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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MODEL
OF QUALITATIVE EVALUATION TO
SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE POLICY AND PRACTICE OF
MEASURING STUDENT
SATISFACTION IN A HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)

DATE OF SUBMISSION

31st March 2005

Statement

None of the material offered has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification of this or any other university or institution.

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Faculty of Education and Language Studies

Doctorate in Education

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ABSTRACT

The dissertation is an analysis of the methods used for the measurement of student satisfaction in Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom and draws on evidence from Europe, Australia and the USA.

The prevalent measurement system is quantitative via the application of surveys. This predominance has been influenced by developments as indicated in marketing literature and adopted widely by manufacturing and service businesses. It is considered appropriate, according to this model, to consider students as customers of the service – HE.

There is increasing formalisation of the survey system because of its adoption as part of audit procedures set up by the QAA. This formalisation is raising the status of student satisfaction on the quality agenda of HE managers.

The research study was designed to establish whether it is practicable to develop a qualitative based evaluation model. The model was developed using a grounded theory methodology.

The application of grounded theory is problematic because of its complexity and the variety of interpretations as indicated by academic literature. The issues concerned in adapting the methodology are considered as part of the methodological literature review. The process of adaptation was both iterative and evolutionary in nature.

Field research involving the application of the model was undertaken in two separate HE institutions – Colleges A and B. The research in

College A was completed over a two-year period. Grounded theory techniques were trialled but were judged incomplete. The research in College B was undertaken in a much shorter time of two months and involved the application of a fully developed grounded theory technique. In both colleges, reports were produced for the consideration of senior managers in each college.

The grounded theory analysis revealed two separate but related core categories. In College A, the core was *Communication Problems* and in College B, *Issues relating to Empathy with Students*. The cores were derived from an analysis that made use of a constant comparative method of examining themes and categories to produce an integrative category that explained the main determinant(s) of student satisfaction.

The methodology, through adaptation provides information that allows HE managers to understand how students experience service quality. In this respect, it has the potential to explain the statistics generated by satisfaction surveys.

The study culminated in the production of *The Student Satisfaction Evaluation Tool* (SSET). This tool was developed from an adaptation of grounded theory techniques.

SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

The measurement of student satisfaction in Higher Education (HE) institutions has become increasingly important in recent years. In March 2002, the QAA announced a new review system for quality assurance in English HE (QAA, 2002). The system uses independent audits to ensure that HE institutions are managing their own academic quality and standards properly, and are providing useful, reliable and up to date information to students and other key stakeholders. The major difference in this system compared to former systems is that students will contribute to the audit process at all stages. The intention is that student surveys will be undertaken at institutional level with results reported at a national level in a league table format and here for the first time in the United Kingdom is evidence that the student satisfaction survey has a key role to play in the measurement and management of quality.

Student satisfaction is to be measured using quantitative based survey techniques. This research study does not attempt to argue against the use of this measurement system (although it does highlight potentially serious flaws) but the contention is that HE managers also require qualitative data that has been rigorously analysed, in order to understand more fully and act upon the quantitative data.

The questions relating to the research study are listed below.

Research study questions

1. What are the issues related to the survey based approach to the measurement of student satisfaction?
2. How appropriate within the context in which HE College A and B operate, is a grounded theory analysis as a measure of student satisfaction? Is the method of analysis generalisable to other HEIs?
3. What illumination, if any, does the research offer to the understanding of the determinants of satisfaction amongst HE students?

The Research Framework

Research involving the development of a qualitative evaluation model was undertaken in two separate HE institutions – Colleges A and B. The research in College A was completed over a two-year period and included pilot work on the use of focus groups. This research was embryonic in nature and involved the trial application of grounded theory techniques. It was not intended to be a full-grounded analysis, in the sense that there was no attempt to relate the analysis to the extant literature. The research conducted in College A was highly embryonic because the researcher was a novice in the application of grounded theory. The research in College B was undertaken in a much shorter time of two months and involved the application of a more developed grounded theory technique. The intention was to simulate the conditions under which an evaluation researcher or research team might apply this qualitative method to present credible results to a senior management team. In effect, the research in college B was a full trial of the development of a prototype management tool.

The findings of the two research studies are included in Sections 4 and 5. These findings are included for two main reasons:

1. They illustrate how the methodology was applied, modified and developed;
2. The findings have been developed into two separate grounded theories of the antecedents of student satisfaction of higher education. They may be of value to other researchers interested in developing a meta analysis as part of a study involving a larger number of cases.

The case for grounded theory research in the measurement of student satisfaction

Customer satisfaction and perceived quality resulting after a service encounter have drawn a lot of attention from researchers and practitioners interested in services marketing. Along with an extensive effort of conceptualisation of the quality and the satisfaction constructs, much attention has been devoted to their operationalisation. Multi-item scales developed according with established paradigms may be considered the most common measurement instruments. While these methods have allowed the identification and the measurement of detailed elements that compose the customer's satisfaction judgement, the underlying assumption of these approaches is that these elements are per se, a source of satisfaction. However, part of satisfaction may be linked to the positive consequences and values that those attributes carry with them. In other words, multi-item questionnaires fail to capture the set of reasons that are related to the positive or negative evaluation of a service characteristic. (Orsingher and Marzocchi, 2003).

Most managers have limited experience and training in survey data analysis and may not be aware of potential pitfalls. For example,

they may fail to note that interim datasets can be unrepresentative of the study population due to uneven sampling rates over the course of a study. They may neglect to employ data weighting, compute statistics on the wrong bases, confuse correlation with causation, cut the data too thinly to be reliable, utilise naïve prioritisation rules and perform other data manipulations that lead to erroneous conclusions. These problems can be further accentuated by a lack of objectivity on the part of the managers doing the analysis. Far too often, they are searching for results to support a decision they have already made (Crosby, 2002).

Almost without exception, organisations that actively seek customer views are surprised. Issues that the organisation believed dominated customer minds are found to be secondary. Standard customer surveys rarely provide this level of powerful input. Unless the customer experience has been disastrous, the overall input of such surveys is generally good enough to create a feeling of comfort. Surveys also suffer from generalisation, while business strategy is dependent on specifics (Macdonald, 1995). All of these issues are discussed in detail in Section 2.

Grounded theory techniques were adopted in this study because the method seeks to listen to participant's own concerns and then designs questions from emergent concepts for subsequent theoretical sampling. The interviewing style is arguably more compatible to participants because they are listened to from the start and not forced by standardised questions about what may be to them, irrelevant issues. In this situation, there is more chance of respondents opening up with what is going on instead of responding briefly and curtly to a non-interesting question. According to Glaser, (2003) grounded theory has the potential to pick up the underlying process. The field research in this research study identified two separate core categories – communication issues (College A) and lack of empathy with students (College B). These core categories

were identified as the result of using an approach that fits neither neatly into quantitative or qualitative data analysis.

“Grounded theory does far more than just give meaning to quantitative findings or give a few conceptual categories to qualitative data analysis descriptions aimed at full coverage. Preconceptions in quantitative research produce a perfect situation for concealing unanticipated alternatives, revealing patterns underlying the findings.”

Glaser, (2003, p 120).

The main argument of this research study is that the quantitative approach is unable per se, to provide the theory of the determinants of student satisfaction. The study stands against the claim quantitative approaches are better, even the only science. As Gummesson notes:

“Counting and classifying can only take one so far. Meaning and interpretation are required to give significance to counts and classifications and these come from qualitative research.”

Gummesson, (2001, p 201).

Grounded theory is a frequently used approach in nursing research and increasingly in educational research too. The methodology has developed in different directions with ambiguous answers to questions of truth and validity. This ambiguity influences the interpretation of the criteria for quality judgement (Lomborg and Kirkevold 2003).

Reflections on the literature combined with experiential interaction with the data led the researcher to adopt the position articulated by

Charmaz (2000). She advocates a constructivist grounded theory that assumes relativism and recognises knowledge as a mutual creation between the viewer and the viewed and seeks an interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings. In this model, truth is not discovered, but rather is constructed and reconstructed and truth and reality are judged by those in the situations rather than by outside authorities. Section 3 considers in detail the functionalist concerns about the proper techniques for conducting grounded theory research and evolves into a discussion of issues of epistemology, and ontology.

A report was completed in each college and was then considered at a senior management meeting, attended by the researcher. These reports as presented to the senior management teams are presented in Sections 4 (College A) and Section 5 (College B). Both reports indicated that students had serious concerns about aspects of service quality. In College A, the core concern was communication problems and this had resonance when compared with the core concern in College B – a lack of empathy with student needs. In the latter case, communication problems were identified as a major property of the core.

Both theory and observation in the field revealed that HE managers are sceptical about the credibility and validity of grounded theory techniques, although the report was received very positively in College B. However, evidence was also collected during the research study that managers have doubts about the value and cost of survey-based methods for measuring student satisfaction. There is scope to be able to persuade managers that qualitative data collection in the form of grounded theory techniques can at the very least complement quantitative methods. Both reports provided managers with agendas for change and development. The case for the development of a new measurement system is presented in Sections 6 and 7.

As a consequence of completing this study, the research questions have been converted into a set of propositions. These are examined in Section 7. In essence, these propositions point to there being scope for the application of a qualitative data analysis tool based on grounded theory techniques. This tool has been named *The Student Satisfaction Evaluation Tool*.

SECTION 2 Review of Relevant Literature

This review examines several key features of the concept of student satisfaction with the service 'HE'. The review first examines the plausibility of classifying students as customers and how student satisfaction is currently being monitored in HE both in the United Kingdom and in other parts of the world. The review proceeds to examine the definitions of satisfaction and service quality as explained in marketing literature. Definitions from the literature are important in providing a measure for HE managers in determining the effective management of student satisfaction. The review then considers the changing external environment in which HE operates. Finally, it examines how student satisfaction can be effectively managed. This is particularly problematical because of a paucity of literature in relation to student satisfaction in HE. The main proposition put forward is that there is a need to give more emphasis towards qualitative systems of monitoring student satisfaction. With regard to management, there is a need to examine employee-management and employee-student relationships in more detail.

The literature review with regard to methodological issues is continued in Section 3.

The changing external environment of HE in the UK and its impact on notions of student satisfaction

The HE sector is becoming increasingly competitive and this is in part driven by marketing that is more aggressive from the "new" universities (Naude and Ivy, 1999). It is also the result of changes in

technology that have lowered market entry costs and increased competition from a larger number of distance-learning and internet-based courses (Prince, 1999). Intense competition in HE has fuelled interest in the measurement of customer-perceived service quality for differentiation purposes (Ford et al, 1999).

The nature of the HE market has changed significantly over the past 30 years. The number of students studying at UK HE institutions is currently 2.23 million (HESA, 2002). This has risen from around 200,000 in the early 1960s. The composition of the student population has also changed with the growth of mature, part time and female students. A third of first-degree students are over 21 (HESA, 2002). Part time students now make up more than a quarter of the HE population and women account for 56% of UK undergraduates having overtaken men as a proportion of the undergraduate population in 1996-97 (HESA, 2002).

HE institutions in the UK are facing major changes to their environment, in terms of both supply of funding and level of demand for their courses. In the past, many institutions have been able to take a somewhat passive approach to student recruitment but the tertiary system in the UK is now undergoing a fundamental change. According to Naude and Ivy (1999), there are three key changes:

- 1 Changes in government funding have meant that total undergraduate student numbers in any institution are effectively capped, and in addition, students have to live on ever decreasing grants.
- 2 In 1992, the former polytechnics were given university status and a wide variety of colleges and educational institutes now offer accredited or franchised university degree courses, thereby dramatically expanding the number and variety of degree courses on offer.

- 3 Changes in technology have lowered the cost of entering the market, leading to an increase in both distance learning and Internet based courses.

The environment is thus now one of having to compete for students. There has been an increase in aggressive marketing and the adoption of Total Quality Management techniques. Some HE institutions have been stimulated and influenced by a total quality framework for both teaching and administrative support functions (e.g. Freed and Klugman, 1997; Hoffman and Julius; 1995, Lin, 1997; Roberts 1995 and Ruben 1995). Such initiatives also recognise the changing conditions in HE including the increase in students' requirements and needs, increasing demands from business and the increasing accountability required by government.

Focusing on the customer is an essential principle of Total Quality Management and the key customer is the student. Without students to teach to, there is no business for HE institutions, no research to conduct or service to provide. It is thus essential to measure students' perceived quality and satisfaction within HE institutions to develop continuous improvement of study programmes, teaching, staff and equipment.

In addition, the government's quality areas for HE include quality and standards, exploiting knowledge produced through research and scholarship, improving the skills of graduates to enhance employability, increasing numbers planning to go on to HE and tackling social inclusion through widening access to non-traditional students.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is charged with the mission "to promote public confidence that quality of provision and the standards of awards in HE are being safeguarded and enhanced" (QAA, 2001).

The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) is charged with providing resources to HE institutions. At present, there is a reduction in the unit of funding of around 1% per year (HEFCE, 1999).

Problems of under funding have been addressed recently by the introduction of fees and by a greater interest in recruiting overseas students. The introduction of means -tested fees and the replacement of maintenance grants with loans is expected to have a major impact on demand with increasing preference for local and part time study (HEFCE, 1999). It has been argued by Lange (1998) that the charging of fees for HE is essential "so that students would enrol on better quality courses". Issues of service quality and student satisfaction inevitably take a more central role as the result of such developments.

Given the need for greater efficiency in the use of scarce resources by HE institutions and the need at the same time to improve the quality of learning for students it has been argued there is the need for a new paradigm in which the service recipient role is re-focused so that students are treated as customers of the organisation (Havarnek and Brodwin, 1998). The interesting point of this argument is that the focus shift will create HE institutions that are more responsive to students. They believe that a new paradigm for institutions of HE deserves exploration. It will be a student-focused paradigm, which in their opinion can be accomplished by the use of smaller direct service units through a student-focused management organisation. They conclude that the student-focused learning team approach will maximise continuity of services to students, increase student satisfaction and minimise costs.

In the private sector, the driving force behind service quality is competitive advantage. The cultivation of service quality is directed towards winning and retaining customers while also pursuing error

reduction, as a means of cost reduction, but within HE, service provision is more complex. It is not simply a matter of meeting expressed needs, but of finding out unexpressed needs, setting priorities, allocating resources and publicly justifying and accounting for what has been done (Brocato and Potocki 1996; Galloway 1998). A further distinctive element of HE is that it is difficult for students to withdraw once embarked on a course of study, although they may more easily withdraw from certain services such as accommodation. The consequence of this phenomenon is that although they may remain, they will exhibit dissatisfaction, which will need to be addressed. In other service industries, there may be the opportunity to withdraw and thus the need to address their dissatisfactions directly will be less urgent.

In March 2002, the QAA announced a new review system for quality assurance in English HE (QAA, 2002). The system uses independent audits to ensure that HE institutions are managing their own academic quality and standards properly, and are providing useful, reliable and up to date information to students and other key stakeholders. The major difference in this system compared to former systems is that students will contribute to the audit process at all stages. The intention is that student surveys will be undertaken at institutional and at national level and here for the first time in the United Kingdom is evidence that the student satisfaction survey has a key role to play the measurement and management of quality. There were two key elements of such surveys:

- Feedback from recent graduates, disaggregated by institution, collected through a national survey and
- Feedback from current students collected through HEIs' own surveys, undertaken on a more consistent basis than now.

Are students, customers of HE?

The notion of students as customers is a controversial one for many reasons. The idea that HE is providing a marketable product is difficult to grasp and is rejected by some writers. There is a market for HE students with clear demand and supply components but it is not a fully developed market. For example, supply is restricted by government-imposed quotas in the form of the MASN (maximum aggregate student number) on home undergraduates, which effectively caps intake by financially penalising institutions, which exceed their allocated MASN. Demand is similarly restricted by limited choice. Potential students are not able to always choose between competing institutions because of stringent entry requirements, distance from home imposing prohibitive costs or other factors.

HE provider-user relationships are very complicated (Kinnel and MacDougall, 1997) and this intensifies the need to understand the nature of these relationships. For example, the cost of students' education is paid for by a combination of government funding (paid directly to the university), government funding in the form of grants (to some students), tuition fees paid by a proportion of students and/or parents, and living costs and other expenses incurred whilst living away from home. This is not a normal market based relationship and such market complexity makes business/marketing goals very difficult to define.

Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) noted that the inherent characteristics of services of intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity not only make it more difficult for consumers to evaluate services than goods but involve a different evaluation process. This process involves three main qualities:

1. search qualities, e.g. entry requirements, achievement rates.
2. experience qualities, e.g. enjoyment of learning experience

3. credence qualities, e.g. where the customer or student has to decide whether the experience was at the required standard and appropriately delivered.

Such evaluations are difficult to make but this does not prevent customers from forming impressions even when they are not well equipped to do so. In essence, according to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) customers will draw on tangible cues to help compensate for intangibility. Therefore, if a tutor appears uninterested even if s(he) is actually fully engaged, this may be sufficient for students to form negative judgements about the quality of aspects of the service. Conversely, if tutors provide assurance and demonstrate a positive attitude, this is likely to be interpreted positively by students and they will form positive judgements about the quality of service.

HE provides a service experience in the form of teaching/learning and the accompanying amenities required to allow that experience to function effectively. There is clearly a service encounter and the primary assertion in this research study is that students are customers of HE in a way similar to a customer of any other service. Because they are customers, there is a need to monitor and manage their satisfaction levels so that their custom is cultivated and they feel content with the service provided.

The above assertion is not fully supported within the literature. At one extreme, some writers reject the notion of student as customer (Barrett 1996; Gould 1998); others accept that students are client-based consumers, who have a set of well-defined consumer rights (Brocato and Potocki 1996; Galloway, 1998). There are however, writers who have adopted ideas of students as customers of the product "HE" (Sanders and Burton 1996; DiDomenico and Bonnici 1996; Hill 1995; Havarnek and Brodwin 1998).

Barrett (1996) disputes the notion of the student as customer and criticises the idea that a good quality HEI is one that is based on the

production of satisfied customers. He suggests that if HE institutions follow the route of “customer care” policies then they run the risk of trivialising the educational experience. The problem as perceived by Barrett is that customer satisfaction does not sit comfortably next to the notion of educational quality. Harvey (1998) also contends that students are not products, customers or consumers but rather participants in a process. It is seen as an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. Gould (1998) similarly has problems with the idea of the student as a consumer. For these writers, universities exist not just to meet customers’ needs but also to provide an element of continuity, stability and permanence in society. In this context, there is no need or requirement to respond to every fluctuation in marketplace demand.

“Where the customer is king, their demands may be just as oppressive as those of government. Students who see themselves as buying their HE will believe that they are buying a qualification – a piece of property – and any failure to deliver it will be regarded as a failure on the part of the provider. Universities that have to act as slaves to the market to survive will have lost a bit of their academic independence.”

Gould (1998).

The above arguments may have some validity but they fail to adequately address a situation of increased student numbers and a student population increasingly being called upon to bear the costs of their own HE.

In an environment of resource rationing, it is necessary to take full account of market trends. Barrett (1996) is concerned that issues such as car parking, the quality of food and sports facilities should not be perceived as of equal importance in the student experience as the teaching/learning experience generated by academic

departments. Yet it is precisely these features highlighted by Barrett that many HE managers are earnestly interested in monitoring and managing. Primary research conducted as part of this research study with focus groups shows that although teaching and learning issues are the main focus for most students, they realise and appreciate the need to have good quality facilities in which to live, work and relax. (Sanders and Burton 1996; DiDomenico and Bonnici 1996; Hill 1995).

The literature central to the client-based features of students is led by Kerridge and Matthews (1998). They explored the tension between the student as a customer and also as a client of professionally provided services. They defined a client as one who is due the best professional advice and practice whereas a customer is one to whom goods and services are supplied to satisfy their needs and/or wants. This creates a major problem in developing quality within HE provision. If the students are perceived as customers then any negative feedback needs to be acted on and then remedied. But if the students are clients then the options are less well defined, since there must be an obligation on the part of the institution to act in the best interest of the student and with the maintenance of standards, whether the students like it or not. As an example of this tension, a student who fails to attend seminars should as a client be warned about the implications of their actions. However, as a customer it might be argued that they have made the decision to study and it is for them to decide how to fulfil this commitment. Reprimanding them and even penalising them for poor attendance may be considered de-motivating and lead to potential dissatisfaction with the course and the institution. It is possible to argue that their decision not to attend is informed by their consumer-based choice. However, even if one accepts the argument of Kerridge and Matthews that students are clients, the idea still holds that they are in most respects also customers of HE.

According to Hom (2002) student satisfaction may be defined as an overall attitude or as a set of attitude components. In this model, it is possible for a student to have a level of overall satisfaction with a student service and at the same time to have a level of satisfaction for each part of the experience. Largely, a student will formulate an overall satisfaction level with a service based on his/her satisfaction with the components of the service. However, the problem is that it is not always possible to discriminate between the varying components. It is thus possible that one component may dominate the students' evaluative process, for example, the student may be so impressed by the quality of teaching that they dismiss from their minds or at least partially forget the problem of a shortage of car parking or poor quality food.

HE is a professional service with three major characteristics – intangibility, inseparability and variability (Mavondo and Zaman (2000)). Although there is a strong degree of intangibility in the service, there are tangible elements such as physical features, equipment, employees, and marketing literature. These tangible elements need to be emphasised by management so that students make positive judgements about the overall service. Inseparability refers to the fact that services are first sold, then produced and consumed simultaneously. Variability refers to the difficulty of a HE institution delivering consistent performance and quality. Service performance may vary from day to day, from one faculty to another and from one tutorial to another, even when delivered by the same tutor.

According to Mavondo and Zaman (2000) this raises a problem in measuring student satisfaction. There are several choices facing the researcher in measuring satisfaction. It can be measured as a post-purchase experience shortly after the service has been provided. Alternatively, it may be a cumulative measure over a whole period of

delivery. This study has adopted the latter approach on the basis that the student engages in on-going evaluation.

Lovelock (1991) identified key components of the service marketing system. The material in brackets refers to how these components might be related to HE. These are:

- Personnel (tutors, teachers, heads of department, administrative staff, careers advisors, counsellors, catering staff).
- Facilities and equipment (buildings, car parking, landscaping, furnishings, photocopying, computer, sports facilities)
- Nonpersonal communications (application forms, registration documents, questionnaires, module information packs, handouts, presentation aids)
- Other people (fellow students, word of mouth comments from friends or acquaintances).

The majority of the research on customer satisfaction has also centred on ways of monitoring service quality and customer satisfaction as opposed to managing it (Mendelsohn 1998). However, there is an implicit assumption in much of the work that successful monitoring will result in successful management and lead to improvement in the quality of service provision and customer satisfaction.

The main measurement methodologies have been dominated by a quantitative, survey based approach but this dominant paradigm is now being increasingly challenged as some researchers become concerned by results that have uncertain reliability and validity (Mendelsohn 1998; Swan and Bowers 1998; Swan *et al* 1996).

Research into customer satisfaction and service quality in HE has been dominated by the same survey based approach and there is little evidence of any qualitative work being undertaken.

The difficulties of defining these provider-user relationships are compounded by difficulties of identifying the customers of HE. Kinnel and MacDougall (1997) list the following as consumers of education – students, parents, future employers and society in general. Conway et al. (1994) rightly adds government to that list and more helpfully categorises HE customers as:

1. Primary – students
2. Secondary – paymasters (government, employers)
3. Tertiary – validating bodies, ex-students, employers, and parents.

Kotler and Fox (1995) extend this category system into sixteen “publics” for educational institutions including foundations, alumni, local community, general public, mass media, prospective students, current students, accreditation organisations, parents of students, administration and staff, faculty, trustees, competitors, suppliers, business community and government agencies. Such a listing helps to identify groups involved in HE but does little in reality to advance the notion of customer.

Although there are contradictory opinions and multivariate definitions of the customers of HE, this literature review provides evidence that there is one group that should clearly and unambiguously be treated as a customer and that is the student. This is because they are the direct recipients of HE and they are the subjects of a clear if somewhat complex service experience. (Motwani and Kumar, 1997).

Given the importance of students as customers, the review next explores how satisfaction and related concepts are defined within marketing literature. It is important to establish reliable definitions so

that HE management can examine how to effectively manage student satisfaction (assuming that suitable measurement systems are available).

Definitions of satisfaction and service quality

The concept of consumer satisfaction occupies a central position in marketing thought and practice (Churchill and Suprenant, 1982; Oliver 1997). O' Malley (1997) seeks to draw a distinction between customer service and customer satisfaction. Customer service is what a business organisation offers and is determined by its mindset, while customer satisfaction results from the provision of the service and is determined by the mindset of the customer. Oliver (1997) defines satisfaction as the consumer's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that a service feature or the service itself has provided or is providing a pleasurable level of consumption –related fulfilment. Kotler and Clarke (1987) define satisfaction as the state felt by a person who has experienced a performance (or outcome) that has fulfilled his or her expectations. Satisfaction is thus a function of relative levels of expectation and perceived performance.

Expectations are formed based on past experiences with the same or similar situations, statements made by friends and other associates, and statements made by the supplying organisation.

Research into service quality and customer satisfaction in the service sector has increased markedly over the past 15 years (Oliver and Desarbo 1988; Smith 1995b; Higgins 1997). There has also been some development in the work done within the specific context of higher education (Rowley, 1997, Athiyaman, 1997). However, Parasuraman et al. (1985) thought that quality in tangible goods had been described and measured by marketers but quality in services was still largely undefined and unresearched. Even during the 1990s, research into quality dimensions and HE has been limited in content and scope (Owlia and Aspinwall 1996; Hampton 1993).

There are two main schools of thought in terms of conceptual definitions of perceived quality. The first is embodied in Parasuraman et al. (1985) who suggest that service quality perceptions derive from the extent of the gap between expectations and performance. When perceived performance exceeds expectations satisfaction is said to occur. When perceived performance falls short of expectations, dissatisfaction occurs. The second is described by Cronin and Taylor (1992,1994) and supported by Motwani and Kumar (1997), Joseph and Joseph (1998) and Ford et al (1999) and argues that service quality perceptions are based on performance only judgements. Spreng and MacKoy (1996) argue that desires as well as expectations are important. If this were not the case, then it might be possible for a customer who expected to receive poor performance to be satisfied if this were indeed the case.

Different writers hold different views on whether quality or satisfaction has a greater impact on consumer behaviour. Parasuraman et al (1991) claim that purchase intentions are influenced more by perceptions of quality. Zeithaml et al (1996) lend further support to this, but then propose that behavioural intentions are a better measure than either overall service quality or customer satisfaction variables as they are more closely related to actual behaviours. They suggest this is an important area because such evidence can justify investment in service quality and because surveys of behavioural intentions can act as an early warning system to identify customers in danger of defection.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) adopt the view that satisfaction exerts a stronger influence. This is an important distinction for if one adopts Cronin and Taylor's approach, then the reality is that customers do not buy the highest quality services, rather they buy those that provide the most satisfaction and for service providers this means they should identify and manage factors which affect satisfaction.

McDougall and Levesque (2000) develop this theory further by suggesting that it is possible for customers to be satisfied with the core service and the way in which it is delivered, but still feel they have not received value for money. They thus introduce into the satisfaction-quality debate the notion of perceived value. They argue that unless perceived value is managed carefully, efforts will centre on attempts to improve what is delivered and how it is delivered and the resultant improvement in satisfaction will be minimal.

Athiyaman (1997) supports and develops McDougall and Levesque's theory in relation to HE in a study conducted at a university in Australia. He found that that pre-enrolment attitude had little or no effect on post enrolment. This led him to conclude that in HE all service encounters should be managed to enhance consumer satisfaction. This in turn would enhance perceived quality.

The problem of intangibility is reinforced by Pizam and Taylor (1999). They acknowledge that customer satisfaction is the leading criterion for determining the quality that is actually delivered to customers through the product/service and by the accompanying servicing. Simply stated customer satisfaction is essential for corporate survival.

According to Pizam and Taylor there are three elements to service evaluation – the material product; the behaviour and attitude of the employees and the environment, such as the building, the layout, the furnishing. However, concerning their specific study of the hospitality industry they thought there were only two key elements - the functional element i.e. the food and beverage in a restaurant and the performance delivery element i.e. the service. The key was that they considered that it is possible to have quite different responses to the two elements. They also contradict Zeithaml and Bitner in that they believe that in service organisations the assessment of quality of a service is made during the actual delivery of the service –usually

an encounter between the customer and a service contact person. They do not see the importance of search and credence qualities.

Given the problems of evaluating service quality, the stages of service delivery are of crucial importance in enabling customers to make informed judgments. The problem then is identifying the occasions when service is delivered. Identifying the tasks to be included is complicated by the fact that service evaluation is based on the performance of supplementary as well as core services (Lovelock, 1991). In HE as much as any service and possibly more, there is a need to identify customer contact points. This is because of its longitudinal nature and the great number of influences on service delivery over time. It may also be possible to identify critical points, such as initial enquiry, admissions procedures, induction, assessment of work and quality of feedback in order to prioritise attention and investment.

The Measurement of Student Satisfaction in HE

In the introduction it was suggested that the work on the concepts of customer satisfaction and service quality was limited in relation to HE. However, this is not to deny that some significant work has been carried out. Some of the most comprehensive work in the United Kingdom has been carried out at the University of Central England (UCE 2002). The former leader of the UCE team, Lee Harvey (1997) claimed that he had developed a student satisfaction approach, which integrated student views into management strategic decision-making and in so doing, was able to develop a quality enhancement tool designed to improve the quality of the student experience. This strategy has been written in the form of a staged manual. This approach is one of five types of student satisfaction survey, identified by Harvey (2003a) and relates to institutional level satisfaction with

the total student experience. The other four that are not being considered in this research study are:

- Faculty level satisfaction with provision
- Programme level satisfaction with the learning and teaching and related aspects of a particular programme of study
- Module level feedback on the operation of a specific module or unit of study
- Teacher appraisal by students

According to Harvey (2003a) it is systematic institution-wide student feedback about the quality of the students' total educational experience that is an area of growing activity in UK HE institutions, and is probably now undertaken in one-third of all universities.

He claims five main reasons why an institution would benefit from an investment in student satisfaction:

It demonstrates the institution's commitment to its principal stakeholder – students. Student satisfaction involves taking student views seriously and acting on them.

It focuses on the student learning experience and is instrumental in enhancing student learning opportunities

It provides a clear set of procedures for a process of continuous quality improvement.

It ensures that strategic management decisions are based on reliable and valid information about student concerns.

It provides a means of benchmarking against which progress over time can be assessed.

In Harvey's methodology students determine the questions to be presented in a questionnaire based on feedback from qualitative based focus group sessions and also from comments on the previous years questionnaires. Unfortunately Harvey does not provide any rationale for the development of this strategy. Indeed he

does not provide any references preferring instead to present the procedures in the form of a staged mechanistic manual. He further claims that it is a portable methodology capable of being used by other institutions. The questionnaire however, is 20 pages in length and according to Harvey takes about 45 minutes to complete. Given that the questionnaire is distributed via post, this is a daunting proposition for most potential respondents and this is borne out by evidence from the 1998 report (UCE 1999), which confirms that the response rate was only 38.1%.

"The response rate has tended to decline over the last four years despite enormous efforts by the centre to raise response rates."

Harvey (1997).

The lack of a clearly defined rationale for the methodology adopted by UCE is frustrating. There is an underlying assumption that a survey-based approach is capable of providing valid data without any accompanying articulated support. The problem facing this approach is that unlike physical goods, services are ephemeral to the extent that they can be consumed only as long as the process or activity continues. Thus service quality can vary from one situation to the next within the same organisation (Hill 1995). It is this problem of variability that the UCE approach does not adequately address.

Quantitative research as suggested by Harvey, is usually seen as value free or objective since it deals with the averages of large numbers of items on large numbers of people (Glaser, 2003).

Qualitative research is usually seen as value unfree, since it deals with the words, meanings and perceptions of participants. There is also the possibility that qualitative data is a bias construct of interviewer and interviewee.

However, quantitative data is often neither value free nor non-issue orientated. The way the questions are formed and sourced, the way

the sample is randomised and the way the analysis is done is very often issue oriented.

The development of a national student survey

The new QAA Review Audit system (2002) requires the administration of a national satisfaction survey, with results made public. The survey was piloted in 2003 and the pilot itself was informed by a report prepared for HEFCE by SQW, The Open University Centre for HE Research and Information and NOP Research Group (2003). The report emphasises that virtually all UK HE institutions possess elaborate mechanisms for the collection of student feedback information and these are both quantitative and qualitative. However, the report authors believe that there remains a need to do more to share experiences and good practice, especially with regard to the analysis, presentation, and uses of student feedback data.

The Report authors note in paragraph 3.49 that student feedback can be obtained in many ways other than through the administration of formal questionnaires. They note that feedback can be obtained from casual comments, meeting of staff – student committees and student representation on institutional bodies. In delineating the forms in this way, the Report almost wholly ignores the collection of qualitative data and in paragraph 3.51 the rationale of their approach is exposed:

“ In principle, one could obtain student feedback using open-ended questionnaires. These might be especially appropriate on programmes in education, the humanities and the social sciences, where students are often encouraged to be sceptical about the value of quantitative methods for understanding human experience. Nevertheless, the burden of analysing open-ended responses and other qualitative data is immense, even with only a relatively modest sample. The process of data analysis becomes quite intractable with larger samples unless there are a limited number of response alternatives to each question that can be encoded in a straightforward manner.”

Paragraph 3.51 Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE – A report to HEFCE by the Centre for HE Research and Information (Open University), NOP Research Group and SQW Ltd. (2003).

In essence, a qualitative approach is not considered in any form. They concede that the content of quantitative instruments can be based on results from qualitative research such as focus groups, but this is the extent of the consideration.

The National Survey is concerned with the quality of teaching and learning. The Report states that “there is research evidence that students’ perceptions of institutional facilities are less important as predictors of their overall satisfaction than their perceptions of the academic features of their programmes” (p 27, Para 3.56, 2003) and therefore there is no need to consider non-teaching factors in measuring student satisfaction. However, at no point in the Report, do they indicate where this research evidence is to be found.

The Report moves on from its dismissal of qualitative collection methods to consider some of the key issues of questionnaire design.

The Report highlights the need for high levels of validity and reliability and yet states “it is unclear how far institutional questionnaires have been tested for their reliability and validity.” (P61, Para 4.58, 2003).

The Report suggests that questionnaires are relatively inexpensive to administer, process and analyse and they provide real evidence because they document evidence in a relatively systematic way. Questionnaires also allow comparisons and analysis of trends. In paragraph 4.60 the negative aspects are alluded to and they include the fact that end of programme questionnaires provide little incentive for respondents. The issue of questionnaire fatigue is also highlighted coupled with low response rates that affect the extent to which actions and decisions can legitimately be made.

Further, the Report identifies the need for clarity about the differences between student feedback on satisfaction, on learning processes (study methods) or on student objectives and their achievement. The Report acknowledges that questionnaires muddle these different kinds of feedback. Given the potential problems identified of using institutional questionnaires, the report authors in their *Conclusions and Recommendations* state that:

“use of a range of feedback mechanisms will be more effective than reliance on questionnaires. For example, the existence of a well-publicised complaints procedure or a discussion during class may provide more effective ways of checking that a module is going well than asking students to fill out questionnaires.”

Paragraph 6.10 Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE – A report to HEFCE by the Centre for HE Research and Information (Open University), NOP Research Group and SQW Ltd.(2003).

There is an implicit assumption in the above quotation, that quantitative data is a straightforward process of collection and interpretation. Issues of reliability and validity of such collection are not referenced or discussed.

Johnston (2003) reported that results are unlikely to be available until summer 2005, almost two years later than promised by the government, because of continuing concerns about the validity of its judgements. A pilot exercise completed in 2003 achieved a response rate of about 40 per cent and it is this figure that has caused managers of the survey to cast doubt on the reliability of the results. It is assumed in the analysis that high response rates will be vital in reducing the margins for error and allowing results to be reported at a suitably detailed level. Contained within the pilot survey was an open-ended question. According to Johnston (2003) about 70 per cent answered this question and this "provided a rich source of data that could be used for analytical purposes."

Macleod (2004) thinks the value of the National Survey depends crucially on whether a high enough proportion of students respond to the questionnaires. He claims that HEFCE is aiming for a 60% response rate. It is intended to obtain responses by e-mail in the first instance and then in order to increase the response rate, by post and telephone surveying. The attempt to drive up the response rate will inevitably push up costs that have been variously estimated between two and ten million pounds. It is intended to report scores for each aspect of quality. In addition, HEFCE is considering computing an overall score that would form the basis of a league table comparison.

Diamantopoulos (2003) identifies another problem with the National Student Satisfaction Survey. He suggests that poor wording and scoring cast severe doubt on the validity of the responses. For example, one item in the pilot questionnaire reads, "For most of the

course, the workload was heavy”, Students were then invited to record their agreement or disagreement on a scale. A score of 1 (agree strongly) would indicate that the perceived workload to be too heavy, whereas a score of 5 (disagree strongly) could either imply that the workload was just right or that it was perceived to be too light. Such problems of implied meaning should be a cause for serious concern in a survey, that when rolled out is intended to cover 350000 students across the nation.

In a later piece of reflective writing, Harvey (2002) acknowledges that student feedback is an important element of quality monitoring and he emphasises the need to link feedback to action and empowerment. For the first time, Harvey is openly reflective of the student satisfaction process and he points out that over-evaluation of students, unlinked to action leads to “questionnaire fatigue” and a sense of cynicism by both staff and students. He suggests that there is a growing tendency for student feedback to be hijacked for other purposes (not discussed) and that there is a need to ensure that students have ownership of feedback. His conclusion is that too much emphasis is placed on a consumerist approach to feedback rather than a participative approach. In reaching this conclusion, Harvey begins to cast doubt on the values, validity and reliability of student satisfaction surveys.

Harvey (2003a) is completely opposed to the introduction of a national student satisfaction survey. Given his previous enthusiasm for the survey based approach, it is important to examine his reasons for his opposition.

1. The national survey will clash with internal processes of internal feedback.
2. It will be very expensive
3. The response rate will only be about 40 per cent (the same as Harvey achieved in surveys at UCE in the late 1990s).

4. The results, in his opinion, will be meaningless of use neither to institutions for improvement of quality, nor to intending students as indicators to help them choose suitable institutions.
5. He is strongly critical of the five-point agreement / disagreement scale and extends the argument initiated by Diamantopoulos. Scores on the scale are averaged with a low score being more positive than a high score. He then poses the question that moves to the very centre of the student satisfaction survey approach. It is almost incredible that it is Harvey who should pose the question – *“What do the average scores show? What does 1.5 for teaching mean? Students quite strongly agree that teaching is...is what? Well, better than if it had scored 3.4, but maybe not quite as good as if it had scored 1.3”*.
6. No prospective student is going to make a decision based on whether a teaching score is 1.5 or 1.8.

The metamorphosis of Harvey is now almost complete. In an article in the Guardian newspaper in March 2003, Alice Tarleton writes:

“Lee Harvey, has studied the use of student assessment since the mid –1980s. His work has highlighted the importance of gaining qualitative data –rather than relying on quantitative questionnaire answers – as a means to improve students’ experience and show the effects their feedback is having.”

Tarleton, (2003).

However, this metamorphosis may be less clear-cut than journalists in the national press believe. In an editorial in *Quality in HE*, Harvey (2003b) states that student views may be collected in a variety of ways, including:

- Informal discussion
- Formal qualitative sessions, such as focus groups, facilitated discussions or suggestion boxes
- Representative or consultative committees
- Questionnaires

Harvey spends almost the whole of the editorial analysing the survey-based approach and it is clear that he still wholly wedded to the survey based approach with questions being initially framed via a series of focus groups.

The positioning of Harvey in this debate is difficult to place and is made more problematic because he wrote an important book (Harvey 1990) on the importance of doing critical social research. In a detailed analysis he shows how empirically grounded critical social research can be accomplished. He notes that such research is not constrained by data collection techniques and includes in his list, observation; formal interviews with random samples; semi-structured, unstructured and in-depth interviewing; key informant testimonies; analysis of personal and institutional documents; mass media analysis; archive searching; examination of official statistics and reviews of published literature. All that is missing from this list is the use of quantitative techniques. However, this is to some extent to miss the point. For Harvey, it is the way in which data are approached and the framework within which data are analysed that are crucial and the aim is to "shatter the illusion of observed reality" (Harvey 1990, p 196). The manifest aim is to get beneath the surface of apparent reality to reveal the nature of oppressive social structures. The studies aim to show what is really going on and this is the same aim as grounded theory analysis, although admittedly seen from a different perspective.

Clearly, the student satisfaction questionnaire developed at the University of Central England is not intended to be similarly critical in

stance. It is also not clear how it purports to observe reality given the problems inherent in quantitative data analysis.

The Australian experience of measuring student satisfaction

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) is administered by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia and surveys all graduates of Australian universities (Illing 2001). The survey is also used by many Australian universities for internal quality assurance. The CEQ has been used since 1994 and is a questionnaire-based survey. It measures aspects of teaching and learning and the development of generic skills. It does not include any items relating to the pastoral, physical, or social support of students in HE. Until 2001, it comprised 25 items. One item measures overall graduate satisfaction with their course experience, the others are used to generate five scales: good teaching, clear goals, appropriate workload, appropriate assessment and generic skills. The CEQ is considered a valuable instrument for improving the quality of teaching in universities and for informing student choice, managing institutional performance and promoting accountability of the HE sector (DEST,2001). In 2001 an extended form of the existing CEQ was devised (doubling the number of questions) so that broader measures of aspects of the student experience could be introduced. The work completed in Australia has been closely scrutinised by the designers of the UK National Survey.

Illing (2001) believes the doubling in length of the questionnaire will produce survey fatigue and reduce response rates. This has been matched by rising student and academic cynicism about the questionnaire's relevance, legitimacy and impact and as a consequence, producing unreliable and often misleading results.

There is clearly an issue about the use of the Australian instrument but this issue is overshadowed by the practical application of the

questionnaire. Lawnham (2002) reported that many graduates were adding comments to the questionnaire and this has led to a year long project to find a way of systematically mining thousands of write-in comments.

The rationale for using student satisfaction surveys

The questionnaire based approach at institutions such as the University of Central England and at College A is based loosely around the gap approach developed by Parasuraman et al (1985). This method set out to provide a reliable and valid measure of service quality. The approach acknowledges that because of intangibility, firms found it difficult to understand how consumers perceived their services and evaluated service quality. Thus to help develop a reliable instrument, focus group interviews with consumers and in-depth interviews with executives were conducted to develop a conceptual model of service quality. This research revealed ten dimensions that consumers used in forming expectations about and perceptions of services and they claimed that these were dimensions that transcended different types of service. These dimensions were combined into the SERVQUAL instrument. The methodology required that respondents separately recorded both their expectations and perceptions of the service, which allowed the calculation of the gap between the two, defined as the consumer's perception of service quality (Smith 1995).

Consumers are believed to form expectations of product performance characteristics before purchase. Subsequent purchase and usage reveal actual performance levels that are compared to expectation levels using a better than worse than heuristic. The judgement that results from this comparison is labelled negative disconfirmation if the product is worse than expected, positive

disconfirmation if better than expected and simple confirmation if as expected (Oliver and Desarbo 1988).

In their initial study, Parasuraman et al (1985) found that there were ten determinants that characterised customers' perceptions of the service provided. However, as a result of a later study Parasuraman et al (1991) they reduced the ten determinants of service quality to five; tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy and the SERVQUAL instrument was developed based on these five determinants, using 22 items and a 7 point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

However, the gap analysis approach is flawed. Some studies have not found the standard five determinants reported by Parasuraman et al, (Babakus and Boller 1992; Cronin and Taylor 1992).

In relation to HE, the method is for example, unable to measure whether students will continue to attend or recommend their institution to potential students. The method is also incapable of highlighting certain areas, which may be of critical importance in the provision of educational services, such as the level of financial aid.

DiDomenico and Bonnici (1996) do support the questionnaire-based approach through the application of gap analysis. They are convinced that gap analysis offers a disciplined methodological approach, which scrutinises various quality components. Through the measurement institutions can gain valuable information about the areas, which need improvement. Such is their confidence in the approach that they are able to assert:

"In times of decreasing enrolment, such analysis could stabilise the customer base, or even reverse the decline, and improve profitability."

DiDomenico and Bonnici (1996, p 356).

However, despite their confidence, they highlight crucial shortcomings. They suggest that the method is incapable of highlighting certain areas, which may be of critical importance in the provision of educational services, such as the level of financial aid. They suggest that “future measurements would do well to account for such shortcomings” (p 357). What they patently fail to do is suggest how a survey-based approach could reasonably be expected to overcome such “shortcomings”.

Mendelsohn (1998) also has identified a major problem with gap analysis. In his opinion, there is too much management of the measure and too little analysis of consumer behaviour. Coupled with this problem is the one of over measurement. The idea that if for example, 200 items make up the customer experience, the only way to capture the experience is to measure all 200. Such over measurement includes measuring attributes that those in charge of the customer experience cannot change.

The development of “gap” methodology is thus highly problematic. There are key issues relating to reliability, discriminant validity, spurious correlations and variance restriction (Smith 1995; Higgins 1997; Mendelsohn 1998; Robinson 1999; Swan and Bowers 1998; Bitner et al 1990).

Despite these problems the literature shows that the survey-based method is dominant across the world. For example, at the Johns Hopkins University in the USA, the procedure is taken to its logical limit. The assessment of each student’s satisfaction begins with obtaining fast-feedback questionnaires from each student at the end of each class session. Numerical scores of importance and satisfaction are obtained. Brocato and Potocki (1996) think that the numerical scores allow some insight into the value the student places on the importance of the class material and into the student’s

satisfaction with the class. This may well be the case but the authors pointedly fail to discuss the possibilities of fatigue induced in students by the repeated process of having to respond to short questionnaires at the end of each teaching session. The key question with any survey-based approach must be, are the students able to make appropriate judgements (Kerridge and Mathews 1998)?

Katcher (2003) believes the problems with customer satisfaction questionnaires are purely technical and that this should be encouraged as an essential management tool. He suggest that success of surveys depends upon three key principles:

1. Involve senior management – they need to be involved in setting its objectives, monitoring the data gathering process, interpreting the results and actively implementing the solutions.
2. Make certain that customer perspectives are included in the survey – this should be done via pre-survey interviews with customers similar to the UCE model. It also involves asking front line employees for their input.
3. Do everything possible to encourage customers to respond – if there is not a good response rate, senior management will spend more time focusing on the credibility of the data than on what actions should be taken to improve customer satisfaction. Therefore, it is necessary to use multiple methods including mail surveys, the Web and telephone interviewing. Incentives such as raffles should also be included. Finally, over-communication is often required including letters from the CEO telling customers that a survey will be arriving shortly and that their input is important.

Additional research studies relating to the measuring of service quality in the HE sector

Wright and O'Neil (2003) used an on-line library service at a Western Australia University using students who could easily be approached. Two focus group interviews and a quantitative survey instrument were used. The qualitative stage was used to develop the questionnaire to identify attitudes about the importance of specific dimensions of the service experience and their evaluation against each of the SERVQUAL dimensions.

Oldfield and Baron (2000) used an adaptation of the SERVPERF instrument adapted from the research of Cronin and Taylor (1992). This uses an attribute approach to measure customers, experiences of the service only. This instrument makes use of the original SERVQUAL scales and requires the consumer to rate the provider's service performance along a seven point scale, but uses a single set of questions concerning post consumption perceptions of service quality and does not seek to measure expectations. Oldfield and Baron used this to measure service quality in HE and in particular, to study elements not directly involved with content and delivery of taught courses in a UK university.

Galloway (1998) used an adapted SERVQUAL instrument to measure the perceived quality in two separate groups within the context of a University faculty office. He discovered that expectations contributed nothing to the predictive value of the data. He suggested that perceptions identified may also change over time.

Aldridge and Rowley (1998) developed the UCE tool and applied it in a HE institution. It was designed as a longitudinal study over several years using the same instrument to see if students become more critical of service delivery as their relationship with the institution

develops. Focus groups were used to generate questions to be included in a questionnaire based survey.

Sahney et al (2003) identified the minimum set of design characteristics able to cover and provide for quality in education at education institutes in India and then applied the SERVQUAL instrument. This produced 15 items grouped under four factors/constructs for customer requirements and these factors were termed as tangibles, competence, delivery and attitude. The gap analysis produced a series of negative scores with expectation levels being higher than their perception scores. The results obtained led to the conclusion that there was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the educational system – the researchers considered this to be “wake up call” to Indian education institutions.

Five additional studies have also made use of the SERVQUAL analysis. Leblanc and Nguyen (1997), Parisau and McDaniel (1997), Soutar and McNeil (1996), Cuthbert (1996) and Anderson and Zwelling (1996) have all used the instrument to varying degrees. It is particularly relevant that Soutar and McNeil also held discussions with students and developed a wider set of questions as a result.

Clewes (2003) adopted a longitudinal, qualitative research design to investigate the service quality experience of a sample of part time postgraduate students. She points out that whilst quantitative sampling is driven by the imperative of representativeness, qualitative sampling is concerned with depth and richness of data. According to Clewes, the approach is consistent with research designs recommended for gathering data on dynamic, experiential, interactive service processes such as education. She notes that the interviews were analysed to emphasise the description and explanation of respondents' perceived service-quality experience. However, she does not make clear how the design meets the management imperative of reliability and validity of data.

Challenging the supremacy of customer satisfaction surveys as a measurement device

The increasing importance of customer satisfaction surveys in the last decade has been a very significant development in measuring key attributes of service quality. (Binshan and Jones 1997). Surveys do provide valuable information on customer perceptions and they are a rich source of information for generating continuous quality improvements, but only if they are examined carefully and used within a consistent framework.

There is an implication in survey methodology that satisfaction /dissatisfaction is a one-dimensional emotional and/or cognitive state that only varies in its intensity (Stauss and Neuhaus 1997). However, the state of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction is always connected with a specific emotion and this is not a uniform feeling. Satisfaction can be connected with happy confidence or resigned agreement, dissatisfaction with disappointment or angry protest. The tools and methods used for measuring satisfaction imply the conception that customer satisfaction is a state of experience that might vary in intensity but not in quality. This leads to the assumption that customers who express the same degree of satisfaction have a qualitatively identical experience.

It is a far-reaching failure in the process of data analysis to aggregate the results for completely satisfied and satisfied to one category of satisfied customers. It is necessary to regard customers who give different positive satisfaction scores as separate groups (Stauss and Neuhaus1997)

Hyrkas and Paunonen (2000) writing about patient satisfaction in the health service point out that the approaches applied in patient

satisfaction research seem to lay a rather one-sided emphasis on surveys. Only in exceptional cases are other options mentioned.

However, satisfaction can be seen as a multi-sided process including expectations, conceptions and assumptions of the outcome. Thus it is a process of continuing comparisons and not an absolute phenomenon. This comparison process is strongly influenced by attitudes; that is, the patient can express satisfaction even though expectations are not fulfilled or contrarily "Yes I am satisfied, given that I did not expect much."

Satisfaction surveys only partially explain the causes of satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction. According to Binshan and Jones (1997), patient satisfaction research has remained limited and the generation of knowledge has depended almost solely on survey inquiries, which are not sensitive enough to describe satisfaction and its individual, dynamic and multidimensional nature.

Problems with surveys include a tendency to show a high level of satisfaction, a lack of standard satisfaction scales, the proliferation and excessive use of surveys and tiredness of customers being regularly surveyed. A low response rate undermines the validity and generalisability of potential findings because the characteristics of nonrespondents may be unknown. There is the possibility of sample-composition bias where those responding in a survey differ in some important respect from those who do not respond to the survey. Researchers must develop methods to reduce data collection demands imposed on the customers. While the development of shorter customer satisfaction surveys would help, it will have to be implemented by procedures that are smarter and can fill up gaps due to the limited amount of information obtained from the respondents. (Binshan and Jones, 1997).

In the context of the public sector and the HE sector in particular, such problems are a cause for serious concern. For example, Harvey (2001) rightly suggests that in order to make an effective contribution to internal improvement processes, the views of students need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback. However, his solution is to use questionnaires as a sole device. He does acknowledge that sometimes feedback is solicited through qualitative discussion sessions, which are minuted but he does not explain how such minutes can be analysed.

Stauss and Neuhaus (1997) demonstrated that the majority of companies conducting satisfaction surveys reported that their customers give positive responses in most cases. However, despite a high degree of claimed satisfaction customers break up relationships and switch brands suggesting that satisfaction is not as strong as indicated by the survey. The reason for this is that the tools and methods used for measuring satisfaction imply the conception that customer satisfaction is a state of experience that might vary in intensity but not in quality. This leads to the assumptions that customers who express the same degree of satisfaction have a qualitatively identical experience, but it is possible that an answer given by a customer scoring a certain satisfaction index is connected with various emotional, cognitive and intentional components.

Rogers and Karlsen (2000) studying the health service concluded that patient satisfaction surveys were an important way of obtaining user views of health service provision. However they also noted a lack of theoretical underpinning of the concept of patient satisfaction and hence the use of this type of survey. This results in difficulties in reporting what has been measured. While it has been established that satisfaction in general is inextricably linked with expectations of a

service or experience, it has been suggested that expectations play little part in patients' evaluations of health care services.

The development of qualitative monitoring of customer satisfaction

Swan and Bowers (1998) have challenged the prevailing quantitative methodology. They have major concerns about the quantitative "gap" approach to monitoring customer satisfaction. Their concerns are based around three propositions: -

1. The service user is placed in "solitary confinement" and must make judgements about individual attributes in isolation from other attributes.
2. Customers are more than "attribute accountants", who assess how a service scores on a set of attributes.
3. Survey research methods are not efficient for learning about service as a process that unfolds over time.

In essence, their criticism is that current service theory and methods do not focus sharply on user-provider interactions and processes. Research and theory tend to focus on the individual and not on people doing things together. How service experience is interpreted may involve more than attributes. It needs also to consider the nature of interactions between service providers and consumers and to look in-depth at how service failure is managed. They thus argue for the use of ethnographic methods and symbolic interactions (Blumer 1969) to obtain information on activities that unfold over time.

Bitner et al (1990) also are concerned about the lack of detail and shallowness of understanding of customer satisfaction surveys. Instead they advocate the critical incident technique (CIT) as the most appropriate for discovering the underlying sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in service encounters. CIT makes use of content analysis of stories, rather than quantitative solutions,

in the data analysis stage of the procedure. The specific descriptions of events and behaviours are identified as critical incidents. An incident is defined as an observable human activity that is complete enough in it to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act and it is one that contributes to or detracts from the general aim of the activity in a significant way. It thus has the potential for uncovering specific events and behaviours that underlie service encounter dis/satisfaction, which can then be used as a base for developing customer satisfaction monitoring programmes, designing service procedures and policies and training contact personnel.

However the problem with CIT is that it may again not reveal much about the experience of people over time (Swan and Bowers 1998) and as Bitner et al (1990) themselves point out, there are problems in relation to reliability and validity because of the potential ambiguity of word meanings, category labels and coding rules within any particular study.

It has already been stated that quantitative research in the field of customer satisfaction and service quality has been heavily criticised in terms of its reliability and validity. Qualitative research in the field has hardly been developed at all and yet it may have the potential for deepening the understanding of consumer behaviour, in that it does not assume single objective reality and is able instead to examine a socially constructed reality (Swan et al,1996).

Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) suggest that customer satisfaction requires experience with the service and is influenced by the perceived quality and the value of the service. They conclude that customer satisfaction is the accumulated experience of a customer's purchase and consumption experiences. It cannot be measured via the use of snapshot surveys.

This research study seeks to develop and evaluate a qualitative analysis of student satisfaction and to deliberately move away from pre-existing survey based models. In doing this it has been greatly influenced by the relevant qualitative literature. Within this literature, one piece has stood out from the rest and that is the work of Swan and Bowers (1998). They vividly and with great care described a service experience in the form of an organised and guided bird watching trip to Venezuela. They described a series of service failures including bus breakdowns, poor communications between the guides and the transport companies and problems with hotel bookings. In essence there was a series of major service failures and yet at the end of the trip all of the tourists expressed satisfaction. Gap analysis would almost certainly have shown major service breakdowns and an apparent lack of satisfaction. This ethnographically based study however, was able to show that the service failures were overcome by various combinations of using humour and by negotiating alternatives with participants. The apparent paradox was resolved by learning what happened from participants via qualitative investigation.

Could a survey-based approach have identified the antecedents of satisfaction? It is possible that a survey could have extracted the information but as Swan and Bowers point out, the dominant disconfirmation approach to satisfaction holds that as attribute performance increases compared to expectations, satisfaction increases. Clearly in the bird watching trip case, this theory could not hold and the only way of ascertaining the level of satisfaction would be to develop a qualitative model. Ideally, this ought to be via participant observation, but given the limited opportunity to engage in such work, the nearest appropriate substitute must be in-depth interviewing.

The antecedents of student satisfaction

The issue of what determines student satisfaction in HE and subsequent recommendations to prospective students has not been extensively researched.

Mavondo and Zaman (2000) found that the drivers to student satisfaction have complex inter-relations among themselves. Their model suggested that academic reputation, quality of teaching staff and organisational market orientation are significant antecedents to student satisfaction.

Wiers –Jenssen et al (2002) did an analysis of a national student satisfaction survey in Norway and found that the academic and pedagogic quality of teaching were crucial determinants of teaching. However, their analysis also showed that social climate, aesthetic aspects of the physical infrastructure and the quality of services from the administrative staff should not be underestimated.

Snipes et al (1997) suggest that student satisfaction may be significantly affected by employee performance, which is itself affected by the management and monitoring of individual service encounters. To improve service quality in HE, management needs to understand what actions improve employee willingness and motivation to satisfy students.

Capelleras and Williams (2003) conducted a comparative analysis of student satisfaction in two universities in Britain and Spain and found that students in both countries have a tendency to be more satisfied with their experience of interacting with people than they are of the resources available to them. They concluded that students value knowledgeable and enthusiastic individuals who cared about their learning and helped them as individuals to move their knowledge

forward. However, also important was the physical environment as this was an indicator of the institution's capacity to offer service in an organised and professional manner.

Mavondo and Zaman (2000) examined the factors affecting student satisfaction in Australian universities and concluded that there were a series of complex inter-relations and include academic reputation, quality of teaching staff and organisational market orientation.

The case for originality of the research

The research study involved the generation of a grounded theory of the measurement of student satisfaction applicable to HE institutions. The broad thesis (developed via research questions) is that student satisfaction can be effectively measured using a qualitative model to complement survey statistics. It is presently over-measured using quantitative techniques.

Student satisfaction is not a well-researched area as indicated by several literature searches. A search of the *Index to Theses* revealed that although there are many published theses on the theme of HE, only a very few have any relevance to student satisfaction. Perhaps of even greater significance, there are no recent published theses on student satisfaction.

A review of relevant theses

Owlia (1996) recognised the importance of the measurement of quality in the HE sector. The first section of the research included a critical review of different quality concepts and methodologies in HE. As a result of this research it was concluded that taking a pragmatic view for improving quality meant defining it on the basis of customers' needs expressed in terms of measurable characteristics. A review of the literature showed that despite more recent research

on the general services' quality dimensions, little work had concentrated on public services and in particular on HE.

Clayton (1998) suggested that the quality debate in English HE has continued unresolved for over ten years, focusing on the meaning of quality in HE and how to assess and improve it. The research hypothesis was that a TQM-based understanding of quality in HE set in the context of "fitness for purpose" and "meeting the needs of customers" would not only provide a shared understanding of quality but also a method by which quality in HE could be measured, assessed and improved.

Some research has been done into measuring quality in academic departments in HE institutions. Chalkley (1996) suggested that methods of addressing quality in HE departments focused on mechanisms where action was post-process and reactive and where the feedback loop was often not closed. This idea of feeding back to students is considered to be an important part of managing student satisfaction (UCE 2000). However, student satisfaction is related to the overall service experience and not only teaching quality within academic departments.

Work of relevance has been conducted in sectors other than HE. Smith (1990) examined the role of quality in the small business/bank relationship and the buying behaviour of the small firm with respect to bank services. Proctor (1997) conducted focus group discussions with pregnant and recently delivered women to discover which attributes of the service were important to them and how these compared with their service experience. This work is quite close to the structure of the present research in that in addition to researching the "customers", semi structured interviews or focus groups were also conducted with professional workers to explore what was important to the service users. It was not however, a grounded theory analysis and the qualitative data was used to construct a questionnaire that was administered to various groups within the

health sector. Smith (1995b) investigated the quantitative instrument SERVQUAL with reference to health care and patient satisfaction and supported the view that due to substantial methodological problems, SERVQUAL may be of little value to either academics or practitioners.

Reference to other literature

In relation to the claim for originality, most work done on satisfaction measurement has been quantitative in nature. There may of course be good reasons for this but there is a case for examining the development of qualitative alternatives and/or developing complements to quantitative survey based work. Ruyter and Scholl (1998) argue that there will be an increase in qualitative consumer research during this decade because of the need of organisations to come up with a unique marketing position. Insight into the perception of the individual is seen as important in this process as HE institutions seek to position themselves in a market of excess supply. Thus, the contention is that this research will be in the vanguard of new research developments in interpretive research in HE.

Interpretive research of the type being undertaken in this study is still very much on the perimeters of consumer research (Szmigin and Foxall 2000) and is worthy of development. Within consumer interpretive research itself, scant attention has been paid to the use of grounded theory (Goulding 1998).

The main inspiration for the research came from the work of Swan and Bowers (1998). Their criticism is that current service theory and quantitative based methods do not focus sharply on user-provider interactions and processes. How service experience is interpreted may involve more than attributes. It needs also to consider the nature of interactions between service providers and consumers and to look in-depth at how service failure is managed. They argue for

research into the development of qualitative based measurement methods.

Key issues emerging from the literature review

1. The contested nature of the concept of the student as 'customer'. If students are not accepted as customers, then measures of student satisfaction may be regarded as vacuous.
2. The development of the National Student Satisfaction Survey is rapidly raising the profile of the concept of the student as a consumer of the product 'HE'. This is providing a sharper focus to relevant marketing literature on customer satisfaction and service quality and emphasises the need for a focus on effective measurement systems of satisfaction.
3. Measurement of student satisfaction is limited to survey based quantitative methods. This is very problematic and has produced data of limited reliability and validity.
4. The new QAA Review Audit system (2002) requires the administration of a national satisfaction survey, with results made public. There is evidence that the adoption of this survey has been made without due attention to the inherent problems associated with the survey methodology. The survey is based around experience from the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in Australia and the CEQ has been the subject both of significant criticism and change that has moved it well away from the present system in the UK.
5. There is a need to consider user-provider interactions and processes in relation to the effective measurement of satisfaction and this requires the consideration of qualitative based measurement systems. Qualitative research in the field has hardly been developed at all and yet it may have the potential for deepening the understanding of consumer behaviour, in that it does not assume single objective reality

and is able instead to examine a socially constructed reality. This construction has the potential to offer HE managers clearer insights on students' perceptions of satisfaction and service quality.

SECTION 3 THE METHODOLOGY AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH STUDY

The Epistemological Rationale

The field research was based on a grounded theory study of student satisfaction in two colleges, one a college of HE (College A), the other a regional community college (College B) that contains an HE section. Most studies of student satisfaction are rooted firmly in the positivistic, quantitative paradigm and this study represents a significant departure from this trend using a qualitative methodological framework.

The epistemological position of the research is problematic mainly because of the difficulty of interpreting and applying grounded theory methodology to the study. In essence, there is no one clear definition of how grounded theory should be applied and there are different interpretations with epistemological implications (Dey, 1999). There are three main strands to the theory. The first relates to the ongoing work of Barney Glaser (1967; 1992a and b; 1998; 1999; 2001 and 2003). The second relates to the work of the original co-author Anselm Strauss who via the work published with Corbin (1990) effectively split from Glaser. The third strand is quite separate in approach but in terms of this study is the highly influential work of Charmaz (2000).

In order to position this research study epistemologically it is necessary to view it in the context of possible paradigms of inquiry.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) proposed four basic inquiry paradigms:

- **Positivism** – reality as a true state of affairs can be determined by research and the researched object is independent from the researcher. This results in an objectivist epistemology and relies heavily on experimental research. Thus, events and processes are investigated primarily through a hypothetico-deductive method in which prior theory plays a primary role (Locke, 2001).
- **Postpositivism** – reality exists but can be apprehended in part only. Objectivity therefore becomes an epistemological ideal (Annells, 1996). Empirical research remains of crucial importance but there is an acknowledgement that qualitative research can be useful in providing additional research evidence.
- **Critical theory et al.** – this is a collection of theories encompassing post structuralism and post modernism in which a virtual reality shaped by numerous values over time can be held. It provides a challenge to the above two paradigms with its own view of knowledge as fundamentally fragmented and unstable.
- **Constructivism** – here the nature of reality is a local and specific mental construction formed by a person and reality is a collection of multiple mental constructions. It is an interpretive paradigm and is concerned fundamentally with subjective reality.

Glaser's interpretation

Grounded theory originated in 1967 with the publication of Glaser and Strauss's book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. The aim was to produce grounded theory, which was defined as "the

discovery of theory from data" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.1). The purpose was to generate theories that at least fit the immediate problems being addressed as well as seeking wider application. There is no doubt that Strauss was an important co-author but in Glaser's opinion, Strauss moved well away from the original thinking of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and Glaser disowned and severely criticised Strauss's later work on grounded theory.

The roots of grounded theory start well before 1967 (Kendall 1999) and can be traced to the development of symbolic interactionism during the period between 1920 and 1950 as developed by the Chicago School of Sociology. For the first time there was a challenge to functionalist theory, which advocates of symbolic interaction suggested gave a more logical and orderly account of social life than supported by empirical observation. Social life and interaction is a highly complex process and is both ongoing and varied and symbolic interactionism put forward the proposition that meaning could only be established through interaction with others. According to Blumer (1969) when human beings associate with one another they are involved in interpretive interaction.

The Discovery of Grounded Theory was a major departure from normal research methods that had been principally concerned with how accurate facts can be obtained and how theory can then be tested more rigorously. Glaser and Strauss sought to discover theory from data and the data itself had been collected systematically and analysed. The idea was that theory would fit empirical situations and thereby be understandable to key participants and managers. It has the added potential for the researcher, that it can help to prevent the use of theories that have dubious fit to empirical data and therefore, limited working capacity.

Since 1967 Glaser has reshaped and elucidated the ideas of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. He has written many texts and

journal articles, but amongst the most influential are *Theoretical sensitivity: advances in the methodology of grounded theory*, (1992a); *Basics of grounded theory analysis: emergence vs. forcing*, (1992b); *Doing grounded theory; issues and discussions*, (1998); *The Future of Grounded Theory*, (1999), *The Grounded Theory Perspective: Conceptualization Contrasted with Description*, (2001) and *The Grounded Theory Perspective II: Description's Remodelling of Grounded Theory Methodology* (2003).

These works have greatly developed the original precepts and were extremely influential in the early phases of developing the methods for the research study. The objective was to generate data and hypotheses about the attributes of student satisfaction that were not derived solely from statistical analyses. Qualitative analysis means any kind of analysis that produces findings or concepts and hypotheses, as in grounded theory, that are not arrived at by statistical methods.

Glaser throughout his writing is keen to separate grounded theory from pure description that characterises a significant part of qualitative research. He separates pure empirical description such as found in life histories, simple data presentations, and other phenomenological approaches from the work of grounded theory. Glaser notes (1992) that some researchers believe that data should not be analysed in any way and that the informants should speak for themselves. Glaser rejects this form of research as irrelevant to the needs of participants seeking to improve their lives and seeking to resolve problems.

Grounded theory is grounded systematically in the data. It does not begin with preconceived ideas or extant theory and then force them on data for the purpose of verifying them into a corrected grounded theory. It is done without this burden and excess baggage. It is not a sophisticated verificational process, honouring some extant theory

that does not fit in the first place (Glaser 1992). For Glaser, (2003) grounded theory is a set of carefully grounded, integrated into hypotheses, set of concepts that are organised around a core category. For Glaser, it is not findings, not accurate facts and not description. In essence, grounded theory is a conceptualisation that is integrated into theory. It is readily modifiable as new data is drawn in from a range of sources including literature, new data and comments from professionals working in the field. Glaser (2003) claims that the method was discovered not invented, and from a qualitative data analysis perspective, this is potentially very problematic. The main custodian of the discovery – Glaser, tends to criticise any modification to his perceived discovery and it becomes almost inevitable that deviation from the original method will occur.

In all of Glaser's works he stresses that a well constructed grounded theory will meet its four most central criteria: -fit, work, relevance and modifiability. If a grounded theory is carefully induced from the substantive area its categories will fit the realities under study in the eyes of practitioners and researchers in the area, i.e. it will be truth based on reality. If it fits and works the grounded theory has achieved relevance. The research product constitutes a theoretical formulation or integrated set of conceptual hypotheses about the substantive area and the yield is simply a set of hypotheses. Testing or verificational work on or with the theory is left to others interested in these types of research endeavour. The aim of grounded theory is not to test hypotheses but rather to generate hypotheses.

Glaser (2001) sets out most clearly the difference between description and conceptualisation. Glaser definitively explains the nature of grounded theory and in terms of this study has created major issues of implementation (see section on *Charmaz's adaptation*). He asserts that grounded theory comes from data but does not describe data. The method does not generate findings; rather it generates hypotheses about explaining the behaviour from

which it is generated. The main thrust of his assertion is that grounded theory is conceptually abstract from time, place, or people. Hence, the work produced is not descriptive. It moves above the requirement for accurate description and instead generates the fundamental patterns yielding hypotheses that can explain the behaviour of the participants as they go through the patterns. In doing all of this, Glaser believes that it yields "good science".

It was this notion of "good science" which first attracted the researcher to the method. It was a response to the quantitative data collection methods using surveys alone to measure the extent of student satisfaction. Although the present study is qualitative in nature, its objective was to remain "scientific" in orientation in an attempt to appeal to HE management that demands a "scientific" analysis.

"Grounded theory came forward as an approach to qualitative data at a time in the late 60's as other qualitative data analysis methodologies did also, in response to the extreme violations brought to data by quantitative, preconceived, positivistic research using forced conjectured theory."

Glaser (2001, p6).

Glaser and Strauss's seminal work is itself the subject of differing interpretations. Charmaz (2000) suggests that the work is often inconsistent and confusing. For Charmaz the inconsistency relates to the tension in the methodology between Glaser's empirical postpositivist inquiry position and the subjectivist nature of much of the methodology in terms of practical application.

Annells (1996) has similar problems in working out the epistemological position of grounded theory. If the ontological position of grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interaction then

according to Annells there is a strong postpositivist emphasis on seeking out concepts of reality and determining the true meaning of events and processes. This is reinforced by the idea that theory can be extracted from "real" data. The problem is that Strauss writing with Corbin diverged in the 1990s from the original position of Glaser and Strauss. Annells (1996) believes that Strauss and Corbin have adopted a more constructivist position in which reality consists of local and specified constructed realities.

Locke (2001) similarly describes inconsistencies and varied positions. However, unlike the above two authors she is more sanguine about the implications for effective research.

Hall and Callery (2001) confidently assert that grounded theory is rooted squarely in the postpositivist paradigm although they acknowledge that the later work of Strauss and Corbin moved the method towards a constructivist paradigm. However, they conclude that the paradigm remains rooted firmly in postpositivism. The argument swings around the extent to which the researcher is required to learn about actors' interpretations and perspectives. This study is in part a reaction to positivist hypothesis testing data collection and analysis and is best summed up by Glaser's own description.

"...more and more researchers and users of the more evidentiary formulated research have become disaffected with their data collection, their findings, what they should find, and whatever hypotheses should be tested.....So, along comes grounded theory 25 years after its inception, saying, let us find out directly what is going on and how we can account for it. Let us see what the main concern of the participants in substantive areas is and how they resolve it. Let us generate the concepts for the theory."

Glaser (1999 p.838).

In the above quotation, Glaser rejects positivism and places this general method firmly in the postpositivist tradition. Adequate verification is sought through this form of research but also by making use of qualitative methods it allows for the collection and analysis of rich sets of data.

The initial intention was to make no claim that the study was constructivist in nature. Experiential learning of the method altered this approach and the assertion now is that the study is firmly constructivist. Strauss and Corbin (1999) do affirm that researchers must learn about actors' interpretations and conceptualisations and that a grounded theory must be faithful to participants' everyday realities so that the theory is relevant to what is actually going on. But this does not imply that the theory supports multiple explanations of reality and collaborative analysis (Hall and Callery 2001). In this general method, the researcher is not required to interact fundamentally with the participants. Neither is validation with participants required to test and develop hypotheses. Instead the researcher occupies the position of the expert who decides how to fit data with theory, make constant comparisons, and code theoretically (Hall and Callery 2001).

The intention from the outset was to present the research as modified objectivist (Annells 1996). The aim was for the researcher to stand removed from the text during the inquiry process and objectively capture truth to form a theory. The justification was to present research findings to managers written in positivist terms in the hope that they would be considered along side survey results. The key point however is that this would be qualitative data which has been lacking in the evidence base collected by the institutions being studied.

Strauss and Corbin's re-interpretation

When the field research in College A commenced, the only text consulted was *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and interpretations of grounded theory, notably Cresswell (1998), Pidgeon (1996) and Pidgeon and Henwood (1996). These last three texts referred to grounded theory as an homogenous method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). This appeared to make good sense in that Strauss appeared as a link between the strands of the theory. The decision was thus taken to make a careful study of Strauss and Corbin's analysis of grounded theory. This was particularly appealing since *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990) was written more in the form of a manual with key steps of progress made easily identifiable to the reader. It was studied at a time when the field research was at a crucial stage of analytical development.

To draw on the differences between *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and *Basics of Qualitative Research* is not easy except that the latter work includes a brand new step missing completely from the original work. Grounded theory is a staged process and the steps are explained in the section at the end of this chapter. The first step is open coding, where concepts are generated in as open a way as is possible, collecting data from many sources and generating categories without the confines of any preconceived ideas or even hypotheses. Strauss and Corbin added an intermediate step – axial coding. This is a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by making use of a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences.

As Strauss and Corbin's method was being studied, the open coding data was beginning to accumulate and so it was decided to begin the process of axial coding. However, the process appeared forced and artificial and quite out of keeping with the admittedly difficult concepts explained in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. This led the researcher to begin to explore other works by Glaser to see if the process of axial coding was better explained. It was at this point that the realisation occurred that this was no longer an homogeneous method with a clear set of predefined focused steps. A detailed study of Glaser's later work showed that the problems being encountered in the field were echoed by Glaser's own findings.

In essence, Glaser (1992a) bitterly and very assertively rejects the *Basics of Grounded Theory*. It was a great surprise (and some relief) to find that experiential misgivings about axial coding were reinforced by the original architect of the method.

Glaser (1992a) asserts that it is wrong to link properties and categories in a set of relationships denoting conditions, phenomena, context, intervening condition, action/interactional strategies and consequences. The reason for this rejection is that it involves preconception and the forcing of theoretical coding on to data; a process that is a complete anathema to Glaser. The rapier blow is delivered thus:

“Strauss says “Unless you make use of this model, your grounded theory analysis will lack density and precision”. This exhortation may apply to conceptual description, but it surely does not apply to grounded theory. How could the analyst know beforehand what will generate and integrate categories and properties into a theory? There is no way this exhortation could apply in grounded theory generating. Strauss’ exception is to force the data into his own pet framework. The pet always feels right! And after all, data was used. It is used in all research we must remember, but how it is used varies for different methodologies. Grounded theory does not force, it has the patience to let frameworks and models emerge- and they do!”

Glaser (1992a, p64).

It was at this point decided to reject the process of axial coding, and the broad thrust of Strauss and Corbin’s approach. However, their work does still show some valuable insights into the development of grounded theory and unlike Glaser it was decided to maintain references to their main work on the theory.

Charmaz’s adaptation

The decision was then taken to focus on Glaser’s analysis. However, the reality was that as the process of coding the data developed, it was plain to the researcher that the study was not independent of time, place and people as Glaser insisted was an essential requirement. This created a major crisis with regard to the methodology. It was becoming evident that the study was not positivist, postpositivist, or fully objectivist. It appeared that it might not be an example of grounded theory at all and if this was so there were doubts as to its true authenticity and usefulness in the field.

It was thus necessary to broaden out the reading on grounded theory still further to see if a qualitative methodology could be salvaged from the problems discovered in seeking to interpret and apply the theory. This search led to the study of Charmaz (2000) and her distinction between objectivist and constructivist grounded theory. It was a search that led to the study developing using Charmazian techniques and principles and these are explained below.

For Charmaz, constructivist grounded theory is a means of creating first hand knowledge of empirical worlds, and takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research forward. It offers the relativism of multiple social realities, recognises the multiple creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed and aims toward interpretive understanding of subjects' meanings (Charmaz, 2000).

The criticisms of the original Glaserian theory is that the method limits entry into the subjects' worlds and thus reduces understanding of their experience. It curtails representation of both the social world and subjective experience and relies upon the viewer's authority as expert observer. According to Charmaz (2000) a constructivist grounded theory assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them. Thus social reality does not exist independent of human action.

Therefore, a constructivist approach recognises that the categories, concepts and theoretical level of an analysis emerge from the researcher's interactions within the field and questions about the data. The grounded theorist's analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story; it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer. This story reflects the viewer as well as the viewed.

The constructivist approach does not seek truth –single, universal, and lasting. However, it manages to remain realist because it addresses human realities and assumes the existence of real worlds. The heart of the Charmazian perspective is that reality can be discovered but this should not be confused with the discovery of truth. The contention thus is that such research can still be useful to hard-pressed managers trying to understand the perspectives of students.

However, neither human realities nor real worlds are unidimensional. The constructivist approach assumes that what we take as real, as objective knowledge and truth is based upon our perspective.... The research products do not constitute the reality of the respondents' reality. Rather, each is a rendering, one interpretation among multiple interpretations, of a shared or individual reality. Interpretation is objectivist only to the extent that it seeks to construct analyses that show how respondents and the social scientists that study them construct those realities –without viewing those realities as unidimensional, universal and immutable. It does not represent a quest to capture a single reality.

Charmaz (2000, p 523).

A constructivist grounded theory recognises that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed. Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the discovered reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts. Researcher and subjects frame that interaction and confer meaning upon it. The viewer then is part of what is viewed rather than separate from it. It looks at how variables are grounded –given meaning and played out in subjects' lives.

A constructivist approach necessitates a relationship with respondents in which they can cast their stories in their terms. It means listening to their stories with openness to telling and experience. This is the crux of the study and the contention is that this approach is of more use to educational managers in trying to determine the attributes of student satisfaction.

Charmaz (2000) believes that the key to constructivist grounded theory is how it is written. She seeks to ensure that the writing includes key definitions and distinctions in words that reproduce the tempo and mood of the experience. She is keen to make use of analogies and metaphors that can draw out hidden meanings and feelings subsumed within a category. She seeks to use simple language and straightforward ideas in order to make theory readable. Thus in this way she seeks to make theory embedded in the narrative, in its many stories. The theory becomes more accessible but less identifiable as theory. Questions posed in the text help tie the main ideas together or redirect the reader.

Therefore a constructivist approach to grounded theory reaffirms studying people in their natural settings and redirects qualitative research away from positivism. Charmaz's argument has three main strands: -

1. grounded theory strategies need not be rigid or prescriptive
2. a focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers rather than limits, interpretive understanding and
3. it is possible to adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory.

Glaser's work remains important to the underpinning of the research study but it has now been greatly modified by Charmaz's adaptation. In 2002, Glaser published a rebuttal of Charmaz's modification of

grounded theory. Glaser (2002) argues that constructivist grounded theory is a misnomer.

Charmaz suggests that the strategies need not be rigid or prescriptive and this flies in the face of both Glaser and Strauss and Corbin's later interpretation. In essence Charmaz's interpretation is constructivist and not objectivist. She believes that grounded theory methods can be used to further knowledge of subjective experience by entering into the experience. There is thus no requirement to accept objectivist assumptions and procedures.

This interpretation accepts that the researcher creates the data and analysis through interaction with the researched. In this perspective reality is derived not directly from the data but rather it is discovered as part of an interactive process. This is a significant departure in itself from Glaserian interpretation but takes on a much greater importance when Charmaz contends that the reality is shaped by the time frame, the culture, and the structure of the analysis.

Charmaz claims that a constructivist grounded theory is closer to the original roots found in symbolic interactionism in that there is the potential for intimate familiarity with respondents and their worlds. It requires the researcher to listen to respondents' stories with openness to their feeling and experience.

However, how can such openness be achieved in field research? The answer lies in the category descriptions. In Charmazian analysis the active codes and subsequent categories preserve "images of experience" which for Glaser are dangerously descriptive.

The deciding factor in choosing to adopt the Charmazian approach was her attitude towards the writing up of the research.

"...I attempt to evoke experiential feeling through how I render it in writing. This means taking the reader into a story and imparting its mood through linguistic and narrative exposition. This strategy removes the writing from typical scientific format without transforming the final product into fiction, drama or poetry.....Simple language and straightforward ideas make theory readable. Theory remains embedded in the narrative, in its many stories. The theory becomes more accessible but less identifiable as theory."

Charmaz,(2000, p 529).

This then, is the researcher's position in the research study.. It is produced as the result of a long and highly evolutionary process. It is in essence, a synthesis technique for grounded theory data analysis, constructed in a manner similar to that proposed by Eaves (2001).

The Glaserian counter-attack and its implication for the research study

Glaser (2003), produces a much more extensive criticism of the modifications made by constructivists to his original methodological analysis. It is a criticism that cuts through to the core of the research contained in this study and is worthy of closer examination.

Glaser begins his criticism by restating the basic essence of relevant qualitative data analysis (QDA) as being the accuracy, truth, trustworthiness or objectivity of the data, its subjectivity, its interpretative nature, its plausibility and its constructivism. All of these factors have featured heavily during the development of the model. It is Glaser's view that that *"the great proliferation of QDA's diverse methods, students, researchers and popularity has massively mauled and eroded grounded theory methodology"* (2003, p 3).

The original design for this research study began with a study of Cresswell's work (1998), in which he compares grounded theory with phenomenology, ethnography, case study and biographical life history. Glaser objects to this approach because it lumps grounded theory to a type of QDA and grounded theory is no longer permitted to stand alone.

In effect, this research study is developed around a method mix of grounded theory and qualitative data analysis. For Glaser, this is highly problematic:

“a method mix is liable to being an eccentric, particularistic mix, which loses guidelines and therefore loses procedural credibility when written up to explain the mix.”

Glaser (2003, p 84).

He claims that neither QDA or grounded theory is best, they are just different. However, of more concern from the perspective of this research study, he claims that the QDA view invariably blocks grounded theory. The blurring of grounded theory and QDA methods make the result look like a personal craft rather than a rigorous methodology and from an acceptance view by HE management this is a potential problem.

Glaser (2003) devotes a whole chapter to dismantling Charmazian constructivist grounded theory. The argument here hinges on the potential significance of the interpretation of interview data and the construction of data that represent the mutual interpretation of the interviewer and the interviewee as the interview proceeds. Glaser freely acknowledges that multiple perspectives do exist but the key point is that the grounded theorist raises these perspectives to the abstract level of conceptualisation with a view to determining the underlying or latent pattern. In essence, in Glaser's analysis, there is

no reason for constructivism to be an issue because if passive, non-structured interviewing or listening is used as the interview method, then constructivism is held to a minimum.

"It appears that constructivism is an effort to dignify the data and to avoid the work of confronting researcher bias. Remember bias is just another variable and a social product. If the researcher is exerting bias, then this is a part of the research, which bias is a vital variable to weave into the constant comparative analysis."

Glaser (2003, pp 169-170).

The critical attack on Charmaz, and by implication the methodological approach of this research study is that she is caught by descriptive capture and remodels grounded theory to QDA story talk, while neglecting the fundamental properties of abstraction analysis. In this Glaserian analysis the ultimate criticism is that the data is forced and grounded theory is remodelled.

At its base level, the Charmaz – Glaser argument hinges on the nature of objectivity. Charmaz believes that data are narrative constructions that they are reconstructions of experience and are not the original experience itself. Glaser seems to accept this argument, acknowledging that researchers reify data by trying to report and code the data. This is bound to result in personal bias and interpretation. Glaser then seeks to extricate himself from this position by arguing that the data is rendered objective by the consideration of many cases on the same phenomenon and corrections are made via coding which are then conceptualised into categories and their properties, which makes the data abstract of researcher interpretations. The key for Glaser seems to be to carefully compare much data from many different participants.

Can Qualitative Evaluation be Objective? The Eisner-Phillips debate.

Senior managers in HE want data that is reliable and credible. They want to know that the results they are presented with show the reality of the situation they are analysing.

The question then is, is it possible to discover reality in anything approaching a pure form and in particular by means of a qualitative approach? Eisner (1985) thinks it is not possible and that such a definition of objectivity is at best naive. According to Eisner there is no pure, clear form of reality. Instead reality is constructed by our own interaction with the environment. This interaction depends on variable factors such as previous experience, expectations, beliefs fashioned over a period of time and perhaps most important of all, the conceptual tools used through which the objective conditions are defined.

In Eisner's definition of objectivity, there is a process of consensual validation, which reduces the concept to one of a belief in what we believe, which crucially, is also shared by others. Objectivity becomes a function of intersubjective agreement among a community of believers (Eisner 1985). This is a highly problematical definition and it throws into sharp focus what is precisely meant by the term "agreement".

In the above analysis, Eisner rejects the idea of ontological objectivity, which requires that beliefs about an objective world must hold good independently of the experiences, or particular state of mind, on which people may rely for their assertion. (Newell, 1986) More simply, ontological objectivity is about seeing things the way they really are, in a form that reveals their actual features. It is about reality without distortion. (Eisner, 1993)

Eisner also has doubts about another definition of objectivity, which he refers to as procedural objectivity. This is when methods are chosen that reduce the need for personal judgement. It is also where procedures are adopted which can be followed by others to produce identical results (1993). Eisner argues that researchers should let go of such definitions of objectivity and put in place other definitions of "truth".

Although Phillips (1993) disputes much of Eisner's warrant for objectivity, he recognises that there is no completely secure starting point for knowledge. It is impossible to be absolutely certain regarding the basis of knowledge and to know that a change in the nature of that knowledge will not occur in the future.

However, researchers generally do intend for their findings to be taken as veridical (Phillips, 1987) and this was certainly the intention of the research in this study. If this was not the case, then the work would only be of any use to the researcher. Researchers are keen that other interested parties should acknowledge the "truth" of their findings.

Qualitative research has posed particular problems for tests of objectivity, mainly because of its research methodology, which is based partly on description and observation. Ratcliffe (1983) however, suggests that all approaches to inquiry are inherently qualitative in nature. In this analysis all data is theory, method and measurement dependent. The facts or knowledge are determined by the theories and methods that generate their collection. (Ratcliffe, 1983). This is the nonfoundationalist epistemology referred to by Phillips (1993), where all knowledge is tentative and subject to change. There is in this model of thinking no absolute body of data or knowledge waiting to be discovered.

For Ratcliffe, Eisner and others, interpreting the work of qualitative writers is not a major issue of concern because interpretation of research is always inevitable. The significance of this line of argument, is that it does not matter whether the methodology is qualitative or quantitative in nature, it will always require interpretation. Indeed, following Ratcliffe's line of reasoning, quantitative data is essentially qualitative, because of the need to use an interpretative symbol system (Eisner, 1993). Quantitative data is often obtained as the result of people recalling experiences and responding to questions in a survey. It is inevitable that memory of these experiences itself changes with time and because of the impact of additional experiences. It also critically depends upon a shared language that can be a major source of ambiguity.

Phillips examined the work of Eisner (1987). He suggested that Eisner put forward three warrants to determine if educational research can be "trusted". These are structural corroboration, multiplicative replication and referential adequacy.

Structural corroboration is dismissed by Phillips as being an unreliable measure of objectivity. It is a process of gathering data or information and using it to establish links that eventually create a whole that is supported by the bits of evidence that constitute it. (Eisner 1985) It is a tool, Eisner claims, that is used in jurisprudence as trial lawyers attempt to present to a jury the evidence that will clear or condemn a defendant. Certainly coherence of this sort must be seen as a virtue in educational research. The problem is, that a tissue of lies can be made to appear coherent. It is in theory, possible for a researcher to concoct evidence or to be misled by a convincing but very ill informed interviewee. History shows that jurisprudence has not always produced correct verdicts. Decisions reached in courts have not always been objective.

Multiplicative replication or as Eisner describes it “multiplicative corroboration” is where others agree that they have seen the same things and can therefore corroborate the findings. Phillips is even more dismissive of this idea. He mentions that there are in the world groups who believe all sorts of strange and weird events and happenings and are willing to corroborate them with each other, even though the great majority of the community completely reject the ideas.

Referential adequacy is the extent to which a reader is able to locate in its subject matter the qualities the researcher addresses and the meaning he or she ascribes to them (Eisner, 1991). Thus Eisner acknowledges that research is completely empirical in the perception and interpretation of the qualities themselves. For Eisner, an educational researcher’s work is referentially adequate when readers are able to see what they would have missed without the researcher’s observations. The notion of referential adequacy is reasonable enough, but it can not imply that the researcher’s account is objective. A reader may understand what the author intended and understand the concepts, but the concepts themselves may be fictitious or created by the author to fit the facts.

Phillips regards Eisner’s work as little more than tautological because of the notion that all research findings can be deemed to be true, providing that a community can be found that will agree to the findings. This is probably an overstatement of Eisner’s position, but it is a criticism frequently levelled at relativists’ work.

Phillips moves on from Eisner to attack the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1987). The former he attacks for confusing credibility with objectivity. Credibility refers to the taking of data and interpretations to the sources from which they were drawn and asking whether the sources believe the results. More importantly, for Phillips, educational research is frequently about

getting an outside perspective where checking the findings with the insiders would be inappropriate and possibly counter productive. The problem for Phillips with the work of Miles and Huberman is that they assume that objectivity can be found by using tried and tested inquiry procedures. Such procedures, many similar to those described by Eisner, are considered by Phillips to have some merit but not to be completely reliable.

Defining objectivity in relation to qualitative educational research is fraught with dangers and difficulties. The problems in determining what is objective, has led some writers to exhort researchers to abandon cherished methods and procedures in favour of a more anarchistic position. Anarchistic may seem a strong term to use but it is precisely this term which is adopted by Feyerabend (1975) of his own work, to describe his method of inquiry into science. He suggests that all rules of inquiry are eventually violated. Further, without such violations, progress would not be made and scientific advancement would not take place. This is a genuinely revolutionary approach. It does however, beg the question about when rules should be violated and when they should be respected and adhered to. If Feyerabend implies that rules of inquiry can be broken as and when required, how can the reader ever be sure that the inquiry is not a subjective mish mash of various strands of evidence?

Most but not all writers, for example, Feyerabend, accept that for research to be objective, then there must be tests for validity. The tests are however, problematical, given that over time, theories change and opinions shift both within groups and between groups. There is not an absolute theory of truth that we can ascribe to and it is this that causes the problems.

In either case, the relativist or pragmatic/instrumentalist case, objectivity is possible, but it is perhaps best portrayed as a moving

target, and this does pose considerable problems when conducting the qualitative research outlined in this report. However, it is more questionable whether objectivity can be secured in educational research if one subscribes to some of the more anarchistic modes of thinking, which appear at the far end of the relativist spectrum. Here, is the idea of multiple realities of truth. Logically, this implies that any view that anyone cares to assert must be accepted as being true. If such a definition were to be accepted, then the word truth and hence objectivity would have to be withdrawn and be replaced by some other word or phrase.

For objectivity to be established, there has to be some warrant or security. It seems the search for appropriate warrants must be an on-going, continual process and the warrants themselves, are likely to be subject to change over time. It is probable that the continued development of grounded methodology and the new interpretations by writers such as Charmaz can at least go some way to meet the criticisms of writers such as Phillips.

It is on the grounds of objectivity and validity that the grounded theory approach has been adopted for this study. The first reason for adopting a grounded theory approach is that it is systematic (Cresswell, 1998), with the intent of generating theory about student satisfaction. In this respect, it offers the opportunity at least, for the development of "warrant" or security. This is not to argue that other qualitative traditions such as ethnography might not be at least as effective in securing validity, but the systematic nature of the data collection and analysis offers some hope for the production of valid results.

Second, the application of this design provides flexibility. It permitted the research to start with broad questions of inquiry (Cresswell, 1998) and to keep an open mind about the development of theory, without first having to develop hypotheses.

Third, grounded theory methodology “fits” well with the field location and general nature of the inquiry. Grounded theory methodology is particularly suited to the study of local interactions and meanings as related to the social context in which they actually occur (Pidgeon, 1996).

Finally, although it is clearly part of an interpretivist perspective to inquiry (Cresswell, 1998), it provides the opportunity for developing qualitative “discovery” based research (Pidgeon, 1996). It is hoped that this research will help in the generation of new ideas about the monitoring and managing of student satisfaction in HE and it is asserted at points throughout the research study that this methodology provides the best prospect for new ideas.

Summary of the Ontological and Epistemological Position of the Research Study

This methodology takes a line by line analysis and constantly compares the data searching for themes/categories. This requires further research into the meaning of the developing categories by further sampling from appropriate participants or other data sources. Ontologically, it seeks to challenge the orthodoxies associated with statistical, deductive approaches to social research. It is based on the precepts that realities are socially constructed and that social actions have meanings that must themselves be interpreted. Thus, it is important that research methods are capable of identifying rules, locating social constructions and / or interpreting social meanings. It is a process of analytical induction.

However, it is accepted that analysis of student satisfaction is also possible using various quantitative analyses. Chalip (1998) makes

the point that science does not advance through methodological prescription. He states:

“It advances as a consequence of meaningful questions, empirical work to answer those questions and a thoughtful analysis of the assumptive underpinnings of our work. In other words, doing robust social science requires that a disputatious community of social scientists attack its questions analytically, applying all methods that may be useful to find answers.”

Chalip, (1998, online)

Developing the Methodology in College A

The method adopted in College A was designed to follow very closely that expounded by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The commentaries written on grounded methodology by Cresswell (1998), Pidgeon (1996), and Pidgeon and Henwood (1996) were used to bring clarity to method implementation.

Grounded theory has dual roots, one in symbolic interactionism and the other in statistically oriented positivism (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000). From the outset, the aim was to utilise a methodology that facilitated the study of human interactions. Symbolic interaction envisions human group life as actively constituted by people in interaction with it. It is centrally concerned with the meanings people attach to their situations and the ways in which they go about constructing their activities in conjunction with others, (Prus, 1996). The intention was to use a methodology that at least claimed to be as “rigorous” as positivistic methods,.

The intention was to generate theory that was grounded in an iterative process involving the continual sampling and analysis of qualitative data gathered from concrete settings such as unstructured data obtained from interviews and archival research, (Pigeon, 1996). Great emphasis was placed upon attention to participants' own accounts of social and psychological events and of their associated local phenomenal and social worlds.

The intention was to conduct the research in three stages. (Strauss and Corbin, 1980).

1. Open coding
2. Axial coding
3. Selective coding

Data was collected from the following sources and provided the basis of open coding. In this college, the researcher was an INSIDERS, as a member of staff and this allowed for the development of several data collection methods including:

1. Five focus groups with undergraduate students.
2. An interview with the Head of Student Services.
3. Five in-depth semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students.
4. Documentary analysis of relevant college committee minutes.
5. Participation in and observation of the *Recruitment, Access and Student Support Committee*.

The process of open coding

Step one Interviewing and transcription

Interviews were tape-recorded. All of the interviews were transcribed, documents were read, and reports produced from them. This work was greatly assisted by the use of the qualitative processing package *Nvivo*. This package did not substitute for the

need to make complex decisions and judgements but it greatly assisted in the cross-referencing, exporting and reporting of data.

When a transcription was completed or a report based on a document was produced, the next stage was to code the document. This process of coding took place whilst other interviews were still being conducted so the actions of data collection and data analysis were run jointly. Strauss and Corbin (1990) emphasise the importance of tightly interweaving the processes of data collection and data analysis because the analysis helps to direct future sampling.

Step two Generating concepts from the raw data

There are various ways of coding. It was decided to use an in-vivo coding procedure. These are codes in grounded theory research where the exact words of the interviewee form the names for initial concepts, (Cresswell, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that they are “catchy” and immediately draw attention to them. However, the reason for adopting this initial strategy was principally to avoid being swayed by the literature too much by using a whole range of borrowed terms. The requirement to complete a literature review as part of the Doctorate examination process did influence the process, in so much that study had already been completed concerning the nature of service quality and customer satisfaction. A conscious decision was taken to try to avoid borrowed terms. Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest that borrowed terms have the grave disadvantage that they bring with them commonly held meanings and associations. There is thus the danger of bias creeping in as standard meanings are laid on top of the research, stopping the inquiry in its tracks instead of opening it up.

The procedure resulted in the production of over 400 codes that formed the basic concepts of the research. From this the development of categories to group the data and begin the process

of theoretical analysis was attempted. The main potential weakness at this stage was that important concepts would be missed and this would have detrimental effects on the quality of the research. To counter this potential problem, it was necessary to code thoroughly and in many instances to code the same sentence in two, three or even more ways.

An example of the in-vivo coding procedure is shown below. The material in the box shows a small section of transcription and the coding that was done with the text.

Figure 3.1 DOCUMENT CODING REPORT Document: Fiona 24 11 00

<p>Node 1 of 448 absolute nightmare</p> <p>45: absolute nightmare</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>Node 2 of 448 bit more understanding and a bit</p> <p>95: bit more understanding and a bit more flexibility</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>Node 3 of 448 canteen I think they should be more</p> <p>173: canteen I think there should be more provision made for people with allergies because I can't eat anything in there</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>Node 4 of 448 enlightening really</p> <p>211: enlightening really</p> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>Node 5 of 448 especially so in the admissions unit</p>

Above are examples of five of 448 in vivo codes referred to in *Nvivo* as nodes. These are the basic concepts of the research.

Step three Generating categories

These in-vivo codes were subsequently placed into categories. This is the process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena – categorising (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The naming of categories was potentially problematical because they have conceptual power and are able to pull together around them other groups of concepts or subcategories. At this point, the key question was - Do the names created, provide sufficient abstraction to enable this drawing together of categories to take place? The answer would only become apparent when the process of axial coding was attempted. It might be contended that the categories remain stubbornly descriptive e.g. *–problems with resources*. This is possibly true but this category encompassed a wide variety of in-vivo concepts that alluded in various ways to dissatisfaction with college resources. There is a level of abstraction, even if at a quite simple level. On the other hand, *the jewel in the crown* category is a very clear abstract definition as it refers to views and opinions of the very special nature of the college, which has been aired by some of the interviewees in the research.

The following 28 categories were established.

Figure 3.2 CATEGORY LISTING

CATEGORY LISTING	
(1) /PROBLEMS WITH RESOURCES	(2) /SAFETY ISSUES
(3) /COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS	(4) /MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES ON SATISFACTION
(5) /IMPROVING THE COURSE	(6) /AMBIENCE
(7) /JEWEL IN THE CROWN	(8) /THE LOCAL AREA
(9) /COMPARISON WITH OTHER UNIVERSITIES	(10) /STUDENT HARDSHIP
(11) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM	(12) /SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL
(13) /THE STUDENT UNION	(14) /ACCOMMODATION
(15) /COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE	(16) /HELPFUL STAFF
(17) /FRIENDLY STUDENTS	(18) /A COMMUTER PLACE
(19) /STUDENT STRESS	(20) /COLLEGE A PLC
(21) /RETENTION ISSUES	(22) /MATURE PERSPECTIVE
(23) /FOOD ISSUES	(24) /GOOD RESOURCES
(25) /UNFRIENDLY TIMETABLE	(26) /CAR PARKING
(27) /UNPLEASANT STAFF	(28) /RELATIVITY

As an example, one category – *Present survey system* is included in Appendix 1.

Step four: Generating attributes/properties/dimensions

The naming of categories is the beginning of theoretical analysis, (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This process is developed further by the discovery not only of categories but also of their properties and dimensions, Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Properties are the subdivisions of a category that provide the broad dimensions, Cresswell (1998). They are the characteristics that relate to a category.

Dimensions are the smallest units of information analysed in grounded theory research. Properties are placed on a continuum and dimentionalised to see the extreme possibilities for the property, (Cresswell 1998).

Below is an example of how properties and dimensions were added to the category ***Present survey system***. The following properties were constructed as part of a theoretical analysis.

Defence of quantitative system
 Requirement for effective feedback
 Validity of quantitative approach
 Value of quantitative approach

Each property was then subsequently dimentionalised. For example, *property 1* the ***Defence of quantitative system*** was dimentionalised in terms of whether this was true or false about the concept. In this example, only one concept is considered to have any of the properties.. However, in relation to *property 3* ***Validity of quantitative approach***, two concepts were considered to be related

to it. The dimension here was whether respondents thought the concept was doubtful or likely to be true. See Appendix 2.

Sampling procedures

The strategy adopted in this methodology is one of theoretical sampling, Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss and Corbin (1990). This is sampling based on concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory. Proven theoretical relevance indicates that concepts are considered significant because they are repeatedly present or notably absent when comparing a variety of incidents and are of sufficient importance to be given the status of categories.

Open coding strategies

The above definition posed particular problems when deciding on the sample during the open coding phase. At this stage the concepts were unknown and the theoretical relevance had yet to be tested. Thus the aim of sampling in this stage was to uncover as many potentially relevant categories as possible, along with their properties and dimensions.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest three possible routes to open sampling or some combination of the three.

Purposeful sampling – deliberately choosing persons and documents.

Systematic sampling – going from one person to another on a list, or whoever walks through a door or agrees to participate.

Fortuitous sampling – this is where evidence is collected unexpectedly during field observation, interviewing or documentary reading.

All three sampling techniques were adopted at various times. There was a need to interview students to fill out the categories. A notice

requesting volunteers to help with the research and four students came forward. Some of the evidence was collected fortuitously. For example, whilst presenting the research framework at a college research symposium in December, one member commented that students are interested in substance and not rhetoric – they want change not carefully crafted words about policies. This was a viewpoint (although contradicted by some other evidence in the database) and I duly noted it and included it in the database. Theoretical sensitivity is as important as theoretical sampling, (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In essence, theoretical sampling was done in order to discover categories and their properties and to form the interrelationships into a theory, (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Axial coding procedures

The axial coding stage was about relating more specifically the categories and subcategories that were uncovered during open sampling and coding and to find evidence of variation and process with reference to them (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Two processes were effectively at work. The first was to look for greater density of established concepts (some concepts were already establishing density via open coding). The second was to uncover further instances of events and incidents that indicate differences and change in conditions, context, action/interaction and consequences. This involved the tracking of categories and represents the primary purpose of axial sampling.

The following questions were to be addressed via field research:
Is there evidence in this situation of this category's relevance?
If so, what form or meaning does it take here?
Is it the same or different from previous situations?

What are its properties here?

What conditions led up to it?

What is the specific context?

What intervening conditions have come into play to give this variation?

What is the form of action/interaction?

How do these change over time?

What happens as a result?

However, this procedure led to major difficulties of effective application. It was decided to abandon axial coding and to identify the core category immediately via a “modelling” procedure.

However, although a report was produced and presented to the senior management of the college, it was not fully grounded, in so much as there was no reference to literature and extant theory.

Grounded theory procedures were attempted but not fully carried through.

So great were the concerns involved in using this method in this piecemeal, embryonic fashion, that it was decided to try the method again, over a shorter time frame combining the basic Glaserian approach with the constructivist work of Charmaz. One intention was to test to see if the method could successfully be applied over a short period and produce data that could be utilised by HE managers. Permission was obtained to use the developing in another college – College B.

Written reports were produced from both case studies. A presentation of the findings was made to the senior management teams in both institutions. The contention is that the report on student satisfaction at College B (Section 5) is fuller, more detailed and most importantly, is truer to the principles of the grounded theory method, than the report produced for College A (Section 4). In this respect it is thus better “science” and is of more use to management.

This claim is in part borne out by the responses of the management teams in each institution. In College A, the response was very lukewarm, with brief thanks for the report and virtually no comments either positive or negative. In College B, the response was very strong with a strongly positive endorsement of the findings. Several managers commented that this confirmed their own opinions. These comments brought to mind Glaser's claim that if a grounded theory is carefully induced from the substantive area its categories will fit the realities under study in the eyes of practitioners and researchers in the area. There were however criticisms from one manager that the sampling procedures were insufficiently rigorous. It was difficult within the confines of the meeting to explain the basis of theoretical sampling to a manager who had a very definite view of "scientific data".

Developing the Methodology in College B

The Method Stage By Stage

The method involved the interviewing of students engaged on HE courses. There were in total twenty three separate interviews. Eleven were with individual students, four were with pairs, and eight were with class groups ranging from eight to twenty five. In total the researcher discussed issues with sixty five students. In this study there were no focus group interviews. The researcher had no prior knowledge of this college and because of its geographical location (100 miles from home) and limited time, it was not possible to set up the facilities required to conduct focus groups. Grounded theory does not require the use of focus groups, but their value as a data collection method is discussed more fully later in the section.

Data Collection

Collection procedures followed closely the advice offered by Glaser (1992; 1998; 2001). Interview lengths were not pre-determined and were based on relevancy. Some interviews took over an hour to

complete, others only a few minutes. The decision was based on how the interview information informed the emerging theory. However, in the early stages, it was not possible to identify properties and categories and therefore, interviews tended to be long and transcriptions were relatively full.

Data Analysis

The process of open coding

Step one Interviewing and transcription

Most interviews were tape-recorded. Because of technical issues, two interviews were not recorded. Instead the researcher made brief notes during the interview and then wrote up a more detailed summary immediately after the interview. All of the interviews were transcribed. This work was greatly assisted by the use of the qualitative data processing package *Nvivo*.

Glaser (2003) suggests that computers take time away from grounded theory in many ways. He believes that the learning curve of any computer program could be better spent on getting on with the emergence and generation involved in grounded theory. For Glaser, "*grounded theory is a technology free method.*" (Glaser, p 17, 2003). There are key reasons for this judgement:

1. Grounded theory does not require the large volume of data that taping produces.
2. In sorting fast, computers undermine the grounded theory sorting that the method calls for. Preconceived categories do not allow the integrative organisation to emerge provided by hand sorting. It prevents the emergence of theoretical coding.
3. Glaser has talked with the creator of NUD*IST (a forerunner of *Nvivo*), who asserts that it is an aid not a hindrance to grounded theory. However, for Glaser, the problem is that

NUD*IST's author is not proficient in the use of grounded theory.

4. With computers, a grounded theory researcher "cannot just do it" as it is designed to be done. For Glaser, word processing is as far as computers can go with grounded theory.

The concept of "just doing it" has been very problematical. The method did require the use of tape recording and transcription in order to capture the relationship with respondents in which they were able to cast their stories in their terms. It meant listening to their stories with openness to telling and experience. Although it was possible to write up two interviews without the use of a tape recorder, it meant that their experience was immediately relayed in the form of the researcher's ideas and perception. Transcription allowed for full reflection and the use of memoing to seek abstractions from the data.

Step two Generating concepts from the raw data

When a transcription was completed, the next stage was to code the document. This process of coding took place whilst other interviews were still being conducted so the actions of data collection and data analysis were run jointly.

This procedure resulted in the production of 254 codes that are the basic concepts of the research. Clearly this was an unwieldy number and quickly required the development of categories to group the data and begin the process of theoretical analysis. The main potential weakness at this stage was that important concepts would be missed and this would have detrimental effects on the quality of the research. To counter this potential problem, it was necessary to code thoroughly and in many instances to code the same sentence in two, three or even more ways. An example of the in-vivo coding procedure is shown in Appendix 3.

As the data was collected, it was compared using *Nvivo*. The comparison consisted of the following techniques:

- comparing different people
- comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time
- comparing incident with incident
- comparing data with an emerging category
- comparing a category with other categories

Step three Generating categories

These codes were subsequently placed into categories devised by the researcher. This is the process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena, (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Ten categories were created which contained all of the codes. Some codes were placed in two or more categories, others were only placed in one category.

The categories identified were:

1. pleasant atmosphere, location
2. satisfaction explained
3. communications issues
4. safety concerns
5. financial pressures
6. a university experience?
7. resource issues
8. busy tutors
9. feedback problems
10. empathy.

As an example, the codings attached to the category *busy tutors* are shown in Appendix 3.

Generating the core category (selective coding)

The core category was generated using techniques developed by Glaser.

The first stage in the process was to memo ideas. The process of memoing was undertaken at all stages of the study but took on particular significance as the core category was discovered. Memos allowed the properties of a category to be examined and theoretical ideas to be developed (Locke 2000). These memos then became part of the database that were in turn coded and used to establish the core category. See Appendix 5.

The decision had to be taken, following on from the work of Glaser (1992a), to selectively code for a core variable and thus to delimit the codes to only those variables that relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways. No attempt was made in this study to adopt the axial coding method. The core variable then became a guide to further data collection and theoretical sampling. Glaser (1992a) lists 18 alternative ways (or coding families) of locating the core category. He notes that they are not mutually exclusive and that they overlap considerably. It was decided to make use of the eighteenth way that Glaser refers to as *Modelling*. This involved the modelling of theory pictorially by use of property space to show the significance of categories. The model constructed made use of colours to show the inter-relationships between the categories, rather than inter-related lines and arrows. The main reason for this decision was to try to keep the model as simple and clear as possible. The connections between the categories were then explained in textual description. It is the development of textual description that confirms or disconfirms the reality of a core category.

Sampling procedures

Some of the evidence was collected fortuitously. In college B, the researcher spent some time in residence on one of the campuses. Students commented on how quiet, lonely and at times frightening this campus could be and during an evening walk; the researcher experienced these same emotions. Theoretical sensitivity is as important as theoretical sampling, (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The initial sampling procedure in College B was to seek help from a college manager in locating groups and individual students on different programmes in the HE sector. The aim was simply to provide good information on the chosen topic area (Locke 2000), rather than trying to obtain a representative sample.

In essence, theoretical sampling was done in order to discover categories and their properties and to suggest the interrelationships and model into a theory, (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Statistical sampling on the other hand would have been required if the purpose had been to obtain accurate evidence on distributions of people among categories to be used in descriptions or verifications.

Theoretical sampling has posed problems in determining whether the initial sample has been adequate, given that there are no statistical techniques to fall back on. Glaser and Strauss (1967) do not think this a problem because the inadequate theoretical sample is easily spotted, since the theory associated with it is usually thin and not well integrated and has too many obvious unexplained exceptions.

Core category strategies

In this part of the study, the purpose of theoretical sampling was to fully develop the working categories and the working theoretical framework. As the core category of empathy became established,

the decision was taken to interview students who were able to discuss the issue of empathy. In practice the core sample strategy was only slightly different from the open sample approach. There were some gaps in the theoretical framework including a shortage of perspectives from young undergraduates and a requirement to examine the views of students on one particular campus where an apparent lack of empathy was causing particular concerns and anxieties, was also identified.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) suggest that there are three main “tactics” required in generating theory from the categories.

1. To write memos on the theoretical ideas which arise in the course of coding and particularly on the connections between the category properties.
2. Find the core category, the central concept around which the others revolve. This gives the key to the theory.
3. Draw diagrams or models, of the way the categories are related to one another.

Methods and research instruments/procedures used in the pilot study

Pilot study work was completed in College A to examine the worth of focus groups. It was noted that in the UCE Student satisfaction methodology, students determine the questions to be presented in a questionnaire based on feedback from qualitative based focus group sessions. However, it was not clear from this methodology, how the data derived from focus groups was analysed and it was decided to examine some of the issues.

The methods and analysis of the focus group material was as follows:

- Groups selected from discrete subject lists.
 - Groups placed in rooms in a horse shoe formation
 - Each participant initially given a proforma to fill in
 - Discussion on the writing then commenced, with minimum direction from researcher acting as the moderator.
- Questioning ensured that the conversations covered the main areas of service provision and towards the end each group was asked the question – “Do you think your course of study represents value for money?”
- Discussions taped.
 - Tapes listened to and an abridged version was then constructed. It was not practicable to transcribe the focus group interviews because of the complex nature of discussions that took place between individuals in the group. Interactions were noted on paper during the sessions. (Krueger 1994).
 - Each separate typed item was then given a label. then placed into functional/service provision categories.
 - From these categories, a descriptive report was constructed.

The descriptive report was written in terms of a functional/service provision format. The report was useful in highlighting some of the key areas for future investigation, particularly in respect of the potential for different groups of students to have widely differing perceptions and attitudes. However, in terms of research methodology it lacked sufficient rigour and there was no attempt to engage in inductive analysis.

Focus Groups as a Research Method

Morgan (1998) suggests that focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them. It is the researcher's

responsibility to decide which topics to hear about and to focus the discussion on the things that the researcher wants to learn about. However, this creates a tension, as it is important not to be too controlling. It is the researcher's focus, but it is the respondents' group. It is this tension that differentiates a focus group from a group interview. The latter is a group of interviewees being interviewed together through a series of semi-structured questions. A focus on the other hand is a guided group discussion used to generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs

Morgan (1998) suggests they work best when what interests the researcher is equally interesting to the participants in the groups.

They are especially useful for exploration and discovery. They can be used to learn about either topics or groups of people that are poorly understood and they are one of the few forms of research where the researcher can learn a great deal without really knowing. Hearing how the participants react to each other gives an in-depth view of the range of their experiences and opinions. Group discussions can create a process of sharing and comparing among the participants.

The potential benefits of focus groups over other possible data collection methods are summarised below:

Rather than attempting to observe behaviour as it naturally occurs, focus groups create concentrated conversations that might never occur in the "real world". (Morgan, 1998).

The main advantage of focus groups is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time. (Morgan (1988; Dreaschlin, 1999)

It is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion (Krueger 1994).

Those who manage large organisations often find that they have little understanding of the people they are trying to serve. Because the interactions in focus groups provide a window into how others think and talk, they are a powerful means of exposing the project's sponsors to the reality of those they need to understand (Morgan, 1998).

Focus groups have a unique ability to provide needed information as tensions between opposing parties begin to rise. When tensions are present, surveys and other methods may be ineffective because neither party trusts the others intentions. In contrast, focus groups convey a willingness to listen without being defensive that is uniquely beneficial in emotionally charged environments (Morgan, 1998; Dreaschlin, 1999).

The participants' interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer, leading to a greater emphasis on participants' points of view (Krueger, 1994).

The focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services, or programmes are developed in part by interaction with other people. People are a product of their environment and are influenced by people around them. A further assumption is that individuals form opinions in isolation. Evidence from focus groups suggests that people do influence each other with their comments, and in the course of a discussion, the opinions of an individual might shift (Krueger, 1994).

They have a narrow purpose for which they work particularly well – that is to determine the perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking of consumers regarding products, services, or opportunities. They are not intended to develop consensus, to arrive at an agreeable plan, or to make decisions about which course of action to take (Krueger, 1994).

However, there are problems with using focus groups as a key research tool. These problems centre on sampling procedures and analysis of data.

In relation to sampling procedures, 70 or so participants are never going to be representative of a large population. There is often no reason to believe that a randomly sampled group holds a shared perspective on the research topic. Krueger (1994) suggests that the result is that focus groups are often conducted with systematically selected samples: either all the participants come from one limited source, or major groups are consciously omitted from the data collection. However, Krueger rightly points out that such bias is a problem only if the researcher ignores it and it is interpreted as representing a full spectrum of experiences and opinions.

Analysis of the data is a much thornier issue and is poorly represented in the literature. Morgan (1998) understands that the key task is to shape the raw data into a report. However, he is vague on how this is to be achieved. Krueger (1994) believes that the interview should cover a maximum range of relevant topics, it should provide data that is as specific as possible, it should foster interaction that explores the participants' feelings in some depth and it should take into account the personal context that participants use in generating their responses to the topic. – Range, specificity, depth, and personal context. Krueger (1994) provides a series of guidelines to assist analysis.

1. Analysis must be systematic. Data must be coded - as the researcher comes across an idea or phenomenon a label is attached. When an idea or phenomenon reappears, the label is once again attached.
2. Analysis must be verifiable. A process is required that would permit another researcher to arrive at similar conclusions using available documents and raw data. There must be sufficient data to constitute a trail of evidence.
3. Given the above two points Krueger is surprisingly concerned about deciding which quotes to include. However, this research study project has shown that the problem can be reconciled via the application of a general methodology such as grounded theory.

In conclusion, focus groups produce qualitative data that provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants. These results are solicited through open-ended questions and a procedure in which respondents are able to choose the manner in which they respond and also from observations of these respondents in a group discussion. The researcher serves several functions in the focus group – moderating, listening, observing and eventually analysing, using an inductive process. The inductive researcher derives understanding based on the discussion as opposed to testing or confirming a preconceived hypothesis or theory. However, it is crucial that this understanding is derived from the application of a systematic general research methodology such as grounded theory.

Issues in using grounded theory in this research study

Glaser in various books (1998, 1999, 2001) makes it clear the literature is to be reviewed after the grounded theory is formulated.

In this way, there is less danger of using received concepts, forcing frameworks and the over focus on the professional supposed problem.

The regulations of the Open University for study on the Doctorate of Education demand a literature review as part of Stage A activity. This was duly completed. A prior literature review is traditional and makes sense for quantitative and qualitative descriptive research. However, from a grounded theory perspective, it is forcing in terms of conceptualisation and may curb the true discovery of what can emerge (Glaser, 2003). The emergence of empathy as the core category is potentially significant, as its relation to service quality had already been carefully studied as part of the literature review.

The following two sections, reproduce the reports prepared for the senior management in the two respective colleges.

SECTION 4 A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT SATISFACTION IN COLLEGE A

Description Of College A

College A was established in 1885 as the country's first non-denominational teacher training college. It is located in the North West of England in a small town, close to large urban populations.. Academic provision was diversified from the early 1970s. in 2003/4, there were 7970 FTE student registrations. It is now a college of higher education that is seeking to become a university.

Two other campuses located 10 and 17 miles away supplement the main campus. Its mission statement is:

“College A is a Higher Education Institution seeking to provide an innovative, high quality and inclusive learning experience underpinned by a commitment to the advancement, dissemination and application of knowledge. College A is dedicated to developing individuals as skilled and autonomous learners in challenging and supportive environments.”

Its corporate objectives are set out in its annual return to HEFCE. The following selected objectives were set out in the July 2003 Annual Monitoring Statement:

- Continue to ensure the highest possible levels of standards and quality in the delivery of academic programmes and support services.

- Ensure that the Institution meets revised criteria for TDAP/University Title.
- Maintain high levels of financial integrity within a context of value for money and tight resource constraints.

The college has developed a strong and distinctive reputation in Widening Participation and Student Support. Some 45% of its students come from working class backgrounds (IIM-V) and statistically significantly exceeds HEFCE benchmarks for proportions of students from state schools and low participation neighbourhoods.

The *Institutional Student Survey* has been administered centrally since 1996. Since 1999, survey design and administration have undergone a number of substantial revisions and adaptations prompted by the need to increase response rates and ensure academic and service areas ownership and engagement with the centralised survey. Initiated as an on-line survey only in 1996 there was a disappointing response rate. The response rate was 7.6% of the total student population. Low returns remain a concern to senior managers. Notwithstanding this, detailed analysis, reporting and publishing of survey returns was undertaken to provide a vehicle for prompting critical reflection. Awareness of student feedback fatigue led to the introduction of a shorter, redesigned questionnaire from 2001/02. There are opportunities in the questionnaire to reflect and provide evaluative comments as well as tick box responses and the College believes that this ensures a measure of qualitative return in addition to the more easily aggregated returns.

The Independent Newspaper Education database includes a quotation from a student:

The great thing about College A is its community feel. Everybody knows everybody. The union organises the entertainment on campus and provides trips to all local cities on a regular basis.

The most recent QAA subject review report was completed in July 2003. Although only relating to one subject area, some students from the subject were included in the single and focus group interviews that formed part of the research study. The report highlighted the following key strengths:

1. appropriate learning outcomes that take proper account of external reference points
2. a suitably wide variety of assessment methods;
3. thorough and constructive feedback to students, using cover sheets; linked to assessment criteria and learning outcomes;

the degree results, indicating effective support for students, many of whom entered with relatively modest qualifications.

Introduction to the Analysis

This analysis is based on qualitative research conducted over a six month period. The data are derived from eleven in-depth formal interviews of students, two of whom were interviewed more than once, eight focus groups with students at the college and analysis of college documents. A grounded theory analysis was employed.

The grounded theory method does allow for meanings to be explored and interpreted. It has the ability to provide data which can be used to produce hypotheses for testing using survey based methods.

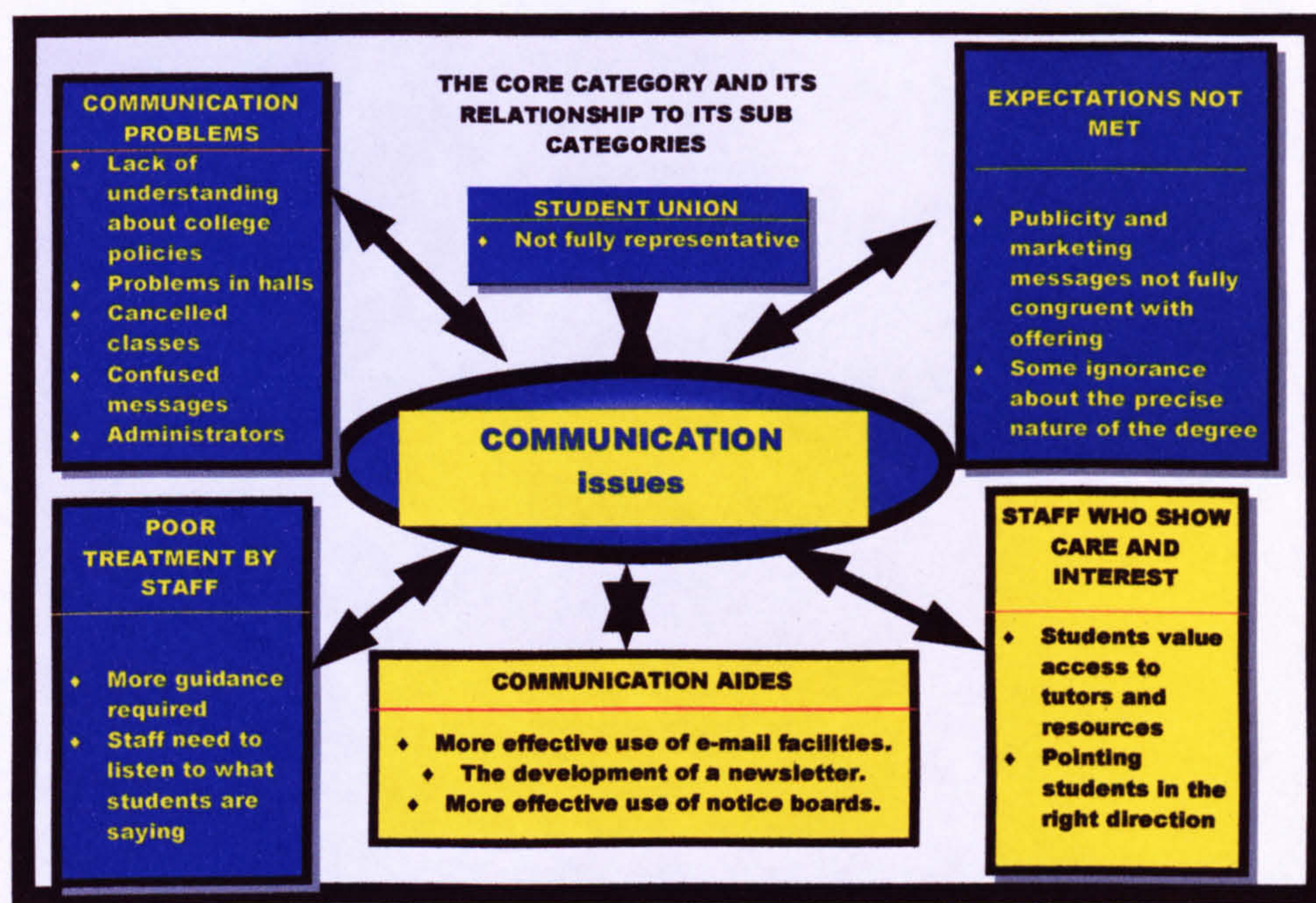
The data was transcribed and then coded. The codes were then placed into categories and the relationship between the categories was explored. A core category was identified which links together a large part of the data. This core category determines how the report is pieced together. In the latter stages of interviewing, questions centred on the core category. In the early stages students were permitted to discuss issues which they considered to be relevant.

Some critics doubt the validity of qualitative research because of the potential for the bias of the researcher or because of concerns about what information is regarded by the researcher as significant. This method uses a rigorous system of analysis which allows the theory (or important data) to emerge from the accounts of the participants.

As a final point, it should be noted that this is an analysis based on student satisfaction with the overall experience of students at College A. It is not an evaluation of particular courses. Therefore, the quotations are not attributed to courses on which the students study as this is not directly relevant in this report. However, students' perceptions of satisfaction in general are coloured to a significant extent by their experiences in the classroom.

The key findings are summarised in the following diagram. The core category has been identified as communication issues and there are sub-categories closely related to this, indicated in the blue boxes. The blue box categories generally lead to features of dissatisfaction. The categories in the yellow boxes indicates elements around the core that indicate positive features and results in feelings of satisfaction.

Figure 4.1 CONSTRUCTING THE CORE CATEGORY IN COLLEGE
A



Communication Problems

Students identified a wide range of communication problems. These problems frequently were identified as leading to dissatisfaction with aspects of the college.

Some students are not clear about why resources are operated in the way they are. For example, the relatively short opening hours of the LRC and LINC building (particularly when compared with some other institutions) are not clearly understood.

One thing that surprised me was that I've got a lot of friends in the country and I go to visit them at universities and when it comes to core assessments, the library will be open for 24 hours which is a great help.

Do you know why it's not open?

No I don't know if it's staffing or what. They do communicate when it is open. They put it on the notice board in the library itself or on the e-mail. If people travel in by train or bus, they don't have the time to go into the library and go back home.

Students living in halls of residence experienced particular problems. Conditions in some of the halls were identified as being the main problem but the underlying problem was poor communications between students and the hall managers.

*I think the courses here are brilliant. My cousin has just started at *** and I told her not to live in halls for the first year and if I started again I wouldn't live in halls. It was awful. The phone didn't work; the electricity was on and off all the time. My SA had a boyfriend and often wasn't there. We never had hall meetings.*

Students who live in halls and have travelled from other regions to study at College A can feel particularly vulnerable, the source of this vulnerability is to be found in the structure of the college, and the way people interact within it.

There are so many segregations for such a small college.

You can get shut out for not being a local. But at xxxxx everything in the town is geared to students.

It's such a small place. Most have come from around here so we can't socialise with them.

Students expressed the view that they often felt confused and not fully aware of what was going on in the college. This caused them to feel a range of emotions from anger through frustration to a feeling of powerlessness. They were aware that there is a lot of relevant

documentation relating to their courses and life at the college but this often led to feelings of overload. Tutors may refer students to notice boards but it is not always clear which notice board needs to be referred to because of the large number in most of the buildings.

*I've just had *** this morning - it's supposed to be between 9 and 1 but we've only done two hours today because we spent an hour talking about an essay which made no sense on this sheet and we had to go over it for an hour just to get an idea of what we had to write about. It happens all the time. Even in *** they say it's on the board and you go to the board and there's nothing there. One teacher says ask them and another says ask them and you are going around in circles.*

Communications are very poor. I came for a meeting with a lecturer - it was really difficult to get in. When I got here I find she is ill. It would have been nice to have got a phone call but instead we are treated as a full time student. There wasn't even a note on her door. You have to go and find people. The secretary then asked the student to tell the rest of the class that it was cancelled. The root cause is, there is no procedure in place.

On one page it will state we've got to assess this that and the other. The next page it will say you don't have to do that but you could do it if you want and you come to the end of term and you are not sure what.

If you query it with one tutor they will tell you something different to another.

Concern was often expressed about the poor quality of communication between staff at a variety of levels including between teaching staff, between administrators and between teaching staff and administrators. There is a view that at certain times and among certain staff there is a lack of professionalism and empathy with regard to student needs and concerns.

It's not important, but if you were in a shop it wouldn't go on. It just makes you feel guilty for being a student. You think that people working in a college wouldn't feel that way but they obviously do. They look down their noses at you - do I really have to be here?

I come from an administration background and they don't seem to talk to each other at all.

People in the admin centre don't have day to day communications with the course team.

Staff don't seem to talk to each other and you get a very confused picture of what you are supposed to be doing.

Some students complained that messages were not picked up and problems were not dealt with properly. There was some evidence presented that suggested that staff from various departments were keen to pass on problems and in effect "pass the buck". Some students felt there was not a clear system of redress. One student in the sample had made extensive use of the complaints system and found the whole experience to be very unsatisfactory and intimidating.

Anxiety Brought On By Poor Communications

Poor communications generates a feeling of anxiety in students and this leads to dissatisfaction which can permeate more aspects and attributes of the college experience.

I was hoping for a bit more understanding you and a bit more flexibility.

The other day I was worried about the exams because when I first came they said check the boards for pass lists. So I asked in the office and they said you won't be getting your results until July in the post, is if you're worried about it go and ask your tutor. She said she was pleased with me but without that I would be daunted. With regard to work placement the company were not really expecting us and they were totally shocked and that put us back three weeks because they had to accommodate us.

It is worrying because you don't know what you are doing.

However, one student who was generally very satisfied with most attributes expressed a more positive coping strategy. Satisfaction, to some extent depends on how students are able to cope with their learning environment.

The criteria are set out very clearly and if people don't know what's going on it's down to them. At 6th form college you are told what you are doing but at university you get the criteria at the start of the year and it's up to you. I've got no complaints about that.

Student Union

A part of the communications problem centres around the relationship of the Student Union to the student body in general. Most students in this sample had little positive to say about the Union and felt it was at best a mediocre servant. One generally positive student sets the scene:

Do you think the SU is a good servant of the students?

I think it is, it's doing ok. It's not quite what I'd expect at other universities. Their SU is a lot more proactive.

I think the poor opening hours in the bar is something to do with things that happened before I came here, it's something that they can't do anything about. It would help if it was open later. In the week I can go out into town A. But at other universities such as City B you would visit the union bar a lot more.

A lack of creativity and a view that it is dominated by mainly masculine sports teams leads students to believe that a vital conduit to senior management has been lost. This leads to feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Although this view was expressed most vociferously by non-sports participants it was also expressed by members of sports teams.

I think they are trying to get a group on environmental things. They have a student governor but hardly anything gets mentioned in the SU. It's not a democracy. The SU president in the last two years has been voted in by the football team. Because they've got six teams they get all these people to vote that's about 150 people to vote to start with. You get less than 1000 votes for a SU president in a college of 12000. They only vote on one day. Hardly anyone goes to the hustings. EH is mainly a female college and yet I think there has only ever been one female president. The person who went up for it wasn't on a sports team but she did come second. It's always a male AU person who ends up as president.

However, there is now evidence that the Student Union is itself aware of some of the criticisms and is trying to appeal to a wider cross section of the student population. It now has e-mail facilities to

communicate with all students but some confusion remains despite this facility.

The past couple of events in the SU there has been some confusion with people not knowing what is going on. We were only getting told three hours before.

The Union is trying to adopt procedures and policies to obtain the views and concerns of a wider range of students and to represent them effectively on various committees and groups. However, at the writing of this report the evidence for this development is limited.

I certainly wouldn't go to the student union if I had a problem. I would go to see one of the lecturers.

There was a protest about the fees, but the SU told us to protest after some visitors had left. People in the SU have been there too long, Only their friends vote for them. I think it's fixed.

Students are aware that the Student Union does important community based action and are appreciative and supportive of its efforts in this regard. However, even in this respect, concerns about poor communication are noted.

I've been with the community action team and I do think they do a lot of good social work.

Unless you go in there you have no real idea what they do. They do a lot of work for charities but whether anyone else here knows about it is another matter. They don't advertise very well. Posters go up but that's about it then they complain when they don't get enough support but no one knows enough about it. In the annual meeting you need 600 people to get anything passed but none of us knew anything about it. So they have to arrange a second day and then they have to start threatening people in sporting societies to turn up or they won't get their cheque.

Expectations Not Met

One aspect of communications refers to the marketing of the college and how students react to the messages. There is some concern that the offering is not the same as the marketing publicity and pre-course information.

The first years get the propaganda about College A. They use pictures in the brochures which are really old. My friend has a picture in and they are extremely embarrassed about it. They put a few photographs in there which are misleading. There's one of a café in xxxxx and I don't know of any student who has actually been there. They show a picture of Restaurant C instead of Café D. If you are on the food card plan you can't eat at Sages. It's kind of slightly misleading.

Marketing that so that people know what they are getting into might help retention rates.

The prospectus makes it sound fantastic

Open day tours do not appear to always visit the key sites.

They don't explain the difference between majors and joints. It's just a course that's it.

You come on your open day and students show you around campus and then you go and see your lecturers for the major subjects you've applied for and they don't tell you that you are going to do any minors.

Ignorance About Courses

Closely linked to the above section is the problem of students not understanding the structure of the degree programme.

I didn't know what minors were.

I reckon they make you do minors to help subjects which are struggling. The minors I got were not the minors I wanted to do.

I'm a 3rd year and in my first week I didn't know we had to do a minor and I ended up doing subjects which I didn't want to do.

Your UCAS form says what do you want to do. So I put down media and communications. That's what you are accepted for it doesn't ask you for something else. But when you get here you have to fill up your timetable with so many credits.

The minors they offer you are not relevant to your course.

Feedback Problems

During the period of this research concerns were expressed about the difficulty encountered in trying to obtain feedback about assignments and examination results. Personal experience and written instructions from a senior manager suggest that this problem may be easing very rapidly. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware

that these sort of issues cause concern for students and lead to a range of negative emotions.

Takes a long time to get assignments back. Keeping track can be difficult

This thing with marks. I know there's been industrial action. I don't think it's just that like. I got back yesterday an essay result from December (comment made in late March) and like how are you supposed to know how you are doing if you are not getting any feedback.

One of my friends has had a lot of trouble. He did a report in December and he kept going to the tutor and said have you got my mark back and he said, "Oh I'll give you it next week". So he came in next week and he made a specific journey to get here because he is only part time and eventually he got a letter to say that the results would be here on Friday afternoon but he couldn't go on Friday afternoon. He went again the next week for his mark and he was told he would have to go to a timetabled session and if you can't make that then someone else will have to pick up your mark. I don't think that is very fair.

Information Overload

We've just done the programme planner and that was the biggest confusion I think anyone has ever gone through. Everyone was complaining because they couldn't understand what was being asked of them.

I remember last year we got the programme planner and I thought oh my God! It's more confusing than it actually is. All I had to do was write two words and tick three boxes.

We don't find out anything about the college, do we? When you get here you get this huge handbook with all the information in. When you log into the computers they put messages up like about jobs that are going. But anything else you actually have to go physically into the SIC. You're not told about things.

Too many booklets given out at the beginning of the course. It should all be in one booklet.

Listening Required

Students want to know and feel that they are being listened to and that their views are valued and where possible acted upon.

When I was a student you sometimes feel well no one is listening here. Most people round here think well if no one's listening then no one is listening. There a few people who will shout and I think the college respects that and they will listen and get things done.

The above comment perhaps suggest an immature community struggling to find a system or process to adequately represent views.

Below a student disgruntled about life in hall points to the fact that problems which had been clearly identified by staff had not been adequately acted upon.

I'm liking my course still. I've got a better SA in my hall. I cook for myself this year. Managing things for myself it's much better. I get a bit fed up sometimes with the bureaucracy around EH. You hear that they are charging us for certain things and those things haven't been fixed. The oven door the handle is broken and the fan isn't working. You'd think something like that EH would have gone around and seen if anything had been broken and fixed them. People have paid for that through their lounge deposit. Last year we filled in some complaint forms and they wrote back to say these things had been done two or three days later. So it was a bit patronising to say we have done this when in fact they had yet to do these things. The hall was in the same state as it was the year before. When you've got a horrible carpet anyway no one is going to respect it. Because there's no continuity with the students living in halls they say they are going to do it next year but you've got no guarantee that they are going to do that. After Hall E was knocked down I would say Hall F was the worst hall. They should see what is happening themselves (the hall mangers).

Helpful Staff

There are many positive features of student experience at College A. Not all communications issues are negative and the remainder of the report examines the key positive features which have led to satisfaction and can perhaps be further built upon in the future.

Although some students expressed concerns about the quality of some aspects of teaching, there was a strong endorsement of tutors who were seen as being approachable and of good quality. Some students did not differentiate between teaching staff and administrators and many remarked on the help they had received from a variety of staff. This help was very much appreciated.

The tutors are good, relaxed and approachable

The tutors from what I've seen are interested how they can help you

*That's why I came here. I thought *** was too big and it's friendly here. It's small enough so that you can usually find someone you know to talk to. The staff are really good.*

Several students mentioned one particular administrator who in their opinion gave especially good service. I had need to draw upon her help in organizing this research and I endorse their comments. She went "the extra mile" to help students and other members of staff and she did this in a cheerful and positive manner. The key point is that it was noted by students and frequently referred to in their comments in a range of situations. The comment below refers to another helpful administrator.

Main building reception are always very helpful. There's one woman who is really nice. At the start of term I just didn't know where some rooms were and she got out a map and showed me.

Friends And Tutors Are Key Links In Coping

So what do students do when they do need help and advice, to whom do they turn? The answer is they tend to turn to tutors and their own friends. However, the personal tutor system does not appear to be working well and this may well be viewed as a lost opportunity to enhance the system of communication.

Personally I go and see a tutor that I get on with. But some people need a name.

But I haven't even seen my personal tutor this year - what are they there for? If I have a problem with a course I will go and see the module leader. I didn't know until January that my personal tutor was a writing tutor.

In line with the generally critical comments of halls or residence, student assistants were not often considered to be effective.

I wouldn't turn to my S A but I would turn to one of my mates and then to my tutors but not my SA.

*You've got a personal tutor you can talk to, then you've got your research study tutor and you can talk to any of the tutors. You've also got the help of so many research students and *** the secretary is extremely good and helping with you stuff and directs you to where you should be.*

Communication Aides

Finally, students made several suggestions about how communication might be improved to help improve their overall experience.

Some felt that more use might be made of e-mail to communicate messages although there is evidence that students do not always open their e-mail. Students would also welcome a more efficient network to help them access information.

Yea, I had two years out and I have learnt the drill. But with the electronic system if everyone can get on it then that's a great help because you can find out what to do.

I've got a part time tutor but we converse by e-mail he gets back to me straight away. He emails us before every session telling us what we are going to be doing.

Leaflets on a range of issues were praised and more were encouraged. There was some support for a newsletter informing students of events and changes in the college.

Notice boards were referred to both positively and negatively. Students are happy to read them if they can locate the appropriate board and be assured that the message is there for them.

The following section is included to fulfil the requirement that the research study provides a significant contribution to professional practice and policy in education.

Summary

Effective communication will help students to better appreciate the attributes of College A. It is the oil which lubricates the entire engine.

- Confusion between branches of administration exists and this transmits to students
- Lectures and seminars need to be more closely tied to each other with the relevance of each made more explicit
- Document overload - requires human interaction to explain the precise meaning of documents
- Information requires appropriate transmission - acute problems for commuters in accessing accurate information.

- Notice boards are not always the solution.
- It is not clear to students how to seek redress and have their problems followed through.
- Assessment feedback needs to be quickened.
- Unexpected and unwanted surprises on courses
- Lecturers and administrators appear not to communicate properly
- Elusive lecturers – difficult to track down

SECTION 5 A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT SATISFACTION IN COLLEGE B

Description Of College B

College B is a major provider of post-school education, located in the North of England in an area of concentrated urban population. The College provides more than 1100 courses in education and training, leading to over 6000 qualifications and has 34000 students. There are four main sites within a seven-mile radius.. Its mission statement is:

“Meeting learner needs and aspiration through excellence”.

It was founded in 1990 by the merger of several smaller organisations.

The College is affiliated to a number of universities and this means that it is in the top 15 largest of all further education colleges delivering HE courses. It has over 5000 students registered for courses in the HE sector.

Most HE courses are delivered at a rural campus, six miles from the town centre and location of the main college campus. An 18th century hall provides most of the classrooms and offices and this is set in 125 acres of woodland.

The Independent Newspaper Education database includes a quotation from a student:

“An excellent place to study, live and learn with loads of courses and loads of pubs, you’ll be spoilt for choice in every respect.”

The most recent QAA subject review report was completed in December 2003,. Although only relating to one subject area, some students from the area were included in the single and group interviews. The report highlighted four key strengths in relation to:

1. learning outcomes that are available for the overall programme;
2. curricular content that allows maximum flexibility for students, supports the achievement of outcomes and places an appropriately increasing demand on students through the levels;
3. assessment practices that are generally appropriate, allow measurement of relevant learning outcomes, include a clear strategy for formative feedback and have progressively strengthened and reduced the variability over the last academic year;
4. a diverse and wide range of achievement present in many modules at all levels, with successful students broadly achieving the planned learning outcomes and minimum expected standards.

Issues include:

1. a need to demonstrate more fully how assessment criteria link to learning outcomes, and how they are used to calculate marks;
2. a need to reduce variability in the quality of written assessment feedback

The quality of teaching and learning and the learning resources was judged commendable. The quality of student progression was approved, but it was considered that there was a need to continue to embed new strategies for recruitment, admissions and academic support, to enhance students' abilities to cope with the demands of higher education.

There is no Institution wide student satisfaction measurement undertaken. Individual modules are monitored by the use of student questionnaires that relate to the quality of teaching and resources.

Introduction to the Analysis

This analysis is based on qualitative research conducted over a five-week period using interviews (single, double and group) and using a grounded theory analysis.

The grounded theory method does allow for meanings to be explored and interpreted. It has the ability to provide data which can be used to produce hypotheses for testing using survey based methods.

The method involved the collection of data via interviews. Twenty three interviews were conducted and over 60 students were involved in the process. All were studying on degree or sub degree courses apart from one group that was on a postgraduate diploma course.

The data was transcribed and then coded. The codes were then placed into categories and the relationship between the categories was explored. A core category was identified which links together a large part of the data. This core category determines how the report is pieced together. In the latter stages of interviewing, questions

centred on the core category. In the early stages students were permitted to discuss issues which they considered to be relevant.

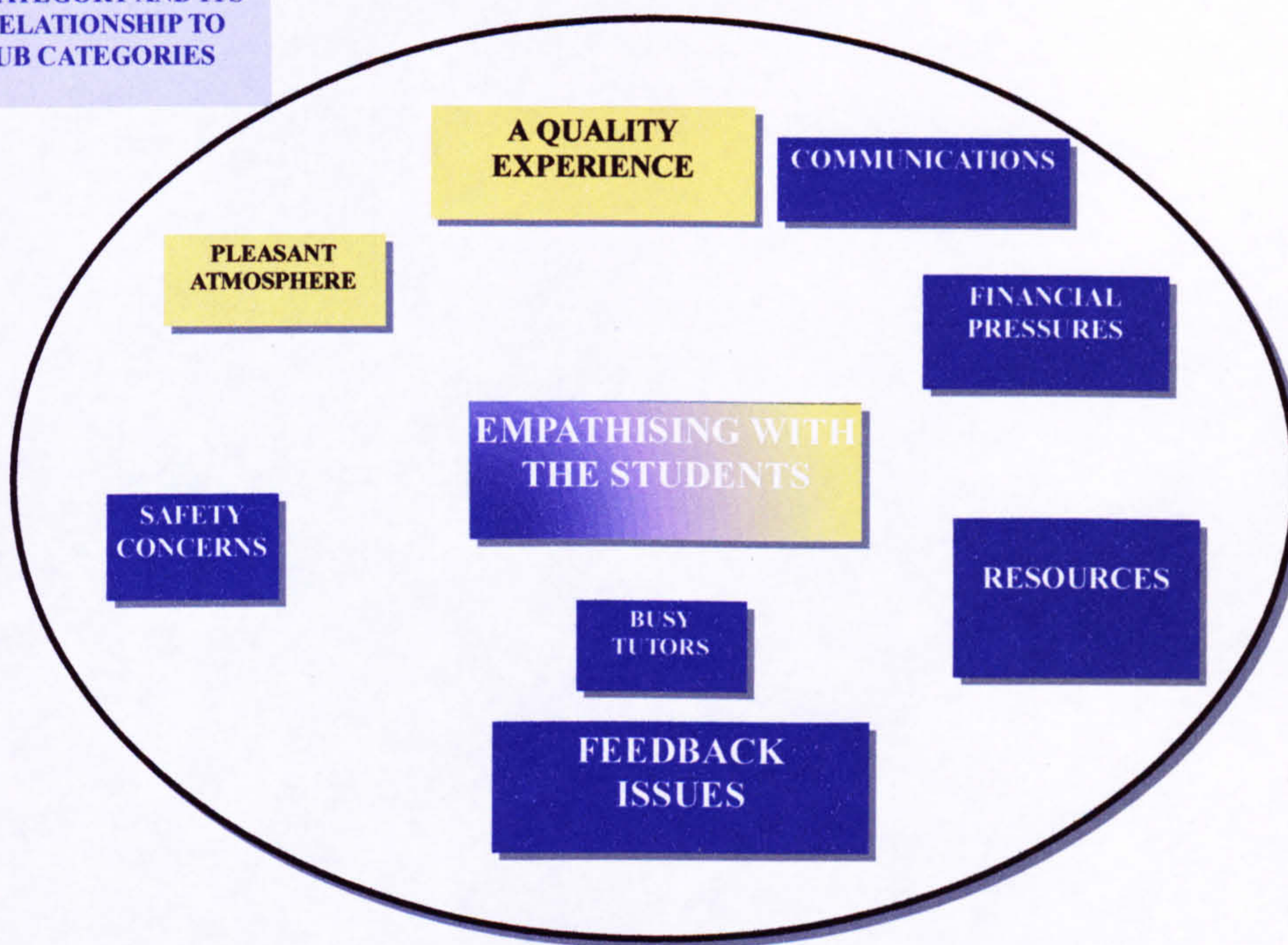
Some critics doubt the validity of qualitative research because of the potential for the bias of the researcher or because of concerns about what information is regarded by the researcher as significant. This method uses a rigorous system of analysis which allows the theory (or important data) to emerge from the accounts of the participants.

As a final point, it should be noted that this is an analysis based on student satisfaction with the overall experience of students at College B. It is not an evaluation of particular courses. Therefore, the quotations are not attributed to courses on which the students study as this is not directly relevant in this report. However, students' perceptions of satisfaction in general are coloured to a significant extent by their experiences in the classroom.

The diagram below shows the construction of the core category. This research indicates that the core concept that affects whether students are satisfied or dissatisfied depends on the degree of empathy shown to them by staff and in particular by course tutors.

Figure 5.1 CONSTRUCTING THE CORE CATEGORY IN COLLEGE B

THE CORE
CATEGORY AND ITS
RELATIONSHIP TO
SUB CATEGORIES



The blue boxes show related categories that influence and are influenced by issues concerned with an empathetic approach. These are all analysed in the report. The yellow boxes show the key factors that generate satisfaction at College B and these are reported on in the recommendations as well as in relation to the categories in red.

Empathy, generates both strong positive and strong negative attitudes in relation to satisfaction.

The report is written using the headings contained in the diagram. Each of the categories has a series of properties and these are analysed within each category.

Frequent use is made of direct quotations from students. This is wholly deliberate and is part of the methodology which seek to ground the theory in the lived experiences of the students. The quotations appear in smaller font, bold and italics. They are not

selected because they are representative of all that was said, but because they are representative of the development of the theory.

1 Busy Tutors

It is probably a truism to state that tutors are busy people. However, this can convey itself to students as a problem which has the potential to detract from their learning experience. Students notice that a lot of tutors appear to be overworked and although many students express a deferential attitude, it clearly disturbs them and makes them feel uncomfortable.

I feel really guilty because the tutors are really nice and they are overloaded with work and you don't like to bug them. They say they have not had time to mark it yet.

Tutors convey their burden to students

The potential problem in the above statement is that tutors appear to play on the fact that they have not had sufficient time to mark the work. Several students commented that tutors entered into lengthy explanations about the severe time constraints that they were working under. This creates an impression in students' minds that other issues relegate their work to secondary importance. Some students expressed their concerns more forcefully.

I wanted to hear that if you let me have a look at that, I'm sure we can work on it. Or if you can't find x, y and z, ask. I am more than a bum on a seat.

Tutors say they are accessible but you try and catch one and say can I have a chat and they say oh I am too busy. She will say she will give you the time but you try and catch her. I do not know the e-mails of my lecturers and I am making an alternative student website. I can put the college notes on because it hasn't been done yet. Lecturers have admitted to me today that they are just a little bit too busy to be doing this. What they teach is not what they often practice and I can't stand the hypocrisy of it.

Channels of communication

This comment also suggests that channels of communication are not always as open as they need to be. Many students did not know how to contact their tutors by e-mail or telephone and even when this facility was available, it was often difficult to make contact with tutors.

Tutors are accessible to a certain degree but some teach in other places so they do not always get back to you. Sometimes they get back to you when you leave messages but not always.

Now there have been a couple of occasions when I have left messages on the answer phone which they haven't picked up. I doubled on two phones to make sure and it didn't get to either.

I came in every day during reading week just to try and find a particular person and I couldn't find them. It affected my performance. I got a merit in the end but I had to stay up all night - it was a last minute thing.

I have e-mailed staff during reading week. I e-mailed that member of staff but he didn't look at his e-mails. I had to tell him and then he looked at it and he said oh yes there's yours! Very helpful thanks.

Making contact

Mature students often "make it their way" to find the numbers of tutors but not all students know how to gain vital access. Students want to be able to communicate with tutors, not necessarily on demand but within a reasonable time period. There is evidence of a lack of customer care awareness.

One factor of considerable importance is the extent to which management is able to set an appropriate example and generate an appropriate culture for employees to interact successfully with customers.

"Top management must establish a proper atmosphere. If managers are customer-oriented, employees are likely to respond accordingly. Management must be cognisant that disgruntled customers will probably not complain or patronise the firm again; rather, they will spread their stories to others who will avoid dealing with the company. Managers will not know what sales were lost because of customer dissatisfaction."

Fleming,(1999).

Several authors have identified employees as the key to satisfied customers. (Fleming 1999; Beecy 1999; Disney 1999). Employees of a firm mirror to customers the attributes they experience on the job. (Beecy 1999). Is it then possible that the poor attitude

demonstrated by some staff is because of inherently poor management attitudes?

In relation to employees' behaviour, Disney (1999), researching the transport industry found that bus customers expect to be treated in a friendly manner by the driver at all times and even more so when incidents occur which affect the journey. But this approach is much more than merely training employees to mouth the words "have a nice day". It requires a commitment to satisfying customers' realistic needs, regardless of any inconvenience placed on the employees (O'Malley, 1997).

"Customers can sense a self-serving façade, a superficial smile, and uninspired enthusiasm. Customers can tell if people care about them or about doing business with them. Visually, verbally, and environmentally, customers consciously and subconsciously search for clues that a business does care."

O'Malley, (p22, 1997)

Recent research across a variety of service industries (Mohr and Bitner, 1995) shows that customer's perception of employee effort has an impact on satisfaction independent of outcome. More effort is generally viewed positively by customers and there is some positive correlation between effort levels and customer satisfaction. Their research further showed that customers were never satisfied with transactions characterised by employees who did not work hard for them. Moderate effort encounters are almost always dissatisfying as well. High effort encounters were less clear with several descriptions of several high effort employees that were unable to satisfy the customer. In these cases, the employee either tried too hard and was thus seen as overbearing, or the employee had to work harder than the customer expected due to perceived incompetence. Overall, these results show that high employee effort levels do not

guarantee customer satisfaction, but they do usually help. The work analysed as part of the primary research most definitely confirms this view.

Beecy (1999) outlines six steps to the management of problems experienced by customers.

Apologise - the person handling the problem should offer a sincere apology for the difficulty.

Listen and empathise - let the individual vent his or her frustrations.

Fix the problem - provide a fair solution to the problem.

Offer atonement - provide compensation for the difficulties caused.

Keep your promises - do not let your resolution fall flat.

Follow up on promises - keep the individual informed and don't fail to remind them of the successful resolution.

In effect, Beecy is outlining a policy for service recovery. Johnston (1995) in a study found the key attributes of staff affecting a recovery are to appear pleasant, helpful and attentive, show concern for the customer and be flexible. The key activities in the recovery process are to provide information about the problem, take action and that staff should appear to put themselves out to solve the problem and if possible involve the customer in the decision-making.

Thus, organisations need to learn to become more customer oriented. (Hennestad, 1999). For this to occur there is a need not only to harness existing knowledge about customers but also to create a new knowledge base. The "infusion of customer knowledge" requires the development of management systems and procedures. Hennestad (1999) identified three key developments:

1. The development of quality feedback systems allowing for corrections, and keeping the customer agenda at the forefront of management thinking.

2. The establishment of reward systems to sustain interest in the new direction.
3. The integration of the follow-up into the planning, general management and meeting systems of the company in order to secure a clear focus and avoid the development of mixed messages.

Hill (1995) asserts that in the absence of meaningful performance measures it is necessary to align as closely as possible students' expectations with their perceptions of service performance. Educational organisations should then take appropriate steps to manage such expectations. As a minimum, this would involve informing students of what is, and what is not possible, and outlining the reasons why.

Management policies that are customer-oriented are not sufficient to guarantee customer satisfaction. Trout and Rivkin (1998) warn against fuzzy customer-oriented thinking of focusing on the complexity of a product or service to impress customers. However, they suggest that simple strategies which focus on customer service as part of a coherent marketing plan can and do succeed. Perhaps more significantly, any marketing programme should make current customers feel justified in making purchases. Therefore, managers should make them feel smart for being a customer. Their philosophy is simple:

"You should treat customers so they No 1, buy more and No. 2, complain less."

Trout and Rivkin (1998, p 38)

Alternative perspective

But not all students have had a bad experience with regard to tutor accessibility. What is not clear is why some students have

accessibility and others do not. It is probably partly to do with the proactivity of individual students but it may be related to other factors.

One mature student had really persevered with making good working relationships with tutors and was able to pay the following compliment.

I look through very different eyes to some of the young ones. And I am increasingly appreciating the ability of the tutors. When you have a one to one talk with them and realise what these tutors actually know and it is quite considerable - but they don't wear their heart on their sleeve.

Tutors need to show their concern and care more openly.

Above all, what students want is to feel that tutors are "bothered". Transmitting this sentiment can help to dramatically boost satisfaction levels.

Halliday (2002) suggests that what is required is attention to the concept of "value". The process of value creation needs to be understood, if it is to be managed and enhanced. For Halliday, there are two salient questions:-

How does an organisation deliver consistent value to its customers?
How can this capability be engineered into the grass-roots of the organisation?

Gronroos (1990) and Kotler and Fox (1995) suggest that it is the service encounter, which is the vehicle that creates value. Value is the benefit which the customer receives in using the service. It is necessary to understand the perceptions of both staff and students of service quality in order to identify how value can be created.

Staff have also to become motivated in order to create customer satisfaction Halliday, 2002; Adsit et al, 1996; Schneider, 1994 and Siu and Wilson 1998 have done research into the education sector and found a link between staff motivation and satisfaction levels.

2 Communications problems

This issue has already been touched on in the preceding section. But there are other properties to consider. Important properties include the cancellation of classes, notification of cancellation and the availability of cover when staff are absent.

Communication has been defined as a process by which individuals share meaning, it offers the means of creating and implementing behavioural changes both within and without an organisation (Dibb et al, 1991; Cheney 1991; Cheney and Christensen, 1998). Asif and Sargeant (2000) believe that the communication process also enhances overall levels of service quality by ensuring that an understanding of the needs of the customer is fostered at every level within the organisation.

In researching the National Health Service, Tourish and Irving (1995) found that in order to achieve high quality outcomes it needs to pay attention to the quality of its communications with internal and external publics. This means asking what patients want, listening to their replies and shaping service to meet expressed need. But it is not only the consumers of the service that require proper attention, it is also the needs and experiences of those within the organisation. Tourish and Irving (1995) argue that staff who are ignored or abused are incapable of paying proper attention to the needs of client groups, or of communicating to these groups a positive image of the organisation concerned.

Also research about the NHS by Tourish and Hargie (1996) has shown the need to audit communication within an organisation. The problem with auditing communication, is that the feedback which results deals with highly sensitive issues as how people interact with each other, how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

It is important that professional service organisations use all the means at their disposal to identify the needs and requirements of their customers and then ensure that these needs are satisfied (Harte and Dale, 1995). The problem is that professional services are characterised by intangible outputs, high buyer-interaction levels and a lack of heterogeneity.

Cancelled classes

Data does indicate that classes are cancelled on a fairly regular basis although the data does show that it varies from course to course.

Overall it has been well organised. Lecturer attendance can be disappointing. Sometimes you just don't have anyone to cover your lessons which can be quite annoying. There has been an absence this morning.

I turned up for one lecture at 7 on a Tuesday and not only had I missed it but it had taken place on the Monday. How was I supposed to know that? There was a notice on the board but I was not in to see it.

Contacting students

Information is often placed on notice boards but students are not always physically present to read it. The student above, who missed the class because of a timetable change was in a group of only five

students and felt that telephone contact should have been made with her. Clearly this is not a viable possibility in larger groups.

The issue of cover is one for management to consider, although there appears to be some consensus from students that course teams ought to try and cover absence, even if it only involves the setting of work.

Ignorance/ confusion about the nature of courses

This was not frequently an issue. Most students interviewed were clear about the nature of their courses and the resources available to help them. However, some were less clear and one student was considering leaving his course because he had misunderstood its demands. He did not blame his tutors for this but the problem was causing him major concerns. He made the following comment:

Surprise because I've had to change my plans. It does not impress me very much. But at least I realise now rather than later, but it has come out of the blue.

Students who had joined courses late, often when transferring from other institutions felt that induction was poor and in some cases non-existent. Regular students were pleased with the quality of induction.

There was no induction for top up students - we were lost. I think some of the tutors didn't realise that we were new. We just didn't have a clue. We were not given a tour, we were just posted a timetable and we were up and running. We didn't even know where the library was. The HND assignments were very different and we didn't really know how to do assignments. It took us a couple of assignments to pick it up and we failed one!

Staff intra-communications

There was some concern, expressed by some students, that staff did not communicate properly with each other.

Although the importance of quality is well appreciated in the market, there seems to be major perception and implementation problems (Fletcher, 1999). Service quality can be improved only through a systematic, step by step process that enhances the employee's ability and willingness to provide service by creating an organisation that supports service in all areas. (Berry et al, 1988). However, it is unlikely that the enhancement of service quality can be achieved unless senior management see it as central to the organisation's mission (Fletcher, 1999). In essence, there is a fundamental need for top management commitment. There is a need to share vision, purpose of change to be adequately communicated and employee involvement, team spirit and commitment secured (Crosby, 1996). In this view, if the whole organisation is not working as a team to encourage quality the efforts will be in vain.

Research evidence concluded that managers with a commitment to service quality are more likely to empower employees (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996) as it is essential in a high contact environment that decisions should be made by the entire organisation and not exclusively by management (Christison, 1994).

To ensure effective customer service, it is necessary to engage in employee research (Fletcher, 1999). This is because employees can offer insight into conditions that reduce service quality in the organisation. Such research also acts as an early warning system. Employees have more intensive exposure to the service delivery system and system breakdown is often noticed before the customer does.

Closing the loop

Some students expressed the concern that when problems were raised with managers, little or nothing was done to resolve them. This appears to be a confidence problem rather than based on clear evidence. Some students did mention that they had been recently surveyed to find out what they think budgets should be spent on but they felt this was too late in the academic calendar and they did not know how this data would be fed into the decision making process.

The traditional view of service delivery in a business organisation sees directors and senior management as rather distant from the customer and customer service. (Griffiths et al, 2001). They are far not only from the actual provision but also from any customer feedback.. The solution to this perceived problem is to provide new organisational structures supported by the use of fast, wide and cheap communication systems. In particular, they argue for the development of web based e-support to provide fast, reliable communications systems.

There is now research evidence about complaint management. A major reason for this is the fact that by the application of professional complaint management, complaint satisfaction can be achieved. This specific type of satisfaction leads to positive attitude changes, positive word of mouth, and increased readiness to engage again with the service provider (Stauss, 2002).

On the basis of a comprehensive review of complaint behaviour literature, Stauss (2002) was able to differentiate nine attributes of complaint satisfaction:

1. adequacy/fairness of the outcome; adequacy of the problem solution;
2. access: ease of finding a competent contact person;

3. friendliness, politeness, courtesy, communication style;
4. empathy: willingness to take the customer's perspective, understanding the customer's annoyance, individual complaint handling;
5. individual handling: non standardised response that is customised to the problem and the wishes of the complainant;
6. effort; visible effort to solve the customer's problem;
7. active feedback: activity to find out the best solution for the customer; notification about delays, feedback about procedures and decisions;
8. reliability: keeping of promises; and
9. speed of response: speed of reaction to the complaint, speed at which complaints are resolved.

3 *Feedback on assignments*

Students in HE have a variety of priorities with assignment marks being very highly valued. Ask a student to do a piece of research to help broaden their knowledge base and some will resist. Ask them to do the same work as part of an assignment and most will respond with vigour and they will at the very least be interested to receive feedback in the form of grades and written comments. In effect, grades are the currency of HE.

This research has indicated a significant problem with regard to the issuing of feedback by tutors. Most students raised it as an issue and some expressed high levels of dissatisfaction. There are several properties to consider.

Time delays

Feedback is helpful when you get it. They can say you've passed but that's about it. You need feedback before you go into exams. It's supposed to be 21 days officially when you get feedback.

The first one they said it would be 3 weeks and it was 6 weeks. It's not professional but you can understand there are reasons.

Students are concerned that their performance is affected because they are unable to determine what they are doing right and what requires improvement. One student said that marks were really important to her and yet she felt that tutors thought she was obsessed by marks. She went on to say that she nearly "went mad" waiting for the mark.

Another highly motivated student articulated the same view:

Feedback is accurate. Time taken does vary and I still haven't got feedback from a couple of assignments from last year. which isn't particularly helpful. I don't know where I was going wrong. I don't know why this is so, but I think it's because of the workload of the tutors. And yet it is the same tutors that are teaching now. Sometimes it is quite late and mistakes can be replicated.

The above is demonstrably an example of service failure and is the cause of a large generation of complaints. Boshoff and Leong (1997) argue that service recovery is possible but an important ingredient in this is the willingness of both managers and employees to apologise for mistakes. They contend that an apology is important for three reasons:

It can be done quickly and in this way, reduce the customer's anxiety. It conveys to the customer that the problem is being attended to and that the organisation cares about them and their well being.

A complaining customer is often an angry customer. An apology can, at least to some extent, defuse that anger and curb the possible harmful effects of service failure such as negative word of mouth.

However, only when apology leads to a positive outcome does apology play a significant role.

Clarity of expectations, clarity of outcomes

Some students thought that assignments were clear and there was fair marking based on professional standards. They also thought that the feedback was constructive. Others were less satisfied and felt that assignment briefs were unclear which affected their performance in relation to feedback. Some students could not understand how their mark had been assessed. Comments are not always directed at any particular part of the assignment.

Equity

There was some concern about the fairness of the system. This view particularly emerged in relation to the deadlines for tutors receiving work from

students. There was concern that the penalties for late hand-ins were not clear and it might be that some students were being given extra time without any penalty.

4 Resources

Students did identify some concerns about the quantity and quality of resources. There was considerable variability in the comments made and some students were very satisfied. There were also variations between students on different sites.

Books

Nearly all students interviewed complained about the paucity of books. The library on all sites was severely criticised and it causes stress and concern to many students. Some go to other universities to try and find book resources, others look in local libraries, whilst others rely on web-based resources. Students on one course were pleased to have been given a copy of the core text and they were less concerned about book shortages.

Computers

There were some complaints about the lack of computer facilities particularly at the country site but on the whole students were not very affected by this resource. The reason for this is shown in the quotations below and was repeated on numerous occasions:

Put it like this, if I was not in a position to have a computer at home I would be struggling to do assignments. The print queues are very long.

I have used the computers once here. There are now more computers. With family commitments you need a computer at home. I find it easier.

Students on the Town site were concerned about networking problems linked to the Town site.

Loads of problems with computers. Everything is networked to a server at W and it wasn't working. Some of us are paying good money, well over £1000 and yet the facilities are still in a teething stage. Before the networking, it worked fine. We all signed a form to say we were not going to pay our tuition fees until it was sorted out. You fall behind in briefs because the computers are not working. It has now been sorted.

Value for money was a concept that emerged during the research and was particularly mentioned by students on the town site. Some believe that resources on the site are inferior to similar ones at Town site and this coloured their views on a range of issues.

Food

Students emphasised that food is cheap to purchase in all of the restaurants. However, some thought that it was of poor quality and needed to be improved. There were also mixed views about the service provided by catering staff. Some thought the staff were friendly and excellent whilst others were far less impressed and complained that staff were officious. For example, there were complaints that queues at the Country site were not properly alleviated and managed – staff refusing to serve until set times, even though food was ready to serve. Officiousness reveals itself in the following quotation:

I once moved a chair and a table in the canteen and I was moving it to pull two tables together so that we could sit together and as soon as I started someone said you can't move that because it will never get put back.

Student accommodation

Several students interviewed lived in halls of residence on the Country site. All were young and all were unhappy in varying degrees with the quality of the accommodation and the accompanying facilities. They identified problems with noise in the halls and the high cost of renting rooms. However, the main concerns centred around the lack of campus facilities – one bar, no shops, lack of transport at the weekends and dull, quiet weekends in general. A mature student at Country site summed up the sentiment:

The younger ones don't see the college in the same light as we do. They want a more varied social life. We have a small group and we go out for a drink now and then, but they want more. I wouldn't like to think that I was a 20-year-old student on this site.

Another said:

They didn't say anything about the weekends. The buses are very irregular. There is a bar but the opening hours are poor.

Female students sometimes coupled this with safety concerns about the campus and an apparent lack of security and warden visibility. One student described the mood of young students living at Country site as “gloomy” and the researcher in several of the interviews noted this mood.

5 The university experience – a quality experience?

Students know that College B is not a university but they also realise that they are fully engaged on degree or sub-degree courses. They

have expectations of a university type experience and this has coloured their views regarding satisfaction with the college.

Comparisons with other providers

Many students made comparison of College B with other providers. It was not always clear how these comparisons were being made, although a few had studied at other universities. Some had friends and relatives who gave them information based on their experience but it appeared that some of the comparisons were based on rumour and speculation. The comparisons varied in quality. Some were very favourable, others more unfavourable.

It hasn't really got the atmosphere of a uni. I spent a year at and alright I was just a number to the lecturer with 200 people in a lecture. They know me here but there was a student atmosphere but we are partly to blame because we don't stick around.

There is a richness of data in the above quotation. Students appreciate the fact that they are mainly taught in small groups and even though some consider the tutors to be too busy, they enjoy the more intimate atmosphere. However, they also note that the college is very quiet and this is particularly noticeable at Country site. Part of the reason is that many students are commuters and they only come to the campus when they have classes.

There was a sentiment expressed that College B is a community education college and several students expressed their gratitude for the HE being provided. Some were pleasantly surprised by how high the standard was at the college:

And I thought oh College B that's not going to be seen as good. I was really surprised.

But others felt they were experiencing an inferior product.

It's College B, you know what I mean.

Talking to people from other universities they have started from where we have left off.

We will carry on here reluctantly because the standard here is not as high and we will have to stay here.

Does not compare well with other universities. A lot of kids roaming around acting as if they are at school.

This latter comment reveals another concern expressed by some students that younger FE students cut across the life and work of the HE section.

6 Financial pressures

Pressure to quit

Even in this relatively small sample, some students were considering leaving their course and the main reason appeared to be financial pressures. One student was considering leaving because of the conflict between Saturday classes and the need to hold down a well-paid part time job. Another was not likely to proceed to the degree course from the HND because of the need to earn a full time income to help support his family and pay the mortgage.

Juggling priorities

Some students have jobs just so that they can carry on with their studies. Financial worries intensify the pressure and alter perceptions and work practices. One student pointed out that a lot of the student loan went on paying for a car loan and yet without a car it would be impractical to study at College B.

Balancing the equation

Students are faced with severe financial pressures and one student did not feel that managers adequately take these pressures into account. For many it is an equation and this distorts their thinking about the attributes of the college.

If I decided to work full time only I'm pretty sure I could be earning a lot more money than I am now. I want a job which is challenging and rewarding.

I am worried now about what type of job I'm going to get when I leave because I'm going to have so much student loan to pay off it's unbelievable.

Is it worth studying four years to get a decent job when I could work now and work your way up. You just don't know, it's a gamble.

For some students though finance was not a critical issue. Some have support from parents and /or partners and some do not pay fees. Others regard the student loan not as a debt but a future income tax and carry on with their studies in a freer spirit. But others were just grateful that they were able to get by and wondered how others survived.

Car parking

Parking and the lack of it is an issue for some students but others had no complaints. It was a severe and disturbing problem on the Town site 2 where parking is all but forbidden. This causes stress and adds to financial pressures.

A group of students reported to the researcher that some people have gone home so that they don't get clamped. For one person it was costing them £5 a day for parking and she asked if she could park here and they said no and yet another student without children was given a permit.

Students pointed out that even if they have long journeys, they are refused permits for the Town site 2 .

7 Empathy

This is the core category identified in this research. The hypothesis generated is that most issues of satisfaction/dissatisfaction centre on the notion of empathy and on occasions the lack of it. The key properties of empathy are analysed below.

Supportive tutors and administrative staff

Students are keen to acknowledge and praise supportive and helpful staff – it means a great deal to them.

Doing research study at the moment and have two tutors at the moment. They are helpful and supportive talking us through what's expected of us. I can take my work backwards and forwards to her and say what do you think about this and she can say yes and point me in a different direction. We have a lot of contact with them. Can give her a ring or use e-mail. If you leave a message they will usually get back to you.

These tutors are a really good team. They communicate well with each other and they are quite young and they are easy to relate to. I can go to them with problems and know I won't feel stupid or patronised.

A good tutor – she has some how got rid of the phobia. She speaks in basic terms, she goes through it slowly, she will ask if any one has got any problems, not rushed. I can't explain exactly what she does. And she will walk around the class while you are doing something she won't just stand and expect you to have done it. She will help and check what you are doing.

Three quotations but many students expressed delight with the quality of the tutoring. They want to feel that the tutors are bothered and that they are not just numbers in the system. Mature students are particularly exacting in relation to their expectations and some did point out that students need to be assertive to ensure that they get their full allocation of attention. Students do want to feel that tutors will return their calls and set up meetings where required. Above all it is crucial in terms of satisfaction that students do not feel they "are bums on seats". This was an expression which re-occurred on several occasions in different contexts and situations.

Organisational initiatives designed to instil customer orientation among key workers are now widespread (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000). These interventions represent attempts by management to instil or strengthen proactive service attitudes and values among key workers as important means to generating desired customer-oriented behaviours. However, the presence of such programmes cannot automatically be equated by employee acceptance. Studies by Edwards et al (1998) and Rosenthal et al (1997) have revealed a tendency among employees to endorse customer –orientation programmes, but the reactions are by no means uniform.

Peccei and Rosenthal (2000) have identified four main groups of employees in their reactions to customer –oriented interventions. The first group are termed “rejectors” and from a management’s point of view, they represent the failures of the strategy. These are employees who exhibit low attitudinal commitment to customer service and behave accordingly. At the opposite extreme are the “committed”. These are employees who exhibit positive customer service attitudes. They have internalised service values and beliefs and at the same time, consistently engage in customer-oriented behaviour. The two remaining groups are somewhere in the middle. Both of these groups are characterised by a lack of consistency between employees’ customer attitudes and behaviours. There are “behavioural complaints” who tend to engage in appropriate forms of customer behaviour but exhibit low levels of internalisation of customer service values and beliefs. There is a lack of underpinning in the form a strong sense of commitment to customer service. Sturdy (1998) suggested that such employees may well smile but they do not necessarily mean it. The final category is referred to as the “lip service” group. These employees are characterised by high levels of attitudinal support for customer service but low levels of actual engagement in customer-orientation programmes. Such employees accept customer service values and beliefs but do not

necessarily translate into concrete forms of customer-oriented behaviour.

The management solution may well be to empower key service workers leading to both attitudinal and behavioural changes in employees. The core element of empowerment involves giving employees discretion over certain task related activities (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1998). Such empowerment will lead to quicker response by employees to the needs of customers, as less time will be wasted in referring customer requests to line managers. Linked to this, is the problem of service failure that is inevitable given the complex nature of all services and particularly the product – HE. Speedy service recovery is essential when service failures occur. Empowerment of key service employees is one of the key components in breaking the cycle of failure in services.

However, empowerment has real costs that need to be borne in mind by management. Rafiq and Ahmed (1998) identified the following costs of empowerment:

- It increases the scope of employee jobs and this requires that they are properly trained, thus increasing overall costs
- It affects recruitment, as it is necessary to ensure that employees recruited have the requisite attitudinal characteristics and skills to cope with empowerment.
- Empowered employees expect to be better compensated, again increasing costs
- It can slow down the service delivery process as the empowered employee attempts to individualise the service for customers
- Individualisation of the service might be seen as unfair in situations as the employee may be seen to be not sticking to procedures.

The key to the successful implementation of empowerment is for management and employees to accept that managers are not the only people who can solve problems and make decisions (Boshoff and Leong, 1997).

Careers advice

The Careers Service did not receive favourable comments. Only one student interviewed had used the service and many felt it was irrelevant. Perhaps of more concern was that students on many courses did not receive advice either from tutors about possible ways forward after the courses had been completed, except sometimes to promote their own masters progression courses. Students on one course though gave an alternative view, praising staff for pointing out the jobs that might be available.

Professional caring required

Although many students were complimentary of the staff and the empathy demonstrated, others were less pleased and some were highly critical. In one joint interview, with two students both on the same course, one was completely delighted with the course and all its aspects and one was very disgruntled and critical. How can this be? To an extent it is related to student previous experiences and expectations, it is also the result of experiences whilst at college. Students are not simply customers of the organisation, but they do exhibit customer attributes and there is some evidence that some tutors ignore these attributes with highly negative and damaging results.

I've had a mixed experience I would say. I'm an assertive person, I've run businesses, I can approach people.

What I do find is that I have been made to feel in certain circumstances that I should have understood what has been said and it could have been something really small and yes I should have understood it but I couldn't quite grasp it and the way they approached it was in such an academic level that it still didn't come down to my level.

There are two or three tutors who I don't look forward to meeting with. There are a couple of lecturers who I go and see in the hope that it will shine some light on my problem and I almost know that I'm going to come out and not be any further ahead. I do find that problematic.

The above highly critical comment was made in varying degrees by other students. Some felt it was like being at school and that any hint of ignorance by students was met by a hostile and sometimes patronising response.

There were only a few comments made about administrative staff but when they were, negative comments usually occurred with staff being described as "miserable" and "patronising". When asked why they thought this was the case, they thought it might be because of large numbers of FE students present on the campus who caused annoyance and irritation to the staff.

Given that other students presented completely alternative views, there is a strong likelihood that these views are based at least as much on impression as real substance. If this is indeed the case, then it is important that all staff are aware of the issues which drive students and respond to create favourable impressions.

Schneider (1994) sheds important light on the relationship between employees and service delivery and created the notion of customer-focused HRM. He demonstrated that organisations in which

employees report they work in a positive climate for service have customers who report they receive superior service quality. In similar terms, he reported that organisations in which employees describe the Human Resource Management practices under which they work in more positive terms have customers who report they receive superior service quality.

In Schneider's taxonomy, there are four key facets required to produce a climate for service:

1. Managerial behaviour that rewards, supports, plans for and expects service excellence
2. Tangible evidence of support from Marketing Departments and HRM Departments that customer service is critical (e.g. through staffing adequacy)
3. Active emphasis on the retention of existing customers.
4. Tangible evidence of the existence of equipment, supply and facility support to deliver service excellence

In a similar manner, Schneider identified five facets of effective HRM practice:

1. Supervision which provides feedback on performance, establishes reward contingencies and shares information
2. Organisational practices that facilitate personal career development and planning
3. Working for an organisation that has a good status and image in the larger community
4. Organisational training and socialisation practices that facilitate newcomer entry into the organisation
5. Organisations which, generally, facilitate rather than inhibit job performance

Schneider concludes that employees can be used effectively by service organisations as monitors of the strategic customer focus of the organisations for which they work. Employees have the ability to diagnose whether their employing organisation is establishing the policies, practices and procedures required to meet a particular customer focus. This has been subsequently reinforced by Gremler et al (2001) who note that service businesses need to consider empowering employees and giving them the freedom to develop relationships, do what is right and correct problems. They believe that the flattening of organisational hierarchical structures and the employees' ready access to data base information is better enabling their empowerment.

The requirement for well focussed employees has been reinforced by Siu and Wilson (1998) in a study on the development of a marketing culture in the Further Education sector. They noted that a marketing team is needed in an organisational structure in which the marketers are experienced and committed to instilling a client conscious attitude in every layer of the organisation. It is important to involve staff in promoting the image and direction of the organisation and to empower staff by allowing them to make decisions at lower levels of the organisation.

Customer care is a key concept but it should not be confused with customer courtesy (Baines 1996). It is much more than "smile training". A customer complaints section which deals with complaints in a friendly manner will do little to help the organisational image if the complaint is still not attended to in a manner perceived by the customer to be appropriate and effective. In Baines's analysis, what is required is a concentration by the organisation on the front line service, developing more effective means of providing and enhancing the various products or services in line with customer needs. In this model, the management and administrative functions of the organisation are seen as being in support of service delivery.

Closing the loop completely

Reference has already been made in this report to the need for managers to be seen to respond to problems and issues. It is not always possible to remedy student complaints but students want to see that their concerns are being taken seriously. There is some evidence that issues are not always adequately dealt with.

...He always acted on whatever he was told and that is the most professional thing that this organisation lacks. In one week the timetable completely changed. We went into one lecture and the lecturer said this is not relevant for these students so you might as well go home. You've paid for childcare and the lecturers don't even know what they are doing. I spoke to a senior member of the team and I was told that I would get extra tuition time and nothing came of it. They didn't even have the decency to say we acknowledge what you've said but we are not going to act on it or yes you're going to get the extra time but we never heard from them again and that to me is just rude.

If senior people are aware of a problem it needs to be addressed, there is a culture of keeping it under wraps, don't let it out, keep it at home. I've gone to my year head with problems about lecturers and it has been brushed aside. He's new, let him settle, we'll see. I'm satisfied but there is big room for improvement. It just doesn't come across as a professional organisation. I don't think they are always very clear on what their key objectives are.

There is also some evidence that students on courses do not have adequate representation on relevant quality boards and processes. This adds to a feeling of powerlessness and frustration.

However, throughout this analysis there is an acute awareness of strong contradictions and students having mixed feelings. Below, is a comment from a student who travels an hour and a half to get to College B even though he claims he was offered a course very close to his home. He came across as highly satisfied and yet he states:

Value for money? No. you pull yourself through this course really and you fill in the gaps. Not very impressed by the tutoring. Some of it leaves a lot to be desired. Most of it leaves a lot to be desired. I have worked for 10 years since school so I don't need that encouragement to get on. It could have been handled a little more professionally and some of the tutors are treading water. I would prefer it wasn't like that.

The contradiction is probably explained by issues around self-motivation and also a realisation that other institutions have similar problems.

The following section is included to fulfil the requirement that the research study provides a significant contribution to professional practice and policy in education.

Recommendations to further enhance levels of satisfaction

These recommendations are based around the data analysis done on the properties of a satisfied student and on the main points from the core analysis at College B.

1 Although staff are extremely busy, they need to make aware to students what channels are available for communication and

accessibility. They should always respond to complaints/issues/concerns.

2 Feedback on assignments should be given back within an agreed time frame and when this is not possible, an explanation should be provided. Feedback, where possible, should indicate how students can improve the quality of their work.

3 The Country site is regarded by most students as beautiful and peaceful and it is an asset of the college. However, the needs of young people in halls of residence on the site are not being adequately met and their concerns need to be addressed.

4 Tutors and managers need to be more aware of book shortage problems and consider making contingency arrangements.

5 The Town site 2 is considered by students to lack adequate resources, particularly in comparison to the Town site. Issues of parity need to be addressed.

6 Administrators require training in customer care techniques.

7 Students require careers advice tailored to the particular course they are studying.

8 Ways should be explored to develop an effective personal tutoring system which allow students to receive feedback and obtain advice.

SECTION 6 THE MODEL AND ITS RELEVANCE TO HE MANAGEMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE

The key problem in presenting this model is that HE managers have tended to view quantitative research as “traditional” and have labelled qualitative methods as an accessory to quantitative methods. Cassell and Symon (2004) note that quantitative researchers do not call their research quantitative, they just call it research and qualitative research is viewed as something subsidiary.

Ruyter and Scholl (1998) noted that qualitative research does not have a good track record amongst managers and academics. Its failure to provide hard data and its reliance on small samples cast doubts on its representativeness and ultimately its validity. They suggest that qualitative research does not measure but rather it provides insight.

“It is flexible, small-scale and exploratory and the results obtained are concrete, real-life like and full of ideas.”

Ruyter and Scholl, (1998, p 8).

Interpretive research has been used sparingly in the field of consumer research during the last 15 years (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). The main reason for this is that there is concern amongst researchers that interpretive work may not be deemed “scientific”, (Ruyter and Scholl, 1998). With regard to student satisfaction there is a view among some researchers and academic managers that

only hard statistics have any meaning. Managers need to know for example, that x% are satisfied with the catering and another x% have no fixed opinion. But consumer research is concerned with complex social science phenomena (Healy and Perry, 2000). It is not sufficient to know that x% are satisfied or dissatisfied; cognisance also needs to be taken of why consumers have these opinions and by so doing management can then ascertain whether there is a problem or potential problem and how this can be dealt with. It is the contention of this research study that survey based methods cannot provide the required detail. They are important in their own right but management requires a richer set of information to enrich and inform the "hard" statistics.

If the model is to be accepted by HE managers then there will be a need to convince organisations that normally only associate quantitative methods with science and truth. There is thus a social and political context to be encountered and engaged with. This has not been attempted as part of this research study because of the limitations of time, but would form the basis of research into the testing of the model in the HE marketplace.

The National Student Satisfaction Survey is an example of a project based on positivist concerns, adopting an essentially conservative research strategy investigating minor variations of already established theoretical models. The model that is the focus of this research study has the potential of offering new insights by adopting a critical stance on accepted practices and approaching the topic of student satisfaction with a set of different objectives.

The case for developing a qualitative based system of measurement

The main measurement methodologies have been dominated by a quantitative, survey based approach, but this dominant paradigm is

now being increasingly challenged as some researchers become concerned by results that have uncertain reliability and validity. (Mendelsohn 1998; Swan and Bowers 1998; Swan et al.1996).

But can qualitative measurement be regarded as valid as quantitative based approaches? Healy and Perry (2000) suggest three possible criteria for judging the quality of the qualitative paradigm in relation to the management of consumers.

- **Ontology** – does the study describe reality and with reference to the quantitative paradigm, do the findings equate with survey-based results?
- **Epistemology** –the relationship between the reality and the researcher.
- **Methodology** – the technique used.

Does this research study meet the demands of the above criteria? It is not a study based in positivism, the paradigm which predominates in science and which claims to provide hard facts (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Instead this is a research study based in the constructivist paradigm (Healy and Parry, 2000). This is undoubtedly problematical. First it is not positivist and therefore potentially not ontological in a way that an HE manager would easily recognise.

However, of much more concern is that it might not be taking a sufficiently “realistic” perspective because of the nature of grounded theory research. This is research about a constructed reality that people have in their minds and inevitably depends on the interactions between interviewer and respondent. Within this context Healy and Perry (2000) have doubts that this type of research can add much to the field of consumer research ;-

“This constructivism approach may be suitable for some social science and consumer behaviour research like about religion, beauty or prejudice but it is rarely appropriate for marketing management research because the approach excludes concerns about the important and clearly “real” economic and technological dimensions of business.”

Healy and Parry, (2000, p120).

But it is the contention of this research study that the paradigm is realist and the concern cited above comes from a misrepresentation by the authors of the nature of qualitative inquiry and by implication grounded theory. The students in both colleges were very concerned about the “economic” aspects of their study, in terms of value for money judgements and they were very aware of the technological dimension in terms of access to computers and the facilities available in classrooms and on the campus in general.

The research study is ontologically sound because it brings managers closer to the students in their care and explores themes that may have previously only been captured by statistics. In essence, the study allows management to see how students really experience service quality. (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000).

Below is an explanation of how these two research studies enabled management to see how students really experience service quality.

College A

The research study in College A included an analysis of documents including committee reports. A minute reference from the Student Support Committee in 2000 read:

Consideration needs to be given to removing the % statistics from reports on student satisfaction data. For example, a change of 15% may represent the views of only three or less students, given the low response rates.

The above does not provide a ringing endorsement of the student satisfaction survey method used by the college.

The core category identified was communication issues. This category was referenced on numerous occasions in the course of interviews and it was clear that it was having a profound effect on the perception of overall quality. It does not explain all of the satisfaction/ dissatisfaction variables but it unifies many of the concepts that form the basis of the report. The analysis showed that students had many positive ideas for improving communications, including better use of e-mail, use of newsletters and better use of notice boards. They also were quick to sing the praises of helpful staff. In the course of the research, attention was drawn on several occasions, to a very helpful and proactive administrator. The data provided formed the basis of an important theoretical code referred to as the "*Jan Principle*". The data provided in this code formed the basis for a significant part of the final report. The data showed that there were a series of directly relevant communication problems. However, the data also showed that there were other related issues impacting on the core category of communication issues, namely the role of the student union, the poor attitudes of some staff members and a perception that some expectations had not been met, generating a sense of doubt in some students about the ability of the college to communicate effectively.

In all of the above, management is presented with an agenda for change and development, which if implemented would aid in improving levels of student satisfaction, as measured by survey results.

To reinforce the above, an examination has been made of College A's (unpublished source) Annual Student Satisfaction Survey report 2000/01. This report relates to the same period that the research study in College A was undertaken. The response rate was 7.6% of the total student population that by normal survey standards is very low. The reporting style makes it difficult for management to draw any conclusions.

For example, a series of bullet summary points indicate:

An increase of 7.5% in students who felt satisfied with the standard of teaching they received.

A big improvement of 16% in satisfaction levels relating to how quickly coursework and feedback was returned.

The comment in relation to one division – the School of Education read:

Virtually all sections were reported as satisfactory.

However, the report on the School of Sciences, Sport and Technology was longer and did provide some valuable information.

Generally, the students were satisfied with their course and structure. They did highlight “neutral” levels of satisfaction relating to the workload on their course. Students were concerned about access to work based learning. Students expressed a general level of concern relating to coursework: both the speed at which it is returned and the feedback given on it.

Most of the above analysis was in fact obtained from qualitative comments that students had added at the end of the questionnaire. It is not clear how the survey researchers had analysed these comments and formed the report.

The report concludes by drawing heavily on the qualitative comments and notes that students are “willing to offer their opinion and do”, (evidence for this view is not clear) and they want to be involved in decision making processes. They want dissemination of feedback and visible action on problem areas.

There is evidence that “communication issues” was arising as a major concern, but it would be difficult for a manager from reading the report to draw any firm conclusions.

College B

The full methodology was trialled in College B. The report was very well received by the Senior Management Group and further meetings were set up by them to consider its findings.

The identified core category was Empathy. Most of the identified concepts were identified with this category and included communications, the impact of financial pressures, resource issues, feedback problems, safety concerns and tutors who gave the appearance of being too busy to be properly concerned with

students. As in College A, there were ameliorating factors and in particular, many students thought they were receiving a high quality experience and considered the atmosphere of the college to be pleasant.

Again, the report provides an agenda for change and development. College B does not organise a student satisfaction survey but there is some evidence of the use of focus groups on some courses. It is not clear how data from such groups is analysed.

It is not yet clear whether College B will be subject to the National Student Survey because it is an FE college offering HE provision. If it is, then students will answer 37 questions on a five-point scale in the following sections:

- The teaching on my course
- Organisation and management
- Feedback on my submitted work
- The assessment on my course
- Personal development
- Workload
- Support and advice
- Learning resources
- Other
- Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course
- Overall, I feel the course is a good investment

Students are also provided with the opportunity to comment qualitatively on their “good” and “bad” experiences.

It is impossible to predict the quality of information that such a survey would provide for College B. However, assume for the sake of argument that scores on “Feedback on my submitted work” are poor.

What information will this provide for the HE managers ? It will alert them that there are issues around feedback, but what are the precise issues?

Applying the model of the research study would inform them that there is a considerable problem in relation to feedback and there are properties attached including time delays, lack of clarity relating to some assignment briefs and a concern that some students received poor treatment in relation to the submission of assignments.

It is of course possible that such student concerns are unfounded or that there is misunderstanding, but at least this rich data provides managers and tutors with knowledge of the source of concerns and allows them to develop coping strategies to the benefit of all parties.

A conscious decision, based on the Charmazian approach was made to include a large number of quotations from students. The objective was a simple one - ensure that managers can see that the theoretical categorisation is grounded in the thoughts and opinions of the students.

SECTION 7 Conclusion

Construction of Propositions

The following propositions have been constructed at the conclusion of this research study:

1. Qualitative strategies to measure and monitor student satisfaction can be developed and can inform policy choices and developments.
2. Qualitative strategies to measure and monitor student satisfaction are an effective means of generating accurate information for management to utilise.
3. There is scope for creating a management tool to identify the underlying determinants of student satisfaction.

These are bold propositions and before a justification is provided, it is judicious to consider the problems and difficulties that have been encountered.

Firstly, the process of grounded theory research is extremely time-consuming. A large volume of complex data is generated in a very short period of time, although the use of *Nvivo* greatly aided the process of data analysis. Related to this aspect, is the potential cost to an institution of financing an evaluation.

An estimate of the cost is as follows: (assumes one researcher collecting and analysing all data.)

	£	
25 days of research on site @ £ 150 per day	=	3750

50 days of analysis @ £150 per day	=	7500
Completion of report. 3 days @ £150	=	450
Administrative support. £12000 x ¼	=	3000
TOTAL	=	14750

Secondly, grounded theory research involves long periods of uncertainty. The absence of a priori hypotheses to test and lack of established protocol to follow implies a considerable period when it is not clear what, if anything of worth is being discovered.

Thirdly, it has been a difficult methodology to pursue and has required long periods of iterative reading and study. Pandit (1996) suggests that the approach does not favour the novice researcher who may be just beginning to acquire qualities of confidence and creativity. He believes that novice researchers are likely to find grounded theory study more difficult than “conventional methodologies” and the more experienced postdoctoral researcher is likely to produce better theory.

In addition to these three problems there are also issues about generalisability, researcher bias and the nature of the hypotheses generated.

Generalisability - Two separate case studies were completed. Case studies, in general, are sometimes accused of being anecdotal and provide an impressionistic account of events. If this is the case, then theory development is prevented. This is a charge that was levelled by one manager in the presentation of the report in College B. It is probably true to state that a formal theory would require more case organisations. However, this procedure was considered too lengthy, given the constraints imposed by the parameters of the research study.

However, the basis of the generalisation is not primarily about the typicality of the organisation, it is about the existence of particular processes, which may influence behaviours and actions in the organisation (Hartley 2004). The final process of referring to existing literature did assist in the process of generalisability.

Researcher bias - Both case studies relied on one researcher as the analyst and creator of the categories of the grounded theory. There is clear scope for bias to enter the analysis and it is difficult to determine what impact this may have had on the findings. If this research study is to be replicated in other situations and/or institutions, then there is scope for introducing a research team to carry out the data collection and analysis. Lansisalmi et al. (2004) conducted grounded theory research into collective stress and coping in the context of organisational culture. They were aware of the problem of research bias and sought to overcome this by triangulating several types of data, by negotiating differences amongst themselves and with the use of anonymous third parties during later stages of the analyses and by conducting a blind re-analysis of a random sample of data. They also considered seeking an initial group consensus in the generation of categories.

Linked to this, is the issue of the position of the researcher in the two colleges. In College A, the researcher was also a member of the teaching staff. In College B, the researcher was introduced to the research field by the College Principal. It could be argued that in College A, the researcher was an 'insider' and in College B, an 'outsider'.

Researchers as well as researched are allocated a certain status not only in relation to structural factors inherent in the setting, but also as a result of the relations established between those participating in the research. Consequently, positions of power and control are

continually constructed and reconstructed through the interaction of the various individuals involved

The research conducted in College A was done as an insider, as a member of the teaching staff. This provided several advantages, not least being familiarity and quick, easy access to the field. Hockey (1993) however, thinks that too much of the social process may be taken for granted and perhaps more tellingly that there is potential for bias to creep into the analysis. Although, much of the data was familiar to the researcher, in terms of the use of local terms and institutional acronyms, too much emphasis can be placed on the perceived power of the "insider researcher" .

In this research study, the researcher taught none of the students who took part in the interviews and focus groups, and there were no professional or personal relationships. The researcher introduced himself as a person who "worked at the College, undertaking doctoral research". No student ever raised the issue of teacher-student relationship in relation to the interviews, although it can not be assumed that it was not in students' consciousness . All interviews were conducted in classrooms and not in the researcher's office, providing a degree of neutrality.

The research conducted in College B was done as an outsider. Research in the latter was facilitated by the explicit and open negotiated permission of the College Principal, who as part of the agreement to allow the research, requested that a report be prepared to be considered by the College's senior management team. Students in College B were not aware of this arrangement, but the staff that were working with students were fully briefed. The reaction of staff in College B was almost uniformly one of complicity mixed with suspicion and some reservation. Staff were particularly wary of interviews conducted with class groups. However, the impact of this wariness was probably minimal because students were

clearly open in their responses and did not in any situation raise the issue of the researcher's status.

The researcher deliberately, as part of the grounded theory approach, did no prior investigation into the history or organisation of College B. Therefore, it was important that key informants gave full explanations for the context of their remarks. It was not always easy to understand the context of their remarks. For example, one group gave a graphic description of structural problems on their course:

The only trouble is that they are trying to get a BA set up and there has been a lot of paper work and they have been very busy. And for me, we are paying for tuition; we are not paying them to do paperwork. And then they come back and they say oh I don't like what you've been doing here and they try and steer you back in a different direction and you feel like you've been wasting your time. But we understand they've got a lot on their plates but we are paying to be tutored. I pay full fees. My wife is supporting me through college and car parking is just another headache. When I first applied I asked was there any student car parking and they said there was some. And then you find out you've got to live 50 miles away to get anything like that. You've got to bring your equipment here and it is very heavy on a bus. Some students have to get taxis.

Student comment from group interview

The above quotation indicates rich data. The problem for the researcher was interpreting the full context. In the quotation are the following ideas:

- **The college is setting up a new degree programme –** although confirmed by this group, no other evidence emerged

to support it and this raises the issue of whether managers should also be interviewed as part of the research study.

- **Tutors are perceived as being very busy** – this was a key theme identified in the research study, but again no evidence was sought from tutors to confirm the evidence.
- **Car parking** – the students explained that there were complex rules about obtaining parking permits. In effect, the researcher was taking this evidence on trust. It is of course, important evidence in its own right because it expresses an underlying feeling of students. However, if the students are exaggerating or bending the facts, it may contaminate the process of constant comparison of the evidence.

However, the above argument sets up a false and naïve argument. Naples (1996) writing about the feminist position in relation to ethnographic research, contends that the insider/outsider distinction masks the power differentials and experiential differences between the researcher and the researched. The bipolar construction of insider/outsider sets up a false separation that neglects the interactive processes through which 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' are constructed. The researcher's position as experienced in the field, was neither fixed or static – it was ever shifting and differentially experienced and expressed by students. The researcher was never fully inside or outside of the situations but instead had to negotiate and renegotiate in regard to everyday interactions.. According to Naples (1996) these interactions are themselves located in shifting relationships among the researched.

Grounded theory analysis counteracts insider/outsider relationships and potential bias through the application of the technique. During the data collection, memos were written which focused on the perceptions of the interviewees. Memo writing is the pivotal intermediate step between coding data and writing the analysis. It helps to define and delineate theoretical categories and to focus

further data collection. In so doing, it has the potential and power to help interpret data in the light of the insider-outsider researcher issues. At the very least, it makes the researcher theoretically sensitive to the positional issues. Grounded theory must come from data, not prior knowledge. The goal of the discovery process is a theoretical description of the basis social process that is most central or problematic to participants in the investigation (Glaser, 1978).

The issue of bias was also addressed by checking the hypotheses that were being constructed.. This was achieved in two ways. First, as codes developed, interview questions were amended to focus on participants' concerns and issues. Second, as the hypotheses were constructed, codes were checked and verified, through direct questioning, for their relevance to participants' meanings. In this way, participants were invited to refine, develop and revise the emerging theoretical structure. For example, in College B, some students spoke at length about how busy some tutors appeared to be. Further questioning about the meaning of this busy –ness established that in some cases students were referring to the emerging core category of a lack of empathy with the students in their roles.

The use of participants' own language at all levels of coding also aided hypothesis construction and countered issues of bias and insiderness/outsiderness.

The nature of the hypotheses generated – No attempt has been made in this research study to generate a coherent theory about the social processes producing these phenomena in the context of student satisfaction in HE. This is a possible next step but would require the development of additional cases.

Given these problems, how did this research study succeed in achieving the two key propositions?

The methodology allowed the identification of the rich, contextualised detail of the major determinants of student satisfaction in two separate institutions and how these determinants inter-relate and affect other aspects of student satisfaction. The National Student Survey (HEFCE 2004) will provide a large amount of information that will be relevant to management decision-making. However, its focus on teaching combined with the quantitative nature of the results, will not permit managers to determine the key antecedents that determine the scores. For example, one of the proposed questions is:

The elements of the course fit together well.

HEFCE, 2004, Question 9.

Assume that 75% strongly agree with the above statement. A manager will consider this a good indicator of quality and probably with some justification, but it will not indicate the factors that have shaped this statistic. It may also provide little information about the reasons why a significant minority are not able to fully agree with the statement. If managers want to implement change, if they want to target key variables affecting student satisfaction, then they require a richer set of information.

The National Student Survey consultation document states:

The student feedback project concluded that the questionnaire should focus on issues directly related to the quality of teaching,....

HEFCE 2004, Paragraph 24

My research study did not solely focus on the quality of teaching and for a good purpose. Teaching and learning is a complex issue and the determinants of the quality of teaching depend on more than the

basic performance of teaching. Perceptions of quality, as indicated by the findings of the research study depend crucially on the aspirations of students, the financial stability of students and the care and attention they have received during their studies. The quality of teaching is determined by a complex inter-relationship of factors that only a qualitative study can reasonably seek to discover.

The findings are of significance for managers in HE. In College A, there was significant evidence that communications systems were working ineffectively and were influencing other perceptions of quality. This college has since the time of the report, invested very heavily in seeking to improve its communications systems through mechanisms such as institution-wide student consultative committees, staff forums and a complete overhaul of its quality management structure.

In College B, empathy and the perceived lack of it in key aspects of the College's functions had impacts on several other variables, including perceptions of the quality of teaching.

In the presentation of both reports to senior managers, it was noted that it produced a description of organisational reality, which are easily recognisable by the managers, although this sentiment was more strongly expressed in College B.

Based on the work done in this research study, there are three inter-related questions relating to its efficacy

1. Is a good description of organisational reality, sufficient justification to merit HE managers investing in the research process?
2. Does this method generate theory of relevance to managers?

3. Is it possible to make any claim that the method is credible and forms the basis of "good science"?

Managers require information that explains what is going on within the organisation, and this is an important criterion of any theory. Managers seek predictability and certainty with regards to findings, hence the unquestioning faith placed in surveys.

The ability to "explain" is not an unproblematic concept but it may be defined as providing a theoretically plausible answer to a problematic situation (Miller and Marcel 1999). The purpose of a grounded theory study is to provide a plausible explanation of some phenomenon and the studies in both college A and B sought to do this. In this sense, and relating to the study in College B, the theory generated was accommodating because the body of data was given an explanation by showing it to be consistent with existing theories relating to the management of service quality.

The main concern for Miller and Marcel (1999) in relation to the claim for theory generation, is that if the major function of a theory to predict, then can a theory be judged to be adequate if it is seen as only accommodating certain data? It is not certain that it is able to predict in the sense of being able to be further tested or assessed in some way i.e. it may not fully replicable. The argument here is, that if grounded theory is truly a theory, it ought to be able to generate testable claims. If it is unable to do this, then there is an argument that there is no worth in pursuing the method. If it is unable to predict, then managers may not view it as an accompaniment to survey based methods.

The key issue at stake is whether the same questions can be asked of people in different organisational settings and whether the same observation can be carried out across organisations. The research

studies completed in colleges A and B indicate that this degree of replicability is possible.

In the pragmatic world of HE management, the argument is not whether the grounded theory method is scientific or not, but whether managers can view it as having the perception of being scientific in comparison to survey based methods.

Even if grounded theory is unable to predict, there is still some hope that it can be held up as a form of scientific enquiry. Haig (1995) believes that suitably reconstructed, grounded theory offers an attractive conception of scientific method. This reconstruction involves seeing the study as a problem-oriented endeavour in which theories are generated from data patterns, elaborated through the construction of plausible models and justified in terms of their explanatory coherence. It is on this basis that the methodology is to be presented to HE managers.

There is one final point that may yet have a powerful influence on the efficacy of the model. When this research study commenced, there was no indication that a national student satisfaction survey was being considered. In 2004, this is now high up the agenda of HE managers. Student satisfaction –its measurement and management is an important issue that cannot be avoided. It is highly probable that league tables will be published, showing how different institutions compare on the same questions in the survey. Managers will increasingly require rich data to inform them of why survey results are as they are indicated. This qualitative based method is one possible method of obtaining the required data.

Based on the claims made in the propositions, a prospectus has been prepared for explaining and proposing the method to HE managers. The research study has culminated in the production of the *Student Satisfaction Evaluation Tool (SSET)*. This Tool is the

final expression of the adaptation of the grounded theory methodology discussed in Section 3 and researched in the field as noted in Sections 4 and 5. It has been designed following reflection on the processes that have been experienced and developed.

A draft prospectus to be presented to HE managers is shown below. The intention is to make the Prospectus available for the consideration of HE managers to purchase as part of their Quality Assurance budget. The language in the Prospectus is designed to provide a balance between academic terminology and general management comprehension. It is probable that it will require modification following interactions with interested managers.

Draft prospectus information for senior managers in UK HEIs.

**THE STUDENT SATISFACTION EVALUATION TOOL– a
management information tool for use by senior managers in
HEIs**

Systematic institution-wide student feedback about the quality of the students' total educational experience is an area of growing activity in UK HE institutions.

Engaging in this process will help to:

Demonstrate the institution's commitment to its principal stakeholder – students. Student satisfaction involves taking student views seriously and acting on them.

Focus on the student learning experience and help enhance student-learning opportunities.

Provide a clear set of procedures for a process of continuous quality improvement.

Ensure that strategic management decisions are based on reliable and valid information about student concerns.

Provide a means of benchmarking against which progress over time can be assessed.

The first full **National Student Survey (NSS)** will take place in early 2005, and will provide information on teaching quality for prospective students by summer 2005. The results of the survey will be published alongside other teaching quality information as outlined in HEFCE 2003/51.

HEFCE 2004/22, suggests that although the NSS may provide useful data for the purpose of quality enhancement within HEIs, this is not its primary purpose. It is not intended to have the same role as

internal feedback surveys that institutions typically undertake at a more detailed level for monitoring and enhancing quality.

The student feedback project had concluded that undergraduate students should be surveyed at or near completion of their programmes of study. For 2005, it is intended to survey early in the calendar year and to include all full and part-time undergraduate students registered at HEIs in England and Northern Ireland.

How will you be able to anticipate the results of the NSS in relation to your institution?

How will you be able to collect data in the future that will indicate areas of student satisfaction for further monitoring and management?

The *Student Satisfaction Evaluation Tool (SSET)* is one possible solution to the problem of finding out what your students really think about the quality of teaching and other services in your institution. A dedicated and trained research team will manage the process and provide you with rich data that can be further analysed and tested through internal surveys.

The SSET has been developed as part of a doctoral study over a two-year period and has been successfully trialled in two separate HEIs.

SSET is a systematic approach of data collection and analysis of data that relates to the subject of student satisfaction. It is fundamentally about discovering the factors that determine the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) of students within the institution.

Field Data Collection Method

Data is collected by individual thematic interviews, group interviews, and focus groups and complemented by analysis of relevant documents. Informants are drawn from all sections of the institution, in line with the parameters indicated by the National Student Survey requirements.

Following a short period of analysis, further data is collected centred on the key themes emerging from the initial analysis.

Analysis Procedures

An inductive analysis of the data is conducted following the basic principles of grounded theory methodology as developed originally by Glaser and Strauss¹. The aim is to develop a full analysis of the key factors affecting levels of student satisfaction in the institution.

Data is coded and then clustered into concepts. These concepts are then organised by themes, which form the basis of integrative categories.

The analysis makes use of a constant comparative method. The comparison takes place on three levels:

1. Codes are compared with transcriptions provided by interview and focus group data.
2. Concepts are compared to one another, which results in the definition of a set of properties and dimensions describing each theme and, finally, an integrative category.
3. Comparison is made of themes and categories to seek to produce an integrative category that explains the main determinant(s) of student satisfaction.

¹ Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine

The integrative category is then further tested, by the collection of additional data from interviews and document analysis. This process ceases when the marginal value of the new data is minimal in terms of adding to the generation of material relevant to the integrative category.

A full report is completed and the whole process takes between three and six months. The precise period to be determined by negotiation.

The Potential Contribution of the Model to Management Practice in HE

HE managers may be sceptical about adopting this type of qualitative model. It is probable that some managers believe that quantitative data already allows them to predict, explain and understand what is happening in relation to the antecedents of student satisfaction.

The model developed in this research study has the added potential to allow managers to:

- ❖ Anticipate other additional kinds of consequences, conditions or strategies of an antecedent besides which managers know empirically;
- ❖ The development of concepts as opposed to incidents may help understanding, particularly when the concepts are integrated in a theory in the place of a multitude of unintegrated incidents;
- ❖ Grounded theory allows for the development of emerging theory. This has the potential to be a powerful counter weight to managers who might become locked in a status quo orientation. Managers are given the opportunity to see the processes making for change and can modify their ideas to handle the new knowledge. Grounded theory illustrates that

incidents are often only elements of patterns in a process. It allows managers to work with familiar situations more purposefully.

The model has the ability to generate theory that is contextually sensitive, persuasive and relevant. The theory is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis. It uses a systematic set of procedures to develop inductive theory about student satisfaction. This systematic approach allows the model to be presented as “good” scientific research by making effective use of scientific criteria.. These criteria are significance, theory observation compatibility, generalisability, reproducibility, precision, rigour and verification.

It permits the investigation of higher level and lower level factors of causation which is critical when investigating and seeking to explain variability in the complex human interaction of finding the antecedents of student satisfaction. It is also a unique form of theory construction and this in itself is worthy of commendation to hard – pressed managers in HE.

However, Jones (2004) has argued that grounded theory in management research is in danger of losing its integrity. In his opinion, the methodology has become so pliant that management researchers appear to have accepted it as a situation of ‘anything goes’. This research study has demonstrated that the grounded theory as evidenced in research literature is variable in relation to ontology and epistemology. Jones (2004) concludes that grounded theory methodology cannot continue to be practised as a free for all methodology without risking serious danger of becoming irrelevant. This conclusion is borne out in this research study and should be emphasised to HE managers.

In conclusion, the model developed is able to counter the critics of grounded theory including Jones but only if the following points are emphasised in both the construction and the justification to managers:

1. The model must justify (not just state) all elements of the research approach, including the choice of approach (Charmazian) and all of the techniques employed;
2. The essential elements of the grounded theory model need to be emphasised to HE managers. These are:
 - ❖ The theory generated is based on the concept of the simultaneous, coding and analysis of data;
 - ❖ It is driven by theoretical sampling and the constant comparison of data. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory. By identifying emerging gaps in the theory, the research is guided as to next sources of data collection and interview style. This approach to data collection done jointly with analysis is far different from the typical qualitative study that adopts a preplanned, sequential approach to data collection and management.
 - ❖ The final product is the production of a theory in the sense of inter-related categories that contain a measure of explanatory and predictive power.

Further research questions / issues

There are a number of issues that merit consideration for further research.

1. The outstanding issue relates to HE managers perceptions of measurement issues related to the phenomenon of student satisfaction. This study has not considered their perspective. It is likely that this perspective is shaping rapidly as the

National Student Survey becomes a reality. Various methodologies could be employed to research this issue, and there is scope for adopting another grounded theory study.

2. There is also the issue of other qualitative research methodologies that might yield valuable data for HE managers. In particular, the critical incident technique, analytic induction, and attributional coding may be able to provide rich data acceptable to managers. A research study using one or more alternative qualitative techniques would illuminate the efficacy of the grounded theory methodology and would also provide further evidence in relation to epistemological and ontological concerns relating to quantitative and qualitative study.
3. This study ends with the preparation for the presentation of the model to HE managers. The next logical study would be to examine how managers can be encouraged to respond to the model in practical terms. This may take the form of the development of a quantitative measurement of their responses to the model. However, there is also scope for generating an additional qualitative inquiry using grounded theory techniques or another methodology.
4. It would be very useful to adopt this model in an HE setting and compare this with a quantitative analysis of student satisfaction completed at the same time in the same institution. This would allow managers to make direct comparison of results and enable the research team to compare and contrast findings and draw stronger conclusions about the robustness of this model.
5. During the period in which this research study has been completed, grounded theory has developed and evolved. This

is potentially problematic as the understanding of what is implied by a grounded theory study is shifting. Any future study using grounded theory, should make explicit how the methodology has been applied. There is a pressing case for changing the nomenclature and titles of some grounded theory studies to make the actual methodology more transparent for both managers and members of the academic community.

6. Finally, there is the possibility of developing a meta level analysis across cases. This research study has produced an interpretive output in relation to two separate cases. However, with several cases, it is possible to produce a meta analysis and a more formal theory can be generated to explain a more generalisable phenomenon. Although there were similarities between the two cases and it is probably true that empathy and communications are always linked, it cannot be concluded that there is a generalisable phenomenon.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

The material in the box shows the category "*Present survey system*". Along side this there is a brief description of the in-vivo concept that relates to the abstract category. More importantly, it also shows the source of the concept.

CATEGORY

(11) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM

CODE/CONCEPT

258 (11 1) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/"qualitative feedback

section

259 (11 2) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/concerns about the methodology

260 (11 3) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/Feedback rate 7%

261 (11 4) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/important that students see that fee

262 (11 5) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/people who fill it in are generally

263 (11 6) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/survey on the cheap

264 (11 7) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/ the completion rate was higher

It will be noted that some of the descriptions of these concepts are very brief. This is not a problem because the *Nvivo* package possesses the ability to rapidly report on a coding area and expand the text as shown below.

705 (11) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM

706 (11 1) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/"qualitative feedback section

Description:

InVivo node created from RASS COMMITTEE 8 11 00

707 (11 2) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/concerns about the methodology

Description:

InVivo node created from RASS COMMITTEE 8 11 00

708 (11 3) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/Feedback rate 7%

Description:

InVivo node created from RASS COMMITTEE 8 11 00

709 (11 4) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/important that students see that feedback

Description:

InVivo node created from RASS COMMITTEE 8 11 00

710 (11 5) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/people who fill it in are generally

Description:

InVivo node created from Head of Student Support 10 1 00

711 (11 6) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/survey on the cheap

Description:

InVivo node created from Head of Student Support 10 1 00

712 (11 7) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/t the completion rate was higher than

Description:

InVivo node created from RASS COMMITTEE 8 11 00

For example:

711 (11 6) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/survey on the cheap

Description:

InVivo node created from Head of Student Support 10 1 00

INTERVIEW
SOURCE

In this extract the Head of Student Services is referring to the present survey system for student satisfaction within the college. *Nvivo* is

able to rapidly expand this extract to provide a better context and reference point to other ideas and concepts. The expanded section of text is indicated below.

711 (11 6) /PRESENT SURVEY SYSTEM/survey on the cheap

Description:

InVivo node created from Head of Student Support 10 1 00

I totally agree with focus groups and last year I asked Rachel to get students to help in designing the survey as they do at the University of Central England but only one student volunteered.

They are getting the survey on the cheap. Surveys produce a snapshot of different years. It would be good to look at a student as they go through the system.

It's about making some thing that is cost and time efficient and being able to take action on it. For instance this year they said that careers was brilliant but they didn't think it was important. The first years didn't think that books were as important as the Internet. Given the wealth of information on the Internet you'd expect that to start coming through. Most surveys will say they want more books and more car-parking .

APPENDIX 2

Node	PROPERTY 1	PROPERTY 2	PROPERTY 3	PROPERTY 4
(11 1) /"qualitative feedback section	-	-	-	LOW
(11 2) concerns about the methodology	-	-	-	LOW
(11 3) Feedback rate 7%	-	-	-	LOW
(11 4) important that students see that feedback	-	TRUE	-	-
(11 5) /people who fill it in are generally	-	-	DOUBTS	-
(11 6) /survey on the cheap	-	-	DOUBTS	-
(11 7) /t the completion rate was higher	TRUE	-	-	-

APPENDIX 3

The material in the box below shows a small section of transcription and the coding that was done with the text.

<p>The research might have been better at the beginning rather than the end!!</p> <p>No careers advice offered. Little evidence that careers fairs have been advertised.</p> <p>There is no evidence that change and reform is on the way</p> <p>At Scunthorpe we were more able to ask for advice and complain if I wanted to There was clear</p> <hr/> <p>representahon it doesn't happen here</p> <p>There's no shop either.</p> <p>Two students tried to find the student counseling service but when they went there was no one there</p> <p>Focus groups are for people who have an axe to grind.- the hangers and the floggers</p> <p>There must be something positive to say but I can't think what it is</p> <p>Do students want to be nurtured?</p> <p>Rather strong. I would like to feel that they are bothered. One lecturer said, his exact words were "I'm getting paid to be here, I don't care about the rest of you it's up to you whether you learn or not". I really didn't need to hear that. I wanted to hear that if you let me have a look at that, I'm sure we can work on it. Or if you can't find x, y and z ask. I am more than a bum on a seat.</p> <p>Tracking a tutor was a real problem had to wait a long time to see a tutor.</p>	<p>] No careers advice offered-</p> <p>] lack of representation</p> <p>] lack of facilities</p> <p>] There must be something positive to</p> <p>] I would like to feel that they are b</p> <p>] being bothered</p> <p>] access to tutors</p>
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APPENDIX 4

Nodes in Set: busy tutors

Created: 06/05/2002 - 16:58:24

Modified: 06/05/2002 - 16:59:05

Number of Nodes: 18

1 ~the course leader has had promotion

Description:

InVivo node created from EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES

2 A lot of them are overworked~

Description:

InVivo node created from HND MUSIC GROUP

3 access to tutors

4 accessibility

5 being bothered

6 cancellations cause stress

7 communication problems

8 good tutors but with a qualification

9 I don't feel I can go to my tutor h

Description:

InVivo node created from first year HNC Business group

10 I think tutors who teach on our cour

Description:

InVivo node created from first year HNC Business group

11 I thought I'm paying for this to tea

Description:

InVivo node created from HNC BUSINESS INDIVIDUAL

12 I will not let them ruin my career~

Description:

InVivo node created from HNC BUSINESS INDIVIDUAL

13 I would like to feel that they are b

Description:

InVivo node created from COMBINED STUDIES YEAR 3 TWO
STUDENT

14 pressures on tutors

15 reliability of classes

16 See ourselves as cattle~

Description:

InVivo node created from first year HNC Business group

17 staff availability

18 They see us as pupils at a high scho

Description:

InVivo node created from first year HNC Business group

APPENDIX 5

EXAMPLES OF MEMOS GENERATED FROM THE DATA

Memo 4

Not a very happy group. These pauses were a characteristic of the first Monday of interviewing.

The rural setting attracts locals and people with cars but can be a problem for people relying on public transport. This may result in quirky characteristics and reactions.

Memo 34

Young students seem to have less grievances with admin staff. There appears to be a problem with mature students and their dealings with administrators. This needs checking out as part of core category delineation.

Memo 45

Tends to take full ownership of the problem - reluctant to blame the college or the tutors. This idea of taking personal ownership and not looking for external factors is very important – it is bound to affect notions of satisfaction with service delivery.

Memo 50 – this memo dissects a student quotation and begins to seek extant literature for support and clarification. It was at around this point in the analysis that the concept of empathy as shown by issues of poor service quality started to figure very prominently.

I've had a mixed experience I would say. I'm an assertive person, (this is very important in the context of this evidence) I've run businesses, I can approach people. What I do find is that I have been made to feel in certain circumstances that I should have understood what has been said and it could have been something really small and yes I should have understood it but I couldn't quite grasp it and the way they approached it was in such an academic level that it still didn't come down to my level. There are two or three tutors who I don't look forward to meeting with. (communications problems, personality clashes?) There are a couple of lecturers who I go and see in the hope that it will shine some light on my problem and I almost know that I'm going to come out and not be any further ahead. I do find that problematic.

This is very powerful stuff but typical? Well, yes and no. There does appear to be some kind of communication gap requiring a bridge. Need to pursue some marketing / service quality concepts to see if there is any pattern. If there is a lack of real service quality then how can this be expressed? – what is it that is lacking?