openly to a member of staff.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the methodological issues that related to my research study and has examined some of the theories underpinning my choice of research methods. It has also highlighted some of the ethical considerations affecting researchers studying their own institutions. In the next chapter, I describe how I selected my sample group and the process I used to collect the data.

Chapter 4 - Data collection

The Questionnaire

Questionnaire sample group

The focus for my research was young students aged 18–24 who were new to the Open University and had no previous experience of higher education. I was particularly interested in exploring whether there were significant differences between students aged 18–20 (hereafter known as Group 1) and those aged 21–24 (Group 2). Group 1 was nearest in age to school-leaver or post-gap-year students who had elected to attend full-time, face-to-face higher-education institutions. There is a body of research literature available on the problems experienced by some of these full-time students in adapting to higher education study (Cook and Leckey, 1999; Thomas, 2002; Harrison, 2006) that I hoped would provide a useful comparison to my own sample group (see Chapter 2). Students in Group 2, aged 21–24, are still considered to be ‘young students’ in the Open University context but I wanted to investigate whether their experience of University study was different in any substantial way from the younger group (see research question 2, p. 9). It was possible, for example, that the older group had a broader range of life experiences that may have made them more confident learners whereas younger students may have had more recent experience of studying at school/college with less need to refresh their study skills.

In order to restrict the survey numbers to a manageable total for the purposes of the research, I centred the investigation on students studying Level 1 modules in the

Faculties of Arts, Social Sciences, Health and Social Care and Science. (Level 1 introductory modules at the Open University equate to half of the first year of a full-time undergraduate programme at a face-to-face university.) The aim was to represent a broad range of academic disciplines and produce a manageable sample size. The choice of these particular modules would also enable me to identify potential differences between students studying particular disciplines. My sample included all students who met the criteria I had set: new Open University students aged 18-24 with no previous higher education qualification, studying one of four specified introductory level modules and living in England. I excluded the Faculties of Education and Language Studies, of Mathematics, Computing and Technology, and of Business and Law from the sample as they did not have a comparable Level 1 introductory module in their curriculum. Participants from Ireland, Wales, Scotland and outside the UK were excluded from the study because the differences in their education systems would have made comparisons more complex.

The modules are identified in the study by their name or module code as follows: The Arts Past and Present (AA100); Introducing the Social Sciences (DD101); An Introduction to Health and Social Care (K101); Exploring Science (S104). All four modules were of nine months' duration and worth 60 credit points. The Arts and Social Sciences modules were assessed by seven assignments plus an end-of-module assignment and the other two modules by six assignments and an unseen examination. Appendices 2.1–2.4 contain summary descriptions of each module (based on the *Study at the OU* website) and details of the learning outcomes (taken from the student assignment booklets).

In accordance with the rules set down by the Open University Student Research Projects Panel, I designed the format and content of the questionnaire but it was administered by the Survey Office within the Institute of Educational Technology. Students in the specified sample were contacted by the Survey Office and given a hyperlink to a secure remote website where they could complete the survey. I also made a request for the Survey Office to provide additional demographic information from the University's administrative database. In addition to age and module, I requested data on gender and prior educational qualifications as it was possible these would be important factors in answering the research questions. The available information on educational qualifications was grouped into three broad categories: those who had previously achieved A-levels or equivalent, those with qualifications below A-level standard and those with no formal, externally accredited qualifications. Only six respondents were listed as having no formal qualifications which made it difficult to make any statistical claims about this particular group in the analysis.

My analysis of the quantitative data focused on age group and module, although other factors such as gender and prior educational qualifications proved of interest in the qualitative research and these are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

I drew on the experience of the pilot study (see Chapter 3) to plan for a sample size that was both manageable within the time restraints of the research study and commensurate with 'the level of accuracy demanded of the findings' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 47). I took into account the fact that my sample would exclude: students who had already taken part in two research studies in the last year; students who had been identified as potential participants in planned institutional research; those who

had opted out of taking part in any research surveys. I also had to be prepared for the fact that the final sample size was reliant on volunteer participation, both in the response to the questionnaire and in those who were willing to take part in the follow-up study. This again raised issues about whether a self-selecting sample was representative of the wider population and whether this would impact on the validity of the results.

Design of questionnaire

I ensured that the self-administered questionnaire (Appendix 3) was short and easy to follow (Burgess et al., 2006, p. 76); it took around ten minutes to complete.

Cohen et al. (2000, p. 247) advised that questionnaires need to have a clear purpose and that careful thought should be given to choosing appropriate types of question and eliciting the most appropriate kinds of data to answer the research questions.

There were twenty six questions in total. Twelve were multiple choice, seven used Likert-type response scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and six questions invited participants to give open responses rather than select from a pre-defined list. The final question invited participants to take part in a follow-up study and had a yes/no response. In designing the survey questions, I followed the guidance of Dillman et al. (2009, p. 114) who advised researchers to use open questions sparingly (see also Burgess et al., 2006, p. 76) and only for important topics where descriptive information was necessary. I accordingly restricted the number of open questions in the main study questionnaire to less than a quarter of the total number of questions (23.1%).

The 26 questions covered four main areas specifically addressing the research questions. Questions 1-5 related to the reasons young students gave for studying with the Open University (Research Question 1). Questions 6-10 examined the factors that may have influenced their decision, such as support from family and friends, employment status and previous study experience (Research Question 1). Questions 11-25 investigated the experiences of students studying their Open University course, including their assessment of their progress, their support structures and their preferred learning styles (Research Question 2). Question 24 was an open question which sought to identify the key skills/characteristics required to be a successful Open University student (Research Question 2).

I was aware that the opening page needed to 'provide immediate and clear confirmation that the respondent has accessed the correct page' and to be 'welcoming and encouraging in ways that have wide appeal to potential survey respondents' (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 204). I attempted to achieve an appropriate balance between an informal friendly greeting and communicating the necessary information about data protection and participant consent but this was not easily managed. I believe that the closing screen achieved its two aims of informing respondents in a friendly and professional manner that they had completed the survey and thanking them for participating (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 205).

There were several issues to be considered concerning the navigation within the survey and the visual design (Jenkins and Dillman, 1997). There were limited opportunities to make major changes in this area as the University uses a standard template for online surveys but I did ensure that I used a consistent page layout which helped respondents to focus on the task of answering the questions and I used

space to indicate the expected length of response to the open questions. I also ensured that each question could stand alone without reference to previous questions. For further discussion of these issues, see Dillman et al. (2009, pp. 116, 203, 207).

The invitation email advised participants that they had the option of omitting any questions they did not wish to answer. This had the potential disadvantage of producing incomplete data and impacting on the validity of the findings but there are also disadvantages in requiring participants to answer a question. Forcing a response before participants can move to the next question, for example, can increase non-response and measurement error as participants may become frustrated and either terminate the survey or give an incorrect response (Dillman et al., 2009, p. 209).

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to take part in follow-up interviews and, if they agreed, they were asked to provide a contact phone number and email address.

Distribution of questionnaire

I decided to contact students near the beginning of their module when their early experiences of Open University study were still clear in their minds and they could remember the concerns they had had before embarking on their course. In selecting a date for The Survey Office to send out the questionnaire, I considered the due dates for tutor marked assignments (TMAs) for each module. I wanted every respondent to have submitted their first TMA so that they had had experience of at least one assessment activity. I also wanted to choose a date that would not conflict with a TMA deadline as this may have had an adverse effect on the response rate.

The eventual choice of early November fulfilled these criteria but also had some disadvantages. First, it had an impact on the dates I could carry out the interviews. I had wanted to contact students soon after the closing date for the questionnaire while they could still remember their responses. However, a closing date for the questionnaire at the end of November meant that the interviews would coincide with the weeks leading up to Christmas. It was likely that this had been a key factor in the poor response rate to the telephone interviews in the pilot study and I did not want to repeat this error. I therefore decided to focus on the questionnaire up to Christmas and carry out the interviews in January /February 2012. The further disadvantage was that this risked putting too much time/distance between the initial questionnaire and interview and students might have disengaged from the process.

The survey was sent to 827 students (Appendices 3, 4 and 5), 291 in Group 1 (aged 18–20) and 536 in Group 2 (aged 21–24). Students were given around three weeks (23 days) to complete the questionnaire, with a reminder sent after two weeks (Appendix 6). This was intended to generate a better response rate than the pilot study where I had only given two weeks for students to return the questionnaire. Respondents were assigned a number when they returned their questionnaire in order to preserve their anonymity when I reported the results.

Despite the amendments to the methodology for the main study, it was still possible that the response rate would not improve, particularly for the interviews which were more likely to generate the rich data I was hoping for. I therefore included in my research timetable a contingency plan to repeat the interviews (and the questionnaire if necessary) for the next presentation of the four modules in February 2012. This would have had the disadvantage of generating very high levels of research activity

during the first few months of 2012 but it would have provided a further opportunity to produce a viable sample and to increase the validity and reliability of the results. Fortunately, I had sufficient responses and did not need to repeat the study.

Remembering McCoyd and Kerson's (2006, p. 399) advice about the importance of maintaining the 'bond required for good data collection' by using clear but informal communications with 'multiple expressions of thanks', I sent a personal email to all the respondents (Appendix 7) at the beginning of January. I thanked them for completing the questionnaire and advised them that I would be contacting some of them again in the following two months. I ensured that I used the form of name they had provided in their contact details, including shortened forms or variations in spelling. I confirmed that they were under no obligation to take part in the follow-up study, emphasised that their personal data would be kept confidential and invited them to contact me if they had any queries about the research.

Email interviews

Sample for email interviews

In selecting a sample for the email interviews, I was aiming for around 24 responses in total which I hoped would give a reasonable spread of replies across the age groups and modules. I used the evidence of the response rate in the preliminary study (40%) in deciding to contact 64 students from the total number of 158 survey respondents who had agreed to take part in the email interviews. At the end of the 25 day period I had given for replies, there were less than 24 responses so I contacted a second group of 36 students, making a total sample group of 100 (Appendix 8).

Age and module were two of the key criteria in my sample so I included equal numbers of these. I also incorporated both male and female respondents. I was interested in exploring whether students with few educational qualifications had particular problems with Open University study so I included examples from respondents with and without GCE A-levels (General Certificate of Education Advanced Level– the normal standard of entry qualification at face-to-face universities).

There was an element of opportunism in my strategy as I incorporated all those who had stated specifically in the free text responses in the questionnaire that they would be prepared to answer further questions.

My sampling strategy was complicated by some anomalies in the sample. First, there were no male respondents studying K101 or S104 amongst the 158 volunteers so this restricted my ability to investigate the possible impacts of gender on educational experience across all four modules. When I investigated why this had happened, I discovered that the University had been carrying out a research study into dyslexic students at the same time as my study and this had taken out a disproportionate number of male students from the potential pool of volunteers. In addition, the Open University recruits a disproportionate number of women in the under 25 group – 64% women to 36% men (The Open University, 2011b). The K101 sample also had a larger proportion of students aged 21–24 (Group 2) than the other modules, possibly because the vocational focus of the module tended to attract those with previous work experience, and this made it more difficult to find sufficient students aged 18–20 (Group 1) for the sample. The breakdown of students taking each module largely

reflected the balance within the larger population, with DD101 and AA100 being the most popular Level 1 modules (Open University, 2011a, p. 2).

Design of email interview schedule

I used the survey responses and thematic analysis of the open responses in the questionnaire to identify aspects of the data that I wanted to follow up in the email interviews. The first three questions were made up of one key question followed by some example topics to act as prompts (Appendix 9).

Question 1 related to my first research question (see Chapter 1, p. 9) but focused on the factors that influenced a student's decision to study at the Open University. It asked about their educational experiences before they began study: e.g. their experience of school/college; events or people that had influenced their educational decisions; the role of family and friends on their educational choices; and the main factors that had brought them to the University.

The next question linked to the second research question (see Chapter 1, p. 9) e.g. what it was like coming back to study after a break; how they managed the competing demands of work, family and study; the parts of the teaching programme that worked best for them; how confident they felt about completing their module.

The third question asked about their study and career aims. The responses to Question 11 in the questionnaire showed that 92.6% of respondents (212) were studying their module as part of a programme to achieve an Open University qualification. It is possible that having clear study or career aims generated the motivation for students to persevere with their studies. In the interviews, I asked for

more details about their future study and career plans to investigate whether there was any relationship between these and successful completion of their module.

I added two more questions that did not appear in the preliminary study. The first (Question 4) asked where they had last studied before coming to the University. This was to see if there was a possible link between the teaching and learning styles employed at the previous institution and successful adaptation to Open University study. One could argue, for example, that students who had attended further education (FE) colleges might be more familiar with independent styles of learning than those attending schools and therefore adapt better to Open University study. The second question (Question 5) requested details of their GCSE/A-level examination results. I later compared these with the students' Open University examination results to investigate any possible relationship between previous educational qualifications and successful study at the Open University.

I sent these questions to one hundred respondents who had indicated their willingness to take part in the interviews. I included a statement about confidentiality and a consent request for further contact. A reminder was sent ten days later (Appendix 10). I followed the advice of Meho (2006, p. 1290) in trying to ensure that the questions were self-explanatory and the instructions were clear. I also embedded the questions in the email message as this was likely to lead to a much higher response rate than sending an attachment (Dommeyer and Moriarty, 2000, p. 48).

I made minor amends to the email message to suit the circumstances of the individual (e.g. I did not include the prompt about returning to study after a break when it had been less than one year since they had last studied).

There were further questions I would have liked to have asked but I was sensitive to the fact that the students were already struggling to manage work, family and study commitments. I therefore decided to limit the communication to one set of follow-up queries and then ask if I could come back at a later stage if I needed to.

Once I had received a reply to the first communication, I sent out a further set of individualised questions (example shown in red in Appendix 11) to probe particular topics in more detail. I only sent a reminder for the second set of questions if students had not been reminded to complete the first set. I wanted to avoid any possibility of students feeling harassed by my questions so resolved to send only one reminder per student.

I was interested in finding out what respondents believed had helped them to complete their module successfully as this would assist in answering the second research question. It seemed that the best time to do this would be when they had just completed the course and the experience was still fresh in their minds so once the examination results were published, I logged the results for the 40 email interviewees in a table (Appendix 8). I then emailed the 36 respondents who had achieved a pass or distinction grade for their module and had given their consent to further contact. I asked them to reflect on the positive and negative experiences of studying with the Open University over the last year and to identify the key factors that had enabled them to complete their module successfully. Sixteen students replied to this email, nine on the same day it was sent and all within eight days of receipt.

The final stage was to compare the GCSE/A-level grades of the 40 email interviewees with their Open University examination results to assess whether there was any link between the two and whether there were any differences between Group

1(18-20) and Group 2 (21-24). I also examined data on the completion rates for all 231 survey respondents in order to make comparisons with the email respondents.

Thematic analysis

In analysing the responses to the email interviews, I repeated the process of thematic analysis that I had used for the open questions and tackled it in three stages. First, I read through all the email responses in Group 1 to identify and highlight key parts of the text that were relevant to my research questions. Next to each part of highlighted text, I wrote a brief description and assigned the text to a provisional category (Appendix 12). At the end of this stage, I reviewed the data to ensure that every piece of highlighted text was assigned a category.

The second stage was to group similar categories together and from this came nine main themes based around my research questions (Appendix 13) with a number of sub-themes under each. I transferred the information from each email interviewee into a table and placed it under the relevant theme headings. I then wrote summaries at the end of each section and also counted the overall number of responses in each category to give an idea of frequency of response. While the number of responses did not necessarily equate to the importance of that category, it was a useful indicator of the issues that might matter most to the students. I repeated the whole process with Group 2.

The third stage was to review the information once again and summarise it into one table (Appendix 14). I noticed that there was overlap between themes so I reduced the number of overall themes to six and arranged them so that they matched the order of my research questions. Under each theme were a number of sub-themes which

formed the basis of my discussion in Chapter 7. I also noted in the text whether the categories had come from Group 1 or Group 2 or both so that I could identify any key differences between the two groups.

Conclusion

The experience of planning and executing the research highlighted the importance of the pilot and preliminary studies in fine tuning the research instruments and processes. The extra time expended in preparation work yielded benefits in improved response rates and strong engagement from the students, even when more was demanded of them in the free text responses. There was, for example, a predicted drop out among respondents when they reached the open questions on the survey but more students than I expected went on to complete the questionnaire. Indeed, many gave comprehensive responses about their feelings and past experiences.

There was an even higher level of engagement with the email interviews and several respondents shared personal details about their family and educational backgrounds. A number of students were prepared to participate in extended conversations over several days and took an active interest in the research, some even requesting a summary of the main findings.

The peculiarities of the sample caused some difficulties with the analysis of the survey. The fact that there were no men in my sample studying K101 or S104 meant that any comments on gender could only apply to AA100 and DD101 students. Similarly, I had expected there to be a larger number of students without any formal qualifications but the fact that there were only six might be a unique feature of this

particular sample group or it might indicate a shift towards a more highly qualified intake among younger students.

The analysis of the findings is covered in three chapters: Chapter 5 examines the closed questions in the survey; Chapter 6 looks at the open questions; and Chapter 7 reports on the findings from the email interviews. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the quantitative data from the questionnaire where the questions relate to the early study experiences of students joining the Open University and the influence of family and friends on their educational decisions. These topics link closely to the theoretical concepts of transitions and networks of intimacy and the discussion is therefore organised around these two concepts. Cultural capital only emerged as an important concept in the email interviews when I asked students to reflect on their past educational and biographical experiences and it is therefore discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Chapter 5 - Survey responses to closed questions

In this chapter I discuss the findings from the twenty closed questions in the questionnaire. (The remaining six open questions are discussed in Chapter 6). The first part of the chapter provides information about the statistical analysis of the responses, the response rate and the nature of the sample; the second part is a detailed discussion of the findings. I explained at the end of Chapter 4 that the discussion in this chapter is organised around the concepts of transitions and networks of intimacy and that I consider cultural capital in my examination of the email interviews in Chapter 7. As outlined in Chapter 4, my analysis in this chapter also considers age and module although I do comment on other demographic factors such as gender when they have relevance to the research questions. Throughout the discussion I refer to students aged 18–20 as Group 1 and those aged 21–24 as Group 2 and throughout the statistical analysis, I use the conventional significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The wording of the survey questions is generally summarised in the table headings; the full text can be found in Appendix 3.

Questionnaire responses

At the end of the three week period I had allowed for responses to the questionnaire, 251 students had visited the website but 20 of these did not go on to complete the questionnaire. This left 231 responses from an initial mailing to 827 students, although some respondents did not answer all the questions. Where there is missing data, this is shown in the totals given in the tables. Information about the response

rate by module and by age group is included in Table 5.1 below and Table 5.2 gives the comparative figures for the total population. The overall response rate of 27.9% almost doubled that for the pilot questionnaire which had been 15.5%. A higher proportion of Group 1 than Group 2 students responded to the survey although the differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 3.03$; d.f. = 1; $p = 0.08$). Similarly, the response rate of students studying S104 was proportionally higher than the other modules but not significantly so ($\chi^2 = 3.01$; d.f. = 3; $p = 0.39$).

Table 5.1 – Response rate to questionnaire by module and group

Module	Group 1 (18–20)			Group 2 (21–24)			Overall %
	Contacted	Responded	%	Contacted	Responded	%	
AA100	144	45	31.3	254	67	26.4	28.1
DD101	95	29	30.5	146	40	27.4	28.6
K101	30	8	26.7	104	23	22.1	23.1
S104	22	10	45.5	32	9	28.1	35.2
Total	291	92	31.6	536	139	25.9	27.9

Table 5.2 – Total student numbers for the November 2011 presentation

Module	18-20	21-24	All other ages	Total
AA100	211	479	3780	4470
DD101	162	380	2863	3405
K101	78	305	2601	2984
S104	81	253	1868	2202
Total	532	1417	11112	13061

'All other ages' includes students where there is no recorded age in the University database

The last question on the survey asked students if they would be willing to take part in a follow-up study. 158 of the 231 survey respondents agreed to do so (a response rate of 68.4%) and provided contact details. Of these, Group 2 had a higher response rate than Group 1 (72.7% against 62.0%) and women a slightly higher response than men (135 of 196, 68.9% against 23 of 35, 65.7%). DD101 students were the most likely to agree to take part and S104 students least likely.

Table 5.3 shows that K101 had a much higher proportion of Group 2 students than the other modules – 74.2% compared with 47.4% for S104. This may have been because it is a compulsory module in all of the Open University's professional programmes in Health and Social Care and therefore may attract a number of slightly older applicants who have already had employment experience in the sector.

Table 5.3 – Percentage of students in Groups 1 and 2 by module

Module	Group 1 (18–20) (n = 92)	Group 2 (21–24) (n = 139)
AA100	40.2	59.8
DD101	42.0	58.0
K101	25.8	74.2
S104	52.6	47.4
Total	39.8	60.2

There were other issues to note about the sample. First, only 6 out of the 231 respondents were categorised as having no formal qualifications so this limited my ability to make meaningful comparisons between this group and the rest of the sample. Second, I had specified that the sample should only contain students with no previous experience of higher education but it emerged in the email interviews that eight students in Group 2 had started to study at a face-to-face higher education institution but had not completed their course. I decided to include these in the analysis of the email interviews as they gave some useful perspectives on the research questions.

Gender distribution in sample

It was notable that 84.8% of respondents to the survey were women (81.5% in Group 1 and 87.1% in Group 2). This differed from the normal pattern of gender distribution amongst the under 25 group in the University where there is a 65.2%/34.8% split in favour of women in Group 1 and 63.2%/36.8% in Group 2 (The Open University, 2011c, p. 10). There may be a number of explanations for this difference. I have already noted in Chapter 4 that the distribution of the questionnaire

followed on immediately from an institutional survey on dyslexia that had removed a substantial proportion of men from the sample pool. The difference may also relate to gender imbalances in the response rates to online surveys although the findings of research studies in this field are contradictory (Smith and Leigh, 1997, p. 501; Sax et al., 2003, p. 424; Dommeyer et al., 2004, p. 614; Smith, 2008, p. 9-15).

'Other' responses

Before entering the data into SPSS, I carried out an analysis of the responses for each question where students had opted for 'Other' in place of any of the given options. Some questions had quite a high number of 'Other' responses which might have indicated a missing category or a lack of clarity in the phrasing of a particular response. Where appropriate, I reclassified the response against one of the predefined answers or I created a new category where a number of students had given a similar answer, as for example, in Question 6 'Who, if anyone, was the main person who supported your decision to take an Open University module?' where fifteen students wrote 'Myself'. In cases where there were very low numbers responding to a particular question (less than 5), I moved these to the 'Other' category and excluded 'Other' in my analysis of the responses.

Once the results of the questionnaire were input into SPSS, I used the chi-squared test to analyse questions where there were non-scaled responses and either the Mann-Whitney U or Kruskal-Wallis test to compare the responses of different groups on an ordinal scale.

In the next section I discuss the findings from the questionnaire in the context of the two theoretical concepts of transitions and networks of intimacy. I begin with transitions.

Questionnaire findings – transitions

Leese (2010) pointed out that the transition to higher education was a crucial period in a student's learning experience and likely to impact on future achievement. I noted in Chapter 2 that Yorke (2000a) highlighted the importance of careful preparation for the transition to higher education and the survey indicated that over two thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt well-prepared for Open University study (see Table 5.4). Group 1 appeared more confident with 73.6% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement against 62.6% of Group 2, although the differences were not statistically significant. These findings were perhaps not surprising for Group 1 who had had more recent experience of full-time study at school or college but there were similar results for the 10.2% of respondents who reported in Question 9 that they had last studied more than five years ago. One might have expected this latter group to feel less confident about their readiness for study after a substantial break from academic work but 60.9% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt well prepared.

Table 5.4 – Q.10 ‘Before I started my module, I felt well prepared for studying at the Open University’ by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 87)	Group 2 (n = 139)	Overall (N = 226)
Strongly agree	25.3	17.3	20.4
Agree	48.3	45.3	46.5
Neutral	18.4	25.9	23.0
Disagree	6.9	10.1	8.8
Strongly disagree	1.1	1.4	1.3
Total	100	100	100

While the results were not statistically significant, Science students seemed to agree most strongly that they were well prepared (see Table 5.5). Nearly 80% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement compared with between 61.3% and 67.3% for the other three modules.

Table 5.5 – Q.10 ‘Before I started my module, I felt well prepared for studying at the Open University’ by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 107)	DD101 (n = 69)	K101 (n = 31)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 226)
Strongly agree	17.8	24.6	12.9	31.6	20.4
Agree	49.5	40.6	48.4	47.4	46.5
Neutral	19.6	26.1	32.3	15.8	23.0
Disagree	10.3	8.7	6.5	5.3	8.8
Strongly disagree	2.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100

As well as feeling well-prepared, students appeared to be confident about their studies. Davies et al. (2002) pointed out that lack of confidence was one of the main barriers affecting a successful transition to higher education but levels of academic confidence were generally high among all respondents in the survey. Over 80% of students in Group 1 and Group 2, for example, agreed or strongly agreed that their module was at the right academic level for them (see Table 5.6).

Table 5.6 – Q.12 ‘I feel confident that my module is at the right academic level for me’ by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 91)	Group 2 (n = 136)	Overall (N = 227)
Strongly agree	33.0	35.3	34.4
Agree	49.5	50.7	50.2
Neutral	11.0	11.8	11.5
Disagree	5.5	1.5	3.1
Strongly disagree	1.1	0.7	0.9
Total	100	100	100

K101 respondents seemed most confident that the academic level of their module was right. 93.5% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement compared with the lowest percentage of 80.5% for AA100, although the differences were not statistically significant (see Table 5.7).

Table 5.7 – Q.12 ‘I feel confident that my module is at the right academic level for me’ by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 108)	DD101 (n = 69)	K101 (n = 31)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 227)
Strongly agree	32.4	34.8	35.5	42.1	34.4
Agree	48.1	50.7	58.1	47.4	50.2
Neutral	14.8	11.6	3.2	5.3	11.5
Disagree	3.7	2.9	3.2	0.0	3.1
Strongly disagree	0.9	0.0	0.0	5.3	0.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Respondents were also confident about their academic progress. More Group 1 than Group 2 students described their progress on the module as excellent or good– 81.3% against 73.3% – although the differences were not significant (see Table 5.8).

Table 5.8 – Q.13 ‘How would you describe your progress so far on the module?’ by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 91)	Group 2 (n = 135)	Overall (N = 226)
Excellent	15.4	13.3	14.2
Good	65.9	60.0	62.4
Satisfactory	15.4	26.7	22.1
Poor	3.3	0.0	1.3
Very poor	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100	100	100

Science and HSC students appeared to be more likely than Arts and Social Science respondents to describe their progress on the module as excellent or good – 84.2% and 83.9% respectively against 71.0% for DD101 and 76.6% for AA100 (see Table 5.9).

Table 5.9 – Q.13 ‘How would you describe your progress so far on the module?’ by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 107)	DD101 (n = 69)	K101 (n = 31)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 226)
Excellent	15.0	13.0	9.7	21.1	14.2
Good	61.7	58.0	74.2	63.2	62.4
Satisfactory	23.4	24.6	16.1	15.8	22.1
Poor	0.0	4.3	0.0	0.0	1.3
Very poor	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

There was a tendency for confidence levels to increase with the level of previous qualifications. For example, 50% of respondents with no formal qualifications described their progress on the module as excellent or good compared with 65.7% of those with qualifications below A-level and 79.4% of those with 1 or more A-level.

Students in both groups and across all modules were very confident of completing their course. The results from the two age groups were very similar with over 90% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing that they would finish their module (see Table 5.10).

Table 5.10 – Q.14 ‘I feel confident that I will complete the module’ by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 91)	Group 2 (n = 136)	Overall (N = 227)
Strongly agree	60.4	60.3	60.4
Agree	33.0	33.8	33.5
Neutral	5.5	5.1	5.3
Disagree	1.1	0.7	0.9
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100	100	100

Similarly, over 90% of students from each module agreed or strongly agreed that they would complete their module – with 100% from S104 (see Table 5.11).

Table 5.11 – Q.14 ‘I feel confident that I will complete the module’ by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 108)	DD101 (n = 69)	K101 (n = 31)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 227)
Strongly agree	64.8	55.1	45.2	78.9	60.4
Agree	26.9	42.0	45.2	21.1	33.5
Neutral	7.4	2.9	6.5	0.0	5.3
Disagree	0.9	0.0	3.2	0.0	0.9
Strongly disagree	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

The pass rates of respondents to the survey reflected these high levels of confidence. Of the 231 respondents, the pass rate was 80% (74 of 92) for Group 1 and 73% (102 of 139) for Group 2, with 9% in each group achieving distinctions. This compares with an average 62% pass rate for the total population of the four modules (see Table 5.12 below).

Table 5.12 – Proportion of students achieving a pass or distinction in their final assessment (%)

Module	18-20	21-24	All other ages	Overall
AA100	67.8	68.3	71.3	70.9
DD101	66.7	56.3	61.6	61.2
K101	55.1	52.5	54.6	54.4
S104	51.9	48.2	54.6	53.8
Overall	63.2	58.1	62.1	61.7

'All other ages' includes students where there is no recorded age in the University database

The high completion rates for those who had responded to the survey were consistent with the findings of Remedios and Richardson (2012) in their study of 781 adult learners taking courses by distance learning. They concluded that completion rates were significantly higher in the students who had responded to the survey (74.5%) than in those who had not (59.7%), $\chi^2(1, N = 1123) = 25.07, p < .001$.

It is possible that having a defined study purpose has a role in supporting a successful transition to university study and there was evidence that respondents had clear

career and study aims. In response to the questionnaire, 93% of respondents said they were studying to achieve an Open University qualification and 46.0% were studying for reasons relating to employment (see Table 5.13), although there were significant differences between the two age groups ($\chi^2 = 26.63$; d.f. = 4; $p < 0.001$). The younger students were more likely than the older students to be studying to help get a job and because they had an interest in the subject while the older group were strongly focused on changing their career. A similar proportion of students in each group were studying for reasons of personal development, perhaps indicating an interest in learning for its own sake, as well as for employment related purposes.

Table 5.13 – Q.2 Main reason for study by group (%)

Main reason for study	Group 1 (n = 92)	Group 2 (n = 132)	Overall (N = 224)
Interest in the subject I'm studying	28.3	16.7	21.4
To help get a job	29.3	14.4	20.5
To help me change career	8.7	37.1	25.4
Personal development	28.3	27.3	27.7
Other	5.4	4.5	4.9
Total	100	100	100

Social Sciences students cited personal development as their main reason for study (see Table 5.14) while Arts, Science and especially Health and Social Care students gave their principal reason as seeking career change. Health and Social Care (HSC)

modules are closely aligned to professional practice and it is possible that this would have led to a greater focus on career development among HSC students although the apparent differences shown in Table 5.14 were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.28$; d.f. = 12; $p = 0.84$).

Table 5.14 – Q.2 Main reason for study by module (%)

Main reason for study	AA100 (n = 107)	DD101 (n = 68)	K101 (n = 30)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 224)
Interest in the subject I'm studying	20.6	22.1	23.3	21.1	21.4
To help get a job	23.4	20.6	13.3	15.8	20.5
To help me change career	26.2	17.6	36.7	31.6	25.4
Personal development	24.3	35.3	23.3	26.3	27.7
Other	5.6	4.4	3.3	5.3	4.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Students' choice of the Open University was also affected by practical considerations. The three main reasons students chose to study part-time were the same for both groups (see Table 5.15): first, to fit their study around their work commitments; second, because they could not afford to study full-time; and third because they did not want to move away from their home area. Half of Group 2 students said they needed to fit their study around their employment and could not have afforded to give up work to study full-time. This was consistent with the

findings relating to work and the cost of full-time study in the two Callender studies reported in Chapter 2 (Callender et al., 2006; Callender et al., 2010).

Table 5.15 – Q.3 Reasons for part-time study by group (%)

Reason for part-time study	Group 1 (n = 92)	Group 2 (n = 139)	Overall (N = 231)
I can't afford to study full-time	31.5	43.2	38.5
I need to fit my study round my work commitments	42.4	50.4	47.2
I don't want to move away from my home area	28.3	23.0	25.1
I have domestic responsibilities for children or other family members	12.0	22.3	18.2
Health reasons or disablement	7.6	6.5	6.9
Studying full-time or elsewhere	6.5	2.2	3.9
Other	10.9	10.7	8.7

In Question 3, students were asked to select all responses that applied so the percentages add up to more than 100%

Table 5.16 shows that the largest proportion of respondents were undertaking their Open University study at the same time as being in full-time employment. Five of these were also engaged in voluntary work or had caring responsibilities. Significant differences were found in employment status between the two age groups with Group 2 more likely to be in full-time employment ($\chi^2 = 9.6$; d.f. = 1; $p < 0.001$) and Group 1 more likely to be in part-time employment ($\chi^2 = 4.19$; d.f. = 1; $p = 0.04$).

Group 1 were also more likely to be undertaking voluntary work ($\chi^2 = 5.75$, d.f. = 1, $p = 0.02$).

Table 5.16 – Q.8 Employment status by group (%)

Employment status	Group 1 (n = 92)	Group 2 (n = 138)	Overall (N = 230)
In full-time paid employment or self-employment	22.8	42.8	34.8
In part-time paid employment or self employment	38.0	25.4	30.4
Unemployed	22.8	21.0	21.7
Working on a voluntary basis	19.6	8.7	13.0
Training for a particular career	6.5	5.8	6.1
Studying at another institution	5.4	2.9	3.9
Undertaking caring responsibilities for children or other family members	8.7	15.2	12.6

In Question 8, students were asked to select all responses that applied so the percentages add up to more than 100%.

A number of students were also managing their study alongside family commitments. 18.2% chose to study part-time because they had domestic responsibilities for children or other family members (see Table 5.15). There were significant differences by age group and gender with Group 2 more likely than Group 1 to study part-time because of domestic responsibilities ($\chi^2 = 3.98$; d.f. = 1; $p = 0.05$) and women more likely than men to do so ($\chi^2 = 6.51$; d.f. = 1; $p = 0.01$).

Given the difficulties of juggling study, work and family commitments, it was unsurprising that the main attraction of Open University study for both age groups was that students could study in their own time (see Table 5.17). There were significant gender differences in the responses. While the majority of women were drawn to the Open University by being able to study in their own time and at home ($\chi^2 = 20.37$; d.f. = 4; $p < 0.001$), men were more likely to say they were attracted by the lower cost and the open access policy that provided a route into higher education that would not otherwise have been possible.

Group 1 seemed to be more cost sensitive than the older group with nearly a third saying the lower cost of Open University study was the main attraction. This was consistent with the study by Davies et al. (2002) which stated that the two younger groups in their research were more concerned with issues of cost. At the time my survey was carried out, a substantial proportion of respondents (77.5%, 179 of 231) were studying with Government subsidised financial support which meant that many of them had to pay little or nothing towards the costs of their fees. They also had help with childcare and other study related costs which made the Open University a financially attractive option for many.

Table 5.17 – Q.4 Main attraction of Open University by group (%)

Main reason for study	Group 1 (n = 91)	Group 2 (n = 130)	Overall (N = 221)
I can study in my own time	33.0	40.0	37.1
I can study at home	23.1	22.3	22.6
I prefer studying on my own	8.8	6.9	7.7
I did not need to have previous qualifications	4.4	10.0	7.7
It cost me less to study at the Open University than other institutions	30.8	20.8	24.9
Total	100	100	100

Table 5.18 shows the breakdown of responses by module. K101 respondents were the least cost sensitive of all the students; only 1 K101 student selected lower cost as the main attraction of the Open University. This may reflect the fact that K101 had the highest proportion of Group 2 students (23 of 31) who were less cost sensitive and no men, who tended to be more sensitive to cost. In contrast, S104 and AA100 students appeared more sensitive to cost factors. A third of S104 and 29.0% of AA100 students were attracted by the fact that it cost less to study at the Open University than others institutions.

Table 5.18– Q.4 Main attraction of Open University by module (%)

Main reason for study	AA100 (n = 107)	DD101 (n = 67)	K101 (n = 29)	S104 (n = 18)	Overall (N = 221)
I can study in my own time	38.3	29.9	48.3	38.9	37.1
I can study at home	17.8	26.9	31.0	22.2	22.6
I prefer studying on my own	10.3	6.0	3.4	5.6	7.7
I did not need to have previous qualifications	4.7	11.9	13.8	0.0	7.7
It cost me less to study at the Open University than other institutions	29.0	25.4	3.4	33.3	24.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

It is possible that successful transitions to higher education are partly influenced by the level of commitment to the choice of institution. When students were asked what type of institution they would select with a free choice, over half confirmed their choice of study by distance learning (see Table 5.19). There were significant differences by age group with Group 2 more strongly in favour of distance learning than Group 1 ($\chi^2 = 6.14$; d.f. = 2; $p = 0.05$) and Group 1 more likely to prefer studying part-time at a local college or university. Students studying AA100 were the most strongly supportive of distance learning although the results were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.24$; d.f. = 6; $p = 0.06$). Women were significantly more likely to prefer distance learning than men and men were more likely to prefer studying at a full-time institution ($\chi^2 = 8.87$; d.f. = 2; $p = 0.01$).

Table 5.19 – Q.5 Preferred place of study by group (%)

Preferred place of study	Group 1 (n = 91)	Group 2 (n = 130)	Overall (N = 221)
Study full-time at a campus or city-based university	31.9	35.4	33.9
Study part-time at a local college/university	23.1	10.8	15.8
Study by distance learning	45.1	53.8	50.2
Total	100	100	100

A successful transition might also be affected by the extent to which a student's preferred learning style matches that of the institution. The responses to Questions 15 (preferred way of studying) highlighted the extent to which respondents viewed themselves as self-reliant learners and there was little difference by age group, module or educational qualifications. Over 75% of students in both groups preferred studying on their own compared with taking part in face to face tutorials or online group activities with other students (see Table 5.20).

Table 5.20 – Q.15 Preferred way of studying by group (%)

Preferred way of studying	Group 1 (n = 89)	Group 2 (n = 138)	Overall (N = 227)
Study on my own	79.8	76.8	77.6
Take part in face-to-face tutorials with other students.	12.4	18.1	15.8
Take part in Open University group activities with other students online	2.2	3.6	3.1
Other	5.6	1.4	3.5
Total	100	100	100

There were similar results in the breakdown by module (see Table 5.21) where there was a strong preference across all modules for studying on their own, particularly for Science students.

Table 5.21 – Q.15 Preferred way of studying by module (%)

Preferred way of studying	AA100 (n = 109)	DD101 (n = 68)	K101 (n = 31)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 227)
Study on my own	76.1	77.9	77.4	89.5	78.0
Take part in face-to-face tutorials with other students.	15.6	17.6	16.1	10.5	15.9
Take part in Open University group activities with other students online.	3.7	1.5	6.5	0.0	3.1
Other	4.6	2.9	0.0	0.0	3.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Questionnaire findings – networks of intimacy

In Chapter 2 I discussed the work of Brooks (2003), Fuller et al. (2008) and others who highlighted the importance of networks of intimacy in supporting students through the transition to higher education and there was evidence in the findings of the survey that family and friends had a key role in encouraging students' learning and influencing their educational decisions. Over half the students in both groups, for example, found out about the University on the recommendation of a family member or friend (see Table 5.22).

Table 5.22 – Q.1 How people found out about the Open University by group (%)

Source	Group 1 (18–20) (n = 92)	Group 2 (21–24) (n = 139)	Total (N = 231)
TV	21.7	16.5	18.6
Leaflet in magazine/newspaper	7.6	4.3	5.6
Recommendation of family/friend	53.3	56.8	55.4
Internet	40.2	44.6	42.9
School/college	15.2	6.5	10.0

In Question 1, students were asked to select all responses that applied so the percentages add up to more than 100%.

Table 5.23 shows that there was a significant difference among the four modules with Arts students more likely than students studying others modules to have heard about the Open University from family and friends ($\chi^2 = 9.37$; d.f. = 3; $p = 0.03$).

Table 5.23– Q.1 Respondents by group who heard about the Open University from family/friends (%)

Module	Group 1 (n = 49)	Group 2 (n = 79)	Overall (N = 128)
AA100	66.7	64.2	65.2
DD101	37.9	57.5	49.3
K101	37.5	39.1	38.7
S104	50.0	44.4	47.4

AA100 students were also more likely to know people who were or had been Open University students (see Table 5.24) although the figures were not statistically significant. There was little difference between the two age groups in Question 7 with just over half the respondents in both groups knowing family and friends with Open University study experience (see Table 5.24). The apparent differences between the two age groups studying K101 need to be regarded with caution as the numbers were very small.

Table 5.24 – Q.7 Respondents by module and group knowing family or friends with Open University experience (%)

Module	Group 1 (n = 47)	Group 2 (n = 74)	Overall (N = 121)
AA100	62.2	60.6	61.3
DD101	48.3	42.5	44.9
K101	12.5	47.8	38.7
S104	40.0	55.6	47.4
Overall	51.1	52.9	52.2

After family and friends, students were most likely to have heard about the University from the internet or from television (see Table 5.22), possibly having been influenced by direct television advertising or by the University's association with popular programmes such as *Frozen Planet*. In a few cases, students stated they had heard about the institution from the film *Educating Rita* which features an Open University student as the main character.

There was a significant difference between the two age groups concerning the influence of their school network ($\chi^2 = 4.72$; d.f. = 1; $p = 0.03$). In Group 1, 15.2% had heard about the Open University from school or college compared with 6.5% in Group 2. This perhaps reflected the younger group's more recent exposure to discussions about higher education in the school environment or possibly greater awareness in schools about the Open University in recent years.

Students' networks of intimacy also had a key role in encouraging learning although there were significant differences between the two age groups when they were asked to identify the main person who had supported their decision to study with the Open University ($\chi^2 = 18.14$; d.f. = 5; $p = 0.003$). Table 5.25 shows that Group 1 students were more likely to say their main support came from their parents/guardians, perhaps indicating a stronger parental influence on the younger age group, while partners were cited as the main supporters for Group 2. There were no significant differences by module.

Table 5.25 – Q.6 Main support for decision to come to the Open University by group (%)

Main support for Open University study	Group 1 (n = 92)	Group 2 (n = 131)	Overall (N = 223)
Parent/guardian	54.3	30.5	40.4
Partner	19.6	40.5	31.8
Other family member	7.6	6.1	6.7
Friend	6.5	13.0	10.3
Other	5.4	3.1	4.0
Myself	6.5	6.9	6.7
Total	100	100	100

Similarly, when asked about the person who supported them most in their learning (see Table 5.26), Group 1 were significantly more likely to nominate their parents as

their main supports while Group 2 were more likely to nominate themselves, followed by their partners ($\chi^2 = 15.61$; d.f. = 5; $p = 0.008$). Nevertheless, students as a whole claimed they were principally self-reliant.

Table 5.26 – Q.17 Person who most supports learning by group (%)

Person who supports most	Group 1 (n = 89)	Group 2 (n = 136)	Overall (N = 225)
Parent/guardian	32.6	14.7	21.8
Partner	18.0	33.1	27.1
Other family member and friends	7.9	5.9	6.7
Other Open University students	2.2	2.9	2.7
My Open University tutor	7.9	3.7	5.3
Myself	31.5	39.7	36.4
Total	100	100	100

Thomas (2002) and Harrison (2006) claimed that students relied on their social networks to support them through their first year and the pilot study seemed to show that in a distance learning context, social networking sites such as Facebook might be important for supporting students' learning but these results were not replicated in the main study (see Table 5.27). It was notable that more Group 1 students disagreed than agreed that social networking sites were helpful in discussing their studies with other students. I found this surprising given the popularity of such sites among the

age group covered in the research and decided to investigate further by asking a specific question in the email interviews about students' use of Facebook and similar sites.

Table 5.27 – Q.16 Respondents who find Facebook helpful by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 90)	Group 2 (n = 134)	Overall (N = 224)
Strongly agree	10.0	11.2	10.7
Agree	17.8	22.4	20.5
Neutral	37.8	38.1	37.9
Disagree	30.0	21.6	25.0
Strongly disagree	4.4	6.7	5.8
Total	100	100	100

K101 students were exceptions to the general trend in that 50% strongly agreed or agreed that they found it helpful to discuss their studies with other students on Facebook (see Table 5.28), although the difference was not statistically significant. It is possible that K101 students who were studying towards a professional qualification may have found more benefit from the support of other students on Facebook but this was an area I wanted to probe in more depth in the email interviews. It was not clear why over half of S104 students gave a 'neutral' response to this question. It is possible, for example, that they chose this option because they

were not regular users of Facebook but the question did not offer a 'not applicable' response.

Table 5.28 – Q.16 Respondents who find Facebook helpful by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 106)	DD101 (n = 69)	K101 (n = 30)	S104 (n = 19)	Overall (N = 224)
Strongly agree	9.4	10.1	16.7	10.5	10.7
Agree	16.0	23.2	33.3	15.8	20.5
Neutral	41.5	29.0	36.7	52.6	37.9
Disagree	25.5	33.3	10.0	15.8	25.0
Strongly disagree	7.5	4.3	3.3	5.3	5.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Kember et al. (2001) claimed that students who had strong peer support developed a sense of belonging to the institution. They concluded that there was a link between a sense of belonging to a student's class group and better quality learning outcomes with increased student retention. The evidence of the survey did not appear to support this finding. While completion rates among those who responded to the survey were good (80% for Group 1 and 73% for Group 2), only just over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt part of the Open University community (see Table 5.29) or part of their tutor group (see Table 5.30).

Table 5.29 – Q.22 ‘I feel part of the Open University community’ by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 86)	Group 2 (n = 130)	Overall (N = 216)
Strongly agree	7.0	13.8	11.1
Agree	47.7	36.2	40.7
Neutral	29.1	39.2	35.2
Disagree	12.8	10.8	11.6
Strongly disagree	3.5	0.0	1.4
Total	100	100	100

There was very little difference between the two age groups in their sense of belonging to their tutor group (Table 5.30). Around half of the respondents in both groups agreed or strongly agreed they felt part of their tutor group and a substantial minority disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 5.30 – Q.23 ‘I feel part of my tutor group’ by group (%)

Response	Group 1 (n = 86)	Group 2 (n = 130)	Overall (N = 216)
Strongly agree	5.8	17.7	13.0
Agree	45.3	33.8	38.4
Neutral	30.2	29.2	29.6
Disagree	12.8	17.7	15.7
Strongly disagree	5.8	1.5	3.2
Total	100	100	100

DD101 students were the least likely to have a sense of belonging to their teaching group with 25% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they felt part of their tutor group (see Table 5.31), although there was no evidence to show that this has had a detrimental impact on DD101 student retention or pass rates.

Table 5.31 – Q.23 ‘I feel part of my tutor group’ by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 102)	DD101 (n = 68)	K101 (n = 28)	S104 (n = 18)	Overall (N = 216)
Strongly agree	14.7	7.4	25.0	5.6	13.0
Agree	37.3	39.7	32.1	50.0	38.4
Neutral	28.4	27.9	32.1	38.9	29.6
Disagree	16.7	20.6	7.1	5.6	15.7
Strongly disagree	2.9	4.4	3.6	0.0	3.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Students studying DD101 were also least likely to agree or strongly agree that they felt part of the Open University community (Table 5.32).

Table 5.32 – Q.22 ‘I feel part of the Open University community’ by module (%)

Response	AA100 (n = 102)	DD101 (n = 68)	K101 (n = 28)	S104 (n = 18)	Overall (N = 216)
Strongly agree	10.8	8.8	21.4	5.6	11.1
Agree	46.1	32.4	32.1	55.6	40.7
Neutral	32.4	41.2	32.1	33.3	35.2
Disagree	8.8	17.6	10.7	5.6	11.6
Strongly disagree	2.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	1.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100

There did not seem to be a link between feeling a sense of belonging to the institution or the tutor group and achieving excellent results. Of the eighteen students who achieved distinctions in their final assessment and answered questions 22 and 23, less than half agreed or strongly agreed that they felt part of the Open University community and only half agreed/strongly agreed that they felt part of their tutor group.

Reflections on the findings

The findings of the survey appeared to indicate that respondents possessed a number of characteristics that were likely to support a successful transition to the Open University: they felt well-prepared for the move to higher education and had clear study and career goals; they were confident about their academic progress and about

their ability to complete the module; they considered themselves to be independent learners; and they were committed to studying through distance learning. The Open University also overcame any practical barriers to study in being cost effective and allowing students the flexibility to combine their study with work and family commitments. Most students were studying for reasons related to their job or career and the vast majority were aiming to achieve an Open University qualification. I decided to include a question in the email interviews about their future career plans to investigate whether the specified qualification was related to a particular career goal.

The survey highlighted the importance of students' networks of intimacy in raising awareness of the Open University and supporting their transition to higher education. In an age where young people in particular are strongly reliant on the internet as a source of information, it was perhaps surprising that the majority of young students had heard about the Open University from a family member or friend and just over half knew friends or family with Open University study experience. It was not clear from this research study whether this is a phenomenon peculiar to young students but if the University is principally reliant on word of mouth in attracting young students to study, this may have implications for its future marketing strategy.

Parents had a key role to play in endorsing Group 1's initial decision to study with the Open University and in supporting them through their module. Group 2 students were more dependent on partners but both groups relied on family and friends for advice and support. I was interested in pursuing the role of networks of intimacy in students' educational experiences and included a question about this in the email interviews.

The pilot study had indicated that social networking sites might offer a helpful alternative to students who could not access face to face support and Facebook appeared to be very popular in society as a whole, particularly among younger age groups. I therefore found it surprising that respondents, especially those in Group 1, were ambivalent about the value of social networking sites to their learning and the possibilities for peer support that sites such as Facebook offered. It is possible that students in Group 1 were making unfavourable comparisons with their more recent school experience when they had had daily contact with their teachers and other students. They may have viewed Facebook as an inadequate substitute for face-to-face support. The role of Facebook in supporting students' learning was not clear and I decided to probe this issue in more detail in the email interviews.

The survey included two questions about the extent to which students felt part of their tutor group and the University as a whole. Respondents did not appear to have a strong sense of belonging to either but it is possible that this is something they share with other part-time students.

Chapter 6 - Survey responses to open questions

The six open questions in the survey were intended to elicit some more reflective comments from the respondents to help answer the research questions, particularly in relation to students' study experiences.

In Chapter 3, I made reference to the issue of lower response rates to open questions in surveys so I was prepared for respondents' answers to be brief and factual and for some students to opt out of the survey at the point when the open questions began. In fact, students provided a great amount of detail in their responses, some sharing personal information. This may have been because they felt protected by the anonymity of the questionnaire. Of the 231 respondents who answered four or more of the 26 questions, only 17 chose not to answer any of the open questions.

I explained in Chapter 3 that I used thematic analysis to identify the key themes in the open questions. I began my analysis by recording every student's response, by question number, in a table. I then read through the entire data set to get an overall impression of the main ideas, highlighting those that appeared regularly. As I became more familiar with the data, I started to group the responses into main categories. Every response was allocated a category and these were summarised into themes and in some cases, into sub-themes (Appendices 15 and 16).

My research questions do not refer specifically to issues of gender but there were some notable differences in the responses of men and women in the open questions, even accounting for the disparities in numbers. Where relevant, I comment on these

differences. My reflections on gender refer only to respondents studying AA100 and DD101, the two modules which had both men and women in the sample. Quotations in the text are coded by respondent number, module, gender and age group e.g. 30/D/W/1 = Respondent 30, DD101, woman, Group 1. This chapter continues the discussion begun in Chapter 5 of the two theoretical concepts of transitions and networks of intimacy; the concept of cultural capital was relevant to the email interviews and is therefore considered in Chapter 7.

Transitions

When asked to describe their study experiences, students highlighted several aspects of the Open University that eased their transition into higher education study, including the flexibility, the lower cost and the quality of the curriculum.

Given the fact that the majority of students were combining study and full- or part-time employment, it was perhaps unsurprising that students valued the flexibility of Open University study, particularly the freedom to choose where and when to study.

If I have 15 minutes spare before I have to go out, I can do a bit of work. I can read my textbook in the bath, or on the bus or while I'm eating my lunch. You don't get that kind of freedom with lectures in normal universities. I also like that there's no getting up early to go to class. I'm never awake in the mornings, so I don't even bother looking at my OU work until after lunch, when my brain is actually capable of working. Again, you wouldn't get that choice at a normal university. (99/A/W/1)

Students in both age groups also liked studying at their own pace, in their own home and having the opportunity to combine study and work.

I enjoy being able to study on my own time. I set myself work to do weekly, and can fit this around my work commitments and social life. (198/S/W/1)

Women in particular said flexibility was the feature they liked best about the Open University, possibly because many of them were balancing the demands of family, study and work.

I can study, work and spend time with my family. My partner gets involved and takes an interest in the modules and chapters I'm reading. Along with this I like that I've finally managed to input a routine that works well in my home. We have set bedtimes, study times and in general everything's more balanced. (67/A/W/1)

This was consistent with the findings of Question 4 in the survey where the main attraction of the University for women was the ability to study at home in their own time while men were attracted by the open access policy and the lower cost.

Students appreciated the fact that they did not incur debt and Open University modules were more affordable than other providers, although the introduction in 2012 of higher tuition fees and student loans may change this view in the future. The finding in the closed questions of the survey that K101 students were the least cost sensitive of all the respondents was replicated in the open questions where K101 were the only group that did not mention issues of cost in their responses. As passing K101 was an essential first step towards attaining a professional qualification, it is

possible that issues of cost were less important to K101 students than the opportunity to develop their career.

The majority of concerns about the cost of study came from AA100 students, particularly those in Group 2. This was consistent with the closed questions in the survey where AA100 students were more likely to be attracted to the University because of lower cost and with the finding that Group 2 students were more likely to say they were studying part-time because they could not afford the cost of full-time study.

The quality and variety of the curriculum was another aspect of Open University study that appeared to facilitate a smoother transition to higher education study. A number of respondents praised the range of courses, the interesting content, the quality of the teaching and the excellence of the supporting resources.

The material is incredibly engaging and easy to work with, and the interactive aspects are completely appropriate. (48/A/W/2)

K101 students were particularly focused on the positive learning experience and the career benefits of Open University study although one student highlighted the importance of being well-prepared and pointed out that the module was time consuming and had a heavy workload.

Be prepared as much as you can for the extent of work that you will be expected to do. When you first get your materials don't stress, like I did, just follow the Module Map as best you can and you cannot go wrong.

(272/D/W/2)

In line with Yorke's (2000a) emphasis on the importance of careful preparation, respondents stressed the value of good planning and organisation and described four clear stages to successful study. The first was a research phase where potential students were advised to consider the time taken to complete an Open University qualification, the study methods employed, the academic skills required and to ensure that a distance learning programme suited them.

I would say to make sure that distance learning is really something you are comfortable with before making a definite decision. I love this aspect of studying with the OU, but I can see how some people who don't have a lot of self-confidence or motivation could fail with it. I would also advise them to make sure they have the time to commit to a course, because the best way to get the most from the experience is to do as much of the work as possible, not just the assignments you need to pass to get the grades. (136/A/W/2)

The next stage involved having a clear plan/aim, choosing an appropriate course and planning the study time.

Make sure you stay organised. Plan what you will study for each week and try not to get behind. (147/A/W/2)

The third stage included keeping to a schedule and meeting deadlines and this was managed by effective organisation: starting early to get ahead, doing the preparation activities and reading the materials with the TMA questions in mind.

To read the course materials thoroughly with the question in mind when making notes, as if you don't you end up with pages and pages of notes that have no relation to the assignment question. (300/D/W/2)

In the final stage, potential students were urged to have a specific place in which to study, refer to the extra material on offer and attend the face-to-face tutorials.

You need to be self-motivated and driven as your learning is entirely your responsibility, not your tutors. You are given assignment dates, it's up to you to ensure you meet these. Attend tutorials, you'll meet others in the same position as you and can discuss what you don't understand with others on your course. (13/D/W/1)

Nevertheless, a number of respondents commented on aspects of their learning experience that made the transition to Open University study more difficult. The predominant concerns for both age groups before they began their Open University studies related to anxieties about their ability to manage the level and amount of work.

In AA100 the thing that concerns me most now is hitting another chapter about something I really don't understand. I took this module to start working towards a history degree and have found it hard to grasp things like the history of art and examining paintings in such a short time. I am also worried about falling behind because right now there are more than a few things going wrong. (150/A/W/2)

These fears seemed to be exacerbated when respondents did not have A-level (or equivalent) experience.

The last qualifications I had completed before the start of this module were GCSE's and I was a little worried I'd jumped in the deep end aiming for a degree without first completing A-Levels. I'd never studied at such a level

before so I was unsure what to expect and was rather scared that the workload would be too much and/or too hard for me. (303/A/W/1)

K101 students in Group 2 were particularly anxious about managing to keep on schedule and the potential difficulty of the work, especially after a break in study. Both of these may relate to the fact that K101 is linked to a professional qualification and students may therefore feel highly motivated but also under more pressure to succeed. Others had concerns about having the appropriate study skills to tackle the assignments.

I was worried that I would find it hard to find time to keep on top of my work. I was also worried about essay writing as it had been a long time since I last wrote one. (150/A/W/2)

Some highlighted the fast pace and difficulty of the work. Nearly all of the comments in this category came from women who were concerned about covering the work thoroughly enough.

I do think that maybe a week on some of the subject matter isn't enough. Though I am completing everything as I should, I do worry slightly that I'm not absorbing as much as I would if I were able to spend more time on a subject without worrying about falling behind. (48/A/W/2)

In contrast, others found the academic level and pace of the module too low and believed the module did not cater for those who wanted to progress more quickly.

I don't like the fact that most of the information and books are geared to people who haven't studied for years, people that don't even know how to use a computer. I understand there is a need for that, but maybe there should be

different sets of information for different abilities and ages. I don't enjoy feeling like the minority! (30/A/W/2)

Proportionally more men than women reported being concerned about the academic reputation of the Open University in comparison with other institutions and the impact this might have on their future employability. They questioned whether 'studying with the Open University may be intellectually or academically lacking' (40/A/M/1) and wondered whether 'a degree with the Open University was well received by employers when compared with a "brick" university' (110/A/M/1).

A number complained about the length of time it took to complete a qualification and presentation patterns which resulted in overlapping modules. Others disliked being compelled to study an interdisciplinary module as part of their qualification while some found assignment titles confusing or restrictive, the assessment schedule inflexible and the word limits constricting.

Ozga and Sukhnandan (19980, Thomas (2002) and Leese (2010) highlighted the importance of effective institutional support in the transition to higher education and there were indications in the responses that Group 1 students in particular needed more support during the induction period to prepare them for Open University study. One student, for example, had a number of concerns in this area.

Not knowing what to expect or how much time the studying would take up during the week. Not knowing how to use the OU website well and worrying about not understanding work properly doing it myself. (276/K/W/1)

Some of the anxieties raised related to practical issues such as how to submit assignments. It is possible that such concerns might easily have been resolved with better signposting of key information in induction materials.

A major concern for students in both age groups in the transition to Open University study was managing the conflicting demands of study, family and work, particularly when this was linked to worries about maintaining motivation.

I was concerned with my self-motivation and fitting it in around my work. I work 37 hours a week and was already having to fit some other commitments ... so the idea of 12 hours of study a week was slightly daunting. As for the self-motivation, all through sixth form and the college course I did afterwards, I was definitely one of the ones who left essays etc. to the last minute, so I was a little worried that I would leave myself all of the work to do at the last minute and then not have enough time to finish it all.

(99/A/W/1)

There were a number of concerns raised about managing study around family commitments but these were mentioned solely by women and represented about 10% of all the responses from women studying AA100 or DD101.

Being a full-time mum and working part-time, I was concerned about finding time to complete my assignments and to do all the book work and read up on the subject. (322/A/W/2)

The problems were exacerbated when students were also struggling to study on their own.

I'm finding myself with less and less time to study and because things I need to do come up at the last minute I find it hard to stick to a study time table and keep falling behind. I sometimes lack the motivation to study on my own as well and am constantly putting things off and doing them last minute which I fear will have a negative effect on the overall quality of my work.

(303/A/W/1)

For women with caring responsibilities, the problems of managing study and home life became particularly difficult without the support of other members of the family.

A key concern for one student was

finding the time to study with looking after my daughter as my husband doesn't help out much with looking after her. (58/A/W/2)

Women in particular relied on family members to support their learning by providing practical support for childcare and other household tasks.

Ensure you have a support team to take on some of your responsibilities now and again, children, housework etc. (304/D/W/2)

Davies et al. (2002) highlighted the issue of students' lack of confidence as a barrier to a successful transition to higher education. In the closed questions on the survey, students expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to complete the module but the open questions presented a rather different picture. Women appeared to be less self-confident than men or perhaps were more prepared to admit deficits in their skills or knowledge to a female researcher. They tended to compare themselves unfavourably with other students and to think their work was 'rubbish' (298/K/W/2).

Anxieties about a lack of ability as well as fear of failure were mentioned solely by women.

[I was concerned] that I would not be able to get the hang of distance learning as I like to be able to get things clarified there and then if I'm struggling. Also, that I wouldn't be as good at the module as I was in school and that I would fail. (100/A/W/2)

Concerns about assessment took on a much greater importance once students started to study in earnest. Respondents in both groups had concerns about doing well, maintaining standards and passing the final assessment.

I'm now concerned about doing well in all of my TMA's and getting an overall good grade/score for my whole course. (4/A/W/2)

At the time the research took place, some students had only just completed their first assignment and were waiting for feedback from their tutor. Their comments emphasise the importance of feedback early in the course to provide reassurance and help them assess their progress.

As this is the first marked assessment we have no previous feedback which leaves me unsure of what is expected from my assignment work. Hopefully this will be more clear on receiving some feedback from my tutor. (46/A/W/1)

One student commented on the value of positive feedback in improving her levels of confidence.

(I was) really happy with my first TMA score. It showed me I could still write to a reasonable standard and gave me more confidence to complete the next assignment. (300/D/W/2)

Some students in Group 1, with recent experience of assessment in school, wanted the reassurance of being able to measure their performance in relation to others in the tutor group. Women, in particular, had concerns about the lack of feedback on their work and some craved the ‘sense of competition that being in a normal classroom’ (205/S/W/1) would give them.

I suppose my biggest concern is if I'm doing well enough, or as well as I can do. We get our own grades, but we have no idea where we are in the class- which is something I'm used to from sixth form. In sixth form, you could judge whether you were doing well enough by comparing your progress to the others in your class. You can't really do that in OU, and it feels rude to ask people in the forums what grade they got. (99/A/W/1)

This would seem to be easily resolved without breaking confidentiality by giving students information about the range of marks achieved and the average mark for each assignment.

Networks of intimacy

A number of respondents emphasised the importance of their networks of intimacy – family, friends, tutors and other students – in providing practical and emotional support for their studies. Some respondents advised new students to

make sure that they have people around them who will help keep them motivated. (106/D/W/1)

McGivney (2004) and Yorke (2004) both emphasised the vital role of tutors in building confidence and providing supportive feedback and students in both age groups recognised the importance of tutors in providing effective study support.

The tutor I have has been such a huge help to me, especially over assignment week when I must have sent him so many emails but he still replied to them all with really helpful points that answered any questions I had. (89/A/W/1)

Respondents in Group 2, particularly those studying K101, seemed to place most value on the support of their tutor and that provided by tutorials and forums, possibly because they had greater reliance on tutor support in helping them to study towards a professional qualification.

Your tutor is always to hand if you need help as are other students. There is a real community vibe to the forum and you always find someone in the same boat as you. I like that there are constant assignments and iCMA's [interactive computer-marked assignments] as they give you lots of comment on your progress. (34/K/F/2)

Nevertheless, a substantial number of responses from both groups related to the lack of tutor support, particularly the difficulties of quick access to a tutor in case of problems and the limited opportunity for face-to-face contact.

I don't like not being able to just pop and see my teacher which is what I have got used to after being at secondary school and 6th form in recent years. (312/D/W/1)

AA100 students seemed particularly concerned about the lack of face-to-face support from tutors and other students.

I'm still concerned that perhaps I could do with more face-to-face time with my tutor and tutor group. (140/A/W/2)

Now I have been studying and making the tutorials/deadline. I am concerned I am not completing things correctly and find I could use more step by step support. (161/A/W/1)

A number of responses referred to the lack of communication and interaction with other students with a consequent loss of peer support. For some students, this led to feeling of isolation, both in their academic studies and socially.

I found it slightly disorienting at first when I realised how isolated the study was going to be and I also miss the interaction I had in full-time study when I could ask for clarification or help from the tutor or other students. (111/A/W/2)

Cook and Leckey (1999) highlighted the difficulties some students had in becoming autonomous learners and students in both age groups reported feeling isolated in their academic work. Women appeared to be particularly concerned about working on their own.

I was worried that I might not be able to cope with working alone all the time – this is the first time that I have received education without a tutor always present. I was worried that I would either fall behind or that I'd not be doing the work correctly. (283/D/W/1)

As well as increasing feelings of isolation, the lack of social contact with tutors and other students also seemed to have an impact on motivation.

Studying alone through distance learning it can be hard to motivate myself sometimes, and it can feel a bit isolated. (318/A/W/2)

When describing their attitude towards independent study, men seemed to make a clear distinction between studying and tuition. In responding to the closed questions in the survey, the majority said they preferred to study on their own and yet given a free choice, they expressed a strong preference for face-to-face tuition. There are indications in the open questions that some students may have found a way of meeting both their preferred learning style and their support needs by combining independent study with effective tutor support.

Truthfully, when in a classroom environment I become distracted very easily. I will cheat if I can get away with it, leaving me uncertain about my own academic abilities. With the OU I am forced to take my studying seriously and the result will be an accurate reflection of how much work I have put in. In short, I like working by myself and having a tutor at hand to help me if need be. (3/A/M/2)

Students in Group 1 seemed to be more reliant on their networks of intimacy and were more likely to experience social isolation. It is possible that they were making comparisons with their recent experience of face-to-face support at school/college and with the social experiences of friends who were attending full-time institutions.

If I'm honest, I sometimes feel a little left out with regard to the social side of university life, particularly when talking to my friends who are at traditional universities. (133/D/W/1)

Only students studying AA100 and DD101 commented on the social aspects of Open University study; there were no responses in this category from K101 and S104 students. It is possible that the Health and Social Care students were more focused on making progress towards attaining a professional qualification but it is not immediately clear why the social aspects of Open University study appeared to be less important for students studying science.

Women in both age groups seemed to rely more heavily than men on social interaction with tutors and other students to support their learning. For example, they were particularly worried about missing the opportunity to attend tutorials, something not mentioned by men.

I am struggling to find the time to attend tutorials and I am concerned that I may be missing out on work and discussions that would help me with my work. (226/A/W/2)

There were a number of responses related to students' difficulties with tutorial attendance. These included tutorials or day schools that were either too far away or at the wrong time and the concerns came predominantly from women.

Tutorial groups are only on Saturdays, I have to work Saturdays so it's hard for me to get them off and I want to make use of all study options available. It would be good to have evening classes too for people in a similar situation.

Also having not met my tutor yet I'm a bit nervous about asking questions, it doesn't feel very personal. (50/A/W/2)

The timing of tutorials raises questions about the implementation of the University's equality and diversity policy. As well as affecting those who have to work at weekends, the decision to hold tutorials on a Saturday could also disadvantage those who keep Saturdays for religious observance.

Men and women from both age groups complained about the small number of tutorials or day schools but the expressed need for extra tutorial support was contradicted by a number of women who reported feeling inadequate when they compared themselves with other students at face-to-face tutorials and claimed they found the experience undermining.

Tutorials can make me feel like I am not doing as well as some of the others. I like to read things through thoroughly on my own. (107/A/W/2)

For those who were unable to attend face-to-face tutorials, the online environment seemed to offer a viable alternative for study support and an opportunity for fostering new social networks. For example, students had access to online synchronous tutorial sessions using the Elluminate system as well as other online support activities. While some respondents found these helpful, others, particularly women, disliked electronic options such as the online forums or found them confusing and unhelpful.

I find these to be so confusing at times just due to the sheer number of topics that can be discussed under one heading and the fact the replies can be posted all over the place so if you drop in and out of forum it can be really difficult to know what is actually being said. I also find some topics to just be

really off putting in the forums as they may be made so far ahead of the course plan that unless you've read the whole book you won't know what the topic is in reference to but by the time you get up to the certain in the reading so many people will have commented it's hard to understand. I don't feel this is linked to my lack of understanding of the technology as I'm constantly on social networking sites and am used to all different types of interaction but I do just generally find this one really confusing. (89/A/W/1)

One of the questions raised by the responses to the open questions was whether the young age of the students had had an impact on their ability to develop new networks of intimacy to support their Open University study. The age of the students did appear to raise concerns amongst those who had anxieties about their lack of life experience in comparison with older students.

One of the things that concerned me most about studying with the OU was the fact that being so young I felt like I wouldn't have enough life experience or knowledge to complete some of the activities and that the work would be aimed to a much older age range than I fit into. Also I felt that my answers to the assignments would reflect that I might not have the knowledge expected of an older student. I was under the impression that the OU courses were designed for people adding to qualifications and to those who already had careers not people like myself who are hoping to use this degree to gain a start on a career path. (89/A/W/1)

A small number from Group 1 also mentioned that there were not many students of their own age in their tutor groups which may have added to their sense of isolation.

There aren't a lot of face-to-face tutorials, and I haven't met anyone who is around my age yet. (201/A/M/1)

Nevertheless, some of the responses about social integration were positive and encouraging. Prospective students who were concerned that Open University study was primarily for older people were reassured that

more mature people on the courses are still friendly and kind and shouldn't put you off. (1/A/W/1)

Additional findings arising from the data

Another issue emerged from the analysis of the open questions in addition to the two main theoretical concepts that were the focus of the discussion. Respondents from both groups seemed to agree that a love of learning was an essential prerequisite in their study success, an issue that relates to the work of Dweck (1999) and which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7. A number of respondents described the 'personal enrichment' and sense of achievement they had experienced from Open University study as well as the opportunity it gave them to improve their job and career prospects. Some had rediscovered a love of learning.

I'm also very much enjoying the subjects of study, and feel someone has taken a key and opened up my mind again. (157/A/W/2)

Respondents also listed other personal characteristics that they believed were needed for successful study. These included effective time management, the capacity for hard work, determination/drive and the desire to learn. The four characteristics that

were mentioned most often were self-motivation, commitment/dedication, the ability to study independently and self-discipline.

Think about it, it's not for everyone. You have to be self-motivated, otherwise it doesn't work. That doesn't mean you're not going to have support, you will get it when you need it but it all starts and ends with you. (6/A/W/1)

It is a good way of studying but it is hard and you need enough self-discipline and motivation to complete the work and assignments. It has to be the right way of learning to suit you. (276/K/W/1)

Reflections on the open questions

The information elicited from the closed questions on the survey was largely factual and objective while the open questions encouraged more reflective responses about respondents' thoughts and feelings and provided some new perspectives on students' study experiences.

Young students in the study highlighted a number of practical factors that eased their transition into Open University study such as the lower cost and the ability to combine study with work and family commitments. Women in particular valued the opportunity to work flexibly at home. Many students also praised the quality of the teaching materials and supporting resources although there were differing opinions about the appropriateness of the academic level and pace of the module.

There were indications that Group 1 students in particular would have benefited from increased levels of learning support during the induction period. This covered

practical issues such as information about how to access websites, submit assignments and the amount of study time required each week. A key concern for many students was finding sufficient time to study around their work and family commitments and women with caring responsibilities often relied on the support of family members to assist with childcare and other household tasks.

Students' networks of intimacy – family, friends, tutors and other Open University students – had an important role in supporting students' learning and maintaining their motivation. As well as providing emotional and practical support, these networks also helped to mitigate the effects of social and study isolation experienced by a number of students. Women in particular appeared more reliant on interaction with tutors and other students to provide support and encouragement for their learning but in some cases there was a contradiction between their expressed desire for more tutorials and their anxiety about the undermining effects of comparing themselves unfavourably with other students in their tutor group.

There were differences between students studying the four modules in the extent to which they relied on their networks for support. K101 students were more likely to say they valued the support of tutors in developing their learning. In contrast, AA100 respondents were more likely to raise concerns about the lack of face-to-face support from tutors and other students. They and DD101 students appeared to be more reliant on social interaction to support their learning and to believe that they were missing out on the social aspects of the university experience although it is possible that these differences related to the age or gender distribution in the sample or other sampling peculiarities.

The online environment provided an opportunity for students to access tutorials remotely and to develop new social networks that would support their learning. Having grown up in the age of the internet, I had expected young students to be confident about using new technologies and to welcome the opportunity to have online support but a number of students found the online seminars and forums confusing or even unhelpful. The closed questions on the survey had also revealed an ambivalent attitude from students about the educational value of social networking sites so the role of the online environment in students' learning was an area I pursued in more detail in the email interviews.

One of the other areas I wanted to explore was the concept of cultural capital and the potential impact of students' past educational and biographical experience on their Open University study. As this was a topic that was better suited to a descriptive response, I had excluded it from the survey questions but resolved to examine it in more detail in the email interviews. I also decided to ask the email interviewees for information about their previous educational qualifications to investigate whether there was a possible link between these and successful study (Appendix 9).

It is possible that students' ability to adapt successfully to Open University study may have been influenced by their past educational experiences. The focus on student concerns in Questions 18 and 19, for example, revealed some notable differences between the responses to the open and closed questions of the survey, particularly about levels of academic confidence. The closed questions had indicated that students were very confident about their preparedness for study and their ability to complete the course but there were indications in the open questions of underlying anxieties and self-doubt, particularly among women.

Chapter 7 - Analysis of email interviews

The questionnaire responses had begun to build a picture of students' reasons for studying with the Open University and their study experiences but one of the disadvantages of surveys is that there is no opportunity for the researcher to ask follow-up questions or to probe certain areas in more depth. This is what I hoped to achieve in the email interviews.

At the end of Chapters 5 and 6, I indicated a number of topics I wanted to pursue further including: students' career goals; their past educational experiences; the influence of their networks of intimacy on their educational decisions and their progress on the module; the impact of cultural capital on students' ability to adapt successfully to higher education study; and the role of the online environment in students' learning experience. I also asked interviewees for details about their GCSE and A-Level results, information that was not available from the University databases. This was for two reasons: first to investigate any possible relationship between attainment in public examinations and success in completing Open University modules; second to examine whether the University's open access policy was a key factor in the interviewees' decision to study at the Open University. The University has traditionally been viewed as an institution for those who had missed out on earlier opportunities to study at higher education level, including those who did not have the qualifications to gain access to an undergraduate course at a face-to-face university. I wanted to investigate whether the younger students in my study were in this category or they had the necessary university entry qualifications and

were making an active choice to come to the Open University in preference to other institutions. The answers to both these investigations were likely to have a bearing on any recommendations for student support that arose from the research.

Responses to the email interviews

In Chapter 4, I gave details of my sampling strategy. The 100 students in my sample were sent the same five questions by email. The first three were open questions with a number of prompts to help them frame a response (Appendix 9). The last two questions asked about their previous institution and their public examination results.

Of the 100 contacted, there was a 40% response rate. AA100 students were more likely to agree to take part than students studying the other three modules and those in Group 2 were more likely to respond (43.5%, 27 from 62 contacted) than Group 1 (34.2%, 13 from 38). The response rate for men and women was very similar at around 40%, although the number of male respondents was very small (7).

Thirty-three students entered into further dialogue by email after the first set of questions was sent. I noticed that students appeared to respond more readily when I was able to reply to their emails almost immediately but this was not always practical.

In Chapter 4, I explained that I contacted 36 students at the end of their course to ask them to identify the key factors that enabled them to complete their module successfully. Sixteen interviewees responded to this email, eight from each age group.

I noted from the data I had collected on examination results (see Chapter 4 and Appendix 8) that these sixteen respondents included a high proportion of those who had achieved the highest grades in the final assessment of their Open University module. Seven of the ten students who attained a distinction responded to the final questions which appears to support Deys' (1997, p. 221) claim that students who perform well in education settings are more likely to respond to surveys (see also Porter and Umbach, 2006, p. 241; Remedios and Richardson, 2012).

Academic profiles

I noted that there were differences between the two age groups in the numbers having two or more A-levels. (Appendix 8 includes information about their previous qualifications and the final result attained for their Open University module). 63% of Group 2 interviewees had two or more A-levels – a similar proportion to the sample group as a whole (62%, 142 of 231). In Group 1, however, the figure was much higher at 77%.

There were also differences between the two groups in the proportion of interviewees achieving the highest grades at A-level (A*, A, B). All ten A-Level students in Group 1 had three or more A-levels and 71% (22 of 31 A-levels achieved) of these were at the highest grades. This compared with 42% (21 of 50) in Group 2. This may relate to a sampling issue but it could also suggest a shift in the educational profiles of younger students (aged 18–20) coming to the Open University towards those with higher A-level grades. Nearly three quarters of Group 1 interviewees had high enough grades to attend a wide range of face-to-face universities but seemed to have

made a positive choice in favour of the Open University, possibly an economic decision in response to the recent increases in student fees.

I noted in Chapter 4 that I compared the GCSE/A-level grades of the 40 email interviewees with their Open University examination result. An important aspect in considering appropriate forms of student support for younger students was the possible link between their previous qualifications and their final Open University assessment. If it could be established, for example, that students with lower level qualifications were less likely to complete their course successfully, it might help to identify particular students who would benefit from additional support. The evidence from this study appeared to paint a more complex picture. While there seemed to be a relationship in Group 1 between their A-level grades and performance in their Open University assessment (see Appendix 8), this was not the case for Group 2. In Group 1, the three students with the highest A-level grades were also the ones who achieved a distinction. In Group 2, however, the majority of students who attained distinctions in their final Open University assessment (5 out of 7) had two or three middle grade A-levels (or equivalent) and others with higher grades or more A-levels attained a Pass grade. One possible explanation is that the impact of educational qualifications recedes as students get older and other factors become more important in the successful completion of the module, such as greater life experience and maturity. It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate other research into the relationship between the entry and exit qualifications of undergraduates but it was an area that could be pursued in a future study.

Thematic analysis

In Chapter 4, I described the thematic analysis process I used for the email interviews and the themes I identified are summarised in Appendix 14. My discussion in this chapter considers the themes in the context of the two theoretical concepts I highlighted in earlier chapters: transitions and networks of intimacy but also includes an examination of the issue of cultural capital. I explained at the end of Chapter 4 that cultural capital only emerged as an important concept in the email interviews when I asked students to reflect on their past educational and biographical experiences so it is discussed in detail in this chapter. Quotations used in the analysis are referenced by student number, module studied, gender and age group e.g. (10/A/M/2). They are reported verbatim with only minor adjustments to spelling and punctuation when it was necessary to clarify the meaning.

Transitions

In Chapter 2, I discussed the importance of careful preparation in ensuring a successful transition to higher education study and there was evidence in the email interviews that students had given thoughtful consideration to a number of factors that were likely to impact on their transition to the Open University. These included academic, practical and financial issues. The survey had shown, for example, that one of the attractions of Open University study was the lower cost in comparison with other institutions but the email interviews brought a different perspective in revealing that respondents were not just considering the module fees but appeared to be making a more considered economic assessment of the value of higher education

study. For some, the choice of the Open University was based on financial pragmatism, particularly those who did not want to relinquish a paid post that benefited their long term career plans or simply could not afford to give up work to take up full-time study.

I had a good job ... and was very reluctant to give that up to go off to uni. I liked the fact the OU was so much cheaper and I could get financial support while earning and still living at home. (230/A/W/1)

Some students also recognised that the Open University's open access policy was an essential factor in their transition to higher education. Over a quarter of respondents to the survey as a whole and ten of the forty email respondents had less than the normal minimum entry requirement at face-to-face universities of two passes at GCE Advanced Level and, for them, the University provided an opportunity for higher education study that would have been denied elsewhere. One student, for example, had had health problems and had never completed her A-levels. She 'hated the typical educational environment' but had always enjoyed learning and was aiming for a career as a librarian.

I did (and still do) have ambition in terms of a future career and so I did really want to continue studying which is what brought me to the OU ... I would find it near impossible to get into any other uni without any UCAS points. The OU allowed me to study despite my educational background. (303/A/W/1)

The responses to the open questions highlighted that the transition to higher education study would have been unmanageable for many students without the

ability to combine their Open University course with work and family commitments and to study at home in their own time and at their own pace. Around a third of email respondents in both groups confirmed that this was one of the most positive features of their study experience.

I like how I can fit my studying around my life and don't have to have set times and days in which I study. If, for instance, I ever need to work an extra shift at work, I can make up for this lost study time later whereas I have friends at other universities who've been in this situation and simply had to miss a lecture. I like how I can pick where I left off in a time that suits me and my needs. (303/A/W/1)

Students also praised the course content and the variety of teaching methods. Group 2 students in particular were enthusiastic about the broad range of topics on offer and module materials that supported their learning.

I thought the study materials were written very well. I found the tasks easy to engage with, even when they were on subjects I initially thought I would struggle with. (73/A/M/2)

As a result, email respondents described a 'growing confidence' in their ability to 'achieve at a higher level' (13/D/W/1) and pleasure in 'opening (their) mind to new ideas' (202/D/W/1).

It was as if my brain danced with delight at being stimulated again.
(58/A/W/2)

Students who considered they were managing their transition to higher education study successfully identified themselves as self-reliant learners. A large proportion of

respondents in both groups expressed a preference for independent study and found that the learning and teaching model at the Open University suited their learning style.

All in all though, I think that the structure of the OU really works for me as I do prefer independent study but there are enough options of support and you can participate as little or as much as you want which is great if you have other commitments as well. (37/A/W/2)

Respondents appeared to adapt more readily to Open University study when they had come from institutions that fostered independent learning styles. One student believed that the teaching style at her college meant she felt very well prepared for University study.

The independence I experienced at college meant a lot of work had to come from you. You had to be motivated to work hard yourself, without being constantly reminded of work and deadlines by your teachers. It helped me to get more organised and to sensibly consider how I could best use my free time for both study and friends and how best to balance the two. (13/D/W/1)

In contrast, students who had come from schools with high levels of personalised academic support found the transition to Open University study more difficult. One student acknowledged that she may have experienced similar problems at a face-to-face higher education institution but perhaps not to the same degree as the Open University where she believed more self-study was required.

I think school and university are very different. I went to a small school of only 400 girls and the sixth form was also relatively small so we had a lot of

face-to-face time with our teachers and lots of support. The teachers' offices were always open to us and I know if I didn't understand something, I just had to walk down the corridor and ask one of them. Perhaps I became so used to that, that I found it hard to adjust to self-study to such a degree as with the OU. I know that all the unis require self-study and it's not the same as school, so I am sure that would have been the case had I have gone to King's or anywhere else. It is hard when there is something I don't understand as there isn't really anyone I can ask at that moment, unless I note down my question and remember to ask it at the next tutorial.

(56/A/W/2)

It is possible that there is a relationship between the teaching and learning styles of the students' previous institution and their ability to adapt to Open University study. It could also be argued, however, that a student's successful adaptation to distance learning is as much to do with their own skills and knowledge and their personal biographies as the impact of their school/college experience (see also Fuller et al., 2008).

While the study experience of most email respondents was largely positive, there were features of Open University that posed challenges in the transition to higher education study. One of the main problems for most students was time management. Respondents had to be particularly committed when faced with the difficulties of 'juggling' (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 38) family commitments, University study and full-time work.

Coming home at six o'clock after being at work all day and picking up your OU course book can be quite a challenge! But I like to keep focused and think

it would be very easy to get left behind if you lack that motivation and dedication to begin with. (46/A/W/1)

Students acknowledged that Open University study was ‘very time consuming’ and social life had had to ‘take a back seat’ It was also ‘quite hard finding time to have a break or holiday’ (13/D/W/1), particularly for those studying the equivalent of full-time. Several of them had developed particular strategies for managing their workloads: planning study time well in advance; getting ahead of the study calendar; stealing every opportunity to study, even for short periods; and leaving out any sections of the set work that were not related to the assessment tasks.

I personally find the time restraints the hardest thing and have found the only way to keep up (especially as I am now overlapping the end of my first module and the start of my second) is to skip chapters that are not related to the essays, to give myself more time with the ones that are. (30/A/W/2)

Some only managed to keep on top of things by dint of working part-time or being unemployed. One student recognised that he would not have been able to give as much time and attention to his studies if he had have been working full-time.

At times, I get asked by friends and family and feel that I have to explain to them why I am only working part-time at the moment and some of them can't understand. But working full-time would more than likely lead to me missing deadlines, rushing assignments, falling behind in my work and ultimately giving up my studies altogether. (143/A/M/2, underlining shows italics in original)

A number of those who had embarked on the equivalent of full-time study while working were struggling with the workload and assessing the wisdom of their decision. Some were planning to study only one module in the following year to improve the quality of their study experience.

I am also still contemplating slowing down a bit and doing one module at a time. Not only because of the pressure of two modules but because I so enjoy all of the assignments and doing outside research etc. that I have found I don't have enough time to do everything I want to, read everything I want to read. I would like to have the luxury of time to fully delve into every subject and aspect of the course. (79/A/W/2)

A number of students believed that having a clear study or career goal was a key factor in making a successful transition to Open University study. While Group 2 students had often had experience of work and were looking for a change of career, Group 1 students were more likely to be embarking on their careers and the majority came to the University with a defined career path.

My ultimate goal is to work in child or adolescent psychology and so I'm undertaking a BSc in Psychology with the OU... Career aspirations were probably the biggest driving factor in me committing to the module. (195/D/W/1)

Some students attributed their reluctance to pursue higher education in the past to the absence of a career aim.

I did consider university and had a place to study nursing but I was unsure what I wanted to do and did not really feel at the time that a degree would benefit me. (101/A/W/2)

Others later regretted their decision to leave education and wanted to return to learning.

My family, I think, always intended for me to go to university from college sixth form etc. but when I was younger, I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so to me it seemed pointless in studying anything that would perhaps later be useless. I have also though regretted leaving sixth form but I know I just have to move on from that now. I started looking at the OU because I wanted to study something again. (286/A/W/2)

For some, the lack of a clear career goal had been a key factor in their educational experience since sixth form and had had a major impact on their motivation to study.

I think one of the main reasons for not really trying hard was that I didn't ever know what I wanted to do (as a job). My friends around me all had plans and I could never settle on anything. (30/A/W/2)

This student's indecision about a future career had led her to take a gap year and experience a number of roles before realising that she wanted to work with young people. Her epiphany came when she found a job as a special needs teaching assistant in a speech and communication school.

Here I found my calling. I loved being with the students, I loved teaching them things and I loved being creative for them. I began to develop my now

firm loves: teaching and writing. This is what brought me back to the OU.

(30/A/W/2)

In the same way that a career aspiration had brought some students to the University in the first place, fixing on their career or study goals gave them the motivation to continue studying, even when things became difficult.

I believed that starting the course with a set career goal in mind did help to motivate me throughout the course as I felt I was striving to do well in order to secure a highly regarded job role as an end result of my degree.

(89/A/W/1)

Several other students reported that their decision to become an Open University student followed a period of uncertainty when they had been reassessing their life situation and future career. Some seemed to be motivated to come to the University at the point when they felt trapped in uninteresting employment and realised that a degree would be a passport to improved career and job prospects. One student, for example, had achieved good grades in her animal management course at college but

unfortunately, I did nothing with these grades because I had the opportunity to work with Tesco. I have worked for Tesco for 4 years and I felt like I was stuck in a rut and I wanted better things for myself. (123/K/W/2)

Similarly, another student had had a series of 'rubbish jobs' after dropping out of university and wanted to study again but was concerned she would 'have a bad experience like before'. She was motivated by a desire to 'prove to myself and others that I could get a degree'.

I started to think about what I wanted to do with my life and knew having a degree would help give me more options. (47/A/W/2)

Consistent with the findings of the survey, the email respondents expressed high levels of confidence in their ability to complete their module although the picture is often one of growing confidence over the life of the module, rather than strong confidence from the outset.

I felt confident I would complete the modules from the start, but I was nervous about how I'd manage the assignments and whether it would be a big step up from college, but as the courses have progressed, I feel that I am managing well and am happy in my progress and don't feel out of my depth, so my confidence has grown as the courses have progressed. (13/D/W/1)

Such confidence appeared to be justified as all the email interviewees in Group 1 and 93% of Group 2 passed the module, a substantially higher percentage than the sample group as a whole.

Nevertheless, the surface confidence often masked some underlying anxieties, particularly around the area of assessment, and was often related to students' past educational experiences.

I'm 85% sure I will pass this module but there is always a chance I will somehow flunk the EMA. (110/A/M/1)

Students who had not passed A-levels often faced particular challenges in studying at higher education level.

Coming back into study was difficult and quite a daunting experience as I hadn't done anything as advanced or difficult before. It is a lot more advanced than GCSEs. (161/A/W/1)

Similarly, some Group 2 students struggled to regain their academic confidence after a break of more than five years.

I was very nervous about coming back into my studies after having my daughter and although those around me said I was more than capable, I questioned my own abilities. (279/D/W/2)

It was not always the case, however, that Group 2 students had difficulty adapting to study, even after a break of 5-6 years, as long as they had developed relevant study skills from their earlier experience.

I think my previous A-level study has really helped me come into the first module of the OU with a sound base to develop my skills and the fact that two of my A-levels are within the Humanities area has really helped as the core skills are transferable to my study now. It also means I am familiar with essay writing and analysing sources etc. and because I haven't had too long out of study (6 years) it is still reasonably in mind when working on my OU study. (37/A/W/2)

Women tended to have lower levels of confidence overall and to express more anxiety than men about the difficulties of study.

I initially found it quite intimidating coming back to studying and was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up with the academic demands of the course or put enough time in, particularly as I work shifts. (101/A/W/2)

Nonetheless, some Group 1 students who had had much more recent study experience believed that they had an academic advantage over those who had been out of formal education for a longer period.

I partly feel that I could be at an advantage to other students, maybe because I have only just left school and so do have that learning mentality still fresh in my mind. (110/A/M/1)

Cultural capital

In Chapter 2, I noted that I would consider the concept of cultural capital in the context of students' past biographical and educational experiences. Leese (2010, p. 241) claimed, for example, that cultural capital relates to family background, commitment to education and the amount of resources available to students and can impact on their ability to make a successful transition to university. A number of students stated that their reason for studying at the University related to improving their job or career but this headline reason often masked a more complex set of motivations affected by past educational experiences and the values and attitudes inherited from their family. Parents, for example, had a major role in encouraging education aspiration.

My dad was a prime influence. He was always very interested in my education, wanted me to go to university, but ideally wanted me to pursue a science career. (10/A/W/2)

Students who inherited a belief in the value of education and received encouragement to achieve their best appeared to feel confident in pursuing their goals.

[My dad] has always encouraged me to work hard, aim high and he's taught me if you work hard, you will get what you deserve. He has always encouraged me to read, helped me in my school work and proofread my coursework for me. (13/D/W/1)

The reasons students gave for studying with the Open University were often a reaction to different forms of disruption in their educational biography. In some cases, for example, their progress at school and access to university had been adversely affected by ill health or personal circumstances.

I found school and college quite difficult as I get tired very easily. The long hours and travel to college made this worse and so I think this inhibited my learning. (195/D/W/1)

Several students had felt confined by the regimentation in school and what they saw as a utilitarian approach to education where the focus on passing examinations took precedence over the enjoyment of learning. Some had had to endure an environment that was not conducive to learning or had even felt personally threatened. These experiences had had a long lasting impact on their capacity to learn.

I absolutely hated secondary school. I was heavily bullied and my grades suffered for it and I didn't get on well with the regimented exam structure where you have to drill in certain facts rather than actually learn and explore a subject for the sake of enjoyment. I genuinely feel that a lot of my creativity

was crushed within secondary school and I'm only just recovering it now.

(268/D/M/2)

Others had enjoyed school in the early years and been inspired and enthused by their teachers but the problems often began in the sixth form where a substantial proportion disliked the teaching style, felt restricted by the numerous rules and regulations and the lack of independent learning.

I found 6th form restrictive because of the time and day restraints, the geographical constraints (sitting at a desk continuously in a few rooms, all indoors), the fact that I had to go, otherwise I would be judged in certain ways and seen to be failing academically, the fact that everything was geared towards exams and careers, neither of which I believed in much. (202/D/W/1)

This student raised challenging questions about the nature of the education system and the impact of cultural capital. She described herself as coming from a

middle class family who helped me to strive for high results, which I did, coming out with 3 A-levels at AAB. (202/D/W/1)

Her educational background and the cultural capital inherited from her family made her a successful student within the system but at the same time, she rejected its 'rigid and limiting' structures and the pressure she felt from others to have a specific career aim. She had decided to eschew a 'traditional career' in favour of pursuing her interest in community and environmental projects.

A number of students had lacked support or been given poor advice at school and this had affected their A-level grades. One student, for example, had been told on her first day of sixth form that one of her subject choices at A-level was no longer

available and she had to study an alternative. The resulting D grade at A-level meant that her university options were limited.

I had a few offers and did have the possibility of going to university. The thing was I had aspirations and hopes of where I wanted to go but the reality was that I felt I would be going to a university that I didn't really want to go to because I hadn't done as well in my studies as I had hoped. (46/A/W/1)

Students appeared to have very clear ideas about what constituted a 'good' university in their eyes and some were not prepared to compromise by accepting an alternative institution. One student, for example, took a gap year when her Russell Group university of choice did not make her an offer. She studied with the Open University to improve her chances of being accepted the following year and was successful.

Poor educational experience, however, was not always the fault of the school. Some students, on their own admission, had not been good scholars.

I enjoyed secondary school. I did not really enjoy studying and would leave any homework until the last minute. My main concerns were playing football and enjoying myself; my focus was not on studying. I was always a 'could do better' student. I could have achieved much better grades had I bothered to study but I was able to pass (just!) without studying and in my naivety, I deemed this acceptable. (73/A/M/2)

Students in both groups reported substantially more negative than positive experiences in their education up to sixth form and in many cases these experiences had restricted their higher education choices. There were, however, examples of

students who had actively selected the Open University in preference to other full-time institutions.

One such case was a student whose two A* and one A grade at A-level would probably have secured her a place at most full-time institutions of her choosing. She was a high achiever who had been encouraged by her family to value education and work hard from an early age. She had had a positive experience at school and had enjoyed the greater independence of the college experience but found the standard university offering

a bit limiting as there were always a few units of degrees that didn't interest me. (13/D/W/1)

For her, the attraction of the Open University was the breadth of its curriculum and the fact that the Open Degree was 'highly flexible' and enabled her to 'choose any subject of help or interest' to her.

Eight students in Group 2 had started courses at traditional universities before coming to the Open University but had not completed for a variety of reasons. Some believed they had missed opportunities in the past to benefit from their education and now had something to prove to themselves and others. One, for example, had not made a personal choice to go to university and had felt 'a little pushed into' it by his family who said that "if you don't go now, you never will". He had gone to university but dropped out after having 'a party for a year' and then regretted it four years later when he realised that 'lots of opportunities seem out of reach when you are not a graduate'. For him, Open University study was a chance to rectify the poor

choices he had made in the past. (This student went on to achieve a distinction in his final Open University assessment).

I was also a little disappointed in the way I had dropped out of university in the past. I know I have the commitment and determination to see the course out now which I lacked when I first went to university. I will feel a great sense of achievement and pride if I complete the course; it will feel like I have amended some of the mistakes I made by dropping out in 2007/8. (73/A/M/2)

A number of students identified themselves as the first in their family to go to university and were often given positive encouragement from family members who recognised the value of a university education.

I was strongly encouraged by my family, especially since I would have been the first in my family to attend. Both of my parents were very encouraging. They always wanted me to do as well as I could and to do better in life than they had. (111/A/W/2)

While families of first generation students were generally supportive and encouraging, they had had no experience of higher education to draw on in helping students to make appropriate choices or in understanding how the system worked.

My family were supportive but due to lack of knowledge they couldn't really give the advice I needed. ... (They) didn't understand the process of university and wondered why I just didn't go to the local one instead. (47/A/W/2)

This student felt she was 'forced to make a life changing decision in a matter of months with not as much information as I would have liked' (47/A/W/2). This

anxiety about making the right choice was also noted by Moogan and Baron (2003, p. 281). The main reason that nearly half of the students in their survey were apprehensive about making a choice about higher education study was that they considered it to be a major decision affecting their whole future.

Networks of intimacy

Students acknowledged the importance of the support of family, friends, employers and Open University staff/students in successful study. These networks had a key role in influencing students' educational decisions and appeared to carry particular weight when family members had had personal experience of Open University study.

My aunt who studied through the Open University is the only member of the family to try further education. Her recommendation and advice helped a lot when I was deciding whether to further my education. (67/A/W/1)

Students' decisions were made particularly difficult when they were given conflicting advice from the people closest to them. One first generation student, for example, experienced particular pressures in dealing with parental expectations about their choice of institution.

My mum was the first one I questioned. She wanted me to be happy but I always got the impression she didn't regard an OU degree very highly and coming from a family where no one had been to uni, I felt like she had always thought I would be the first to go to uni. I felt if I didn't go to Swansea maybe I would be letting her down. My girlfriend, on the other hand, listened to it

and from an objective point of view said the OU was the best choice for me. My two best friends both said the OU was the right decision as well. So in the end, I listened to my friends and my heart and tried to ignore what my mum had said, not an easy thing to do when she has a strong opinion and is not tactful in voicing it. (110/A/M/1)

Parents had an important role in providing practical support – ‘respecting my need to study away from everyone and without a lot of distractions’ (13/D/W/1) and in encouraging reluctant learners to meet assignment deadlines.

(My mum) was always asking how things are going in terms of my studies and when assignments/exams are and then reminding me constantly that I need to get the work done. She continues to do it to this day and I think it has been important at times to have that occasional ‘kick up the backside’.
(143/A/M/2)

They also assisted with childcare.

[My mum and dad] have been supportive throughout and they suggested I definitely choose the Open University and have offered support of child care for my daughter if I struggle to find time. (67/A/W/1)

Partners were more likely to be the main support for Group 2 students, especially in bolstering confidence and providing encouragement during difficult periods.

My partner has been excellent so far. When I study in the morning, he is there to sort out my daughter and if I have to pull an all-nighter, he is there to bring me drinks etc. There have been times when I have doubted myself and

my abilities and he is the one that makes me push myself further.

(279/D/W/2)

They were also engaged as motivational coaches and proof readers for Open University assignments (notwithstanding the risk of contravening the University's academic conduct rules).

My husband is brilliant at motivating me. He always reads through my essay the night before I send it and together, we make final tweaks. (30/A/W/2)

Friends had a key part to play in influencing students' educational decisions, particularly if they had had personal experience of higher education study.

One of the most encouraging people in my education is my best friend. ... He has always pushed me to apply for any courses that were available to me and has always been honest in saying if he thinks I had made any wrong choices ... I think the fact that he has always been very focused on where his education and career was going, it has helped to influence me. (89/A/W/1)

Friends also exerted unhelpful pressure at times.

I live with a friend. He often says you need to take a break. Other friends have commented that I have gone 'boring' as I am taking my study seriously now. (73/A/M/2)

Tutors too had a pivotal role in helping students in their transition to Open University study and supporting them to complete their modules. Students particularly appreciated the prompt replies to questions and the high quality of the feedback they received on their tutor marked assignments.

The thing that most helped me as a student is the quality of the feedback received after submitting an assignment. It is extremely helpful in developing and improving essays and the reflective assignments really make you notice the errors that you repeat. (73/A/M/2)

In their comments on effective sources of support, students in both groups cited face-to-face tutorials more frequently than any other category and students who were able to attend tutorials found them invaluable. Tutorials and day schools developed social contacts with tutors and other students, clarified understanding of particular parts of the module materials, provided help with assessed assignments and increased students' confidence.

I think [tutorials] are vitally important to my studies. I personally like the opportunity to have actual contact with other students and the tutors at the OU. I feel that tutorials and day schools shed a lot of light on the course materials and really help you to put it all into perspective. (46/A/W/1)

The experience of these students was in stark contrast to those who complained about the poor standards of teaching and the lack of face-to-face contact with tutors at conventional institutions.

I also disliked the general laissez-faire style of teaching. They would have essays set where the brief would be "Write an essay on culture and psychology", so you are essentially left to completely research it, and they'd validate your ability to research it with a score. I do like the freedom of research in essays but I didn't feel they were teaching me anything.

(10/A/W/2, underlining shows italics in original)

It is possible that the growing numbers of university students and the squeeze on university funding have led to a diminution in individual student support at traditional universities. It could be argued that this trend and the shift towards online delivery, even at face-to-face institutions, have led to a blurring of the distinction between full-time study and distance learning. Students who are prepared to accept the loss of the social experience at traditional institutions might feel that the small amount of face-to-face teaching they receive each week is a poor return for their investment in full-time study, and distance learning is a more cost effective option.

Students in Group 2 found particular value in interacting with other Open University students, particularly in mitigating feelings of isolation.

I have attended every tutorial so far and find them very beneficial to my studies. For start off, meeting other people on the course makes a huge difference and makes me feel like I am not alone, especially when I find things difficult. (279/D/W/2)

Nevertheless, social and academic isolation was a problem highlighted by many students. Group 1 students were more likely to report feeling isolated from their fellow students and from access to academic support, possibly because they had had very recent experience of studying alongside fellow students in school/college and were used to daily interaction with teaching staff and other students. Feelings of isolation often came to the fore when students were having difficulties with a specific aspect of their course.

Occasionally I do feel isolated when studying and get a bit down when I am stuck on something and have no one around to ask for help who is on the course. (89/A/W/1)

They were affected by 'feeling a lack of social involvement' (46/A/W/1) with other Open University students and wanted the reassurance of knowing others were experiencing similar issues.

I think the most difficult thing is not being able to discuss your ideas on a particular topic with other students while you're working through something, particularly as I'm not often able to get to tutorials. It would be nice to talk with people who are at the same level of learning as me and just discuss little student tips and tricks such as mnemonics to remember information.

(195/D/W/1)

For some students, the sense of social isolation appeared to increase as the module progressed.

All I had were my tutor groups (not particularly sociable or bound together) so after a few months it got extremely lonely. (10/A/W/2)

Kember et al (2001, p. 326) claimed that developing a sense of belonging to a student's class group was linked to better quality learning outcomes and increased student retention but from the point view of one student, it was hard to foster a sense of belonging to an academic community when attendance at tutorials was sporadic and there was little participation in tutor group forums.

Both my tutor group forums are dead. Tutor group attendance also doesn't help the group. Some people who attended the first one haven't been seen since. Some might attend one per three or four. (10/A/W/2)

Nevertheless, this student still felt she belonged to her tutor group because she participated fully in the group activities. In her eyes, there was a clear relationship between active engagement with her tutor group and feelings of belonging. 'I feel part of my tutor group because I contribute towards it'.

In response to his feelings of isolation, one student planned to change his strategy about tutorial attendance for future modules.

I felt I could easily cope with the workload and the essays without any help from peers. To an extent I have proved this to myself successfully, but in my later modules I definitely feel as though I shall attend the tutorials if they are nearby. This change of attitude has probably come due to loneliness.

(110/A/M/1)

Another student recognised that the ultimate responsibility for managing the work lay within themselves.

Support of others does help but it was up to me to get myself through it.

(47/A/W/2)

For some students who were unable to attend tutorials, online forums provided a viable and helpful alternative to face-to-face support.

I think the support I have received has been a lot better than any other I've experienced. I think it's great how if I'm struggling, I can contact other

students, tutors etc. for help by phone/email or through the forums. It's a lot easier than relying on remembering my query a few days later in a classroom. (67/A/W/1)

In recent years, there has been an increasing reliance at the Open University on the online delivery of materials and the provision of online support. It would be easy to assume that younger students who have grown up in the age of the internet and mobile devices would be comfortable in an online environment but the responses from the email interviews seemed to indicate that students had a more ambivalent attitude towards online activities. Some were observers rather than participants in online teaching sessions while others, particularly women, found the forums daunting and avoided using them.

I don't visit my tutor group forums because I find it quite intimidating and it always appears everyone seems to know more than I do on the current topic. This knocks my confidence and so I find it easier to get on with my studies oblivious to other students as I don't have anyone to compare myself with that way. (303/A/W/1)

Selwyn (2011, p. 90) also observed that many students in his study were content to be passive rather than active participants in the forums and regarded the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as an optional extra rather than part of the core learning activities.

One email interviewee had never managed to understand or engage with the online environment and felt her studies had suffered as a result.

Unfortunately, I still struggle to use the online OU and I have been unable to work out forums, therefore I have not been able to use that in my studies. It is a bit more difficult not having the support of anyone around you doing it also. ... I also feel [that] as I have never been able to work out a forum or even look at one, I am missing out on what these are as they could be a helpful resource. (161/A/W/1)

It is possible that some students felt comfortable when they were using electronic media for social interaction but less confident when engaged in online learning activities, particularly younger students who had the most recent experience of face-to-face teaching and learning.

Some students who disliked the University forums turned to other forms of online support such as Facebook. Student opinions were divided about the usefulness of social networking sites in mitigating feelings of loneliness and providing learning support.

For one student, Facebook was a key factor in enabling her to complete her course successfully. She was an active participant on the Facebook forum where she ‘was regularly discussing the work and answering questions’. This had a positive impact on her learning and tackled the feelings of isolation she was experiencing:

For me, Facebook was extremely important. I didn't start using it until mid-January ... but it definitely improved a lot of things. My scores went up and that isolated feeling that was on the verge of becoming crippling went away. (10/A/W/2)

She preferred the informality of the Facebook groups, 'It's much more conversational, much more informal. Everybody is friends on there', and believed they encouraged open and honest communication.

[Facebook is] the main source of my support and community spirit. ... The Facebook group allows scope for people to open up vulnerabilities, to say they're struggling, and ask for help. (10/A/W/2)

For students who missed the immediacy of face-to-face teaching, Facebook offered a 'network of support from people all in the same boat' (47/A/W/2) and the comfort of knowing that 'you aren't alone in your studies and if you need to ask for help, there's someone that will answer you within a few minutes' (58/A/W/2).

While social networking sites were a helpful source of support for some students, others found them distracting or even unhelpful, particularly over the sharing of TMA results which could easily undermine the confidence of more insecure students.

I have joined the AA100 Facebook group but I very rarely comment, as like with most forum type study groups, there always seems to be some sort of disagreements that are happening on there or as with the result site that is on there you find people comment things like, 'Oh, I only got 89%, I'm so disappointed, what a rubbish score, which I see more as attention seeking than actually sharing results. It is good for tutorial notes that people upload from tutors as they can be helpful to gain a different viewpoint but other than that, I try to avoid them. (89/A/W/1)

One of the questions that arose from the research was whether the young age of respondents was an important factor in their study experience and affected their

ability to develop new supportive networks. When students were asked about their experiences of being one of the youngest students on their module, some had heard about potential difficulties but had not experienced problems themselves.

I did enter OU study hearing stories about discriminatory attitudes from 'older' OU students towards younger people at tutorials, but I haven't experienced this at all ... I don't feel any particular age as part of the OU.

(10/A/W/2)

Others reported feeling 'a little out of place as there seem to be more people older than me on the course' (87/A/M/2). Some would have liked the opportunity to talk to other young students in the same situation but a number of respondents were not aware that they were young in comparison with others in their tutor group, particularly if they did not attend tutorials.

In one case, a student had actively selected the Open University because she 'preferred being more with mixed ages' and 'found it quite refreshing and also inspiring to see how many people of all ages are interested in continued studies' (79/A/W/2). Others welcomed the diversity within tutor groups and believed it enhanced the learning experience.

I have never found being a younger student has brought any issues studying the module and having older people in the group has probably helped because they have a different, more experienced viewpoint at times which is interesting. I think maybe one of the reasons I struggled with my previous uni experience was because I am a lot older for my years so found it harder than most but that is not an issue studying with the OU. (47/A/W/2)

There was a belief amongst some that Open University study was aimed at an older age group and that older students had an advantage in having greater life experience.

The older students often have more life experiences and general knowledge that benefit their studies. I found this quite daunting when I first met the other people in my tutor group as I felt I was less prepared for the module than them. (195/D/W/1)

Nevertheless, one student claimed that being younger had its own benefits

as I am more able to remember my studies from college and therefore am more able to recommence learning successfully. (111/A/W/2)

Some students noted that older students seemed to be more committed to attending tutorials. They were also more communicative than their younger counterparts who tended to say very little in tutorials. There was the perception among Group 1 respondents that older students were studying more for personal development while younger students were focused on their careers and therefore under more pressure to achieve good grades.

I think there is slightly more pressure on younger students as well because the older students tended to say they were doing the course for self-improvement purposes whilst the younger ones were doing it for career so grades are more important. (195/D/W/1)

One student rejected the idea that younger students required any special provision or additional study support.

I think overall the study experience should be the same for all ages of students, regardless of their age. (89/A/W/1)

The evidence from this research study about the impact of age on study experience is contradictory. Some students were concerned about their lack of life experience in comparison with older students in their tutor group and missed the social contact with students of their own age. Others felt confident that they had had more recent study experience and some welcomed the opportunity to work with students of all ages. Moreover, the study only dealt with young students and any claims about the impact of age on study experience would need testing in a further study with older students. It is possible that other factors such as family background, past educational experience and personal characteristics may have had a more influential role than age. It is also possible that some of the difficulties of Open University study identified by students in this research: managing the competing demands of study, work and family; maintaining motivation; isolation; were not related to age specifically but to being new or inexperienced learners.

Additional findings arising from the data

When asked to identify the main factors that had helped them to complete the module successfully, the most important aspects for both groups, but especially for Group 2, were features of their own character. Many of them were struggling with difficult personal circumstances but believed that they possessed particular characteristics that gave them the motivation and focus to reach the end of the module: dedication and commitment; self-discipline and organisation; determination

and persistence. One student who wanted to train to be a midwife, had taken her A-levels alongside caring for a new-born baby, had not attained the grades she had hoped for but was determined to continue her education.

It is a struggle with a 13 month old son and my partner barely home being a chef but in my eyes, it's just got to be done. I've no choice to think about how hard it is because I'd break down to be honest. The stress isn't great but my son keeps me going if I'm honest as I want to prove to him you can do anything if you want it enough. As for if I'll finish the modules, I've every faith that I will because in my eyes, even if I have to work through the night, it will get done. Quitting isn't an option for me. (242/K/W/1)

Similarly, there seemed to be a number of students who were prepared to think independently and challenge the status quo. Some, for example, questioned the tenets of the education system and the purpose and value of higher education study while others were prepared to confront parental negativity in pursuit of their goals.

I must say that the lack of support at home and being constantly put down actually made me want to succeed even more. I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't worthless so the negativity actually helped me to push forward in my studies. (279/D/W/2)

Students who had experienced some kind of disruption to their education often seemed even more determined to succeed 'almost to prove those cynical people wrong and make it so I can prove something to myself and them' (161/A/W/1).

A love of learning and a determination to achieve their new study and career goals were traits shared by the majority of students.

A really important factor for me was, as clichéd as it sounds, being passionate about learning. I felt if I had started AA100 just because I thought I should, I wouldn't have passed but because I crave knowledge and the ability to improve my own skills to make myself more employable, the course was of genuine importance to me. (89/A/W/1)

This strong desire to learn and improve their skills relates closely to the work of the developmental psychologist Carol Dweck (1999), particularly her research on self-theories and mindset. According to Dweck (2010, p. 16), school students who believe that their intelligence and talent are not fixed traits but can be developed through hard work and dedication have a 'growth mindset' and this creates resilience and a love of learning. Dweck (1999, p. 1) claimed that such students seek challenges, value effort and persist in the face of obstacles and thus develop the 'values and tools that breed lifelong success' (2010, p. 20). In a later study on university students, Grant and Dweck (2003, p. 552) also concluded that learning goals 'exert a positive influence on both intrinsic motivation and performance when individuals encounter prolonged challenge or setbacks'. Those who described themselves as reformed learners were often the most enthusiastic and motivated students.

I cannot emphasise enough how important my change of character is. When previously in education, I did not want to be there. Now I enjoy studying and I value my education much more. (73/A/M/2)

Evaluation and summary of the email interviews

Before embarking on the email interviews, I was concerned that the online environment would create a psychological distance between researcher and interviewee and the conversation would be impoverished by the absence of visual clues. However, I found the opposite to be true. The anonymity afforded by the online interview appeared to help respondents feel less inhibited about disclosing personal information although this factor raised important ethical issues. If students felt protected by the anonymity of the email interview, I had an even greater responsibility to deal with their personal information carefully and sensitively.

The asynchronous nature of the exchange was another concern. I believed that the conversation might lack the spontaneity and authenticity of response that characterised a synchronous conversation. In fact, anything that was lost in the immediacy of a face-to-face exchange was balanced by the fact that respondents had had more time to reflect on their replies and often gave very detailed and considered responses. With the exception of one respondent who replied very briefly using text language, these were written in Standard English.

The email interviews brought a different perspective to the research in exploring students' educational and personal biographies and the impact these had had on their adaptation to university study. The interviews also reinforced the importance of networks of intimacy in supporting students' learning and identified a number of factors that appeared to facilitate students' successful transition to Open University study.

Yorke (2000a) stressed the importance of careful preparation for the transition to higher education and there was evidence in the email interviews that respondents had considered their options thoroughly before making their decision to become Open University students. Some, for example, had made a careful economic assessment of the value of taking a degree, balancing the cost against the potential advantage to their future job and career prospects. Others had been considering their options over a period of time and their decision to study often came at a key turning point in their lives when they realised that they were trapped in a tedious job or they had finally discovered a profession that interested them. This gave a focus to their study plans and a renewed enthusiasm for learning. Several students reported that having a clear study or career goal gave them the motivation to undertake study and the determination to complete the module.

For students who were combining study with work and family commitments, the University's flexible and supportive approach to teaching and learning was a key factor in a successful transition, although students also recognised the importance of being self-reliant learners. Those who were used to high levels of personalised support in their previous institution appeared to find the transition to Open University study more challenging,

Respondents reported that one of the most significant challenges to a successful transition to Open University study was time management and juggling the conflicting demands of study, work and family, although several students had devised a number of coping strategies to deal with this.

There was evidence from the email interviews that successful transitions to higher education were related to the cultural capital that students had acquired through their

upbringing or past educational experiences. Parents had a key role in supporting students' study and encouraging educational aspiration and students who came from families who placed a high value on education, often with university experience themselves, had an advantage in having access to advice, guidance and support that were not available to some of the first generation students in the study.

A number of students had had poor educational experiences in the past that had had a negative impact on their academic performance and self-confidence. As a result, some had turned their backs on the education system, criticising the regimentation and the lack of creativity in schools and opting instead for the freedom and independence of distance learning. The survey had indicated that most respondents were very confident about their progress on the module and their likelihood of completing the course but the email interviews revealed underlying anxieties, particularly among women who were more likely to doubt their ability and to express concerns about the difficulties of the work. Several students seemed intent on redressing past educational experiences by proving to themselves and others that they could study successfully to achieve a degree. Students appeared to share a desire to learn and a determination to succeed.

Students highlighted the importance of their networks of intimacy in supporting their learning and giving advice and guidance. A number of students, for example, had concerns about the reputation of the Open University, particularly in the eyes of employers, and sought reassurance from friends and colleagues that the University had equal status with face-to-face institutions. Many family members offered positive encouragement, particularly if they had been Open University students

themselves. In some cases though, students had to withstand the disapproval of parents and friends who wanted them to take a different path.

In addition to the support of family and friends, students valued the support of their tutors, particularly in responding promptly to queries and giving helpful feedback on assignments. Several students emphasised the importance of face-to-face tutorials in supporting their learning although this may be at odds with the University's declared intention of focusing principally on online teaching in the future, at least at the higher levels of study. Nevertheless, several students reported feeling isolated both socially and in their academic work and some viewed online activities as a as a poor substitute for face-to-face teaching.

It was perhaps surprising that the young students in this study were not wholly enthusiastic about the benefits of online tuition. Some welcomed the opportunity to engage in online forums and tutorials, particularly when travelling to tutorials was not possible, but others wanted more face-to-face support. Similarly, students were divided in their views about the value of social networking sites in supporting their learning. Some respondents found Facebook invaluable in mitigating the feelings of social and academic isolation but others regarded them as intimidating or at least as an unwelcome distraction.

One of the issues that arose from the research was whether the young age of the students had had an impact on their ability to develop new networks of intimacy. The findings from the email interviews matched those in the open questions: some reported that they benefited from being in a tutor group of mixed ages; others believed that younger students had the advantage of having more recent study

experience at school but a large number had not even considered age as relevant to their study.

Finally, from a student's perspective, one of the most influential factors on successful study was their own character. They described themselves as highly dedicated, committed, determined, organised and persistent but many considered that a love of learning was the most important factor in their study success. Their desire to learn and develop new skills appeared to equip them with the resilience to overcome difficulties in their current lives or negative educational experiences in the past, some even pursuing their goals in the face of strong opposition from family and friends.

Chapter 8 - Discussion of findings

Introduction

The aims of this research study were to investigate the reasons why young students, particularly those aged 18-20, chose to study with the Open University and the factors that influenced their decision and impacted on their study experiences. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature that related to my research themes; Chapters 3 and 4 described the research methodology and the methods used to collect the data; and Chapters 5-7 gave an account of my findings. This chapter now presents a discussion of those findings and addresses the two main research questions with reference to the three theoretical concepts of transitions, networks of intimacy and cultural capital. I begin with the first research question.

What reasons do young students (18–24) give for studying with the Open University and what factors influence their decision?

Students gave aspirational, pragmatic, and practical reasons for studying with the Open University. There was evidence in the findings that several had made a considered and informed choice to come to the University and this appeared to have had a positive impact on their transition to higher education study. They arrived at a point when they had clear study and career goals and were motivated to learn. Many reported that they were now studying through choice, rather than imposition, and had rediscovered the enjoyment of learning. The majority of students were studying

towards an Open University qualification with the purpose of improving their job prospects (Group 1) or changing their career (Group 2) – findings that were consistent with earlier studies (Callender, 1997; Brennan et al., 1999; Davies et al., 2002). There was a strong belief that a degree would give them access to employment opportunities that would otherwise have been out of reach. A number found themselves in unfulfilling or unsatisfying roles and wanted to pursue new careers, particularly in teaching – an ironic twist on the negative educational experiences many of the respondents had had in the past.

Nevertheless, there was evidence that young students in the study were not solely motivated by factors related to employment. Some were studying because they were interested in the subject and over a quarter said they were mainly studying for personal development. Moreover, the survey question only asked them to give their principal reason and it is possible that many students were studying for a mixture of reasons.

Students' reasons for studying were also influenced by practical considerations. The transition to Open University study was made possible for many because it was more affordable, it did not require them to move away from home, and principally it allowed them to fit their study around work (see Callender, 2006, 2010). Part-time study was often the only practical option for young students with childcare or other caring responsibilities and women in Group 2 were more likely to say they were studying part-time because of domestic responsibilities (see also Callender, 2006).

It is perhaps surprising in an era of greater gender equality that domestic and caring responsibilities seemed to fall principally on women respondents but this was a trend also noted in a report from the Women's Resource Centre (2010, p. 22) which

claimed that women in full-time employment spend nearly 30% more time on childcare every day than men in full-time employment. It was notable that only one man in my research (compared with 41 women) said he was studying part-time because he had domestic responsibilities for children or other family members. For a number of women respondents, Open University study was only possible when families took over some of the caring responsibilities and it was perhaps unsurprising that the main attraction of the University for women was that they could study in their own time and at home. Their roles as carers might also explain why a large proportion of women stated that they were studying in order to change their career. It is possible that caring responsibilities had restricted their employment options and they came to the University at a point when they were finally in a position to focus on their own professional development.

The University's open access policy was a key factor in enabling those without the required university entrance qualifications to make the transition to higher education study, although it should be noted that the majority of the 231 respondents to the survey had achieved the minimum university entry requirements of two A-levels and therefore had the option of applying to other institutions. One of the drawbacks of the open access policy for the Open University was that it raised doubts in some minds about the academic standing of the institution in comparison with conventional universities. I noted in Chapters 6 and 7 that men in particular had concerns about the academic reputation of the Open University, particularly in the eyes of employers; they sought reassurance that a degree from the University would be held in equal regard to others and would be no impediment to securing future employment.

The claims that cost and fear of debt are major deterrents to higher education study are well known and widely documented in the literature (see Chapter 2). The lower cost of Open University study and freedom from future debt were indeed factors that attracted young students to the University, particularly men, but the Government-subsidised financial support that was available at the time of my research study (see Chapter 5 for more details) has since been replaced with student loans and there has also been a recent increase in module fees at the institution. It remains to be seen whether these two factors will have a detrimental impact on the recruitment of young students in the future.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Heath and Cleaver's (2003) concept of 'networks of intimacy' and the quantitative and qualitative studies I undertook both suggested that family and friends had a key role in influencing students' educational decisions both in favour of Open University study and against it (see also Brooks, 2003; Fuller et al., 2008). Women more than men and Arts respondents more than those taking other modules seemed to be particularly susceptible to the influence of personal recommendation. They were more likely than other groups to know family or friends with Open University experience and to have heard about the University from them. The evidence of the email interviews suggested that the encouragement to take up Open University study was particularly strong when these contacts had had personal experience of the institution.

Students' decisions were made more difficult when friends and family had conflicting views about higher education choices. A minority of students experienced negative comments from friends who believed, for example, that Open University study would interfere with the student's social life. The parents of others had

concerns about the academic reputation of the University in the eyes of employers and wanted their children to attend full-time institutions instead.

The influence of parents was much more apparent in Group 1 than Group 2, possibly because a large proportion of Group 1 students may still have been living at home when they embarked on their Open University course. Students in Group 2 were more likely to be leading independent lives away from home, often with domestic responsibilities, full-time jobs and consequent pressures on their time. They were also more likely to be supported by their partner than their parents in their decision to enrol with the University but claimed that they were principally self-motivated. This was consistent with the findings of Moogan and Baron (2003) who stated that the majority of students in their study considered self-motivation as the greatest influence.

The first research question focused on the factors that influenced students to study with the Open University. I now discuss the second research question which concerns their study experiences and the factors impacting on their success.

What are the experiences of young students studying with the Open University and what factors impact on how successful they are?

My discussion of the second research question is organised around the three concepts outlined in Chapter 7: transitions, cultural capital and networks of intimacy. I begin with transitions.

A number of factors appeared to be important in facilitating a successful transition to higher education study and supporting students' learning. First, Open University students seemed to share the same experience as full-time applicants in needing clear information about the nature of teaching and learning at the institution (see also Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998). One of the concerns that students had before their course started was that they did not know what to expect from Open University study. The majority had had no previous experience of distance learning and found it hard to imagine how it might operate. Apart from concerns about the difficulty of the work and the potential lack of support, they also had practical queries, such as the amount of study time that would be needed each week.

Nevertheless, when asked what advice they would give to other young students considering study with the Open University, the majority of respondents were very positive about their study experience and unequivocal in their recommendation to 'go for it', with the usual caveats of the time limitations and having to manage the conflicting demands of work, family and study. It is probable that these pressures were felt particularly by Group 2 who were more likely than Group 1 to have caring responsibilities and to be in full-time as opposed to part-time work.

From the evidence of the survey, the majority of students felt well-prepared for Open University study and confident about completing the module, sometimes irrespective of the level of their previous educational qualifications or their attainment in module assignments. There were also indications of underlying motivations relating to their past educational experiences. It appeared that having made the decision to study with the Open University, often after a series of educational misfortunes in the past, many

seemed determined to prove something to themselves and others by getting to the end of their course, whatever the cost.

In the survey, students made positive assessments about the academic level of their module and their own progress on the course but the open questions and email interviews revealed insecurities underlying the high confidence scores in the survey, particularly among women. Some, for example, expressed anxieties about returning to study after a break from education and questioned whether they would be able to make a successful transition to higher education study. It is possible that early contact between a student and the University might help to allay some of these concerns (see also Burton et al., 2011, p. 30).

Even accounting for the differences in numbers in the sample, women were more likely than men to talk about perceived deficits in their skills or knowledge, less likely to express strong confidence in their progress or likelihood of completing and were more concerned about failure or comparing poorly with other students (see also Lenney, 1977; McCarty, 1986; and Moogan and Baron, 2003).

Women's self-doubt sometimes undermined their expressed need for greater social interaction with tutors and other students. For example, they were more likely than men to raise concerns about their inability to attend tutorials but also more likely to say that they disliked tutorials or found them intimidating. It is possible that women's confidence, in particular, might benefit from more opportunities for one to one contact with tutors where they were not comparing themselves unfavourably with other students.

The research emphasised the important role of tutors in providing constructive feedback and building students' confidence (see Yorke, 2004) and this was acknowledged by many students in their comments about the positive features of Open University study, particularly those in Group 2.

Aligned to the issue of self-confidence in my study was the role of feedback which in a distance learning context is the principal channel for student support as well as providing information on a student's academic progress. Women studying AA100 and DD101 seemed to express a greater need than men for feedback on their progress. They valued timely and detailed tutor feedback on their assignments and also wanted to know how they were performing in relation to other students. It is possible, though, that men had similar needs but were more reluctant to express them.

Lack of feedback appeared to have a detrimental impact on women's confidence, increasing their levels of self-doubt (see also McCarty, 1986). My survey was conducted in the first few months of the students' course and while there was some evidence from the email interviews that confidence levels increased in both men and women in response to positive feedback on their assignments, it was not clear whether gender differences in the levels of confidence remained at the end of the course. The indications of the study were that receiving encouraging feedback on an early assignment had a positive impact on retaining students on their course. One recommendation from this study would be to increase the opportunities for informal, formative feedback on academic progress in the early stages of the module, before the submission of the first formally assessed assignment.

A key factor in the successful transition to Open University study related to cultural capital. A number of students stated that they had inherited positive attitudes about the value of education from their parents, reinforcing Bourdieu's (1976, p. 110) belief that

each family transmits to its children, indirectly rather than directly, a certain *cultural capital* and a certain *ethos*. This latter is a system of implicit and deeply interiorised values which, among other things, helps to define attitudes toward ... educational institutions. (Italics in original)

In Bourdieu's (1977) view, educational success is as much to do with the beliefs and values children have absorbed from their family as with individual ability. Some students in my study had come from a background where parents and other family members had had university experience and they had absorbed the attitudes and knowledge, or 'cultural capital', required to succeed in higher education. In contrast, the problems of adjusting to the 'alien environment' (Bamber and Tett, 2000, p. 74) of Open University study seemed greater for students who lacked the appropriate capital and appeared to be exacerbated for students who did not have A-level experience or who were the first in their family to go to university. Some respondents who had identified themselves in the email interviews as first generation students, said they lacked the advice and guidance and 'capital' they needed to make informed decisions about their higher education (see also Leese, 2010; Soria and Stebleton, 2012) and to make a successful transition to higher education study.

Given the rising numbers of younger students at the Open University, some of whom will be the first in their family to study at higher education level, the University

might want to focus more attention on the support needs of this particular group of students.

Past educational experiences also seemed to have an impact on students' ability to adapt to higher education study. It was notable that a number of respondents reported that they were studying in order to prove to themselves and to others that they could succeed in academic study. This drive to demonstrate their worth appeared to be a powerful motivator to complete the course and was possibly in response to past experiences that had had a negative impact on their academic progress such as: poor teaching; bullying; a restrictive school environment; and disruptions in their personal lives. Some respondents stated that they had rebelled against the limitations and restrictions of education at school but had found the freedom and independence they were looking for at the Open University.

As well as influencing their educational decisions, several respondents stated that their networks of intimacy were an essential factor in their study success. Family, friends, tutors and fellow students all provided emotional and practical support although students believed that their own drive and determination to succeed were equally important.

There were, for example, some contradictory findings in the study about the extent to which respondents regarded themselves as self-reliant and in control of their own learning. When asked in the survey about their preferred mode of study, the overwhelming majority in both groups said they preferred studying on their own and the largest proportion of students said they preferred distance learning to full-time study at a campus university. Students expressed similar preferences in the email interviews. Those who had been discouraged in their learning by the restrictions of

their school experience particularly valued independent study at the Open University (see also Diaz and Cartnel, 1999, p. 135).

Nevertheless, the extent to which students favoured independent study differed by gender and age group. Group 2 students and women studying Arts and Social Sciences expressed a stronger preference for distance learning, perhaps because it suited their work and family circumstances while Group 1 and men seemed to prefer face-to-face, full-time study. While Group 1 were often more academically confident, their more recent experience of personalised support at school often made it more difficult for them to make the transition to distance learning. This was consistent with the findings of my pilot study and indicated some anxiety about independent study, particularly among the younger group who appeared to rely more heavily on the support of their networks – family, friends, tutors and other students. When Group 1 students were asked what they liked least about the Open University, over half the responses related to support issues, particularly the limited opportunities for face-to-face contact with tutors and other students which led to feeling of social and academic isolation (see also Diaz and Cartnel, 1999, p. 130).

The open questions and email interviews revealed that isolation was a major concern for respondents, especially when they were experiencing difficulties with a particular part of their course. The apparent contradiction between the preferences for independent study and the need for face-to-face support might be explained by students weighing the relative advantages and disadvantages of Open University study. The findings of the research indicated that the main attraction of study at the University was its flexibility and the opportunity for students to study in their own

time and at their own pace. It is possible that students assigned greater importance to the advantages of such flexibility over the disadvantages of isolation.

Group 1 students studying AA100 and DD101 were particularly affected by social isolation and expressed a need for more face-to-face contact with their tutor and other students. This may have resulted from the contrast with their more recent experience at school where they had had daily access to their teachers and peers. There was also evidence that they were making unfavourable comparisons with the more lively social experiences of their friends who were attending conventional institutions, although students in full-time institutions can also experience social isolation (see Read et al., 2003; Leathwood, 2006).

Students from both age groups felt isolated in their academic work and for a number of students, the sense of isolation increased as the module progressed. Some students valued the opportunities provided by online tutorials and forums to ask questions and form contacts with their tutor and other students, particularly when they were not able to attend face-to-face events (see also Yorke, 2004; Bray et al., 2007). For others, particularly women, online support was confusing or unhelpful and regarded by some as a poor substitute for face-to-face contact with tutors and other students. This is a problematic finding for a university that is attracting increasing numbers of younger students at the same time as increasing the proportion of tutorial support delivered online.

These findings have implications for course design and student support. While some students might benefit from online learning tasks which increase opportunities for social interaction, there were indications in the findings that online forums need to be moderated carefully by academic staff to enable respondents to feel confident about

posting questions without fear of a negative response from tutors or other students. A proportion of students also indicated that required clearer guidance on the use of online forums. While this might address some of the technical problems experienced by respondents, Price et al. (2007) note that tutoring is not only an academic activity; it also has a pastoral function in developing and supporting students during their course. Students who found it difficult to engage in an online environment felt excluded from an essential part of this support.

The findings indicate that it would be unwise to assume that younger students are necessarily confident in an online environment or in using technology, and offering a variety of learning activities through different methods may provide more effective learning support than focussing solely on online delivery.

A number of students who experienced difficulties with Open University forums developed new supportive networks of intimacy with other Open University students on social networking sites. The use of social networking sites has grown substantially in the last few years, particularly in the under 21 age group, with reports that students are now spending between six to ten hours a week on Facebook (Holden, 2012).

Given the popularity of social networking sites, particularly among Group 1 students, I had expected Facebook to provide opportunities for them to share ideas and develop support networks. For some students, Facebook groups did have a key role in supporting their learning and easing their sense of isolation but the findings of the study revealed that respondents had an ambivalent attitude towards social networking sites as sources of academic support.

For some, Facebook was unhelpful and an unwelcome distraction and perhaps surprisingly, there were more negative comments about Facebook from Group 1

students. It is possible that some respondents wished to keep a clear divide between social interaction and learning support in their use of Facebook and found mixing the two unhelpful or confusing. In the light of these findings, the Open University and other universities who have relied heavily on Facebook in engaging students with the institution may wish to reassess its future value in supporting students' learning.

Finally, students from both age groups identified a set of personal traits that they believed were essential for successful study: motivation; self-discipline; dedication; commitment; determination; organisation; but chiefly a love of learning and a desire to develop their skills and knowledge. Successful students also appeared to have developed coping mechanisms for managing the conflicting priorities of work, family and study: taking advantage of any unexpected slots of time available for academic work; getting ahead of the study calendar to enable them to cope with busier periods at other times; and being selective in their reading by focussing on topics that were essential to complete the assignments.

My final question in the email interviews asked respondents to identify the factors that they believed contributed to their success. While this confirmed some of the findings from the survey or indicated some areas for further investigation, it was limited in that the student perceptions focused on the elements that they could recognise in themselves, such as personal organisation and the support of family and friends. The value of the qualitative study was that it was able to uncover some of the underlying motivations that respondents were less likely to articulate, such as the desire to prove themselves and the impact of cultural capital.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the key findings that related to the research questions and have focused on those that seemed to offer something new to the debate about the experiences of young students in a distance learning institution. In the next chapter, I move on to evaluate the research, make suggestions for further research studies and discuss the implications for practice.

Chapter 9 - Evaluation of the research and conclusion

This final chapter of the thesis evaluates the work I have done and discusses the relevance of the research to educational practice. The chapter ends with some suggestions for future research and an assessment of the contribution the research has made to knowledge about younger students undertaking distance learning courses.

In Chapter 1, I explained that my interest in younger students had arisen from my teaching experience in schools and my involvement in preparing sixth formers for their transition to university. During the discussions with school students about their higher education choices, many said they were looking forward to the social as well as the educational experience that a face-to-face institution offered. I was therefore surprised when the Open University began to attract growing numbers of students aged 18–20 who were opting to continue their education at a distance learning institution in place of a conventional university. My research set out to investigate the reasons behind this trend and the factors affecting students' successful completion of their modules.

The investigation adopted a mixed-methods approach and used evidence from closed and open questions in an online survey to 231 students and from email interviews with 40 respondents. The findings offer some new insights into the motivations and experiences of young students studying distance learning courses and the factors that influence their decisions and impact on successful study.

Achievements of the research

Careful preparation was an important factor in the success of the research. The pilot study, for example, was invaluable in testing the various research instruments and identifying improvements that could be made in the introductory email and the phrasing of questions. I was pleased that the response rate to the questionnaire almost doubled after changes had been implemented.

The value of the email interviews became apparent during the process of analysis where there was sometimes a disjuncture between the responses to the online survey and the more complex picture that emerged during the email conversations with students. For example, a number of respondents to the questionnaire expressed high levels of confidence in completing their module but the email interviews revealed underlying anxieties about their academic abilities and concerns about passing the final assessment. An important difference between the online survey and the email interviews was the personal contact between researcher and student that seemed to allow a relationship of trust to develop. The majority of email interviewees appeared to be willing to talk openly about their backgrounds, motivations and past experiences. Some students went beyond answering the questions and took an active interest in the research study itself. They asked for more detail about the purposes of the research and some requested a copy of the findings.

There was an altruistic element in their willingness to take part in the investigation. Many expressed a desire to give something back to the institution that had enabled them to study successfully and to help future students who might benefit from the outcomes of the research.

Limitations of the research

There were a number of limitations to my research, including my own inexperience as a researcher. I had not fully appreciated, for example, the complexity of designing an effective online survey. If I were to repeat the study, I would make some minor revisions to the questionnaire, such as including 'Myself' as a possible response for Question 6. I would also consider reducing the number of open questions. They were much more time consuming to analyse than I had expected and there was also some overlap with the responses to the email interviews. My concern that I would not be able to recruit a sufficient number of email interviewees convinced me to extend the number of invitations I sent out. In the event, I had forty responses and this produced more data than could be handled comfortably in the time available. As a result, I may have missed some important details contained within the interviews, although I did at least have the consolation of knowing that I had sufficient data to work with.

The analysis of the emails was a complex process and while I took care over the coding of the responses, it is possible that my interpretation of what was said was erroneous or inconsistent. I also realised at the end of the analysis that I had not given sufficient consideration to the potential impact of my gender on the responses of the interviewees.

One of the main limitations of my study was that there were no men in the K101 and S104 sample and this prevented me from commenting on potential gender differences across all four modules. My reflections on gender were restricted to AA100 and DD101 respondents.

Finally, this study was carried out before the changes to the higher education funding arrangements in England and Northern Ireland were fully implemented. It is possible that some of the findings of the research might not apply to the new generation of young students that will be recruited in the future.

Relevance for practice within and outside the Open University

The distinguishing feature of my research is that it focusses specifically on young students aged 18–24 studying through the medium of distance learning. The research was carried out within one particular institution and it could be claimed that the Open University has its own distinct approach to teaching and learning that is not replicated elsewhere. It can also be argued that the research is limited in being based on a relatively small sample of students. Nevertheless, I believe the majority of the findings can be applied more widely and have implications for other higher education institutions offering distance learning courses to students under 25.

One of the findings of my study was that school leavers, aged 18–20, were more likely than those in Group 2 to have difficulty adjusting to the different teaching and learning styles of the Open University and needed more support in the early stages of their module. The following reflections focus therefore on the identified needs of the 18–20 group, although it is possible to argue that the difficulties experienced by the younger group in the research are common to new students in general and some of the suggestions highlight good practice that could be implemented for all new students studying distance learning courses at the Open University and elsewhere.

Using Open University alumni to attract young students to the institution

It is perhaps surprising in the age of the Internet that young students stated in the survey that they had heard about the Open University mainly from friends and family. The evidence from the email interviews indicated that the influence of these personal contacts appeared to be particularly strong when friends and family had had direct experience of the Open University as, for example, a student or tutor. Open University alumni with personal experience of University study are already being engaged as ambassadors for the institution but the Marketing Department could consider focussing these activities more specifically on attracting younger students, particularly when the University has challenging student number targets to meet.

Developing closer links between the Open University and schools/colleges

The survey data showed that students in Group 1 were more likely than the older group to have heard about the Open University from school or college which may suggest that in recent years, schools have become more aware of the University as a possible option for their sixth form students. One possible reason is that the Open University has only recently been listed as an option on the UCAS website. It has also had wide exposure in the educational press over the last two years, particularly in the recent debates over the funding of higher education. Its low fees in comparison with other institutions might be an attraction to those students who are struggling to fund higher education or are debt averse. The University might consider developing closer relationships with schools/colleges by providing more detailed information about the benefits of Open University study and the practicalities of undertaking study by distance learning. This might provide better support to students in their transition from school based learning to the rather different environment of distance

education. Such information might also address some of the reputational concerns students and parents raised about the academic standing of the University compared with other institutions.

Providing earlier information, advice and guidance about assessment and Open University processes -

The evidence from the open questions in the survey indicated that some students wanted more information about such issues as the time required for study, assessment details and Open University processes and procedures. The Open University might consider providing clearer information about the practicalities of teaching and learning at a distance and more detailed advice and guidance about the final assessment process at an earlier stage in the course. This was particularly important for students with no family history of higher education who indicated in the email interviews that they needed informed advice in order to make decisions about university study. In the open questions of the survey, a number of students also raised concerns about study skills, particularly essay writing, and might benefit from additional teaching sessions in this area as part of their induction.

Providing early formative feedback and maintaining individualised tutor support

There was evidence from the open questions and email interviews that students, particularly women, welcomed early personal contact with their tutor (see Chapter 6, p. 113 and Chapter 8, p. 172). Informal and personalised contact seemed to provide reassurance and an opportunity to ask questions that they did not want to raise in a more public forum. It is possible that students who lack confidence, fail to submit TMAs or attain low marks might also benefit from more frequent tutor contact to

offer encouragement and additional support, although it is likely that improving the quality of support for any one group would benefit all students. The University is currently reviewing its student support practices and it is possible that there may be a shift away from personalised communications but this study highlights the importance of maintaining personal tutor contact for young students who are new to higher education study.

In the open questions on the survey, students expressed a need for early positive feedback and to know about their progress in relation to others. Those designing courses might want to reassure students early in the course by providing short activities with immediate and formative feedback while tutors could help by providing an indication of the range of marks achieved by all those in the tutor group.

Improving the technical support for the use of online forums

The evidence of the open questions and email interviews revealed that students had mixed views about the value of online teaching and learning and universities would be unwise to assume that all young students are comfortable about working solely in an online environment. Online forums at the Open University have potential benefits in facilitating social interaction and helping to allay the feelings of isolation experienced by many respondents but some students appeared to require much more practical guidance in their use. Others found them confusing or even intimidating and the indications were that online forums needed to be moderated sensitively to encourage less confident students to participate.

Recognising the limitations of social networking sites in supporting learning

Several higher education institutions, including the Open University, are promoting the use of Facebook as a means to encourage social interaction and to support the learning process but the evidence from the survey and the email interviews indicated that it cannot be assumed that all students will engage with this process. While some students believed Facebook helped to mitigate the feelings of social and academic isolation, others wanted to maintain a very clear distinction between their personal profiles and the academic forums on Facebook and were reluctant to mix the two. The findings highlight the potential limitations of social networking sites and perhaps alert institutions to the dangers of relying too heavily on such sites in supporting students' learning.

Suggestions for future research

The restrictions on time and space did not allow me to fully explore the perspective of the tutor in the study experience of students but the tutor's voice is an aspect that is missing from my research and would be a fruitful area for further investigation. This study would comprise a small number of interviews with tutors from each of the modules where they were asked to describe their experience of teaching younger students and to explain any adjustments they had made to their practice in response to having younger students in their group.

This study did not set out to investigate the experiences of first generation students coming to the Open University but a small number of these students described the difficulties they had had in adapting to university study in comparison with others

whose families had knowledge or experience of the higher education system. A qualitative study of a small group of first generation students would provide valuable information about the best ways to support such students on their modules.

The findings also indicated that there was a complex relationship between the entry and exit qualifications of undergraduates and this was an area that warranted further investigation through a more detailed analysis of the data and a comparison with other studies on the same topic.

Finally, the email interviews highlighted some gender differences in the attitudes and support needs of men and women and I would like to pursue these in more detail in a follow-up study. This research focused particularly on the issue of women's lack of confidence but a future study could examine gender differences from a wider theoretical perspective.

Reflection on the research process and my own learning experience

Voltaire once famously remarked that one should judge a person by their questions rather than their answers and undertaking the EdD has taught me the importance of trying to frame clear and unambiguous research questions and ensuring that I revisit them on a regular basis. Over the last four years of study, I have often been distracted by other interesting questions that I wanted to pursue but referring back to the research questions helped to maintain my focus on the research topic.

I was presented with a number of unexpected challenges in preparing my research. While I recognised that I would need to invest a substantial amount of time in

preparing the survey, for example, I had not appreciated the full complexities of designing and administering a questionnaire and the potential for bias in the layout of the responses. If I were to repeat the research, I would consider revising parts of the questionnaire to take account of this. I had also failed to anticipate the problems of engaging students in the research study and had to make a number of adjustments after my pilot study to ensure I had a viable sample. Finally, I had difficulties in establishing and developing my theoretical framework and should have clarified this at an earlier stage in the research process.

The experience of studying for the EdD has influenced my practice as a researcher and in my daily work. One of the most important lessons I took from engaging with the research process was to challenge my assumptions. An example of this was my belief that younger students would be technologically adept and comfortable in an online environment but I found that this was not necessarily the case. I will need to be alert to making similar assumptions when contributing to Faculty discussions on designing future modules. Another lesson learned was the value of the mixed-methods approach in answering research questions which deal with students' motivations and perceptions. The quantitative study was invaluable in identifying key themes for further investigation but the contribution made by the qualitative study was in revealing some of the underlying thoughts and feelings that might otherwise have been missed.

On a practical level, I have come to recognise the importance of keeping a research journal and the value of meticulous file management. I have also learned that the simplest tools can sometimes be the most effective. The research tool I used more than any other was the handwritten notebook I had for the email interviewees. It

summarised the key information for each respondent and recorded every contact date and the nature of the response. It was an invaluable aide memoire and an essential tool in writing up the research.

Conclusion

The originality of my research lies in its contribution to knowledge about the induction and support needs of younger students; I have offered some practical suggestions for improving the learning experience of young students studying at the Open University and at other institutions offering courses through the medium of distance learning. Nevertheless, I have learned that educational research rarely comes to a final conclusion. There is always more that can be done and this research has raised a number of additional questions that would warrant further investigation. I would like to learn more about the role of the tutor in supporting younger students, for example, and would also be interested in pursuing the apparent gender differences in students' confidence levels and in exploring the experiences of first generation students in more detail. For now, I plan to disseminate my findings to a wider audience and to use the knowledge gained from the research to help improve the learning support for younger students in the Arts Faculty.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Copies of communications approving research

Approval from Student Research Project Panel 8 September 2011

Dear Sue

With reference to your recent Student Research Project Panel application 'An investigation into the factors that attract and retain young students at the OU', I am pleased to report that Panel approval has been given. There are a few things to report:

- **Sample** – it is not possible to select using the criteria of GCSEs or level of grades. If you do need this information a question would need to be added.
- **Interviews** – the Panel have a suggestion which is purely that so please do not think it is a change you need to make. In order to help with your evaluation and analysis you may like to consider adding one or two closed questions. For instance, Q3 could be phrased 'Which of these apply to you.....' and use a list similar to that on the questionnaire.
- **Invitation** – please liaise with John to revise the wording and remove the references to 'she' as it would more appropriate to refer to you by name. It is also important to mention that there will be no link to their study record for anyone participating.

As you know we always inform applicants that Panel approval does not imply either ethical or sample approval should either of these be required. Stephanie (s.c.lay) will schedule your sample in line with your stated timescale – if you have any queries just get in touch directly.

If you would like more information or feel something is not explained clearly above then please do not hesitate to get in touch by return.

With best regards

Jane

Jane Baines
Student Research Project Panel Coordinator
Student Statistics and Survey Team
Jennie Lee Building, Level 1 North
Walton Hall, Ext: 53631
Hours: Mon, Tue, Thur, Fri am only

SRPP Intranet page:
<http://iet-intranet.open.ac.uk/research/index.cfm?id=7082>

Approval from Data Protection Office

From: B.J.Midwood
Sent: 08 November 2010 09:41
To: S.M.Dutton
Subject: FW: DP Questionnaire

Hello Sue,

This is the email I sent in response to your DP questionnaire. The only dp issue that I was concerned about was access to student data that you would not need to have access to in your staff role. I have to ensure that the proper procedures are being followed.

When we discussed the matter on the 'phone, you explained that your application was going through SRPP who would create the list of students that would fall into your required sample. SRPP follow very strict procedures about the release of contact details when the research is being done by a student. This involves the students being contacted by a supervisor who is either an employee of the University or in a similar contract with the University. I have talked to SRPP about your application and they have confirmed that the correct procedures have been followed.

Regards,

Beverley

Beverley Midwood
Senior Manager - Legislation and Information
University Secretary's Office
Ext 58196/53994

From: B.J.Midwood
Sent: 15 July 2010 11:07
To: S.M.Dutton
Subject: DP Questionnaire

Hello Sue,

Thank you for submitting a DP Questionnaire. There are some issues because you want to use OU data in your role as a student rather than a staff member and it is not data that you would access in your staff role, I assume. It would probably be best if you could give me a ring to discuss it.

Thanks

Beverley

Beverley Midwood
Senior Manager - Legislation and Information
University Secretary's Office
Ext 58196

Approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee

From: Duncan Banks [<mailto:D.Banks@open.ac.uk>]
Sent: 15 November 2010 13:20
To: S.M.Dutton; 'Research-REC-Review'; 'Sue Dutton'
Cc: Duncan Banks
Subject: HPMEC Application #825

Dear Sue Dutton,

The attached memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the research project HPMEC_2010-#825-1, as submitted on 7 November 2010, is approved by the Open University Human Participants and Materials Ethics Committee, subject to satisfactory responses to the following attachment.

Regards,

Dr Duncan Banks
Chair, HPMEC

Dr Duncan Banks
Department of Life Sciences
The Open University
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

Appendix 2 - Contextual information about the four modules

Appendix 2.1 -The Arts Past and Present (AA100)

Module description

AA100 is an introduction to arts across a range of subject areas: art history, classical studies, English, history, philosophy, music and religious studies. It covers a wide variety of cultures and historical periods and is structured around four themes: Reputations; Tradition and Dissent; Cultural Encounters; and Place and Leisure. The module teaches the key skills required for further study of arts and humanities subjects

AA100 – Learning outcomes

Knowledge and understanding

- Understand the differences between different artistic media and describe the formal components of works of art.
- Become aware of the diversity of Ancient Greek and Roman materials and of the contexts in which such materials were produced.
- Understand the principal issues raised by the study of a particular period or topic in history.
- Develop a critical understanding and appreciation of a range of literary forms.

- Develop the skills of ‘close listening’ to music.
- Understand how philosophers use arguments and how they appeal to theoretical principles to answer philosophical questions.
- Understand and interpret different and unfamiliar points of view.

Cognitive skills

- Analyse texts and phenomena from different cultures and periods.
- Draw appropriate conclusions on the basis of evidence.
- Take responsibility for own learning and respond reflectively to tutor feedback.
- Record information efficiently and take effective notes.

Key skills

- Write an essay with appropriate referencing that shows the ability to analyse and to construct a plausible, well-substantiated argument.
- Reflect on your learning.
- Understand how to use IT to aid learning.

Practical and/or professional skills

- Organise your study time effectively.
- Present your work coherently and in appropriate forms.

Appendix 2.2 - Introducing the Social Sciences (DD101)

Module description

DD101 is an introduction to the social sciences: psychology; social policy and criminology; geography and environment; politics and international studies; economics and sociology. It explores questions of society's relationship to the environment, questions of identity and issues of social order and governance. The module teaches a range of skills for independent study and for personal and working life.

DD101 – Learning outcomes

Knowledge and understanding

- An awareness of the nature of the social sciences.
- An understanding of how social and material lives are related and an awareness of the issue of sustainability.
- An awareness of how identities are made and of some of the connections and disconnections between people.
- An awareness of questions of social order and how societies are ordered and governed.
- An awareness of inequalities, differences and diversity in contemporary societies.

- An awareness of a range of different disciplinary approaches in the social sciences.

Cognitive skills

- An ability to construct a simple social science argument using appropriate concepts, theories and evidence.
- An ability to use examples, illustrations and case studies in presenting an argument.
- An ability to select and use different forms of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative.
- An ability to compare and criticise different theoretical positions or arguments.

Key skills

- An ability to access and make notes on information from a range of sources.
- An ability to read and understand information from tables, graphs, charts, maps and diagrams.
- An ability to communicate ideas and information in a variety of different forms.
- An ability to undertake simple arithmetical calculations.
- An ability to communicate in a way which recognises differences and diversity.

Professional and/or practical skills

- An ability to plan study, manage time effectively and meet deadlines.
- An ability to organise and complete a programme of individual work.
- An ability to learn from feedback and reflect on your own learning processes.
- An ability to plan a study pathway to link learning with personal and/or career goals.

Appendix 2.3 - An Introduction to Health and Social Care (K101)

Module description

K101 provides an introduction to learning in higher education and an overview of health and social care. It uses real-life case studies to describe the experience of receiving care and working in care services and helps to build knowledge, understanding, and a range of learning skills.

K101 – Learning outcomes

Knowledge and understanding

Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

- The broad picture of care
- Care within lives
- Care environments
- The wider context of care
- Promoting safe care practice

Cognitive skills

Develop the thinking skills required to:

- Describe
- Analyse

- Develop arguments
- Back up arguments

Key skills

Develop skills in:

- Clear writing
- Information literacy
- Basic computing
- Number work
- Learning to learn
- Personal development

Practical/professional skills

Develop professional skills in:

- Care relationships
- Care communications
- Supporting access to care
- Supporting safe care
- Protecting care service user interests

Appendix 2.4 - Exploring Science (S104)

Module description

S104 is an introduction to natural sciences: astronomy and planetary science; biology; chemistry; earth and environmental science; and physics. It investigates the major scientific issues affecting human society in the twenty-first century, explores the fundamentals of modern science and develops important scientific concepts and skills. The module requires some basic mathematical skills and knowledge of basic science concepts.

S104 – Learning outcomes

Knowledge and understanding of:

- Facts, concepts, principles, theories, classification systems and language used in science.
- Accuracy, precision and uncertainty.
- The role of science in the world around us.

Cognitive skills

- Describe, analyse and interpret scientific information and data presented in a variety of ways.
- Apply knowledge and understanding of scientific concepts to address familiar and unfamiliar problems.

Key skills

- Use mathematical skills appropriate to the study of science at this level.
- Process and present data using appropriate qualitative and quantitative techniques and methods of presentation (including graph plotting).
- Communicate scientific topics clearly and concisely.
- Use information technology to learn and communicate.
- Monitor progress and development of effective learning strategies.

Practical skills

- Make and record observations and measurements and report results.

Appendix 3 - Questionnaire

Your Study Experience at the Open University

Your reasons for choosing the Open University

1. How did you find out about the Open University? (Please select all that apply)

1. TV
2. Leaflet in a magazine/newspaper
3. Recommendation of family member/friend
4. Internet
5. School/college
6. UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) website
7. Employer
8. Other (please specify)

2. What was your main reason for choosing to study at higher education level?

(Please select one answer)

1. Interest in the subject I'm studying
2. To help get a job
3. To help me change career
4. Personal development
5. Other (please specify)

3. Why did you choose to study part-time as opposed to full-time? (Please select all that apply)

1. I can't afford to study full-time.
2. I need to fit my study around my work commitments.
3. I don't want to move away from my home area.
4. I have domestic responsibilities for children or other family members.
5. Health reasons or disablement.
6. Other (please specify)

4. What was the main attraction of studying with the Open University? (Please select *one* answer)

1. I can study in my own time.
2. I don't have to travel to particular venues.
3. I can study at home.
4. I prefer studying on my own.
5. I did not need to have previous qualifications.
6. It cost me less to study at the OU than other institutions.
7. Other (please specify)

5. If I had a free choice, I would prefer to (Please select *one* answer)

1. Study full-time at a campus or city-based university
2. Study part-time at a local college/university
3. Study by distance learning
4. Other (please specify)

6. Who, if anyone, was the main person who supported your decision to take an Open University course? (Please select *one* answer)

1. Parent/guardian
2. Partner
3. Other family member
4. Friend
5. Employer
6. Other (please specify)

Your background

7. Has anyone amongst your family or friends ever studied at the Open University? *(Please select all that apply)*

1. Parent/guardian
2. Partner
3. Other family member
4. Friend
5. Other (please specify)
6. No one

8. Are you currently *(Please select all that apply)*

1. In full-time paid employment or self-employment
2. In part-time paid employment or self-employment
3. Unemployed
4. Working on a voluntary basis
5. Training for a particular career
6. Studying at another institution
7. Undertaking caring responsibilities for children or other family members
8. Other (please specify)

9. When you started your Open University module, how long had it been since you last studied at school/college or any other institution? *(Please select one answer)*

1. Less than 1 year
2. 1-2 years
3. 2-3 years
4. 3-4 years
5. 4-5 years
6. 5-6 years
7. More than 6 years

10. How much you agree or disagree with the following statement: ‘Before I started my module, I felt well prepared for studying at the Open University’.

(Please select one answer)

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

Your study at the OU

11. How does this particular module fit in with your study plans? *(Please select one answer)*

1. As part of a programme to achieve an OU qualification
2. As a one-off module with no intention of future OU study
3. Planning to take more modules but undecided on whether to aim for a qualification
4. As preparation for study elsewhere

12. How much you agree or disagree with the following statement: ‘I feel confident that my module is at the right academic level for me’. *(Please select one answer)*

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

13. How would you describe your progress so far on the module? (Please select one answer)

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Satisfactory
4. Poor
5. Very poor

14. How much you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I feel confident that I will complete the module'. (Please select one answer)

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

Your learning

15. My preferred way of studying is to: (Please select one answer)

1. Study on my own.
2. Take part in face-to-face tutorials with other students.
3. Take part in OU group activities with other students on line. (e.g. OU online forum, Elluminate)
4. Other (please specify)

16. How much you agree or disagree with the following statement: ‘I find it helpful to discuss my studies with other Open University students on social networking sites’ (e.g. Facebook). (Please select one answer)

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

17. The person who supports me most in my learning is: (Please select one answer)

1. Parent/guardian
2. Partner
3. Other family member
4. Other OU student(s)
5. Friend
6. Employer
7. My OU tutor
8. Myself
9. Other (please specify)

18. Before you started to study, what were the things that were concerning you most about studying with the Open University? (Please give as much detail as you can in the box below)

19. After studying for a few weeks, what are the things that concern you most now? (Please give as much detail as you can)

20. What do you like best about studying with the Open University? (Please give as much detail as you can)

21. What do you like least about studying with the Open University? (Please give as much detail as you can)

22. How much you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I feel part of the Open University community'. (Please select *one* answer)

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree.

23. How much you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'I feel part of my tutor group'. (Please select *one* answer)

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

24. What advice would you give to someone of your age who is thinking about studying with the Open University? (Please give as much detail as you can)

25. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of studying at the Open University or about this questionnaire? (Please write any comments you might have in the box below)

26. In the second part of my research project, I would like to learn more about your experiences of studying with the Open University. Please would you be prepared to take part in a short follow up study?

1. Yes

2. No

If YES, please write your email address so I can contact you.

Please provide a contact phone number:

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire.

Your comments will be used to improve the support the University provides to new students.



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The Open University

Your Study Experience At The Open University

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Your learning

What do you like best about studying with the Open University?
(Please give as much detail as you can)

What do you like least about studying with the Open University?
(Please give as much detail as you can)

< Back Next >

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Why did you choose to study part-time as opposed to full-time?
(Please select all that apply)

- I can't afford to study full-time.
- I need to fit my study around my work commitments.
- I don't want to move away from my home area.
- I have domestic responsibilities for children or other family members.
- Health reasons or disablement.
- Other - please specify: _____

What was the main attraction of studying with the Open University?
(Please select one answer)

- I can study in my own time.
- I don't have to travel to particular venues.
- I can study at home.
- I prefer studying on my own.
- I did not need to have previous qualifications.
- It cost me less to study at the Open University than other institutions.
- Other - please specify: _____

"If I had a free choice, I would prefer to..."
(Please select one answer)

- ...study full-time at a campus or city-based university.*
- ...study part-time at a local college/university.*
- ...study by distance learning.*
- Other - please specify: _____

Appendix 4 - Letter of support from supervisor

Letter of Support from Professor John Richardson

Dear Student

Questionnaire - Experience of study at The Open University

Sue Dutton is a member of the Arts Faculty here at the Open University. She is also a student on our Doctorate of Education programme, and I am one of her supervisors.

She has a particular interest in the experiences of younger students who are studying at the Open University for the first time. As part of her research, she is sending an online questionnaire to a sample of students studying on Level 1 modules.

Completion of the questionnaire is entirely voluntary. If you do choose to participate, the information you provide will be used to improve the support the University offers to new students.

At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked to help with a follow-up study. Again, participation is wholly voluntary.

I hope you will be willing to take part in this important research study.

Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely

John T. E. Richardson
Professor of Learning and Student Assessment

Appendix 5 - Letter to accompany questionnaire.

Dear ^forename^,

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research study.

As my research supervisor has explained, I am particularly interested in the experiences of students aged 18–25 who are studying with the Open University for the first time.

Please can you help by completing a short online questionnaire? Your responses will be used to improve the support the Open University offers to new students.

The questionnaire will take around 10 minutes to complete. Most questions have tick box replies but there are a few open questions where you type in a response.

All data collected and your identity will remain entirely confidential. I may use quotations from the questionnaire in my thesis but these will be anonymous. No personal data will be passed to any third party and your participation or otherwise in this research will not impact in any way on your Open University study.

Please complete your questionnaire on line at the following link:

^SLINK^

If you have a disability or an additional requirement that makes it difficult for you to complete the survey online, please email the survey office IET-Surveys@open.ac.uk, or telephone them on +44 (0)1908 652422/652423.

Thank you very much for your help with this survey.

Yours sincerely

Sue Dutton

Appendix 6 - Questionnaire reminder

I recently sent you an invitation to take part in an online survey about your study experience at the OU. Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary but if you are willing to help, I'd be very grateful to receive your completed questionnaire by Monday 28th November. The important information you provide will help the University improve the support it offers to other new students.

The questionnaire will take around ten minutes to do. I attach a copy of the original email below.

Very many thanks for your help.

Dear ^forename^,

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research study.

As my research supervisor has explained, I am particularly interested in the experiences of students aged 18–25 who are studying with the Open University for the first time.

Please can you help by completing a short online questionnaire? Your responses will be used to improve the support the Open University offers to new students.

The questionnaire will take around 10 minutes to complete. Most questions have tick box replies but there are a few open questions where you type in a response.

All data collected and your identity will remain entirely confidential. I may use quotations from the questionnaire in my thesis but these will be anonymous. No personal data will be passed to any third party and your participation or otherwise in this research will not impact in any way on your Open University study.

Please complete your questionnaire on line at the following link:

^SLINK^

If you have a disability or an additional requirement that makes it difficult for you to complete the survey online, please [email the survey office IET-Surveys@open.ac.uk](mailto:IET-Surveys@open.ac.uk), or telephone them on +44 (0)1908 652422/652423.

Thank you very much for your help with this survey.

Yours sincerely

Sue Dutton

Appendix 7 - Follow-up email to questionnaire

Dear Student name

Thank you very much for completing my questionnaire about your experience of studying at the OU and for giving such detailed and helpful answers.

I'm now in the process of analysing the data from the questionnaires. This is raising a number of important issues that I would like to follow-up with individual students.

You indicated on the questionnaire that you would be willing to participate in a follow-up study and I may wish to contact you in the next two months to discuss your replies to the questionnaire in more detail. This part of the research will take the form of a short conversation by email.

You are, of course, under no obligation to take part in the follow-up study and can withdraw at any time. All data collected and your identity will remain entirely confidential.

Many thanks for your help with the research and please feel free to come back to me with any queries you might have.

Happy New Year and best wishes,

Sue

Sue Dutton

Faculty of Arts

The Open University

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Email: s.m.dutton@open.ac.uk

Appendix 8 - Email Interviewees contacted

Stud Num	Mod	Woman/Man	Age Grp	Previous qualifications and grades when provided	Final OU module result
1	AA100	W	1	2+ A-levels	
4	AA100	W	2	2+ A-levels	
5	DD101	W	2	1 A-level	
6	AA100	W	1	2+ A-levels	
10†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels ABD	Distinction
12	DD101	W	2	2+ A-levels	
13†	DD101	W	1	3 A-levels A*A*A	Distinction
14	K101	W	2	2+ A-levels	
20	DD101	M	2	2+ A-levels	
21†	DD101	M	2	Access	Pass
29	DD101	W	2	NVQ 3	
30†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels DDD	Distinction
31	K101	W	2	NVQ 2	
32	AA100	W	2	2+ A-levels	
34	K101	W	2	2+ A-levels	
35	DD101	W	1	Other non-UK qual	
36	DD101	M	2	Other non-UK qual	
37†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels BCD	Pass
39	K101	W	1	2+ A-levels	
40	AA100	M	1	No formal	
41	K101	W	2	2+	
46†	AA100	W	1	3 A-levels BBD	Pass
47†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels BCC	Pass
48	AA100	W	2	2+ A-levels	
49†	AA100	W	1	3 A-levels A*AA	Distinction
50†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels BBC	Pass
55†	S104	W	2	5 A-levels ABBCC	Pass
56†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels AAB	Pass
58†	AA100	W	2	3 A-levels AAB	Pass
60	AA100	W	1	2+ A-levels	
62	DD101	M	2	2+ A-levels	
63	AA100	W	1	2+ A-levels	
64	AA100	W	1	No formal	
67†	AA100	W	1	GCSE	Pass
68†	DD101	M	2	2 A-levels BD	Pass
69†	DD101	W	2	Adv Mod Appren	Pass
73†	AA100	M	2	3 A-levels CDD	Distinction
79†	AA100	W	2	2+ A-levels	Distinction
80†	AA100	W	2	2 A-levels CC	Distinction
82	S104	W	2	2+ A-levels	
83	AA100	W	2	1 A-level	
86	DD101	M	2	2+ A-levels	
87†	AA100	M	2	3 A-levels CCC	Pass
89†	AA100	W	1	3 A-levels BBB	Pass
90	AA100	W	2	GNVQ 3	

Stud Num	Mod	Woman/Man	Age Grp	Previous qualifications and grades when provided	Final OU module result
95	DD101	W	2	2+ A-levels	
96†	AA100	W	2	1 A-level	Pass
100	AA100	W	2	2+ A-levels	
101†	AA100	W	2	4 A-levels BBCC	Pass
104	DD101	W	2	2+ A-levels	
105	S104	W	2	2+ A-levels	
107	AA100	W	2	Access course	
110†	AA100	M	1	4 A-levels BBBB	Pass
111†	AA100	W	2	4 A-levels BCCC	Pass
112	AA100	W	2	NVQ 3	
118	DD101	W	1	2+ A-levels	
120	AA100	W	2	GCSE	
121	DD101	W	1	2+ A-levels	
123†	K101	W	2	ONC/OND	Fail with no resit allowed
128	DD101	W	1	ONC/OND	
129†	K101	W	2	National Diploma	Distinction
131	K101	W	2	Access course	
135	S104	W	1	2+ A-levels	
142	S104	W	2	Dip Found Studies	
143†	AA100	M	2	2 A-levels CD	Distinction
161†	AA100	W	1	GCSE	Pass
163	K101	W	2	GCSE	
166	DD101	M	1	GCSE	
172	AA100	W	1	GCSE	
178	AA100	W	1	GCSE	
180	K101	W	2	2+ A-levels	
191	S104	W	1	2+ A-levels	
195†	DD101	W	1	3 A-levels BCC	Pass
202†	DD101	W	1	3 A-levels AAB	Distinction
209	S104	W	1	1 A-level	
216	AA100	W	1	GCSE	
218	S104	W	1	2+ A-levels	
219†	S104	W	1	3 A-levels CDD	Pass
222	DD101	M	1	2+ A-levels	
223	DD101	M	1	2+ A-levels	
229†	K101	W	2	GCSE	Pass
230†	AA100	W	1	3 A-levels ABB	Pass
233	AA100	M	2	1 A-level	
239	S104	W	2	1 A-level	
240†	DD101	W	2	GCSE	Pass
242†	K101	W	1	3 A-levels CDD	Pass
263	S104	W	2	2+ A-levels	
268†	DD101	M	2	GCSE	Pass
276	K101	W	1	2+ A-levels	
279†	DD101	W	2	4 A-levels BBCC	Pass
281	AA100	M	1	No formal	
283	DD101	W	1	Access course	

Stud Num	Mod	Woman/Man	Age Grp	Previous qualifications and grades when provided	Final OU module result
286†	AA100	W	2	NVQ 2	Pass
298	K101	W	2	GCSE	
301	K101	W	2	NVQ 2	
303†	AA100	W	1	GCSE	Pass
304	DD101	W	2	Dip. Foundation Studies	
313†	K101	W	2	No formal qualifications	Fail. Resit allowed
321	K101	W	1	NVQ 3	
324	AA100	W	2	2+ A-levels	

Student number in red and † = those who took part in email interviews.

Appendix 9 - Invitation e-mail and interview questions

Dear Student Name

I have now completed the first analysis of the questionnaire and would be very grateful for your help with a short follow-up study. I am particularly interested in:

1. your educational experience before you came to the OU
2. your study experience so far as an OU student
3. your educational/career plans for the future.

I've listed these three areas below, with space underneath each one for you to write about your experiences and future plans. I've made a few suggestions of things you might want to include but everyone's experience is different so please write about what is important and relevant to you, in as much detail as you can.

I may wish to contact you again to discuss some of your responses in more detail, but only with your consent. This part of the research study is due to end on 6th April 2012.

You are, of course, under no obligation to take part in this follow-up study and you can omit some sections or opt out of the entire research study at any point. All data collected and your identity will remain entirely confidential.

Please feel free to come back to me with any queries you might have about the research.

Thank you very much for your help.

Best wishes

Sue

Sue Dutton

Faculty of Arts

The Open University

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Instructions

Please:

1. click on the 'Reply' button first, and then type in your responses under each question;
2. select either Yes or No next to the Consent Statement about further contact (at the bottom of the page);
3. then email your responses back to me.

1. ***Please describe your educational experience before coming to the OU. (e.g. Your experience of school/college; what you did after school/college and what that was like; events or people that have influenced your educational decisions; the role family/friends had in your educational choices; who or what it was that brought you to the OU in the end)***
2. ***Please write about your study experience at the OU (e.g. how well you are coping with the academic demands of the module; what you are finding most difficult about OU study; what/who keeps you going when things become difficult; how you are managing the competing demands of family/work/study; the parts of the teaching programme that work best for you; how confident you feel about completing the module).***
3. ***Please write about your plans for the future (e.g. your study aims, including planned qualifications; your career aims; your long term aims after finishing study; whether you plan to study with the OU again next year and which module).***
4. **Where did you last study before coming to the OU? (e.g. school, sixth form college, FE college, another university)**

And finally:

5. I am interested in finding out whether there is any link between previous educational experience and successful study at the OU. Please can you list below the subjects and grades of any GCSE or A-level exams you have passed.

Consent for future contact

I agree that I can be contacted again to discuss my responses Yes/No (Please respond with either yes or no).

Thank you very much for your help with this study. I'm very grateful for the time you've given to answer my questions.

Appendix 10 - Reminder email for interviews

I hope you received my email (copied below) asking for some additional information about your study experience at the Open University.

If you haven't yet had a chance to respond but were intending to 😊, please can I encourage you to send back your replies?

Your responses are the most important part of the research study and will help to improve the support the OU offers its students.

If you have the time (5-10 minutes), I'd be very grateful for any information you can provide under the three headings I've listed below.

Thank you very much for your help.

Best wishes

Sue

Sue Dutton

Faculty of Arts

Open University

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Appendix 11 - Example of email interview.

Student No.73 (Male, age 23, studying AA100)

Original answers in blue

Follow up questions in red with answers in green

8th April 2012

Thanks very much,

I wouldn't mind at all.

Sorry for the late reply again.

I will try to be quicker next time!

All the best.

A

From: S.M.Dutton

Sent: 02 April 2012 23:33

To: Student 73

Subject: RE: Research project - Your study experience at the OU

Dear A

Thanks ever so much. Your replies have been very helpful in the research.

I'm not quite sure what else will emerge from my analysis but if I did need to ask you one or two more things at a later stage, would you mind if I contacted you again? No pressure at all to say yes. You've already been a great help.

Hope all goes well for the rest of AA100 and for your studies next year.

Many thanks for all your help.

Best wishes

Sue

From: Student 73
Sent: 02 April 2012 19:04
To: 'S.M.Dutton'
Subject: RE: Research project - Your study experience at the OU

Hi Sue,

Answers are in [green](#).

Hope they help.

A

From: S.M.Dutton [mailto:s.m.dutton@open.ac.uk]
Sent: 29 March 2012 23:31
To: Student 73
Subject: RE: Research project - Your study experience at the OU

Dear A

Many thanks for getting back to me and for your very helpful replies.

If you don't mind, I've written a few more queries in blue next to your answers. If there are any questions you would prefer not to answer, that's fine. I'd be very grateful for any responses you can send back.

Many thanks for your help.

Best wishes

Sue

From: Student 73
Sent: 28 March 2012 18:47
To: 'S.M.Dutton'
Subject: RE: Research project - Your study experience at the OU

FAO: Sue Dutton

Sorry for the late response!

Regards,

A

From: S.M.Dutton
Sent: 12 March 2012 00:20
To: Student 73

Subject: Research project - Your study experience at the OU

Dear A

I have now completed the first analysis of the questionnaire and would be very grateful for your help with a short follow-up study. I am particularly interested in:

1. your educational experience before you came to the OU
2. your study experience so far as an OU student
3. your educational/career plans for the future.

I've listed these three areas below, with space underneath each one for you to write about your experiences and future plans. I've made a few suggestions of things you might want to include but everyone's experience is different so please write about what is important and relevant to you, in as much detail as you can.

I may wish to contact you again to discuss some of your responses in more detail, but only with your consent. This part of the research study is due to end on 6th April 2012.

You are, of course, under no obligation to take part in this follow-up study and you can omit some sections or opt out of the entire research study at any point. All data collected and your identity will remain entirely confidential.

Please feel free to come back to me with any queries you might have about the research.

Thank you very much for your help.

Best wishes

Sue

Sue Dutton

Faculty of Arts

The Open University

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Instructions

Please:

1. click on the 'Reply' button first, and then type in your responses under each question;
2. select either Yes or No next to the Consent Statement about further contact (at the bottom of the page);
3. then email your responses back to me.

1. Please describe your educational experience before coming to the OU. (e.g. Your experience of school/college; what you did after school/college and what that was like; events or people that have influenced your educational decisions; the role family/friends had in your educational choices; who or what it was that brought you to the OU in the end)

After Secondary School, I went to X Sixth form college and completed 4 AS Levels and 3 A Levels: English L/L, Media Studies and History. I then went to X University and dropped out towards the end of the first year.

What was your secondary school experience like? Was school something you generally enjoyed or not?

I enjoyed secondary school. I did not really enjoy studying and would leave any homework until the last minute. My main concerns were playing football and enjoying myself; my focus was not on studying.

I was always a 'could do better' student, I could have achieved much better grades had I bothered to study. But I was able to pass (just!) without studying and in my naivety I deemed this acceptable.

I felt a little pushed into university by family who said that 'if you don't go now you never will'. When I first went to university, I was very much influenced by groups who came into college and branded university as a 'great experience'. I went to university and basically had a party for a year. I was not mature enough to be a committed student.

Since then I have been working for X for almost four years. I have decided I want to further my education

What do you think brought you to this decision at this point?

That I wanted to further my education? I guess lots of opportunities seem out of reach when you are not a graduate. I would love to teach English abroad at some point and I think the degree will make this goal much more achievable.

I was also a little disappointed in the way I had dropped out of university in the past. I know I have the commitment and determination to see the course out now; which I lacked when I first went to University. I will feel a great sense of achievement and pride if I complete the course: it will feel like I have amended some of the mistakes I made by dropping out in 2007/8.

and the Open University seemed like the obvious choice to study and work at the same time. I feel I have matured enormously since I was first a student and am a much more 'well-rounded' person now.

Who would you say has encouraged you most in your education?

I would not say anyone has influenced me or encouraged me to pursue further education. I have friends who can speak other languages and who are graduates. I guess you could say I envy them a little and I want to be able to learn as much as I can.

What do your family and friends think about you studying with the OU?

I live with a friend. He often says you need to take a break. Other friends have commented that I have gone 'boring' as I am taking my study seriously now. However, one friend has also showed an interest in my study and hopes to enrol on a similar course to mine [AA100] in the future.

My family have not really commented on the study. I think both of my parents are quietly pleased I have decided to take up something deemed worthwhile.

2. Please write about your study experience at the OU (e.g. what it was like coming back to study after a break; how well you are coping with the academic demands of the module; what/who keeps you going when things become difficult; how you are managing the competing demands of family/work/study; the parts of the teaching programme that work best for you; how confident you feel about completing the module).

I feel very comfortable with the Level 1 module. I feel I was prepared for more work. I have enjoyed the pace of the module and have not struggled with the demands of work and everyday life.

How do you organise yourself to fit in study with work and social activities?

Do you study at a particular time?

I did make a schedule, I use the calendar feature on Microsoft Outlook to organise my schedule. I have stuck to this very well for the most part. I usually set aside one day on the

weekend for study and will study 3 x 2 hour slots on weekdays, during the evening, after work.

I prefer to study on the weekend as I sometimes find it hard to concentrate after work. My job can be rather stressful.

I was a little anxious and worried about how well I would be able to construct an essay and I am glad there are 7 TMAs for my course as this gives me a lot of chances to improve. I think the feedback give on the PT3 forms and on the actual assignments is fantastic and extremely helpful.

I am confident of completing the course.

Have you been confident from the beginning or has your confidence grown as the module progressed?

I was very confident of completing the course from the start as I was determined I would. However, I was not sure how well I would on each assignment. The grades I have received have been very positive, I feel the marking has been generous. But other students have told me they felt the same. I definitely feel more comfortable now. My confidence dips before an assignment due to nerves. But in general, I am happier and much more comfortable now.

3. Please write about your plans for the future (e.g. your study aims, including planned qualifications; your career aims; your long term aims after finishing study; whether you plan to study with the OU again next year and which module).

I plan to study Module A150 next and have already enrolled. This is another Level 1 course with 30 credits. After this I intend to complete a Level 2 60 credit course and progress toward an English Language and Literature Degree (B39).

After completing the degree I would like to teach English abroad.

4. Where did you last study before coming to the OU? (e.g. school, sixth form college, FE college, another university)

I completed 3 A-Levels at X Sixth Form College.

University of X for around 6 months. As stated previously I was not mature enough to become a University Student.

Since then I have been in full-time employment.

Have you been to any of the tutorials? If so, how important do you think these have been to your studies.

I have been to all of the tutorials bar one, as I had to go to a football match! I think they have been good for building my confidence and to see the other students. The main part of the learning process is reading the course books. I have found the tutorials good for clarification of my thoughts and for discussing ideas. If I did not go to the tutorials I would be more worried about what I was writing. I would be thinking, "is this right?". The tutorials offer peace of mind in that respect.

Sometimes the tutor or another student will bring up something about the subject that I had not noticed. I would not of known about this new perspective had I not gone to the tutorial.

Do you keep in contact with other OU students outside tutorials?

Not really, I keep an eye on the forums and sometimes comment, but not very often. I am quite busy and try to just stick to the coursework and attend the tutorials.

And finally:

5. I am interested in finding out whether there is any link between previous educational experience and successful study at the OU. Please can you list below the subjects and grades of any GCSE and A-level exams you have passed.

GCSE: Maths: C, English Language: B, English Literature: B, Science Double Award: C, Geography: C, History: B, French: C, Design and Technology: Graphics: D.

A Level: English Language and Literature: C, Media Studies: D, History: D.

I cannot emphasize enough how important my change of character is. When previously in education I did not want to be there. Now I enjoy studying and I value my education much more.

What would you say is your main motivation for studying?

As mentioned before, there are several reasons. To open more career opportunities, to broaden my knowledge, to feel better about myself.

I think my main motivation is to improve myself as a person. Studying at the Open University fits into this.

Consent for future contact

I agree that I can be contacted again to discuss my responses Yes

Appendix 12 - Example of initial coding of email interviews

<p>1. <i>Please describe your educational experience before coming to the OU. (e.g. Your experience of school/college; what you did after school/college and what that was like; events or people that have influenced your educational decisions; the role family/friends had in your educational choices; who or what it was that brought you to the OU in the end)</i></p> <p>I enjoyed school and did very well in all subjects, especially those which I enjoyed most like English, French and History. I found GCSE's quite challenging in comparison with previous exams, however this made me more determined to work hard and revise hard to get the higher grades I was aiming for. The results were great and spurred me on to go to college and work hard, as it showed me if that I work hard and aim high I could achieve my goals.</p>	<p>Positive exp at school</p> <p>Determination</p> <p>Hard work</p>	<p>Ed background</p> <p>Self – determination</p> <p>Self – hard work.</p> <p>Aim high</p>
<p>Who have been the particular people who have encouraged you most in your education? What did they do to encourage you?</p> <p><i>My parents, especially my dad. He has always encouraged me to work hard, aim high and he's taught me if you work hard, you will get what you deserve. He has always encouraged me to read, helped me in my school work and proof read my coursework for me.</i></p> <p>I then went to college and once again achieved well in all my subjects, which I had also worked very hard for. While I enjoyed school, I loved college, the greater independence, the more challenging content of subjects and the subjects themselves, which reflected my interests anyway, in Law, Psychology and Sociology. I think enjoying studying these subjects helped with my good grades as I was interested in all of them.</p>	<p>Cultural values inherited from father</p> <p>Supp parents</p> <p>Positive exp of college</p> <p>Strong work ethic</p> <p>Enjoys IS</p> <p>Enjoys a challenge</p> <p>Interest in subject</p>	<p>Cultural capital</p> <p>Supp parents</p> <p>Ed background</p> <p>Ac IS</p> <p>Self likes challenge</p> <p>Ac interest in subject</p>
<p>How well do you thinking the teaching style at college prepared you for OU study?</p> <p><i>Very well, the independence I experienced at college meant a lot of work had to come from you, you had to be motivated to work hard yourself, without being constantly reminded of work and deadlines by your teachers. It helped me to get more organised and to sensibly consider how I could best use my free</i></p>	<p>College good prep for OU study</p> <p>Motivation</p> <p>IS</p>	<p>Ed background</p> <p>Self – motivation</p> <p>IS</p> <p>Self - organisation</p>

<p><i>time for both study and friends and how best to balance the two.</i></p>	<p>Organisation</p>	
<p>I have always wanted to get a degree, not to work towards my future career (as no such qualification is needed) but to further my knowledge in those areas I find most interesting and those that will be most helpful to my future career, before I begin my career. I looked at conventional universities, but I found them a bit limiting as there was always a few units of degrees that didn't interest me.</p> <p>So if I were to ask about what motivates you most in your studies, what percentage would be interest in the subject and what percentage would be getting a qualification? (or if those things don't fit, please choose your own phrases and % for those).</p> <p><i>I have always wanted a degree, but i think interest and knowledge gained from the subjects mean more to me so I'd say atleast 75% interest, 25% qualification</i></p> <p>My Dad, who has always been very supportive of me in my education, then showed me the OU Website. Specifically he showed me the OU Degree, which is highly flexible and enables me to chose any subject of help or interest to me. I looked at the courses and found 6 in areas which interested me and I applied not long after. I'm now studying a degree consisting of Law, Social Sciences (subjects I have done already in college) and Youth Justice.</p> <p>May I ask what your dad studied at the OU and how long ago? <i>My dad did some IT (database) courses atleast 15 years ago.</i> How would you say your dad has supported you in your education? <i>See above</i></p>	<p>Clear study aim Interest in subject main motivation. Limited subject choice at trad unis</p> <p>Interest in subject main motivation</p> <p>Influence of parent who was also OU student. Course choice at OU</p>	<p>Study aim Ac interest in subject Ac subject choice</p> <p>Ac interest in subject</p> <p>Influence parent Course content – wide choice</p>

Appendix 13 - Example of Stage 2 coding for Group 1 Email Interviewees

Resp num	Ed background	Support	Influences	Self	Pos OU	Neg OU	Imp factors in completion	Age	Future plans
13	6 th form college Enjoyed school Enjoyed greater independence of college Interest in subjects Likes challenge of learning Found trad unis limiting in course choice Likes wide choice of OU College good prep for OU – IS, self-motivation, organisation, balancing study and social life.	Tutor helped her achieve full potential Day schools helpful Could meet students Support of parents esp dad. Encouraged her to read, helped with school work and proof read CW. Supp from best friend studying law degree. Helps with law course. Supp fam/friends Tutorials good for consolidating	Cultural capital – parents value education and dad taught value of hard work. Positive influence from Dad to study with OU (students seek validation of study and this one was very positive Teachers at school with OU exp as AL and	Highly motivated Focused Driven (Above 3 are her words) Determined Hard work Aims high Likes independent study Well-organised – plans study Study mot – further knowledge and interest in subject. Confidence in completing from start. <i>Motivated Focused</i>	Conf in ability to achieve at HE level Developing study skills – e.g. referencing, essay writing, IS Flex pace Flex time Suits learning style Flex course choice <i>Academic confidence Developing study skills IS Flex pace Flex time Suits learning style Flex course choice</i>	Social isolation from other students Hard to get a break Needed face-to-face for more complex sections. <i>Social isolation from other students No break Lack face-to-face for complex work</i>	Per Char Prior exp of subjects Interest in subject Supp fam/friends Supp employer Career aspiration has helped keep focus <i>Per Char Prior exp of subject Interest in subject Supp Fam/friends Supp Employer Career aim</i>	Not an issue although good to talk to others in similar position of joining OU after school. <i>Good to talk to other young students</i>	Plans to study only one course a year from now on. Join police or Youth Offending Team Join special constabulary <i>2 to 1 course in future Career – police/youth</i>

Resp num	Ed background	Support	Influences	Self	Pos OU	Neg OU	Imp factors in completion	Age	Future plans
	<p>Always wanted degree</p> <p><i>Enjoyed school Liked IS at college Interest in subjects Likes challenge of learning Other unis limited choice of subject. Likes wide choice at OU College good prep for OU Degree aim</i></p>	<p>work and preparing TMAs Tutorials – get to know other students, ask questions about course, see tutors face-to-face. Quicker and easier than sending emails Facebook a distraction Emails a few students if they get stuck.</p> <p><i>Tutor Tutorials Day schools Parents Friend Facebook not Other OU</i></p>	<p>student</p> <p><i>Cultural capital fam Parent as OU student Teacher as OU student/AL</i></p>	<p><i>Driven Determined Hard work Aims high Likes IS Organised Plans study Interest in subject Conf in completing</i></p>					

Resp num	Ed background	Support	Influences	Self	Pos OU	Neg OU	Imp factors in completion	Age	Future plans
		<i>students</i>							
46	Went straight from 6 th form to OU. Heard about OU in History lessons! Enjoyed school Good teaching esp History Positive influence of teachers – inspired enthusiasm for subject and love of learning Had to do third A-level that wasn't her choice. This led to lower grade in that subject and	Seeks validation of OU from work colleagues Family very supportive– esp Mum Good to hear other students say they are still on same place in study calendar as you. Tutorials very imp. Attends many of them + day schools. Give face-to-face contact with tutor and students and helps		Lacked confidence to leave school and move to college. Too late by time she found out about course choice and then may have been socially isolated at college. Puts pressure on self to achieve. Coping well with two overlapping courses but pressures on overlap. Plans study. Time man Confident in	Study + work No debt Tutorials/day schools for face-to-face and clarification No debt Tutor feedback Tutor sup Interdisciplinary/broad range of topics so you know what to choose to study Taught her time man. <i>Study + work</i> <i>No debt</i> <i>Tutorials/day schools</i> <i>Tutor sup</i> <i>Interdisciplinary/broad range of subjects</i> <i>Teaches time man</i>	Social isolation from other students IS. Self taught to time spent studying and keeping motivated. Time taken to get qual (not fault of OU. Can only study PT) Studying during summer. <i>Social isolation from other students IS difficult to keep</i>	Supp fam/friends Per char Aspiration Motivation Dedication Having goals Determination Focused <i>Supp fam/friends</i> <i>Per char</i> <i>Having goals</i>	Gets on well with older students. Older studying mainly for pleasure. Surprised by so many young people on course (This might help social integration in future) <i>Older students studying for PD</i> <i>Relates well to older</i>	Doing sign lang course at same time Get History degree Teach History or do TEFL course. <i>Other study. Degree aim. Teach.</i>

Resp num	Ed background	Support	Influences	Self	Pos OU	Neg OU	Imp factors in completion	Age	Future plans
	<p>restricted choice of university. Didn't want to go to lesser uni. Essay writing skills from 6th form useful for OU. 6th form didn't teach IS Enjoyed school Good teachers Unwanted A-level choice + lower grade and restricted choice of uni Essay writing skills from 6th form good IS not taught in 6th form</p>	<p>shed light on course materials. Tutor support good. Work colleagues Parents Other OU students Tutorials/day schools Tutor</p>		<p>completing Lacked confidence to move from school to college Pressure on self to achieve Plans study Time management Confident in completing</p>		<p><i>motivated</i> Time taken to get qual Study during summer</p>		<p><i>Surprised by high number of young students</i></p>	

Appendix 14 - Themes for email interviews

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
<p>Poor experience at school/college Restrictions of school and petty rules 1 Poor teaching 1 + 2 Disruptive environment 2 Poor advice re A-level/university choice 2 Did not get first choice of A-level subjects 1 Lack of personal control over learning 2 Lack of independent study 1 Pushed by school to go to uni 2 Choice of university restricted by school actions 1 Disliked teaching style of 6th form 1 Lack confidence in moving from school</p>	<p>Flexibility Can combine study and work and family 1 + 2 Can study in own time at own pace and at home 1 + 2 Freedom of OU 1</p>	<p>Time constraints Juggling study, work, family and social life 2. Lack time management 2 Difficulties of studying more than one module 2 Time taken to achieve qualification 1 Maintaining motivation after work 2</p>	<p>Parents 1 + 2 Parents let her make own decisions 2 Partners/husbands 2 Other family members Friends 1 + 2 Boyfriend 1 Grandparents 2 Employers 1 + 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide funding for study 2 • Support by allowing shift changes for study 2 <p>Work colleagues 1 + 2 Teachers 1 + 2 Other OU students 1 + 2 Supports themselves 2 Tutor 1 + 2 Face-to-face tutorials 1 + 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give confidence 1 • Consolidate 	<p>Positive influences Cultural capital 1 Academic family 2 Parents esp with OU experience 1 Good teachers esp with OU exp 1 Friends esp if OU students 1 Partners/husband/boyfriend 1 + 2 Grandparents 2 Employer 2 Found career aim 2</p> <p>Negative influences Poor teachers 1 + 2 Teachers who exerted pressure to go to uni Family who exerted pressure to go to uni 2 Friends who didn't want them to study</p> <p>Other Educating Rita film 2. Self-motivation</p>	<p>Self Right mindset 2 Focused 1 Driven 1 + 2 Determined 1 + 2 Having aspiration 1 Hard working 1 Aims high 1 Pressure on self to achieve/sets high standards 1 + 2 Works better under pressure 2 Committed 1 + 2 Persistent 2 Self-discipline 2 Self-belief 2 Dedicated 1 + 2 Self-motivated 1 + 2 Got self through course/down to you to achieve 2 Plans study 1 + 2 Organised 1 + 2 Good time management 1 + 2 Putting right earlier</p>

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
<p>to college 1</p> <p>Poor uni experience 1 + 2 Restricted choice of subject 1 Poor or limited teaching 2</p> <p>Financial Put off conventional university by cost 1 + 2 Cost too high 1 + 2 Fear of debt 2 Not convinced uni was cost effective</p>			<p>work 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare for TMAs 1 • Get to know other students 1 • Discussion of course with others 1 • Can ask questions about course 1 • Meet tutors face-to-face 1 • Comfort of knowing others are in same boat 1 <p>OU module website 2 OU forums and activities 2 Module materials 1 + 2 Tutor feedback 1 + 2 Good OU admin support 1 Facebook 1 + 2</p>		<p>mistakes 2 Desire to achieve qualification 2 Independent 1 + 2 Independent thinker 1 + 2 Confidence 2 Confident of completing 1 + 2 Pride in studying/completing 1 + 2 Interest in subject</p>
Good experience at	Course	Study experience -	Negative support		Motivation

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
<p>school/college Inspiring and encouraging teachers 1 Style of teaching and learning good prep for OU study 1 Enjoyed independent study 1 Good personal support 1 Gained essay writing skills 1</p>	<p>Wide choice of subject 1 + 2 Liked interdisciplinary 1 + 2 Flexibility in pathway 2 Good course materials 1 + 2 Open access 1 + 2 Interest in subject 1 + 2 Not stressful 2 Treated like adult 2 Good teaching 2 Variety teaching methods 2 Good pace 2</p> <p>Learning Recent study made transition easier 1 Suits learning style – independent study 1 + 2 Likes independent study 1 + 2 Developing study skills including essay writing 1 + 2</p>	<p>difficulties Big jump from Access 2/GCSE 1 course to OU Disliked interdisciplinary study 2 Good personal face-to-face support at school made transition harder 2 Lack written confirmation of EMA score 2 Lack EMA feedback 1 + 2 High workload 1 Course content 1 Pressure from tutors to attend tutorials 1 Pace too fast 2 Weighting of exam v C/W 2 Keeping focused 2 Work difficult 2 Intimidating at first 2 Difficult getting back to study 2 Nervous or overwhelmed about</p>	<p>No support at home or from family 1 + 2 Parents no experience of HE 2 Friends against study 1 + 2 Facebook unhelpful 1 + 2 Dislikes interaction with others 2 Need more face-to-face support 1 Dislikes forums 2 Struggles with online 1</p>		<p>Wants to complete degree 1 Get recognition for efforts 2 Proving something to self and others 1 + 2 Motivated by study/career goals 1 + 2 Paying for course increases motivation 2 Having control over own learning 2 Motivated by assessment deadlines 2 Motivated by personal development 2</p>

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
	<p>Likes challenge of learning new things 1 + 2</p> <p>Gain academic skills 1</p> <p>Excited by study 2/enjoys learning/missed learning 1 + 2</p> <p>Age Like being with mix of people 2 Like being with range of people who bring variety of experience 2 Helped having younger students in group 2 Good to talk to other young students 1 Relates well to older students 1 Surprised by number of younger students 1 Study experience should be same for all ages 1</p>	<p>writing essays 2 Nervous of exam 2 Difficult to get through to helplines 2 Worried about not being clever enough 1 + 2 Low self-esteem 1 Put pressure on self 2</p> <p>Age Older students difficult when young student was leading team activity 2 OU aimed at older students 1 Older students studying for personal development, younger for career 1 Older converse more, younger are silent 2 Older have advantage of more life experience. Younger have less. 1 + 2</p>			

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
	<p>Younger students – learning fresh in mind 1 + 2 Younger students are academically superior 2 Unaware of being younger 2 No issues re age 2</p>	<p>Older more committed to attending tutorials 2 More older students on course so feels out of place 2</p>			
<p>Personal circumstances No clear career aim 2 Questions benefit of HE 2 Personal circs 1 Family circs 1 Health issues 1 + 2 Didn't want to go away to university 1 Lacked confidence for uni environment 1</p>	<p>Personal gain Personal development Benefit future job/career 1 + 2 Wanted a degree 1 Fresh start 2 Sense of achievement 2 Gain confidence 1 + 2 Gain time management 1 + 2 Gain self-discipline 2 Become more positive through study 2 Found career aim 2</p>	<p>Isolation Academic isolation/independent study – lack face-to-face contact with tutor and other students 1 + 2 Social isolation/loneliness 1 + 2 Lack immediate response to questions 2</p>			<p>Support Tutorials 2 Tutor feedback 1 + 2 Facebook 2 Interaction with other students 2 Family support 1 + 2 Employer 1 Fellow students 1 Friends Parents</p>
Access	Support	Disliked online			Learning

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
Put off conventional uni by high entry grades 1 1 st generation 2	Tutor support 1 + 2 Study support 2 Tutorials/day schools 1 + 2 Tutor feedback 1 + 2 Interact with other students 2 Support of other students on forums 2	activities Disliked forums 1 Disliked online elements Forum tutor who put her down 1			Interest in subject 1 Love of learning/wants to learn 1 + 2 OU matches learning style Likes independent study 1 + 2 Unemployed or PT so more time for study Recent study experience 1 Previous A-level exp of study skills Prior experience of subject 1 Being selective in what to study Opportunistic learner 2 Feels part of tutor group 1 + 2 Feels part of OU 1
Reasons for study Financial Flexibility Self-improvement Career/job Redressing disrupted	Personal circs Suited health condition 1 No travel required 1	OU reputation Believed OU was at lower level than other universities 1 + 2 OU slower pace			Course Course 2 Flex study 2 Course structure 2 Course materials 1 + 2

Educational experience prior to OU	Positive experience of OU	Difficulties experienced at OU	Support	Influences	Factors in success
education for health or other personal circs		than other unis Aimed at older returners to study 1			
	Financial Lower cost than full-time 1 + 2 No debt 1 Can pay through OUSBA 2 Financial support 1 + 2	Choose not to attend tutorials 2 Missed exp of another city 2			
	OU Reputation OU respected 2	None			

Figures in green refer to Group 1 (18-20) and Group 2 (21-24).

Appendix 15 - Themes from open Question 18 by module and age group

Q.18 Summary of themes		AA100 Group 1	AA100 Group 2	DD101 Group 1	DD101 Group 2	K101 Group 1	K101 Group 2	S104 Group 1	S104 Group 2	Total
Coping on course	Theme									
Ac workload	Ac	4		1				1	1	7
Ac on schedule	Ac	4	8	3	2		4	1	1	23

Q.18 Summary of themes		AA100 Group 1	AA100 Group 2	DD101 Group 1	DD101 Group 2	K101 Group 1	K101 Group 2	S104 Group 1	S104 Group 2	Total
Ac not understand	Ac	2	3	2	1	1	3	1	1	14
Ac level	Ac	7	7	1	3		3	1	1	23
Ac overlapping modules	Ac					1				1
Achieving good marks	Ac	1			2		1		1	5
Ac adapting learning style	Ac				1					1
Managing different methods of learning e.g. forums	Ac		1							1
Prob distance	Ac		3	1	1					5
Ac diff	Ac	2	4	1	2				1	10
Ac learning content	Ac	1	2	1			1			5
Manage study after break	Ac		4		1		2			7
Study management	Ac		1	1						2
Subtotal		21	33	11	13	2	14	4	6	104
Lack skills/knowledge										
Lack ed quals	Ac				1		1			2
Ac study skills Interpreting question Referencing Writing essays – (including at HE level) Writing essays after break	Ac		5	5	3		1		2	16
Lack computer skills	Ac	1								1
Lack online skills	Ac			1		1				2
Lack English Lang skills	Ac	1		1	1				1	4
Lack Maths skills after break	Ac								1	1
Lack knowledge	Ac	2								2

Q.18 Summary of themes		AA100 Group 1	AA100 Group 2	DD101 Group 1	DD101 Group 2	K101 Group 1	K101 Group 2	S104 Group 1	S104 Group 2	Total
Ed background	Ac						2			2
Subtotal		4	5	7	5	1	4	0	4	30
Induction										
Wrong course choice	Ac		1		1		1			3
Unclear what expected	Ac					1	2			3
Unclear guidance about getting qual	Ac		1							1
How to submit assignments	Ac		1							1
Subtotal		0	3	0	1	1	3	0	0	8
OU Rep										
OU Rep	Ac	2	3	1	2					8
OU lower standard	Ac	1								1
Course too easy	Ac	1								1
OU v FT HEI	Ac			1						1
Will qual links to career	Ac				1					1
Subtotal		4	3	2	3	0	0	0	0	12
Assessment										
Assignments	Ac		1		1		1			3
Results	Ac				1					1
Complete and pass	Ac		1							1
Getting work wrong	Ac			1						1

Q.18 Summary of themes		AA100 Group 1	AA100 Group 2	DD101 Group 1	DD101 Group 2	K101 Group 1	K101 Group 2	S104 Group 1	S104 Group 2	Total
Subtotal		0	2	1	2	0	1	0	0	6
Total Academic		29	46	21	24	4	22	4	10	160
Getting behind peers studying FT	Time			1						1
Time needed to complete qual	Time	1	1							2
Study v life	Time	3	3	4	2	2	2	1	1	18
Study v work (Plus more than one course)	Time	4	9	4	9		4	3	1	34
Study v study	Time	2						1		3
Study v friends	Time				1					1
Study v fam	Time	2	3	1	4					10
Lack study time (More than one course)	Time	3	6	2	5	1	5		1	23
Total time		15	22	12	21	3	11	5	3	92
Health	Self	1			1					2
Mot	Self	7	6	3	1		1	1	1	20
Disability	Self				1					1
Lack self-discipline	Self	1	4	1	1					7
Fear of failure	Self		2		1					3
Time man	Self	3	3	2	4					12
Others older and wiser	Self	1								1
Work aimed at older students	Self	1								1
Dyslexia	Self				1			1		2

Q.18 Summary of themes		AA100 Group 1	AA100 Group 2	DD101 Group 1	DD101 Group 2	K101 Group 1	K101 Group 2	S104 Group 1	S104 Group 2	Total
Lack life exp	Self	1								1
Manage stress	Self								1	1
Dislike meeting new people	Self	1								1
Not as clever as other students	Self				1					1
Lack organisation	Self	1								1
Ac ability (not being smart enough)	Self	1	1	1	3	1	2			9
Fear exam	Self	1								1
OU not for first degree	Self	1								1
Total self		20	16	7	14	1	3	2	2	65
AC IS (Including studying alone and isolation)	Support	4	5	4		1		1		15
Feeling isolated	Support	1								1
Lack sup	Support	3	1		2		1			7
Can't attend tutorials	Support				1					1
Worried if they could attend tutorials	Support	2								2
Lack face-to-face tutor support. (Plus study v work with more than one course)	Support	1	5	3	3		1			13
Lack face-to-face teaching	Support	2	4	1	2	1		1		11
Lack face-to-face student contact	Support/Social	2	1	3						6
Lack partner support with childcare	Support		1							1
Lack feedback	Support					1				1

Q.18 Summary of themes		AA100 Group 1	AA100 Group 2	DD101 Group 1	DD101 Group 2	K101 Group 1	K101 Group 2	S104 Group 1	S104 Group 2	Total
Lack tutor contact before course start	Support	1								1
Reaction of others	Support			1						1
Total support		16	17	12	8	3	2	2	0	60
Cost	Finance	1	5		1					7
Funding – if granted	Finance		1							1
Total finance		1	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	8
Lack computer or internet access	Logistics						1			1
Travelling to tutorials	Logistics	1		1						2
Lack study environment	Logistics	1								1
Total logistics		2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	4
Nothing		1			1					2
Overall total		83	107	53	68	11	39	13	15	389

Appendix 16 - Summary of themes and sub-themes from open Question 19

Academic

Coping on course	Assessment	Lack skills/knowledge	OU reputation
Workload	Concern about passing/doing well	Study skills, especially essay writing	Lower reputation of OU v other HEIs
Keeping on schedule	Maintaining standard	Interpreting/understanding the TMA questions	
Not understanding	More assessment wanted	Referencing	
Managing the academic level	Final exam	Revision	
Managing more than one module	Exams in future modules	Reading for information	
Having overlapping modules	TMAs too difficult	Lack wider reading	
Absorbing the knowledge	Lack of flexible submission dates	Lack English language skills	
Study management		Lack Maths skills	
Module content		Wrong course choice	
Difficulty of module			
Worry about future modules being too difficult			
Getting working pace right			
Future choice of pathway			
Managing different methods of learning: e.g. forums			
Learning new topics			
Time taken to complete the qualification			

Time

Future modules too time consuming

Conflicting demands of study versus life in general

Study v work/other study/family

Lack of study time

Self

Health

Motivation

Fear of failure

Not achieving or doing their best

Time management

Belief that module aimed at older students

Concern about own position in relation to other students

Concern about lacking ability

Support

Lack tutor support

Lack study skills support

Worry about being able to attend tutorials

Lack face to face tutor support

Lack face to face student contact

Lack feedback

Dislike online tutorials

Face to face tutorials dominated by others

Cost

Cost of current module

Cost of future modules

Cost of travel

Logistics

Difficulty of travelling to tutorials