

How Do Age and Gender Affect University Students' Experience and Outcomes?

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

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Statement

I hereby declare that thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

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Summary

Increasing access to higher education has led to a diversified student body, suggesting that conceptualising the 'student experience' as homogeneous is no longer viable. Previous research reported that age and gender exert significant influences on the student experience, but this has generally taken a 'snapshot' of those experiences rather than tracing differences over time. This study makes a contribution to this area by assessing changes in the student experience over the lifespan of the degree to explore the *relative* impact of age and gender (and the potential interaction between them).

The study employed a longitudinal qualitative design to explore in-depth the experiences of sixty-one students over three years, using an innovative email research method. Data was analysed in two key ways: a thematic analysis of the findings which identified issues including confidence, friendships, social life, paid work and family commitments; the exploration of illustrative case studies used to highlight the experiences of 'ideal type' students in four demographic groups.

Key findings include the following: age and gender influenced the student experience, yet gender exerted the strongest influence. Mature male students were found to share more commonalities of experience with their traditional male counterparts than with female students of varying age. Of the variables which shape experiences, the thesis identified 'external commitments' as the key factor. This was evidenced by the contrast between the mature female and male groups, with mature women reporting being constrained by family and home responsibilities, whereas mature men were able to create and maintain 'separate worlds' of university and home life. The thesis argues

that the 'double shift' described as women entered the workplace, has become a triple shift for mature female students attempting to combine home, work and academic responsibilities; notwithstanding this context, this group are the higher performers academically.

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Chapter 1

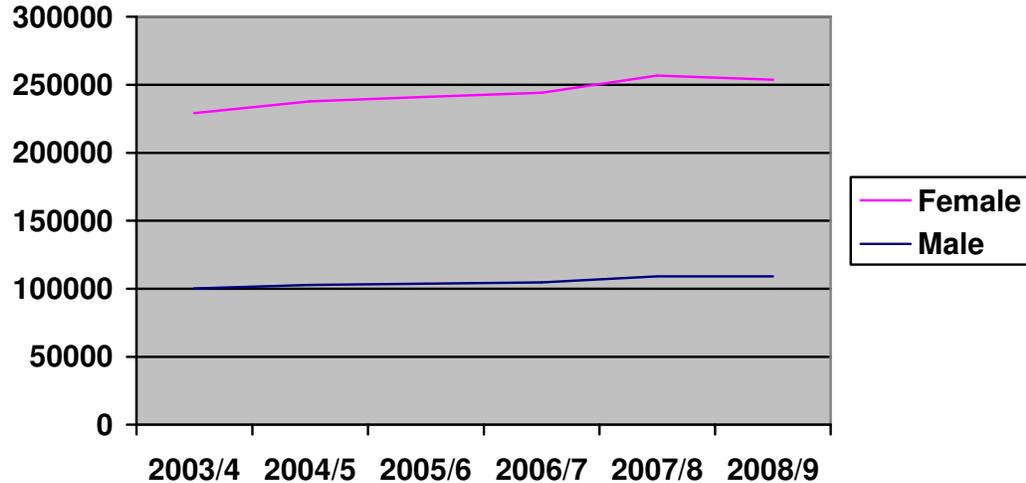
Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past thirty years, there has been a considerable expansion of the higher education (HE) sector, and a significant increase in the number of students at university (Universities UK, 2005; HESA, 2009). A major consequence of this trend has been a marked change in the demographic make-up of the student body. Traditionally, the majority of students attending degree programmes were recent school leavers aged between eighteen and twenty, the majority of whom were male. Today, those attending university include far more non-traditionally aged students and female students (Scott, (1995); Little, (2006). According to Galindo, Rueda, Marcenaro-Gutierrez & Vignoles, (2004), more than three quarters of students in the UK HE system come from professional backgrounds, and only 14% are from unskilled backgrounds, and this inequality in the HE system, they claim, has persisted over the last forty years. It is therefore arguable that key changes in student demographics are related to age and gender. The students within this study graduated in 2003/4 and it is worth noting that since then there have been a number of major changes in UK Government policy in relation to HE. These changes include the introduction of variable tuition fees in the academic year 2006/07 and several changes to student finance. However, as these changes occurred since the participants in this study graduated they did not directly affect this student sample.

It is clear from the numbers in Figure 1.1 that since 2003/4 there have been increasing numbers of male, but even more so, female students within the UK HE system.

Figure 1.1 Student numbers within the UK HE system



This demographic change suggests that it is no longer possible to talk about a homogeneous 'student experience', and also raises questions about whether there are variations in the experiences, expectations and outcomes of these different groups within the overall student body.

1.2 The research

The scene briefly outlined above raises a number of important research questions, not least whether student needs and experiences may differ according to a range of demographic distinctions (e.g. age, gender). This question is not only important in research terms, but has major implications for higher education policy and practice. Institutions across the UK vary in the constitution of their student bodies, with some (especially the post-1992 or 'newer' universities) having a much higher proportion of mature and 'non-traditional' students than others. Particularly in the current economic climate, university managers have to think carefully about how they target limited resources, to maximise student outcomes and enhance institutional performance. Moreover, the 'student experience' has increasingly become a key measure by which that performance is formally assessed, and it features prominently in league table rankings, along with other comparative statistics that are now routinely compiled in the HE sector. Anticipating their students needs and understanding their students experience is essential to universities for many reasons but, above all, these include successful targeting of resources, maximising performance and ensuring that they are successful in what is an increasingly competitive environment.

Therefore, the aims and objectives of this thesis are as follows:

1.3 Aim

To explore how the student experience differs according to socio-demographic factors (such as age and gender), and the impact of these factors in terms of academic engagement, performance and outcome.

1.4 Objectives

- To identify the key factors which influence students experience of university
- To explore differences in the experiences of these factors according to the socio-demographic characteristics of age and gender specifically
- To examine changes in the students experiences over the lifespan of the degree
- To assess the relationship between any observed differences in students experiences, academic performance and outcomes
- To consider the implications of the findings for higher education policy and practice, with regard to student support.

The student experience in HE is a longstanding area of research, for example, Tinto, (1988); Woodrow, (1998); Woodfield, (2002); Kantanis, (2002); Thomas, Quinn, Slack & Casey, (2002); Hatt, Baxter & Tate, (2005) and, at a national level, information about university experiences has been annually gathered through the National Student Survey (NSS) for the past five years. This survey has provided some important insights including: student satisfaction in relation to assessment and feedback; quality of teaching, and overall satisfaction with their student experience. However, because the survey findings are principally analysed by subject group, any potential differences between students according to demographic criteria are not explored. This means that the data from the NSS does not answer the issue of difference by sub-group and, moreover, as is the case with any quantitative survey, the NSS provides substantial data on the 'what' of satisfaction, but is less able to explore more complex questions about the 'why' of satisfaction. In other words, the data gathered does not provide a basis on which the reasons behind different patterns in student experience can be analysed and understood.

There has been some research into differences by 'sub-groups', such as Richardson, (1994); Thomas, (2002); Richardson & Woodley, (2003); Field, (2003) and Stuart,

(2006). These studies have provided useful insights into how student experience differs according to demographic and/or social groups. Nonetheless, these studies are generally small-scale and short-term, therefore providing only a 'snapshot' of experiences at any one point in time. Consequently, they do not address the important longitudinal question of whether, and how, students experiences may change and develop over their years of study (typically 3 years, although longer for some degrees). Such change may be expected, given that time at university is often characterised as being both an academic and a personal journey. There is also a tendency for these short studies to focus only on one demographic factor (for example age or gender) rather than exploring how different demographic factors might intersect.

This thesis, therefore, complements the data of the NSS, and builds on the small-scale studies previously mentioned, by providing an in-depth and longitudinal insight into the complexity of students experiences. It also examines the potential interplay between demographic factors as they influence the course of study. Specifically, it makes an in-depth examination of the influence and interplay of two major factors that might be expected to have a strong effect – age and gender. Whilst the literature shows that various other demographic factors (including SES, ethnicity and disability), also have an influence on the student experience, these will be discussed only if they emerge naturally from the data.

In order to address the objectives outlined above, data was collected from sixty-one students at Sussex University a research intensive university , over a 3 year period. For the purpose of examining the age-gender dynamic, these students were classified according to two demographic axes, based on age ('traditional', i.e. 18-20, or 'mature', i.e. 21 or over), and gender (male or female). The outcome was 4 demographic groups: traditional male; mature male; traditional female and mature female. The thesis identified significant issues that influenced the experiences over the life course of their degrees and, in doing so, it developed a deeper understanding of the factors that both positively and/or negatively shaped the student experience. It further aimed to offer a comparative view of the student experience for traditional and non-traditional students, as well as highlighting any gender disparities between the groups.

The first objective, to identify key factors that influence the student experience, was initially addressed via the literature review, which also provided contextual information for the primary research. The following two objectives: to explore differences in the experiences according to the socio-demographic characteristic of age and gender; and

to examine changes in the student experience over the lifespan of the degree, were addressed via the primary research, using a qualitative longitudinal design, and thematic analysis of the data gathered via email prompts across the students course of study. The next objective, to assess the relationship between any observed differences in students experience and academic performance and outcomes, was addressed by comparing the self-reported data provided by students with their actual performance outcomes as provided by the university Student Services Office. The final objective was to consider the implications of the findings for higher education policy and practice, and this was addressed through a discussion of, and reflection on, the findings in light of the literature review and practical implications of these findings for student support.

This thesis makes a methodological contribution to debates about the use of email as a research tool. Email was used throughout the data collection phase as it is a cost- and time-effective way of collecting data longitudinally from a wide range of students. One other key benefit of this data collection method is that the data is recorded as it was received, with no interpretation taking place, and thus nothing is lost in the recording or transcribing process. It also facilitated a distant, whilst personal, relationship which potentially led to more detailed information being gathered.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 will review key literature within the socio-demographic impact factors, such as socio-economic status/social class and first generation students, as well as age and gender. This is then followed by a review of the literature on obstacles to success in HE, namely: finance; paid work; friendships and dependents. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology utilised within the project, highlighting the research design, process, and details of the participants. Ethical issues and a discussion on the use of email as a research tool, which is an innovative aspect of the research design, are described along with the method of analysis.

This is followed by the data presentation Chapters (4-7), which summarise the findings from the empirical research. Each chapter focuses on the experiences of a particular student group in the following order: traditional male; mature male; traditional female and mature female. These Chapters begin with two in-depth case study examples, which illustrate how the student experience is not only formed, but also changes over the duration of the degree. After a description of the background to, and characteristics of the group, the findings will be presented according to the five main themes identified

through the review, which facilitate as well as impede, a positive student experience, and which shape academic outcomes. These are namely: participation and confidence; finance and paid work; friendships and social life, and family and commitment.

Chapter 8 addresses the academic outcomes of the student sample, and explores the extent to which self-reported confidence is (and is not) an accurate predictor of actual degree outcomes. Although the thesis gathered only overall degree outcomes in this area, it highlights what the students 'say', what they 'claim to do', with regard to academic engagement and contrasts it with an indicator of actual academic performance. Chapter 9 offers a discussion of the findings, and summarises and triangulates qualitative and quantitative data, as well as linking them to the literature. Finally, Chapter 10 highlights strengths and weaknesses of the research, as well as covering avenues for practical implications, future research and offers a practical intervention for consideration by university management.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This Chapter will highlight key arguments within the literature, relevant to the aims of this thesis as outlined in Chapter 1. Themes within the literature are highlighted, and key papers on each of the themes are discussed critically throughout. The Chapter begins by discussing policy issues with particular focus on the relevant time span for the participants in this study (2001-2004). Later policy issues will be discussed at the end of the thesis. This is followed by a discussion of demographic factors which may influence both the students experience and their academic outcomes. These factors include: socio-economic status and social class; first generation entry to higher education, age and gender. The final section considers obstacles or barriers students may have to manage, in order to successfully complete their studies and maximise their academic attainment. Issues covered within this section include: finances; paid work, and dependents or carer responsibilities. Throughout this Chapter it will be argued that, although there is a great deal of research in this field, there is a lack of longitudinal studies, such as the research involved in this study. It is this apparent gap that this research project aims to address.

2.1 Introduction

Participation in Higher Education (HE) is increasingly pervasive across the United Kingdom (UK), with many more students now participating in the system than in previous generations. The research reported in this thesis was conducted during a time when there was concern in the UK, as well as across the world, about breaking down the elite system of HE, and retaining a diverse range of students once they had been recruited. Scott, (1995) argues that as a result of this 'massified system', the idea of 'the' student experience is under threat. Little, (2006), writing eleven years later, agrees and notes that there is arguably a range of student experiences within institutions, for students with different backgrounds. Scott, (1995) also claimed that higher education in the UK has moved from an elite system, populated primarily by upper-middle class men, to that of a mass system, available in theory to anyone with the academic capability. Government widening participation policies have encouraged this transformation over recent years, and aim to 'provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it' (HEFCE 2006). It

will be argued throughout this thesis that, as a result of these changes, the UK now has higher education students who have very different backgrounds, differing expectations, and different social circumstances, all of which potentially relates to cultures of HE. It will also be shown that differences in student experience can lead to disparities in graduate outcomes for various student groups. Each student experience should be considered unique, and the context within which the student finds themselves will affect that student's engagement with the learning process. As Stuart, Lido, Morgan & May, (2009) state: 'the context for learning today is shaped by power, socio-economic and cultural position, with differing effects for diverse student groups' (12).

Field, (2005) elaborates this idea, and suggests a typology of formal and informal learners in the United Kingdom. This typology involved 4 types of learners: permanent learners who study throughout their lives for pleasure; traditional learners who seek formal course learning; instrumental learners whose reason for learning is to improve their career prospects, and non-learners who, for whatever reason do not enjoy learning and therefore avoid organised studying (although still learners as everyone is involved in informal learning). The type of learner a person 'is' was found to be related to their social and cultural position as well as their life experiences. This is an important issue because a person's approach to learning may impact on their experience, outcomes, and the way in which they engage with the university overall.

UK Undergraduate student numbers increased by 40% in the ten year period between 1994 and 2004 (Universities UK, 2005). This figure has led to a total of 2,306,105 students being enrolled at UK higher education institutions in the year 2007/8 (HESA 2009). The student experience, and how to assist this ever increasing number of higher education students, has been the subject of much research over recent years. There is substantial literature on different aspects of the undergraduate student experience for example, Tinto, (1988); Woodrow, (1998); Woodfield, (2002); Kantanis, (2002); Thomas, Quinn, Slack & Casey, (2002); Hatt, Baxter & Tate, (2005). Many researchers have highlighted the complexities of studying what is now a diverse body of individuals. In their description, Stuart, Lido, Morgan & May, (2009) explain the complexity particularly well:

The social context for learning is overlaid with different groups' processes of identification, access to power and access to those taken-for-granted elements of society that define where different identities are located within the broader social structure. It is therefore vital to consider students' educational life history and its interpretation, their social and cultural background, attitudes to learning,

the community context in which they live, their stage in personal development and the political and economic climate in which they are studying. (4)

Although there has been a dramatic increase in quantitative and qualitative studies on a range of specific barriers to a positive HE experience, there is arguably a gap in the literature in relation to longitudinal studies which chart the student experience over the full programme of study, and which examine the complex interplay of factors which may disadvantage (i.e. barriers), or advantage (i.e. benefits), differing students in their pursuit of a degree. For these reasons, this thesis seeks to bridge this gap by drawing on the experiences of a sample of sixty-one undergraduate students, from a small, research intensive university. The sample consists of twenty male and forty-one female students. There were thirty-six students aged twenty-one or over (and therefore classified as mature), whilst the remaining twenty-five were of 'traditional' entry age (i.e. under twenty-one) at the point of entry to HE. Therefore, this qualitative longitudinal study will address gaps in the existing literature, by offering an in-depth look at a relatively large sample of students, over the full course of their studies, highlighting the issues that influenced their experiences and outcomes at university.

2.2 UK Government policy initiatives

There have been a number of Government policy initiatives to improve the UK's industrial competitive global position (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998) and its position in the global market of higher education (DfES, 2003a). UK widening participation and lifelong learning policies are committed to increasing undergraduate student numbers and lifelong learning and educational progression opportunities (HEFCE, 2003).

In the year that the cohort of students in this study arrived at university (2001), HEFCE declared that widening participation to HE was a key priority. It was the first year that the funding per student was increased in over a decade. In 2001 the HE Funding Council dedicated £151 million over three years to assist institutions in focusing on widening participation in HE, for mature students as well as part-time students; those with learning difficulties and disabilities. In the HEFCE strategic plan 2001-06 it was stated that their priorities were to: 'encourage institutions to increase access, secure equal opportunities, support lifelong learning, and maximise achievement for all who can benefit from higher education' (25). They stated that they would assist institutions in making HE accessible and socially inclusive, as well as improving student retention and success by offering additional funds to institutions with high numbers of such

students. Lifelong learning featured in the plan, and the diverse needs of lifelong learners was recognised and highlighted for flexible provision. HE institutions were asked, for the first time, to provide the funding council with a strategic plan of how they intended to widen participation within their institution and locally within their region and they were told that their funding would be allocated appropriately. The aim of this was to make the HE student body more representative of the population as a whole and to increase collaboration regionally and between institutions to 'share and promote good practice of widening participation' as well as maximising student retention and achievement. In summary, the funding council stated that its key performance target was to raise participation by socio-economic groups that were under-represented in HE faster than the overall numbers of students (*ibid: 25-27*). It is important to note, however, that all of these statements are potentially in opposition to the Government's introduction of university fees which were introduced in 2006. Given the lower salary and higher unemployment rates of working class students, it would seem reasonable to suggest that they may find raising the funds for university harder than those from more affluent areas of society. This would then make increasing the numbers of working class students more difficult to attain.

Despite Government rhetoric and funding policies, it is the role of motivation (or lack of it) to study in certain groups of potential students that was discussed in detail by Gorard *et al*, (2006). The authors argued, in accordance with Field's (2005) non-learners mentioned above, that there were a large proportion of people who, even if all barriers were removed, would not want to study because they had no desire to do so. This they argued was the most important barrier of all and this lack of drive to study was the greatest threat for not reaching Government targets.

2.3 Demographic Impact Factors

2.3.1 Socio-Economic Status/Social Class

Socio-economic background is well recognised as impacting on students chances of entering higher education Gorard, Rees & Fevre, (1999); Gorard *et al*, (2006); Marshall, Swift & Roberts, (1997). Reay, David & Ball, (2005) conducted a study of 500 university entrants in the UK using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. They analysed the complex process by which students of differing social classes, genders, race and age enter higher education. They claimed that despite efforts to the contrary, disparities in success by class are increasing due to the expansion of the

system. To clarify, the previously elite HE system was designed for, and inhabited predominantly by, the middle classes. Despite major moves to open up this system to those with the academic abilities to succeed in HE, the system still appears to be biased in favour of the UK middle class Reay *et al*, (2005).

Many of other researchers have reported that pressures on students, linked to class, are negatively impacting on the students chances of successfully completing their academic career, Forsyth & Furlong, (2003); Quinn, (2004). Quinn's study aimed to uncover 'the meanings and implications of "voluntary" drop-out amongst working class students under thirty-five, and offer new perspectives and potential solutions' (60). The research involved eighty interviews across 4 partner institutions, with each institution also conducting a Jury Day with working class students who had left their studies prematurely. Within the study, Quinn highlights the research conducted by Yorke, (1999), which identified five significant reasons for student non-completion as: lack of preparation for HE; lack of commitment to their programme; financial hardship; incompatibility of student and institution and poor academic progress. Quinn, (2004) argued that, despite Yorke not explicitly stressing class issues, all the factors he discussed are more likely to adversely affect working class students, because of their lack of cultural and economic capital. She explained that 'clearly class does matter in drop-out because it constructs the material inequalities that make it more difficult to survive and prosper as a student' (59).

Coming from a working class background impacts upon a person's decision whether or not to study in higher education. Research shows that there are greater risks and more uncertain rewards for these students. Several researchers have discussed issues around under-represented groups of students developing a sense that they deserve to be students in HE as much as anyone else, and that they are not privileged to be there, Bamber & Tett, (2000) & (2001); Leathwood & O'Connell, (2003); Gorard *et al*, (2006). Archer & Leathwood, (2006) stated that working class students value the education system in more uncertain terms than those from more middle class backgrounds. She claims that this is because of the low-status institutions available to them, and the high risk of drop out.

According to Bowl, (2002) and Malach, (2003), some minority group students, including those from working class families, struggle to learn how to survive at university, whilst also having to juggle time and financial issues. Bowl, (2002) conducted a longitudinal participatory study with thirty two mature, non-traditional students, involved in a

community based project in central England. She concluded that issues surrounding non-traditional students, particularly those from working class backgrounds and/or those without a family history of HE, negatively impacted on students ability to study successfully at any level of the education system, but that these factors were particularly negative in terms of students intentions to study at HE level.

As would be expected given the findings above, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are under-represented in UK universities, with young people from families with a professional background being far more likely than their peers from non-professional backgrounds to enter higher education (DfES, 2003b). According to Archer *et al*, (2006) students with parents who work within the skilled manual, semi-skilled or unskilled occupations, make up only 25% of the UK higher education student body. Blasko, (2002) notes that having parents with higher level education, enhances a student's chances of obtaining a first class degree, and that student success is generally closely related to their socio-economic background. This indicates that parental background (for example SES), and parents life experiences, may affect their children's HE aspirations, intentions and engagement. This is clearly worrying given the previously mentioned Government targets to raise the participation of this particular group of potential students, which, despite some success, have a long way to go, before equality in access to, and success in, HE is achieved.

Many other researchers have highlighted the complex interplay of issues around working-class students attending university, such as their social, economic and cultural situations. These include their knowledge of higher education, Hutchings, (2006), the route from which they access university, Leathwood & Hutchings, (2006), funding issues, Jessop, Herberts & Solomon, (2005); Hutchings, (2006b), and concerns they feel about fitting in with the culture of the institution, Field, (2005); Archer & Leathwood, (2006). The complex relationship between these factors has sometimes been neglected but will be examined within the present research project by using an in-depth, longitudinal qualitative study. This will allow insight into a fuller picture of these non-traditional learners experiences, and the role that their socio-economic background has on their university experience and academic outcome.

2.3.2 First generation students

As seen in previous sections, parents experience can influence children's attitudes to HE and, in fact, not having a family history of higher education, has been identified as a factor in reducing a person's chances of entering and succeeding at this level of the

education system. Gorard *et al*, (1999), claim that almost half (46%) of the people in their study who were lifelong learners, had parents who were also lifelong learners, whilst more than half (61%) of those who were not participating in education, had parents who were also not participating. The authors claimed that this emphasised that patterns of participation in education often tend to run in families (25). It is worth noting here that Stuart, Lido, Morgan and May, (2009) make the distinction between student groups that are often wrongly grouped together. They argue that 'first-generation students in higher education, should not be conflated or confused with students from lower socio-economic groups' (16). This more recent piece of research sought to examine non-traditional students progression from undergraduate to postgraduate study. They conducted a large-scale survey of over one thousand UK students, as well as qualitative focus groups with students, some intending to continue to postgraduate study and others not. They found that demographic factors could also act as barriers to postgraduate study.

Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, (2004) developed a model of the intergenerational transmission of educational success, within which they uncovered several areas that were major influences on children's attainment in the education system. They found that the most important 'distal influences on children's attainments are parental education and income' (1). They concluded that:

the intergenerational transmission of educational success is a key element in equality of opportunity. There are substantial benefits of education that accrue to individuals and society in terms of what education enables parents to pass on to their children. (V)

Thomas & Quinn, (2007) reiterate this in their large scale study of ten European countries, and state that having parents who have successfully completed higher education is the most significant factor in raising aspiration for, and finding success in, higher education across geographic and cultural boundaries.

Interestingly, and in contrast to the above studies, Hatt, Baxter & Tate, (2005) argued that parents within their study were ill equipped to assist their children in succeeding in HE, even if they had previous experience within the system themselves. The authors conducted a longitudinal study of more than five hundred Year 10 school children in the South West of England, which involved over two hundred parents completing a questionnaire on both their academic and career history. The findings from these questionnaires highlighted that parents who had professional and managerial jobs,

developed their career before the 'massification' of the higher education system, and therefore may well lack the knowledge and skills developed within this system. The authors claimed that in this way, these parents are similar to those from lower socio-economic groups, and may be ill-equipped to assist their children with their higher education.

Other researchers have highlighted issues around first generation students needing to learn the 'rules' within HE, whilst also identifying other potential problems for these, students, such as money issues, lack of time and possible discriminatory practices Bowl, (2002); Malach, (2003). All students new to HE have to learn these rules, but it has been identified that first generation students lack some of the social capital that non-first generation students may well have inherited from their parents. Issues around socio-economic status and social class, as well as first generation students, are all clearly important factors when endeavouring to uncover what impacts on students experience, and ability to succeed within their studies. Therefore, this research project will highlight the factors which impact on the students cultural capital¹ and informal learning of the university culture, which potentially lead to a more negative learning experience and lower academic achievement.

2.3.3 Age

Whilst Blasko, (2002) stated that age of student on entry to higher education has no impact on the final degree classification obtained, Broecke & Nicolls, (2007) and Connor, Tyers, Modood & Hillage, (2004) disagree, and claim that age was found to impact on a student's likelihood of obtaining a good degree. In their Department for Education and Skills funded study, Connor *et al*, (2004) looked specifically at ethnic minority students. They monitored the importance of demographic variables which affect students participation, retention and progression in higher education. The longitudinal study comprised, amongst other smaller groups, a national survey of one thousand three hundred current students and one thousand prospective students. They concluded that advancing age on entry impacted negatively on students likelihood of obtaining an upper second class degree or above, and that they were more likely to leave their programme prematurely.

¹ Cultural capital refers to types of knowledge, skills, education, attitudes and expectations which may make the educational setting a comfortable, familiar place in which they feel they can succeed (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In accordance with this, age has been shown in government statistics to impact on attrition rates within higher education when all subjects are combined, with almost twice as many mature students dropping out by the end of the first year as their traditional age counterparts (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2004). However, research suggests this trend does not apply for students studying Social Work where, despite the large proportion of mature students, age does not relate to students chances of completing their programme, Moriarty & Murray, (2007); Hussein, Moriarty, Manthorpe & Huxley, (2007). It is worth noting here that there are contextual differences in social work programmes. These programmes have traditionally recruited only mature students so the common default eighteen year old traditional student does not apply here. Unlike the majority of undergraduate programmes at university, these students tend to be a more homogenous group in terms of age, who are studying for a vocational qualification, and are therefore not comparable to the majority student body.

Previous research has highlighted issues around mature students motivation to study, and whether there are age-related factors that lead to some students (generally mature students) being more vocationally focussed than their younger counterparts (Edwards, (1993); Woodley, Wagner, Slowey, Hamilton & Fulton, (1987); West, (1996). Bowl, (2001) found that mature students tend to use a 'pragmatic, goal-directed approach to higher education as a means to a better life' (155). She also stated that:

The 18 year-old student can build social and academic support networks around university life. For the non-traditional student financial responsibility, childcare, family and community expectations are central features of life, around which study must be fitted...(157)

It is interesting that despite their focused reasons for studying, older students tend to struggle to complete their programmes. These mixed findings reflect the complex and interesting context within which my research took place.

In contrast to the studies above, stating that advanced age can have a negative effect on students ability to study, some researchers have found that mature students perform well. Smith & Naylor, (2001) suggest that there is a strong relationship between age and gender, and academic success. Their study split students into 4 age groups at the time of their graduation. Analyses of their data concluded that women over the age of thirty-four, were most likely to obtain a good degree, and the least likely to fail their degree. For the male group, the most likely to obtain a good degree and least likely to fail were those aged between twenty-eight and thirty-three. The study

also argued that the gender differential in attainment (in favour of women), was more pronounced when students were under the age of twenty-four. Therefore it is important not to isolate factors such as age, but to also look at the interplay of various other demographic factors such as gender.

Richardson & Woodley, (2003) analysed a national database of all students in HE in the UK in 1995-96, to examine the roles of age and gender on academic attainment. Students were split into 7 age bands to allow a thorough investigation of age as a determinant of academic success. Those aged under twenty-one were most likely to obtain a good degree², but these were closely followed by those between the ages of twenty-six and fifty. The authors found that only after the age of fifty was it likely that students would obtain a lower classification than those between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five. Findings from these research papers, around the blurring of age categories, which state that there is no simple pre-twenty-one and post-twenty-one split for students are interesting, and have influenced discussion around the issue of age in the data presentation Chapters later in this thesis. It appears from the literature reviewed, that issues of age, attainment and completion are often interconnected. A fruitful area for future research would be to uncover both the benefits and disadvantages of advanced age students ability to succeed with their studies. Issues around age of student, and how this is linked to SES and gender of students, will be examined within this thesis. For example, the experience of lower SES traditional male student, versus that of the high SES mature female student.

Another interesting area around the issue of age and student success, is that of classroom participation. Leathwood & O'Connell, (2003) and Redmond, (2003) both argue that mature students, and particularly female mature students, express concerns over their academic ability, and have serious confidence issues in relation to classroom participation. Howard, Clark & Short, (1996) and Howard & Henney, (1998) focused primarily on age as a determinant of student participation in the seminar room. They claim that over half the students observed did not participate at all in the discussions, and that more women than men joined the debates at a rate of 45.7% to 37.9%. In the Howard *et al*, (1996) study, it is stated that both mature male, and mature female students verbally contributed to classroom discussion more than their younger peers, and that they did so at almost twice the rate of the younger group. They also claim that mature males participated far more than their mature female peers. All the participants

² A good degree is classified as a first class degree or a 2:1.

of the study were asked to explain their lack of participation in class; both traditional and non-traditional entry age students generally gave similar responses. Both groups reported approximately the same number of students having not done the essential reading for the lesson. The most common explanations given by women as their key reason for not engaging verbally with the rest of the group were lack of subject knowledge and their knowledge not being well enough formulated. According to Howard *et al*, (1996), traditional age participants tended to be more concerned with their academic image and grades, whilst mature students were more concerned with class size. This indicates that age impacts on motivation to study and engagement with learning or ease of contributing once in HE.

Tett, (2004) also discussed the interplay of age and academic confidence. Within the study it was discovered that older students felt themselves to be less academically able than their younger counterparts. Conversely, Carney-Crompton & Tan, (2002) reported no difference between the young and older students in anxiety levels around academic issues in their study. Despite mixed findings in this area, it is clear that age is a key demographic factor affecting the student experience. Furthermore, there is a need for more research, to examine the ways in which age is interlinked with other key variables outlined in this literature, including those of being a first generation student and socio-economic status. This thesis will address these issues within the data presentation Chapters, and offer insights on the role of age and its link to other demographic factors in the discussion chapter.

2.3.4 Gender

Gender and age are closely linked in terms of their role on students experience in HE. The topic of gender, and the impact it has on students experience, have been highlighted in a range of media settings over a long period of time. However women have only constituted a large proportion of HE students for a relatively short period. According to HESA (2007), women made up 57% of graduates in 2005-06; this statistic has consistently risen since 1958 when female students were only 30% of the entire student body. They overtook men in 1992/3, and have remained the majority since then. Smith & Naylor, (2001) Richardson & Woodley, (2003) and Richardson, (2008b) all note that the last fifty years has seen a marked shift in the proportion of female graduates. They also note that in latter years, women have overtaken their male peers in obtaining good degrees.

Smith & Naylor, (2001) found that there was a noticeable difference in attainment in favour of women at degree level. Within their analyses, 53% of women obtained a good degree, whereas the figure was 45% for men. In addition, whilst 15% of men failed to complete their degree programme, only 11% of women did. This indicates that gender may be a key factor in HE progression and attainment.

Richardson & Woodley's (2003) study combined the variables of age and gender, and showed that both genders were similar across the seven age bands, with the highest proportion of good degrees being obtained by the youngest group and those between the ages of thirty-one and forty. This again highlights the interplay of age and gender, which is the primary focus of the present research project.

Woodfield & Earl-Novell (2006) analysed a national data set from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for all UK domiciled students completing an honours degree between the years 1994/5 and 2001/2. The data was analysed to uncover differences in representation and performance between male and female students in first class degree attainment across the Arts and Sciences, thus assessing the variable of programme of study. They claim that although men perform less well overall within the higher education system, they are still more likely to obtain a first-class honours degree, and that this is likely to be due to the over-representation of male students in the 'first-rich' science subjects, Woodfield & Earl-Novell, (2006). Richardson, (2008b) concurred, he stated that when the effects of demographic (e.g. SES) and institutional variables are statistically controlled, women are more likely than men to achieve a first-class honours degree. This indicates that gender differences vary according to programme of study to some extent.

Within the HE context itself, many studies have been conducted to assess Hall & Sandler's (1982) idea that there is a 'chilly climate' for women in the college classroom. This theory is based around the idea that the HE system is traditionally designed for, and dominated by, men. The idea claims that faculty members, and male students, often inadvertently treat female students differently than their male counterparts. This, they argue, leads to women students being less assertive, and less likely to participate in classroom discussions than male students, because of a sense that the classroom environment is less amenable to them and their academic skills. Hall & Sandler note:

Subtle biases in the way teachers behave towards students may seem so "normal" that the particular behaviours which express them often go unnoticed.

Nevertheless, these patterns, by which women students are either singled out or ignored because of their sex, may leave women students feeling less confident than their male classmates about their abilities and their place in the college community. (2)

It is further argued that this situation will negatively impact on female students attainment:

A chilling classroom climate puts women students at a significant educational disadvantage. Overtly disparaging remarks about women, as well as more subtle differential behaviours, can have a critical and lasting effect. When they occur frequently – especially when they involve ‘gatekeepers’ who teach required courses, act as advisors, or serve as chairs of departments – such behaviours can have a profound negative impact on women’s academic and career development. (3)

The findings of other studies have been ambiguous. Karp & Yoels, (1974); Constantinople, Cornelius & Gray, (1988); Crawford & Macleod’s, (1990), and Fassinger, (1995) all confirmed a ‘chilly climate’ for women in the college classroom, and claimed that male undergraduates were over-represented in terms of student-tutor interactions. Karp & Yeols, (1976) observational data implied that female students were less vocally active in classroom discussion than male members of the group, and that the gender of the class tutor had a significant effect on classroom dynamics. Further gender differences in the classroom experience will be addressed below. However, it seems that gender does appear to affect the way in which teaching and learning are experienced and interpreted by students. Therefore, this project aims to highlight differences in this area, and uncover the underlying mechanism behind how these differences impact on student experience, and academic outcomes over time.

Boersma, Gay, Jones, Morrison & Remick (1981); Heller, Puff & Mills, (1985); Crawford & Macleod’s (1990); and Cornelius, Gray & Constantinople, (1990), all reported no student gender differentials in class participation. However, Boersma, (1981) and his colleagues observed student-teacher interactions in fifty classes, and concluded, similar to Karp & Yeols, (1976), that the gender of the tutor played an important role in participatory rates of students within the group, with male students being more vocal within class if the group was led by a female tutor. Auster & MacRone, (1994) claimed that the tutor’s behaviour towards students verbal participation, was more important than the gender of the tutor. However, research by Earl Novell, (2001) showed that the gender of the student, and the discipline studied, were significant determinants of level of participation in the seminar room, irrespective of the gender of the tutor.

It is therefore worth noting, that there is some disparity between research papers, as to whether there is a link between age and gender, and on the nature of the link between age and gender, on students performance and attainment within HE. These may be due to cross cultural differences (i.e. research in the UK vs research in the USA), or other sample demographics, such as year of study, and the complex interplay of issues such as age, gender, SES etc. Therefore the factors of age and gender, and links between the two, are in need of more in-depth, longitudinal study such as this research project.

2.4 Obstacles to success in HE

Several areas that are known to be problematic for students success within the HE system are highlighted in the literature. These include the issue of finance, or lack of finance; the need to participate in paid work; lack of friendships within the educational setting, and having people who are considered as dependents. Each of these topics is discussed below. The section concludes with a summary, highlighting the complex interplay of these issues for many students, and showing that for some students, often those who are underrepresented in HE, these factors can complicate studying, and have a negative impact on student success.

2.4.1 Finance

Building on the demographic factors influencing the student experience discussed above, is the issue of finance, and the potential impact this plays on students experience of HE. Several recent explanations for student success and failure in HE, include the importance of financial pressures, Bamber & Tett, (2000), CHERI, (2005); Mori, (2005). McGivney, (1992) described the financial cost of learning as the most obvious obstacle that potential students face. Hand, Gambles & Cooper, (1994) highlighted the indirect financial pressures on students, including childcare, transport and the loss of potential income. It is worth noting here that full-time students in England are not eligible for benefits (such as income support), as in order to comply with the rules, an individual must be available to take up any job offered to them immediately. This research project will review the implications of this, and endeavour to uncover if this leads certain students to be more or less likely to undertake paid work, and the consequences of this on their ability to study.

Over recent years there have been many changes to UK student support arrangements, and the introduction of fees in 1998 has led to an increase in student

debt (Callender, 2003)³. Gorard & Taylor, (2001) agree, and claim that changes to student support arrangements has led to an increase in the number of students in debt, and that this situation is often worse for mature students. According to Connor, (2001), lower socio-economic groups are more concerned about the expense of higher education, and having higher levels of debt than higher social classes. Ozga & Sukhnandan, (1998) argued that students from the two lowest socio-economic groups, were more likely to withdraw due to financial difficulties, than students from the top two social groups.

Thomas, (2002) reviewed literature around issues of financial hardship and paid employment, and concluded that financial hardship has a significant impact on student retention and withdrawal. She also stated that 'financial issues tend to be exacerbated for students from non-traditional backgrounds'. (438) Interestingly, in Stuart *et al*, (2008b) research, they found that the cost of study was not a major factor for students from low socio-economic groups, in terms of their intentions towards postgraduate study. In a later large-scale quantitative study, Stuart *et al*, (2009) concluded that actual debt in terms of student loans, credit cards, debt etc., appeared not to impact upon postgraduate intentions to study, but that it was the worry associated with debt that negatively impacted on working class students intentions to study at postgraduate level.

Jessop *et al*, (2005) described similar findings on a study they conducted of almost two hundred British and Finnish students, to examine students financial circumstances, and how these correlated with their physical and mental health. The study also highlighted that increased concern over financial debt, directly correlated with poor mental and physical health. Factors such as smoking and drinking behaviour, as well as paid employment during term time were assessed. None of these significantly mediated the relationship between financial concern and ill health. Therefore, this study illustrates that, if not actual debt then debt worry, has a significant negative impact on students experience, as well as on their well-being. It can be seen from the research above, that issues around student finance and financial concern, are areas in need of further examination. Therefore it is important to assess students attitudes to debt, and how this may affect their studies over the course of their degree, as well as their actual debt.

³ The introduction of variable fees in 2004 has led to even further student debt but this is not pertinent to this study as the students were all enrolled between 2001 and 2004 .

2.4.2 Paid Work

If students are experiencing financial difficulties, whether real debt or concerns about debt, it is likely that they will make attempts at alleviating these concerns, and participate in some form of paid employment. Within her study, Little, (2006) claims that many students gave financial reasons for entering paid employment, and that they found the demands of this negatively impacted on their ability to study. She also claimed that certain groups of students reported an increased need to enter employment, including older students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and stated that the competing demands on these students time had serious implications for their academic attainment. There is some ambiguity around paid employment, and its effect on students ability to maximise their academic outcomes. Light, (2001) claims that some paid work can be beneficial, as it allows students to collect experiences not offered with their studies, and this can be an advantage to them on entering the workforce. Contrary to this, there are researchers who claim that term-time paid work has a negative impact on degree attainment, Purcell, Elias, Davies & Wilton, (2005). Others have focused on the issues around part-time work and its effect, particularly on working-class and mature students experiences of higher education, Blasko, (2002); Brennan & Shah, (2003). It is worth noting that the amount of hours a student spends in paid work, impacts on their ability to successfully carry out their studies. This may be due to potential lack of time to do the necessary preparation, and perhaps attend classes. Within the institution of the present study, fifteen hours per week in paid work was considered to be the maximum amount for a full-time student, although this figure varies between institutions.

There is also research that claims that paid employment impacts on students abilities to enjoy the social side of university life, and the potential impact this has on student retention. In their study Cooke, Barkham, Audin, Bradley & Davy, (2004) claimed that increased paid employment whilst studying, meant that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who were more likely to need such employment, had less time to participate in clubs and societies, as well as general social activities, than those students from more middle class backgrounds. A recent study by Stuart *et al*, (2009) complicates the issues concerning SES and paid work, as in this study, the authors argue that paid work was positively linked to HE experience for some students. They claim that some students can juggle study, paid work and social activities. They refer to them as 'joiners who can do it all' (6). What they also argue is that lower SES students in particular, were engaged in less student activities, conducted more paid work, and were likely to say that their work and activities negatively impacted on their student

experience. It seems clear from these conflicting studies, that the issues related to paid work and social class, are complex, and in need of further research, to explore both the positive and negative impacts of paid work, as well as the inter-relationship with other factors.

2.4.3 Friendships

One explanation for success and failure of students within higher education, that has drawn some attention, is the importance of friendships (Thomas, (2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, (2005); Stuart, (2006). Stuart *et al.*, (2009), argue that strong, extensive social network links, can help students to 'exchange skills, knowledge and attitudes, that in turn allow them to tap in to other benefits, such as enjoying new perspectives and extending friendships' (18). In her earlier work, Stuart, (2006) argued that having close links with peers at university, assisted first generation higher education students in learning how to navigate the higher education system, and ensuring their chances of success within the institution. She goes on to say that these networks of friendships are a form of social capital than can impact on the effect certain privileged groups have, in terms of cultural and economic capital. Although some may argue with the underlying mechanism, it remains that friendships are emerging as a significant factor for student success.

Psychological theories around a sense of belonging and fitting in are relevant here. Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, (1979) is a framework that can be used to aid understanding of both the psychological and sociological impacts of students sense of in-group identity and feelings of belonging at university. SIT states that humans need to belong to groups, and derive part of their personal identity from these groups. A natural outcome of this may be the need to also define an out-group. SIT also describes how feelings of insecurity and 'identity-threat' may drive the need to reinforce self-esteem, via a positive and strong 'in-group identification'. According to Stuart *et al.*, (2009), 'developing a strong and positive affiliation with one's university and fellow peers is key for producing a positive sense-of-self and increased self-esteem' (2). Holley & Dobson, (2008), highlight that some non-traditional students initially find university 'alienating, impersonal and unsupportive' (1). The authors' research shows how the use of online technologies and social events, helped a group of one thousand first year students in two geographic locations, settle into university. Their sample was asked to complete online course questionnaires, reflective journals, and to use text messages to facilitate their discussion with other participants in an educational visit off-campus. The study concludes that the development of early engagement in university

life and friendship groups, helped facilitate positive initial experiences. Tinto, (1997) also suggested that students require a high level of interaction with both staff and their fellow students to successfully complete their studies.

Aleman, (1997) discussed the educative role of female friendships. Aleman undertook a longitudinal study involving forty-four traditional age undergraduate students in Midwest America, who participated in a range of investigative processes, including interviews and short questionnaires. The role of female friendships for these students was shown to be invaluable, in assisting students to make sense of their educational setting, and to maximise their performance within what they consider to be a hostile environment. She stated that 'female friendship for the college women in this study is an educational site in which "performance" abandons its gendered passivity' (142). She goes on to say that classroom participation 'is not an opportunity to develop self, voice and mind as a totality' (142), but that the safe and non-judgemental friendships they had with female peers, allowed them to explore and develop ideas critically, without the need for caution they described in classroom settings. It becomes clear therefore, that female students compound the notion of the importance of friendships for HE success.

According to several other researchers, association with fellow students engenders feelings of peer support and social capital (Coleman, (1988); Field, (2005); Stuart, (2006). This refers to an array of social links and networks as a resource which helps a person to advance their interests by co-operating with others. Worchel & Austin, (1986) identified the many benefits of peer support and in-group identification, whilst more recently Field, (2003) claimed that strong social networks and educational achievement were mutually reinforcing.

Thomas, (2002) and Brown, (2000) both identified that minority or marginalised groups place high importance on positive in-group identification. Whilst Brown, (2000) focused on ethnic minority groups, Thomas, (2002) talked about an array of non-traditional students, and claimed that these student groups place importance on fitting in academically, socially and culturally, and that these needs must be met in order for the students to progress and succeed at university. She found that friendship networks played a pivotal role in increasing feelings of belonging, as did activities, and living arrangements.

The benefits of friendships for both academic and social purposes are highlighted above. It is clear that the role of friendships is a diverse and interesting subject for

further research. Issues around the impact of student friendships, and a sense of belonging and right to be within an institution, also need further investigation. The effect of student friendships on attrition rates and academic success, and the impact of age and gender on these friendships, will be highlighted within this thesis.

2.4.4 Dependents⁴

As discussed above, time constraints can have a negative impact on students ability to perform at university. One area that can substantially reduce the amount of time available to study, is that of dependents, or family commitments and responsibilities. An array of research is available in this area (for example, Thompson, (1983); Smithers & Griffin, (1986); Clark & Rieker, (1986); McIntish *et al*, (1994). Smithers & Griffin, (1986) point out that family commitment, and the time and energy involved in being a principal member of a family unit, may distract from a students ability to study. The issue of dependents appears to be inherently linked to issues of age and gender. Tett, (2000) claimed that mature female students reported being most likely to express concerns about juggling their home lives and their student lives, whereas the men in his study appeared to be better able to make clear distinctions between their personal and academic lives. Similarly Smithers & Griffin, (1986) note, that within their study, the amount of concern shown by their participants regarding family commitments, varies dramatically between male and female subjects. They state that:

women, in particular, seem quite frequently to have to continue to cope with housekeeping and school-age families – fitting in studies around household chores.....mature students frequently had to make do with the kitchen table or a desk in the bedroom, and for those with young children, time for study could be restricted to after the children had gone to bed, with consequent very late hours. The necessity for parents to be home to meet young school-age children could also mean that some mature students could not take advantage of special facilities provided by some university libraries for overnight loans for books in demand...Men frequently said that they stayed on at university to study because it was difficult to do so at home with the children; women said that they could not use the study facilities because they had to be at home for the children. (ibid: 264)

Bowl (2001) and UCAS, (2002), note that mature students, within their studies, showed concern over what they perceived to be a lack of childcare amongst other things. They also expressed dismay at how higher education institutions appear to be geared towards traditional students who do not have childcare responsibilities. Bowl, (2001), (2002) goes on to discuss how mature female students have to develop strategies to balance both their studies and their family commitments. Therefore these

⁴ Within this context the term dependent refers to anyone for whom a participant of the study has primary responsibility, this might be a child, partner or parent .

predominantly female factors may impact on this demographic group in a significantly stronger (and perhaps negative) way. Linked to this, is the Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett & Slack, (2006) argument, that studying in HE involves an adjustment in lifestyle that is particularly problematic for those with partners and/or dependents. They highlight that being in a long-term relationship can dramatically reduce the time available to women to study, and that this is also more problematic for women than men. In their review of the literature on barriers to HE, they state that time constraints, alongside other potential barriers such as dependents, and/or financial considerations, may help to explain patterns of participation for these students.

Ozga & Sukhnandan, (1998) stated that family commitments were key determinants of non-completion amongst mature students. Bowl, (2001) agrees, and claimed that in her qualitative study of non-traditional students, she found that the problems faced by students with dependents were mostly practical, in terms of time constraints. She claimed that:

the picture emerged of women running to keep up with all the demands on their lives, but determined to do so. Managing tight timetables meant that participants were aware that they could not give as much time to their studies as they would like. They had to develop strategies for coping with the work without neglecting family responsibilities. This inevitably involved skimping: reading only what was essential to pass the assignment and snatching time to study wherever they could. Other than attending lectures, participants on full-time courses were not able to spend time at university learning informally, researching around their subject or attending tutorials. (126)

An earlier study by Clark & Rieker, (1986), claims that female students reported more difficulties with their romantic partner, shortage of time and meeting deadlines, than the male participants in their study. Similarly McIntosh, Reifman, Keywell & Ellsworth, (1994), report that women in general (i.e. not necessarily mature), experience greater levels of stress and anxiety than men in many areas of academic life, notably because of external commitments to their partners and family. The authors claim that gender role expectations, together with the increased number of females who have to combine family life with work and/or study, has led to them having increasingly high levels of stress. In contrast, it is claimed that men have not added family commitments to their existing work and/or study obligations. The authors offer many possible explanations for this. It may be because they are not partners or fathers, or because they have the opportunity and/or capability to ignore these factors in their lives, as the primary responsibility for childcare still falls on the mothers of the children. They also state that women report slightly higher levels of academic pressures and frustration, and

particularly high levels of strain in relation to personal time and relationships with partners, than their male counterparts. Therefore it is particularly important to explore these feelings of responsibility, conflict and negative emotions for this demographic group.

In his study, Yorke, (1999) described differences between male and female students relating to attrition rates. Women reported prematurely leaving university because of the strain on them due to dependents, whilst the men gave reasons such as lack of money, or poor course choice. Research by Winn, (2002) looked at mature students, and highlighted differences between students with dependent commitments who managed to successfully find time for their studies, and those who struggled to find time. Those who did not manage to eke out time to study, reported the whole process as fraught with difficulties, whilst those who did find sufficient time, did so at the expense of their family and social lives, and described the support of their partner as essential in this process.

Similarly, in their US study of sixteen graduate students, Stratton, Mielke, Kirshenbaum, Goodrich & McRae, (2006) highlight the difficulties expressed by their sample around striking a work-life balance when older students have conflicting commitments. Participants described having to wear many 'hats', and expressed difficulties in maintaining any kind of balance in their lives, or having the time to undertake leisure activities that help to alleviate problems related to time constraints. The authors argue that feeling that there is a level of balance in a person's life, along with good social support and high levels of optimism, are invaluable in making students educational experience rewarding and satisfying. These factors are arguably then necessary for successful completion of their studies.

Brennan & Osbourne, (2008) researched the successful 'traditional' student experience. According to them, this experience involves, amongst other things, living on campus, studying full-time and being under the age of twenty-one. However they also claim that they:

heard strong arguments in favour of other types of experience, in particular in terms of the learning which occurred from having to juggle many competing commitments and which could result in the development of both organisational and social competences. (188)

This contradicts the general consensus, described above, that having multiple commitments impacts negatively on the student experience. It is interesting that the role of external commitments and dependents, is considered largely, although not exclusively, in relation to women and older students.

In support of the gender differences highlighted above, Lee & Waite, (2005) reported that traditional ideologies still restrict working mothers, because of housework and childcare responsibilities still tending to be viewed as theirs. This, they argue, leads to limited time to manage their multiple roles, which in turn, leads to mothers experiencing pressure, anxiety and depression. The authors recognise that men are increasing the amount of housework they undertake, but that women still take responsibility for, and conduct, the vast majority. It is therefore clear that, despite shifts in gender roles, an inequality remains in the 'type of work' conducted within the home by men and women in western societies, and that this appears to differently affect working women. It appears that the issue of balancing responsibilities to partners, family, and studying, may impact negatively on students mental health and their ability to study. It can be seen from the contradictory research above, that this is an area in need of further examination. Therefore, this thesis will consider the role of commitments, either in terms of dependents, or family commitments of some other form, and how these issues impact on students with a diverse range of demographic profiles.

2.5 Conclusion

To conclude this Chapter, it seems clear that all of the factors discussed above can impact on a student's ability to successfully complete their academic studies. It also seems clear that there are demographic differences that can impact on the student's experience at university. These factors and differences make this a complex arena to attempt to disentangle and understand. With the relative success of widening participation, and the massification of the HE system in the UK generally, students are arguably becoming an increasingly diverse group, from a range of backgrounds, abilities and educational needs. The infrastructure of institutions within the UK, has been struggling to level the playing field for this varied group of individuals with, some might argue, limited success. As Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, (2008) put it:

For all students studying is challenging, angst-ridden work, but for some it is made easier than for others. Moreover, getting students in and leaving them to it does not work for those who have no prior experience of university. Higher

education not only needs to address the widening of access to university but it needs to get to grips with what goes on inside the hallowed grounds. (176)

Many of the studies discussed here use snapshot data from relatively short term projects, many of them also highlight just one issue such as gender or age, but there is much less research that highlights students experiences at university, that is comprehensive in considering both gender and age, and also longitudinal in design. This research project seeks to contribute to this research gap.

Chapter 3

Methods

3.1 Introduction

This Chapter reiterates the aims and objectives of the research project. It then outlines how the research was approached, the methods used, ethical issues raised by the project, and the practicalities and mechanics of the research process. Justification of the methods chosen is provided, along with a comprehensive discussion of their strengths and weaknesses, including those anticipated, and those discovered throughout the project. The methodology for this study was underpinned by the idea of exploration rather than causal analysis. Therefore it utilised an inductive rather than deductive approach. Throughout the Chapter a reflexive evaluation of the research process and experience of conducting the research is provided.

3.2 The research

The research project aims to highlight how the student experience differs according to socio-demographic factors such as age and gender, and what the impact in terms of academic performance and outcomes are. In doing so, the research will identify the key factors which influence students experience of university; explore differences in the experiences of these factors according to the socio-demographic characteristic of age and gender; examine changes in the student experience over the lifespan of the degree; assess the relationship between any observed differences in students' experience and academic performance and outcomes; and consider the implications of the findings for higher education policy and practice.

This DPhil thesis stems from an ESRC funded project entitled 'Student Perceptions of the First Year Experience of University' (R000 22 3432), on which I was the research assistant. Data collected throughout the first year was collected as part of an ESRC project. At the end of the year the decision was taken to continue with a sub-sample from the project as the basis of this Doctorate. The ESRC project gathered information from students about their experiences throughout their first year via regular email prompts. Although participants in the study were only in their first year of student life, the project highlighted many issues and areas of concern. These included students lack of confidence about their academic abilities, and the impact of external

commitments on their experience of university and their ability to study. Although there were broad similarities between all students, it was clear that the life of students of twenty-one and over was in some ways distinct from that of the majority student body that were under the age of twenty-one. As the First Year project progressed, a literature review around the student experience was conducted. This revealed that, despite the existence of a substantial body of research in the area of both age, Richardson, (1994); West, (1996); Hayes & King, (1997); Crossan, Field, Gallagher & Merrill, (2003) and gender, Crawford & MacLeod, (1990); Francis, (2000); Parr, (2000) differences, there was little literature combining both age and gender as intersecting variables, Sadler-Smith, (1996); Reay, David & Ball, (2003). There was a large amount of research focusing on how students demographic characteristics impacted on the student experience and degree outcomes, Reay, David & Ball, (2001); Thomas, (2002); Wakeling, (2005); HEFCE, (2005/03) but several gaps in the literature were identified.

As the initial findings from the First Year project illustrated, experiences differed according to age and gender during the first year at university. It therefore seemed of theoretical and practical interest, that the project was continued to include the full, 3-year experience of the sample, in order to fully explore these differences across the full student lifespan, thus this project was developed.

As a result of the findings illustrating the gaps in the research, this thesis tracked student experiences as well as identifying significant events that took place over the three year period of the students undergraduate degrees, and in doing so develop a deeper understanding of the factors, that (positively or negatively) shape the students' experience. It further aims to offer a comparative view of the student experience for traditional and non-traditional students, as well as highlighting any gender disparities between the groups.

The age of a student is known to be a key factor in determining commitment to studies, attendance in class and submission rates of both assessed and non-assessed coursework, Richardson, (1994); Richardson & Woodley, (2003); Winn, (2002). Gender is also reported to impact on these outcomes, as well as on academic ability and willingness to participate in class due to feelings of 'otherness' or perceptions of a 'chilly climate' in the classroom, Karp & Yoels, (1974); Heller *et al*, (1985); Crawford & MacLeod, (1990). Building on this literature about the effects of age and gender, this project sought to highlight the interactive effects of these demographic variables. As

will now be discussed, this research project pursued this objective using a subjective participant-led approach, and qualitative email data collection methods.

3.3 Methodological considerations

3.3.1 Objective vs Subjective data collection

A traditional thesis format demands that data be situated as 'knowledge', however, within this project the data was viewed as 'text', Ball, (1994), Olesen, (2000), MacLure, (2003), meaning that the email transcripts were not seen as a way in to the 'reality' of the experience of these students, but were rather a representation, created in a particular situation and at a particular point in time. The data contained narratives co-authored by myself (my identity and ideological commitments impacted on the research process), and a diverse collection of research participants. Further, the narratives were self-consciously produced in a particular space and time, in response to particular questions and in the context of a particular interaction.

3.3.2 Traditional view

Traditionally, within the field of Sociology, interviewers attempt to remain as objective as possible to reduce the risk of interviewer bias, Silverman, (2004). However, the limitations and inadequacies of this type of research have been extensively debated within the fields of Sociology, Social Psychology, Anthropology and Philosophy (for an overview of these debates see: May, 2001). The importance of objectivity and value-freedom in the research process has been strongly emphasised by those who have sought to establish Sociology as a scientific discipline, Morrison, (2006). However, differences between the social and natural worlds have been highlighted by those calling for alternative approaches to their analysis. Above all, it is argued, sociologists are not concerned with pre-given natural objects, but with a social world constituted of meaningful action undertaken by reflexive human beings. Making sense of this world requires interpretation and evaluation, rather than a fixed standard of objective inquiry, Benton, (1978); Stanley & Wise, (1990); Bryman, (2004). It is further argued that the neutrality that an objective approach requires, also undermines social critique, with the sociologist left observing inequalities and injustices, rather than being able to challenge them, Gouldner, (1968); Becker, (1967); Code, (1996).

3.3.3 Feminist Approach

Many feminists have joined this debate, in arguing particularly against the traditional 'scientific' approach to sociological research, suggesting that in order to move away from a hierarchical research process, scholars should take a more subjective and non-hierarchical stance, Oakley, (1981); Stanley & Wise, (1983); May, (1995). Research *should* therefore aim to be a more broadly based social relationship. It is argued that objectivity in social research is an unachievable goal, which means that researchers need to make the opportunity to build an effective rapport with participants, albeit whilst also remaining distant and emotionally uninvolved, Oakley (1981); Stanley & Wise (1983); May, (1995).

Approaches such as participatory research would argue that researchers not only should, but ethically must, engage in creating evidence that actively involves those being studied, for example Gouldner, (1973); Oakley, (2000); Humphries, (2003). From this perspective, the emphasis of any research project should be on research participants and researchers collaborating, sharing the decision making process, and drawing on each others knowledge and experiences.

3.3.4 Subjective approach

A subjective approach informed this research project. Every attempt was made to ensure the research was robust and systematic, whilst acknowledging it is necessarily subjective in nature. The thoughts and responses from participants were invaluable in terms of steering the research throughout. As stated in the literature review Chapter, the impetus for this research stemmed from first-hand experience as a mature, female, single parent student. A traditional sociological perspective might hold that this personal experience forms part of the lens of exploration, making objectivity difficult. Conversely, many perspectives critique the notion of objectivity in relation to subject selection, arguing instead that the decision to study a specific topic is inherently subjective. For example, Stanley & Wise, (1983) state that:

...it is inevitable that the researcher's own experiences and consciousness will be involved in the research process as much as they are in life...The kind of person we are, and how we experience the research, all have a crucial impact on what we see, what we do, and how we interpret and construct what is going on. (50)

A commitment to a subjective, participative approach does not mean that the research was not methodologically robust. As will be discussed in more detail, the sampling

procedures, selection of methods and application of these tools were undertaken with academic rigor. The qualitative methods selected were appropriate to this research, and facilitated the collection of rich, personal in-depth data from the students who participated. Nevertheless, information about me, and my knowledge of the workings of the university, was often shared with participants throughout the project, in order to build a rapport, to demonstrate equality and reciprocity, and with the intention of making involvement in the project beneficial to participants.

Many responses received from participants contained extremely personal feelings and experiences, as well as the expected information about the students' university experience. From the outset, it was clear that many participants were fully and personally engaged with the project, and were spending considerable time replying in order to give detailed insight into their experience. Given this, a decision was taken at the start of the second term to make the time to reply to each email individually. This was not taken in to consideration at the outset of the project but developed as the project progressed. It was done to encourage the students continued involvement in the project, keeping the project response rate high and the attrition rate reasonably low.

Towards the end of the first year of the project, I undertook the role of Student Advisor⁵ at the university where this research took place. The job entailed learning about the facilities available to support students, including welfare services available within the university, the local towns and city itself. There were a number of Student Advisors within each of the schools, who students could make an appointment to see at any time. Students who present with concerns are directed to the professional help and advice they need. In this role, a great deal of knowledge about the problems facing students at the university, and the ways in which these can be addressed and remedied, was accumulated. Where appropriate, this knowledge was shared with students participating in the research project, in an attempt to give them the same support and advice students received at other times. Details about the student loan company, and the process of applying for financial support from the University Access Fund, were particularly useful to many of the participants, as was information about study skills, advice about the student peer mentoring scheme within the university, and academic contacts within the different schools. Indeed, many hours were spent 'conversing' with students who felt that their financial difficulties were too much to bear,

⁵ Student Advisors were locally based members of non-academic staff available to all students in the school for academic advice and guidance and to facilitate access to internal and external support services.

or that they were not academically capable of getting a degree. Through this continued and often personal communication with students, both an emotional engagement with, and sense of personal responsibility towards them developed.

3.4 Email as a research tool

The use of the Internet for social research was a relatively new development, and at the outset of this project, on-line research was almost exclusively for market research purposes, Markham, (1998). With the growing interest in Internet-based social research, some concerns have been expressed about the use of it as a reliable research tool, Fox, Murray & Warm, (2003); Knobel, (2003); Lanksheer, (2003).

3.4.1 Potential benefits

(i) Computer mediated communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers many advantages in terms of resource effectiveness, and the many benefits of researching on-line are well documented, for example, Schmidt, (1997; Murray & Sixsmith, (1998); Hewson, Yule, Laurent & Vogel, (2003); Fox *et al*, (2003). This research method is a cost, and time, efficient way of collecting information, Mann & Stewart, (2000): 71). Within this thesis, email also offered the opportunity to collect interview data longitudinally from a wide range of students at the university, provided ready transcribed data, enabled participants to spend time responding to questions, rather than having to give an immediate answer, and contributed to the maintenance of a large response rate. It also allowed data to be collected without the usual time and monetary cost of face-to-face interviews (ibid: 21). Mann & Stewart describe email as a research tool as 'participant friendly...convenient, quite quick...and free', (ibid: 24) which is in line with the reported experiences of participants in this research project. Enabling students to answer from home or at a time that suited them was particularly beneficial to participants within the project, many of whom had extensive external commitments. Other methods of qualitative data collection (such as diary research) could also have been utilised within this project. However, due to the many benefits of using email (as outlined above) this method of data collection has proven itself to be as trustworthy as any other.

(ii) Quality of email data

A key benefit of email data collection for researchers, over other more traditional methods, is that the data is received 'untouched'. Everything is recorded as it was received, and no interpretation of the information has taken place. Thus, nothing is lost

in the recording or transcribing process, although clearly the coding process introduces a layer of interpretation, comparable with the analysis of interviews transcribed from face-to-face encounters.

Mann & Stewart, (2000) and Hinton-Smith, (2009) discuss the many positive aspects of using email to gather qualitative data. Hinton-Smith describes what she believes to be a 'uniquely co-existing anonymity and intimacy', (ibid: 92) whilst Anders, in Mann & Stewart, (2000) discussed 'the potential of electronic mail to transgress boundaries between the researcher and the researched' (ibid: 77). The experience of conducting this project highlighted that the use of email as a research tool does indeed offer the opportunity for gathering data in both a distant but seemingly close environment. It was sometimes difficult to pick up on clues such as sarcasm and humour on an email, however, the use of emoticons did provide some valuable non-verbal cues that added further depth and richness to participatory responses.

(iii) Participant interaction

One unexpected outcome of using email in this project, was the e-warmth and e-friendliness with which participants interacted, which directly contradicts the assertion that email interaction is remote and impersonal, Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, (1984); Sproull & Kiesler, (1986); Fox *et al*, (2003); Knobel, (2003). Within weeks of starting the data collection, many participants were using emoticon symbols in their emails, or putting kisses at the end of their emails. This is said to illustrate comfort with expressing oneself using CMC, and friendliness towards the recipient, Joinson, (2003). Messages ending like this were received throughout the lifespan of the project:

....xxx :-)

cheers.....xx

loads of love and hugs ;-)

Another illustration of the rapport and mutual support that was shared over email, relates to a short period in time (during the second year of the project) when I was in hospital. An email was sent to the group explaining that I was unwell, and that the next prompt would be sent on my return. The response was overwhelming with e-messages of support. These emails are indicative of the many received:

your regular emails are a sad loss from my inbox and I look forward to your cheery and glorious return :-) (P24)⁶

Do hope you are on the road to recovery and feeling better. Have missed your emails of late. (P35)

Although the above quotes illustrate a potentially close and intimate relationship, I did not meet any participant from the project in a personal or social setting. My emails to them were always free from endearments. These friendly, and often intimate words and emoticons, were unsolicited. Issues around my relationship with participants, and any problematic issues, are discussed later in the Chapter, under the ethics section.

3.4.2 Potential problems

(i) Accessibility

One area of concern about CMC centres on access to the Internet. Some groups of people, primarily those of lower socio-economic status and low educational attainment, may be excluded from social research conducted via the Internet, because they do not have access to a computer and Internet facilities, which can lead to a skewed sample, Bordia, (1996); Stanton, (1998); Hewson *et al*, (2003). However, with ever-increasing use of computers in education, the workplace, and the constant supply of cheap desktop computers and Internet providers, this argument is becoming less feasible.

Access to a computer was not an issue within this project, as all participants were studying at Undergraduate level, and therefore, had automatic and free access to computers and the Internet. However, it is possible that having no, or limited, access to a computer at home, and/or lack of available computers on campus during peak times, may have impacted on student participation in the project. However a small number of students within the project described difficulties in technology causing delays and non-response to some prompts.

Many emails over the lifespan of the project were sent during the night. At the start of the project I checked my email at all hours of the day and night, however this became tiresome so a decision was taken, at the start of the third term, that I would only answer emails on the project during office hours. This was generally unproblematic other than on one occasion when a student was searching for instant help (as discussed below).

⁶ All participant quotes are indented irrespective of length of quote.

Another potential downside is that such mediated interaction does not allow for direct observation of participants, through which important non-verbal behaviour (e.g. body language, facial expressions) can be picked up. Sharf states that the development of CMC is 'a relatively new form of interpersonal contact minus the visual clues' and that this lack of clues has led to the development of 'netiquette' (1999: 244). This idea includes the use of emoticons (as discussed above) to give an indication of the mood of participants and the context in which statements are made.

(ii) Identity Play

Identity Play has been discussed as an area of concern when using the Internet as a research tool. The term 'Identity Play', refers to when people present themselves on-line with an image or persona that does not accurately represent their actual physical selves, Hine, (2003). The debate about Identity Play focuses on questions around issues of the stability of on-line identities. Some researchers argue that on-line users have multiple identities that are fluid and potentially fragmented, Turkle, (1995); Stone, (1991); Fox *et al*, (2003), whilst other research states that on-line identities tend to be stable and consistent, Baym, (1995a; 1995b; 1998). Woodfield states:

...directly accessed accounts are not qualitatively different in terms of their truth-claim, from accounts provided by other sources...The trump card of qualitative techniques, however, is that they can justifiably claim to reveal more versions or aspects of the truths about social phenomena. (2007:79)

When researching human beings, there is always the possibility that participants may misrepresent themselves. For example, problems with a person stating they are thin when they are actually overweight, are no different when gathering data via the Internet, than in a questionnaire study. There are also problems in the face-to-face situation of an interview, where a person can easily claim to be earning £50,000 per annum, when in fact they earn £25,000, so it is arguable that Identity Play is no more or less pertinent on the Internet than in other research interactions, including face-to-face situations. Throughout the project, I was vigilant in looking for any factual contradiction in responses from individual participants. Nothing emerged that raised suspicion. A cross-checking of all the major facts such as age, gender and exam results were conducted. Therefore within this research it is assumed that respondents account of their experiences was fundamentally true, however, it is acknowledged that each person will understand and attach meanings to an event or situation differently, Woodfield, (2007); Hinton-Smith, (2009).

(iii) Richness of email data

The work of Baym (1998) suggested that email interviews could never produce the same deep rich data that can be obtained in face-to-face interviews. When the data collection period ended, it was clear that there were large gaps in the responses of some participants, so the decision was taken to conduct face-to-face interviews. All those with substantial gaps in their data were invited to interview. In the subsequent interviews used within this study, the questions were posed verbally in exactly the same form as they had been in email. This was done in an attempt to minimise any disparity between verbal answers provided in interview, and those received by email.

There is a body of research that suggests that people responding to interview questions on-line feel anonymous, and that this anonymity leads to better levels of self-disclosure, and reduces social desirability distortion⁷, for example, Cannavale, Scarr & Pepitone, (1970); Booth-Kewley, Edwards & Rosenfeld, (1992); Richman *et al*, (1999) which can exist in face-to-face interviews and encounters. As previously stated within this study, an emphasis was placed on participants disclosing personal and private thoughts and experiences.

(iv) Participant interaction

Responses received via email from some participants within the study, were occasionally brief and sometimes even monosyllabic, but from others they were more often very detailed, and it was evident from the contents that these authors had spent considerable time thinking about their response. It is of note that the face-to-face interviews conducted within this study, generally produced longer, but more superficial answers from all those interviewed, than those gathered over email. For example, when asked about friendships within the university setting, email responses tended to be concise 'some of them are ok, most of them are great, actually'. During the face-to-face interviews, when asked the same question, answers tended to be long and drawn out, and often involved personal names, as well as detail of events and conversations, sometimes down to the minutiae. There was no clear pattern to substantiate either side of the argument, above regarding positive anonymity effects.

3.5 Research Design, Process and Participants

At the time of the study, the small, research intensive institution within which this study is based, was organised as a faculty system. Students took a substantive degree

⁷ Social desirability distortion argues that under certain conditions some respondents may answer questions in a more socially desirable way than they might under other conditions.

subject, for example, Sociology, Maths, Biology, within a particular school of study, of which there were eleven in total. Subjects could be studied in more than one faculty – for example, Sociology could be taken in the faculty of social sciences or the faculty of Humanities.

The administrative and welfare arrangements for each student were organised and provided at the faculty level. Each faculty also offered a range of supplementary academic courses, which students were required to take throughout the duration of their degree, in addition to their core degree content.

3.5.1 Stage I

At the start of the academic year 2000/2001, as part of the ESRC project, an email was sent to first year undergraduate students across nine faculties of study. The email welcomed the students to the institution, and invited them to participate in an on-line study; it read:

We would first like to welcome you to [the university]!
We are writing to ask you, as a relatively new student to this university, to take part in a research survey that seeks to get a true picture of what it is like to be studying here in the new century. Over the next year, we will be emailing a series of questions to you - probably an average of one per 10 days or so.

These questions will focus on a whole range of topics: how you cope with the pressures of study, whether the need to undertake paid work interferes with your study, whether you think there are differences between the way various groups of students (e.g. male and female, school-leavers and mature students) approach study and student life in general, how clear you are about what constitutes a 'good' piece of work, how safe you feel on campus etc.

Your answers will be treated confidentially, and will be made anonymous before they are analysed. Once analysed, however, they will be used as the basis of a report that will be submitted to the university's managers and that will hopefully inform future policy discussions and decisions. A copy of the report will also be made available to you.

You can write as much or as little as you want in each of your answers, and, because we are using email, you can answer at a time that is convenient for you. Alternatively, if you do not want to take part, you can simply delete the questions in your inbox when they arrive. They will all be headed with the prefix

'Survey Question'.

Our first question to you is:
Now that you have been at [the university] for a month or so, what are your first impressions?⁸

⁸ For full list of all prompts please see Appendix 2.

3.5.2 Stage II

At the start of the second year, a sub-sample of participants from the ESRC project were invited to continue in the study for a further 2 years, as part of a DPhil thesis. Students were chosen according to the number of responses they had provided in the first year, and to ensure equal numbers of mature and traditional students; male and female students, and from across the Arts and Science faculties, to create a comparative dataset. The decision was taken that this sample needed to be approximately sixty in total. In order to achieve this number at the start of the second year, 120 students were included. By the beginning of the third year there were only 90 remaining participants who had answered sufficient prompts in years one and two to be worthwhile including in the final year of data collection. Drop-out of participants was high in the third year; therefore by the end of the data collection period there were 70 participants still regularly responding, and of these, 61 became the sample for the study.

3.5.3 Timing of emails and response rates

The frequency of the sets of questions sent varied throughout the project, according to the time of year, the year of study, and the institutional processes. For example, during the exam revision period, which falls at the end of the academic year around April/May, a greater number of prompts were sent in order to investigate confidence about assessment methods. Conversely, fewer prompts were sent in the final weeks of terms, for example the last 2 weeks of term prior to the Christmas and Easter breaks, when the majority of students assessments were due for submission, and during the final examination period (May/June), as the participants would have less time to devote to responding to the project prompts. As the intensity and pressure of academic commitments grew, so the prompts became fewer, but responses received were often long and contained extremely in-depth information about the subject in question.

Throughout the project response rates varied according to the topics addressed, with some proving much more popular than others, as demonstrated by the volume and length of responses received on particular topics. Many respondents apologised at a later date for not answering some questions, explaining that time constraints prevented them from finding the time to respond to the questions, or stating that the subject was not something they felt particularly strongly about.

When a participant had not answered several prompts, a 'chase/catch-up' email would be sent asking them to make the time retrospectively to respond, no matter how brief

that response may be. In some circumstances this was unsuccessful and no response was received, but in many cases participants provided an answer. In general, answers varied in length from only a word or two to a full A4 page. However the majority of answers consisted of a paragraph or two.

3.5.4 Stage III

(i) Sample selection, coding & analysis

At the end of the fieldwork, the data for sixty-one students was selected for coding and analysis, on the basis that they had answered consistently over the 3 years (or before they withdrew from the university). Included in this final sample were twenty-five traditional age students and thirty-six students aged twenty-one and over. Of the sample, forty-one were female and twenty male; thirteen were mature males and 7 were traditional age males, twenty-three were mature females and eighteen were traditional age females. For a full list of student responses, please see Appendix 2. Of the sample, forty-three were studying in the Arts and Humanities subject areas, and eighteen were studying in the Natural Science subject areas (see table 3.1 below).

Table 3.1 School of Study

	Arts & Humanities	Natural Sciences
Male Traditional	3	4
Male Mature	8	5
Male total	11	9
Female traditional	12	6
Female mature	20	3
Female total	32	9
Total	43	18

There were initially 4 part-time students within the sample but unfortunately 2 of them permanently withdrew in the second year of the project, so the data collected from them was minimal and they were removed. The remaining 2 participants' responses were examined for any specific issues related to being a part-time student, but no obvious differences were uncovered. It is worth noting however that the sample was very small, and had there been more part-timers, differences may well have been disclosed.

(ii) Topics and issues explored

Semi-structured questions were delivered by email prompts on a regular basis throughout the participants three year undergraduate programme. Twenty sets of questions were sent over the course of the first year, thirteen in the second year and ten in the third (see Appendix 2 for a full list of prompts). Prompts regularly contained between 4 questions,

Year 2 Prompt 2...now that we are half way through the first term of your second year I wondered how you felt things were going academically? Are you finding the work harder/easier/about the same as last year? How do you feel about the fact that this years marks count towards your final degree classification? Has this made you work harder than you did last year?

to as many as eight questions in any one email,

Year 2 Prompt 9...to start the new term I thought I would ask you about the support and advice you have been offered by the university. If your school has one have you seen the Student Advisor, if so how satisfactory was the service you received? If you do not have a Student Advisor in your school who did you go and see for help? How satisfactory was the service you received from them? Have you had much contact with your Personal Tutor? What do you think are the pros and cons of having a Personal Tutor? Have you used the Mentors in your School? If so how useful have you found them? How easy was it to get hold of these people?

Within the first year the topics for discussion were determined by the ESRC project proposal. From the second year on, the topics addressed were developed from the literature that had been reviewed, and from the experience gained whilst conducting the first year of the fieldwork. For example, three important themes identified in the literature and from the first year data, were confidence, commitments and social status. These themes were tapped into via questions on issues such as: exam stress; career aspirations; duty of care; and levels of paid employment. Later questions originated as 'probing questions', that is to say they were follow-up questions driven by the participants earlier responses to prompts. For instance the following prompt was formed to uncover issues around a potential 'Chilly Climate' in seminars, a problem that had been identified in the literature, Karp & Yoels, (1974); Heller *et al*, (1985); Crawford & MacLeod, (1990):

Year 2 Prompt 3...this week I want to ask you about seminar participation. Are you happy to contribute to classroom discussion or do you have reservations? If

so, what are they? Do you think anything influences your decision to participate or not? Do men and women seem to participate equally or is discussion dominated by one sex or the other? Are the dynamics of the group different if the tutor is male or female? Or if there are more men than women in the room? What about presentations, how do you feel about giving them? Do you think giving a presentation is distinct from classroom discussion? Do you think they are of any value to your learning process?

Responses to the above led to a further prompt looking at the impact of age on classroom participation:

Year 2 Prompt 4...following on from my questions about classroom participation I would like to fill in some gaps that were pointed out. Do you think age affects students' participation and studying techniques? Many respondents said that their primary reason for not participating in class was because they had not done the necessary reading and they did not want to make fools of themselves. Is it the other students' or the tutors' opinion of you that you are concerned about?

Occasionally, a new prompt was developed, based on issues raised in unsolicited emails from the sample. To illustrate, on one occasion a student emailed, stating that he was upset about the conflict in Afghanistan that was prominent in the news at the time, and that this was impacting on his ability to concentrate on his academic work. As a result this prompt was developed:

Year 2 Prompt 5...this week I would be interested to hear how you all feel about the current climate with the conflict in Afghanistan. Have you experienced any changes - these can include things that are difficult to describe such as changes in atmosphere, or more specific events - that you believe are related to the fact that race, religion and ethnicity are particularly prominent issues at present? What are your views on the conflict and how it's been conducted? Does this feel like an issue that is central to your life at the moment, or one that is marginal?

This latter type of prompt highlights the strong emphasis on reciprocity in the research process, and illustrates the invaluable role that participants played in helping shape this project.

As referred to above, the selection of prompts, and decisions on when to send them, were made according to the time of year, and in relation to any pertinent issues for students at that time. For example, towards the end of the participants first year, and during the exam period, they were sent the following prompt:

Year 1 Prompt 18: You should now all be coming to the end of your first year, and in the middle of its final examination period. How are you coping? On balance, which mode of assessment do you prefer – coursework, unseen examinations, presentations, etc. – and why? Do you think different modes of assessment test different things, and which, in your opinion, is the best way to test your particular capabilities?

The responses from the sample to the above questions suggested that many students struggled with low levels of confidence, and that there was considerable difference in preferred methods of assessment (discussed in the data presentation chapters). These findings led to the development of the following prompt in order to illicit further information about these issues, and to compare how students felt they had performed in their exams with how they had actually performed:

Year 1 Prompt 19: We would like to know how you think you've done on this year's assessments. Do you feel confident that you've passed? If so, what kind of pass do you think you've achieved? If you don't feel confident that you have passed, what would you say is the main reason why you might not have? It would be great if you could all let us know how you do once you've received your results. If you have no objections, we will check ourselves. If you'd rather we didn't, please let us know.

In summary, the original prompts were designed and developed within the ESRC project, by the Principal Investigator, in conjunction with the researcher, and were based on the literature review undertaken by the Principal Investigator and, latterly, from the First Year projects results. During the second and third years of the project, prompts were developed on the basis of a reciprocal approach, whereby themes and issues identified by participants were asked of the entire sample, and/or were probed in greater detail. The individual contributions of the participants themselves (e.g. as with the issue above relating to the conflict in Afghanistan) cannot be underestimated.

3.6 Data coding

All data was coded for analysis using the software package Atlas.ti which was designed for the precision analysis of qualitative data and support theory building. An initial familiarisation with the participant responses was conducted by reading, and re-reading a sample of participants' data. Codes were developed inductively from the data itself and coding was then conducted in a systematic and rigorous fashion, by coding (using the Atlas.ti 'free code' function) and re-coding the data several times to maximise integrity, to check for accuracy and to ensure that nothing was omitted. This was an ongoing and iterative process, whereby themes emerging from successive re-readings of the data were incorporated as new codes, merged codes or deletions. Codes were both descriptive (for example age, gender, school of study etc) and

analytical, so that the coding process supported both data management and retrieval, and thematic analysis.

While the findings were combined into a single dataset, the application of descriptive codes supported comparative analysis of the differences between student groups within each of the key themes. This was achieved using the query tool in Atlas.ti, which allowed tagged data to be sorted by age and gender. So, similarities and differences between the four demographic groups in relation to, for example the issue of social life, could be easily identified and explored. At this level, the key aims of the analysis were to examine differences between the four groups, in terms of the meanings they applied to key themes (for example social life), the relative importance of those themes, and the potential inter-relationships between different themes (for example how might social life be affected by other factors such as finances and paid work).

3.7 Illustrative case studies

It was decided that individual narratives of each demographic group would be presented as illustrative case studies, to assist the reader in establishing a clear picture of the experience of those within the groups, and to supplement the thematic analysis, with some in-depth presentation of the insights shared by participants. Once this process began, it became clear that it would be necessary to case study a high achiever and low achiever from each of the groups, in order to ensure a full picture of the group was presented. It was, therefore, decided that 8 case studies would be included in this thesis. Every participant's folder was read, and the most typical case studies were chosen. These typical student examples were later incorporated into the 'ideal type' students developed further on in the research process. Within some of the groups it was not easy to find both high and low achievers that were 'typical' of their group, but the case studies presented in the Chapter below offer a good example of their demographic group as a whole.

3.8 The development of 'Ideal types' of student experience

A key aim of the thesis is to explore potential differences in experiences by age and gender. Comparative analysis of this kind poses a challenge in qualitative research, where the aim is to capture and preserve social complexity, rather than gather data in standardised formats. To make comparative analysis possible, the diverse data gathered, had to be aggregated into meaningful units of analysis, that would enable comparisons to be made. To this end, an important step in the analysis was the

development of 'ideal typical' student experiences for the 4 groups of interest: mature male, mature female, traditional male, traditional female.

The concept of 'ideal types' (initially identified in 1904 by Max Weber) was developed as a useful conceptual tool for social scientists trying to highlight similarities between groups, which are, of course, infinitely varied. Ideal types are not literal descriptions of a particular group, but aim to capture common and salient characteristics. As Parker, (1982), referring to Weber's idea, notes:

ideal types only approximate to social reality, they do not and cannot mirror it faithfully...the point that Weber is touching upon here is that it is illusory to imagine that we can somehow capture the 'real essence' of social reality. Social reality does not possess a real essence because it is always capable of being constructed or represented in various different ways. (29)

It is clear from Weber's work that he thought no system was able to reproduce all reality, and no concept could reproduce the entire diversity of any particular phenomena. However, as Parker, (1982) highlights,

'a theoretical device such as the ideal type is indispensable as a means of bringing some conceptual order to the chaos of reality'. (29)

Such conceptual order is essential for the process of comparative analysis, to make the move from analysis at the level of individuals, to analysis at the level of social groups. Indeed, only once the 'ideal types' were identified, could similarities and differences between the groups be readily explored.

The ideal types within this thesis emerged from the data after the coding and analysis had been completed. The process of identifying the 4 groups emerged from careful analysis of the four demographic groups' data, and the identification of characteristics that were common to, or representative of their experiences. For some groups this process was easy, because their characteristics and experiences proved to be homogenous. For others, namely the traditional females, there was greater diversity, and therefore it took longer and was more difficult to identify and define ideal-type characteristics.

3.9 The importance of ethics in research

3.9.1 Issues of anonymity and confidentiality

As email was the principal medium used for the collection of data, it was not possible to ensure anonymity of the participants to the researcher, as the participants were easily identifiable through their email address. No participant asked for anonymity, but their confidentiality and anonymity in terms of the dissemination of the results of the project was assured. Participants consent to take part was obtained at the start of the project. On occasion, contact was made between the researcher and students involved in the project, due to the various roles held by the researcher within the university. With regard to this, it should be noted that fifteen participants in the project were based within the school where the researcher held the position of Student Advisor. Whenever contact with a student was made in this role, the project, or the researcher's role in it, were not mentioned. Many project students introduced themselves to the researcher when they encountered her on campus, and seemed, in the majority of cases, to be pleased to put a face to a name. When these situations arose, the researcher was polite and happy to discuss the broad aims of the project, but avoided discussing the project in any detail, or how their response compared to any others. Every effort was made on all occasions to separate any knowledge imparted in relation to the project, from any information provided in the role as Student Advisor. Although students from this project were given the option of seeing an alternative Student Advisor, no-one accepted the offer.

Only 1 student involved in the project decided to no longer participate following a chance meeting. The researcher and student met in a common room of the university during a university open day, and the researcher was wearing a name badge. The student approached the researcher, introduced herself, and asked to be removed from the email list, as she felt that issues around anonymity had been compromised. On her wishes, she was immediately removed from the project. No other project student encountered expressed similar concerns, or asked to withdraw from the project. Three of the sample actively sought out the researcher and requested face-to-face meetings with her. All meetings took place in an informal setting, and advice and support was offered when requested. Indeed, it was generally felt that face-to-face contact reinforced the participatory approach to the research. The students' anonymity and confidentiality, in terms of the data they shared, was unaffected by these encounters.

For the purpose of confidentiality, all respondents were informed from the outset that only the researcher and the DPhil supervisor would have access to email responses, and that these would be anonymised for added security. Throughout the project, all email responses were stored under the students' email alias on a computer (the alias

was a code used purely to identify individual students, but is not accessible to anybody outside of the university). A back-up copy of the data was kept on CD, and a paper copy printed; both were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office. On completion of the data collection phase, all identifying features were removed from the data to ensure that responses could not be traced back to individual students. Pseudonyms and participant numbers were then randomly allocated to identify each participant in this and all other dissemination exercises.

3.10 Ethical problems and benefits of data collection

Throughout the data collection process ethical issues occurred, these were addressed as and when they appeared.

3.10.1 Breach of anonymity

At the start of the first year data collection period there was a serious breach of anonymity. One respondent replying on her home computer sent her response to everyone on the email list for her school. Although this would not have been possible within the university, it was made possible because of the settings on her home computer. Although the message content was insignificant in terms of project content, it did contain her personal details, including her home address and phone number. These details were sent to almost thirty other students. The participant involved was understandably upset about this breach of anonymity and confidentiality, and demanded to be removed from the email list; this was done immediately and apologies were sent. From this one email there then followed a series of responses from other members of the group, again sent to the entire email list, stating concerns regarding issues of confidentiality. This led to 4 requests for participants in this particular school to have their names removed from the list, and to withdraw from the project, which were also met immediately. Unfortunately this incident meant that a number of mature students in the school were taken out of the project. From that moment on, all emails were sent using the blind carbon copy facility on the computer, which was a new facility to the university, but which should have been deployed earlier. This meant that students could not see the other email aliases that the emails were sent to, and could not copy their responses to the other members of that email list. Apologies were sent to the entire group, and wine was sent to the respondent whose details had been disclosed, as a means of apology. It is worth saying many students wrote saying they were not worried by the breach. However, this was a major issue for many participants within that school and the project suffered as a result. There were no other threats to anonymity or confidentiality during the remainder of the project.

3.10.2 Researcher/respondent boundaries

There were other occasions where ethical issues arose within the project. For example, the email below was received from a male, traditional entry student at the start of the second term of his first year:

I hate it. I hate my course. I hate my job. I see no point in anything anymore. I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve. I have no appetite. I can't sleep. I'm sick with worry. I can't think. I feel I have no support; I don't know who to turn to. The only time I don't feel like this is when I finally do get to sleep. I am fearful and worrying endlessly. I don't know what to do or who to turn to. I don't want to feel like this. So, at the moment I'm hating it here. But also, I know that I really do love it here and I won't even consider leaving because I know I'm doing the right thing (for me) and I know (hope) things will get better. Though at the moment it really feels like they won't. I really don't know what to do. Everything is wrong. (P101)

At the time this email was received, there were approximately one hundred emails connected to the project that remained unread. As the researcher was employed on the project part-time, the email was not opened and read until 4 days after it was received. Having considered the response carefully, a reply email was sent suggesting that the student contact the support services available to him, but he was unwilling to do so. Several phone calls with the student subsequently took place, and the researcher was able to successfully act as a go-between for him and the campus counselling staff. Although the student withdrew from university, he later emailed to send thanks for the support he had been given at the time:

I just wanted to say thank you for the assistance you gave me earlier this year, when I was incredibly depressed and hating uni. Your support was invaluable. I haven't answered many of your survey questions recently because I have not really been at uni. I have given up my course (Sociology - because it was shit / I hated it) and I am now working full time in the town. I have moved into [the city] and am so much happier. Thanks for your help. (P101)

This example highlights the ethical dilemma occasionally faced during the lifespan of the project, around issues of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. It also illustrated the issue of time lapse between receiving and reading of emails. The skills developed through dealing with this stressful situation, and many others that I encountered within my dual role as research assistant and Student Advisor, enabled me to enhance my understanding and empathy with a range of students, with a variety of problems and issues. Another benefit to the dual role was that I gained an insight into academic and pastoral services available to students. It can be concluded that

undertaking the role of Student Advisor facilitated my ability to offer participant's advice and guidance, in areas that **she** would otherwise have been unable to offer.

3.11 Conflict of Researcher/Student Advisor roles

There were also problems that arose because of this dual role. For various reasons, outlined above, I felt a strong sense of responsibility towards, and engagement with, the students that participated in the research. On occasions, and because it was known that I was employed as a Student Advisor, interactions with the project students went beyond that of the conventional researcher-participant relationship. In particular, students involved in the project approached me for advice or support, and it was very important to me that I was able to provide this where appropriate. However, this did place additional pressure on my time, as well as on my ability to give the right level of support to students in both of these roles (as researcher and Student Advisor). While this did not present a uniquely ethical dilemma, I did have a *formal* responsibility to support and advise the students in the school where I worked, and had to balance this against a *personal* responsibility to support and advise the students in the study. Making sure the duties to these different student groups was fulfilled, was at times difficult to achieve, but nonetheless very important to the ongoing success of both roles.

3.12 Conclusion

This Chapter presented and discussed the methodological framework for this research project. Specifically, the importance of a participative approach and non-hierarchical relationship with the research participants was emphasised. Such an approach was reflexively developed during the course of the study, to adapt to the changing circumstances and needs of the project. A strong commitment was made to cultivating reciprocal relationships with the research students, who were divulging both important and sensitive details about their university experience. As shown above, this had benefits to the student participants, to myself as researcher, and to the project as a whole. The Chapter has also discussed the various ethical issues around the project, and this interactive style of data collection. Such ethical issues can never be totally removed from research of this nature. However, as shown throughout this Chapter, where possible, these were anticipated, minimised and reflected upon, as part of a research process in which ongoing learning and development was a major part.

Chapter 4

Traditional Male

4.1 Introduction

At the outset of the project it was intended that there be fifteen participants from each of the 4 demographic groups: traditional male student; mature male student; traditional female student, and mature female student. Unfortunately, due to differing response rates between the groups, this was not possible and the traditional male group being the least responsive, consisted of a small group of only 7. It was often hard to encourage the traditional male group to respond at all, they were regularly brief and inexpressive in their responses, and several of them dropped out early in the project. Despite this, interesting and informative data is presented within this Chapter.

The Chapter will examine the student experience of the traditional males in the sample (n=7), who illustrate the most 'typical', or even 'traditionally stereotypical' student experience. It will begin by presenting the case studies of 2 students, Richard and Mike, the former being a high achiever, and the latter a lower achiever. These case studies were selected, as they were representative of the demographic group, and illustrative of the emerging issues and patterns of behaviour. The experiences of these students will be reviewed chronologically over the course of their studies, and illustrative quotes are used throughout. Following the case studies, findings from analysis of the data provided by the remainder of the traditional male sample will be presented, and emergent themes are discussed.

4.2 Case studies

4.2.1 Case Study 1: Richard - Traditional male student high achiever

Richard was a traditional age male student who came from, what he described as, a comfortable middle class background in the north of England, and commenced university at nineteen years of age. His father was financially secure, owning his own computer business, whilst one of his parents and both of his brothers had attended university and successfully completed degrees. After achieving 4 A grade A levels, Richard took a gap year and went travelling around the world. On his return, he was unsure of how he wanted his future to map out, and hence did not apply for university

through UCAS. He later decided however, to attend university, and applied to the university through clearing, which was one of several impulsive decisions discussed by Richard throughout the course of the data collection. As well as this initial comment on deciding to attend university, he described making impulsive decisions about course choice, friendships, and a variety of other issues. In this way Richard was typical of many traditional male students in the sample.

First year:

On arrival at the university, Richard described himself as confident and happy with his choice of institution and programme subject, particularly praising the standard of teaching and IT services on campus. He stated that he liked [the city], and thought that staff and students at the university were friendly and helpful, and the setting of the university was 'gorgeous'. The only problems reported during his first term related to being away from home comforts, and the fact that not living with his parents would result in money worries. Richard was placed with a host family⁹ off campus due to pressures on university accommodation, which he was unhappy with, and instantly requested a move into halls of residence. He showed no evidence of difficulty in finding university staff to assist him with this, and showed no confidence issues about asking for help so early on in his time there. He reported that he was not unhappy with the standard of accommodation when living off campus, but that he found it problematic when he had early morning lectures followed by large gaps before afternoon classes, explaining that he had nowhere on campus to relax between classes and not enough time to return home. This, he claimed, sometimes led to him missing morning teaching, in order to minimise the length of his university day. He further mentioned that living off campus with a family had a negative effect on his social integration with his peers, and claimed that this caused him unnecessary stress during the first few weeks at university.

After the Christmas break, he was moved into campus accommodation, but this proved to have its own problems, as the temptation of having other students constantly around and a cheap bar on his doorstep, also led to him missing classes. The increased social benefits of living on campus therefore also negatively impacted on his attendance in class.

1. Students are placed within families in the local area when the university does not have enough accommodation on campus to meet demand.

Towards the end of his first year, Richard said that he had been studying approximately fifteen hours per week outside of formal class time throughout the year, whilst at the same time claiming to be spending a large amount of time in paid employment, and also enjoying plenty of leisure time. However, there was less emphasis on studying than either paid work or leisure pursuits in his responses throughout the first year.

One area that was clearly important to Richard from the outset, and throughout his time at [the university], was the social side of university life, which was often mentioned during his first term:

My decision to do Social Psychology was more or less an impulsive one, because I saw it as being of secondary importance - the main reason I wanted to come was to enjoy a good social life.

Comments relating to university friendships appeared regularly throughout the first year. Despite his initial problems making friends due to not living on campus, he described many new friendships when he moved onto campus during the first year. He also said that he kept in contact with these friends during the long summer break, but despite these comments he claimed that friendships were not particularly important to him. He reported that he did not have a large number of friends, but that if he needed support of any kind, it would be his friends that he turned to rather than any of the official support mechanisms available to him, saying that "if something goes wrong and I'm hacked off I turn to me mates cos I don't really want to talk to the uni staff about it. My mates can help". Interestingly, there was almost no mention of Richard's family in his first year, other than to say that he did not miss them whilst at university.

Despite his emphasis on social life and his lack of emphasis on studying, Richard exhibited high academic confidence from the beginning of his time at [the university], and during his first term he was clearly secure about his academic abilities:

I knew that practically any university would accept me because I got 4 'A's at A-Level. This gave me a lot of freedom in deciding what I wanted to study and where to study it.

This confidence did not appear to waiver during his first year, and at the start of the third term when participants were asked how they felt about their forthcoming exams, Richard stated that he was not at all worried.

Towards the end of his first year at university Richard said that he had made good academic progress, but that he had found the work unchallenging and uninteresting:

I had this idea that with a university education should come some kind of higher intellect (and the ability to complete the Guardian crossword), but this hasn't proved so.

He reiterated this point in relation to his assessments in the first year, which he felt had not pushed him hard academically:

I'm pretty confident about my exams. The thing is, I came to university wanting to do some proper hard work, and put all of my resources into studying. But, well, it wasn't to be. It seems that the first year is intended to be a bit of a doss year, and I feel this was reflected in the exams.

The final comment elicited from students in the first year, related to a question asking for his best piece of advice for incoming first years, to which Richard's response once again highlighted his high confidence levels:

My advice to next year's student is, well, regarding the courses, don't bother doing much ... The minimum amount of effort seems to get you through.

His confidence levels were justified, when, despite his lack of attendance and reported effort, he finished the first year with a very high 2:1.

Second year:

At the start of his second year Richard discussed missing the social side of life over the summer holiday, and despite his desire to maximise his academic potential, Richard often discussed issues relating to the impact his social life had on his studies, which was particularly evident during terms 4 and 5. At this time he claimed to not have developed clearly defined boundaries between paid work, study and leisure time, and stated that his primary focus was on leisure pursuits rather than anything else. As demonstrated by the quote below, he described himself as inconsistent in terms of attendance at lectures and seminars, and said that:

The main reason for this inconsistency is that I only really came to university for the social side of things, and so I like to maximise my social opportunities. Often the best way for me to do this is to shut myself off from the outside world, work like a swine for a few days, complete all the necessary coursework-type stuff, and then take another week or two off.

At the start of term 6, Richard ceased paid employment and described settling down to his studies. Despite this Richard contradicted himself regularly insofar as he described both a strong commitment to studying, with much time spent focusing on his academic ambitions, but at the same time, an overarching, clear and consistent commitment to having a really good time whilst at university. Comments such as this were common:

It's all about the social side of uni life for me. I came here to enjoy myself. A levels were hard work and school was no fun at all, but I'm older now and independent and I want to enjoy myself. Don't get me wrong, I want a good degree, but mostly I want girls, beer and fun. I'm very clear about that!

Overall however, during Richard's second year, there was less emphasis on social activities, although leisure pursuits remained prominent throughout his participation in the study.

Although he described being academically unchallenged in the first year, Richard said that in the second year he enjoying feeling more challenged by the content and volume of the work required, and pleased that all his work now counted towards his final degree classification.

Richard only once explicitly mentioned lacking in academic confidence with regard to his writing skills throughout his 3-year participation in the project, and this occurred at the start of the second year, in relation to one specific compulsory course which he was finding particularly difficult. However, in contrast to earlier descriptions of his confidence, Richard claimed that the thought of giving oral presentations in class made him nervous, and that his lack of confidence in this area meant that he worked particularly hard at them. Despite his reservations, he stated that the attributes required to successfully perform this mode of assessment were valuable, and that he was excited about conquering his fears and honing his presentation skills. This lack of confidence and nervousness, therefore, seemed to lead to a reactive coping style, whereby he appeared to engage more with the assessment, and saw it as a challenge which he could overcome and succeed at. He claimed that:

The challenge is always good. I like to be pushed and anything I find difficult I want to beat. I do get nervous but I think the skills are really useful when you are out in the world of work so I want to beat them for that reason too. I always face up to my challenges and haven't yet failed so I'm not gonna let this beat me.

Richard claimed to have no issues relating to participation in classroom discussion, as he felt that he generally had valid comments to express to the group.

He attributed his high confidence levels to achieving 4 As at A level, and Richard stated that this set a high standard and expectation for his achievements at university level study. When he achieved high grades in his coursework, he claimed that this motivated him to work harder to ensure that he attained even better marks, and to help him get a first class degree classification at the end of his programme. In his opinion, academic success is closely linked to high confidence levels and motivation:

I've got it into my head that I've got the ability, so any results that I achieve that don't meet my standards I attribute to a lack of effort or momentary lack of confidence, and thus next time I work harder. So, in my line of thinking, confidence is the key to academic success for me personally. I suppose, then, that my A Level results have boosted my confidence, which in turn has had a positive effect on how I work at university.

Richard described a lack of money in his second year, due to his not having term-time paid employment, claiming that this had a serious detrimental effect on his ability to study, as it led to high stress levels resulting in a lack of funds for leisure pursuits. Despite this self-reported high stress Richard ended his second year with a high 2:1 overall.

Third year:

In his final year, Richard indicated that he found academic work no more challenging than the second year, but stated that he struggled with the immense volume of reading and written work expected of him, despite the fact that he felt he worked very hard at his studies. Regardless of these claims of a concerted effort with his studies, he contradicted himself by describing many evenings with his new girlfriend, and reporting that he did not work at weekends, no matter how much university work he had to do. He illustrated this point with quotes like this:

I study hard all week so why should I give up my weekends to study as well? I think if I was in paid work they wouldn't expect me to work all weekend for nothing would they? I've got my girlfriend, my mates and a life and no amount of coursework's gonna take precedence over them!

Richard was questioned about the use of campus welfare services during his three years at university, and responded that he did not use any throughout his time there, as

he had not struggled either academically or personally with any issues. This seems to support his reported confidence levels in both his academic and personal life.

There was some discussion about Richard's family during his third year, when he stated that he did not want his family to attend his graduation, initially claiming that this was because his family were not supportive of his studies. However, on further questioning he revealed that he had lived in the shadow of his very successful brother for most of his life, and felt that any achievements he made in his degree would not be recognised by his family. It appears that success for Richard involved competing with his brother, and this was a major motivation for his studying and achieving, claiming that his family had not taken an interest in his choice of degree despite supporting him financially.

Richard had no clear career path when he was studying, and even at the end of his programme he seemed unsure what he wanted to do after graduation. He said he was considering postgraduate study, feeling it was an easy option, because he had no idea what he wanted to do with his life, and could therefore postpone the decision by staying at university:

I have no idea what I want to do with my life. I dunno have fun mess around with my girlfriend travel a bit more maybe. I could stay at uni and do a master or phd it's be easy enough cos I'm gonna get a first. Better than going out to work I guess. Would buy me some time to really think about what I want anyway cos right now I haven't got a clue to be honest with you.

Richard completed his psychology degree with an impressive first class degree (73%), and went on to postgraduate studies. Both his parents attended his graduation.

4.2.2 Case Study 2: Mike - Traditional male student low achiever

Mike came from the south of England and arrived at university as a traditional age male student of nineteen years. He said that he was familiar with [the city], and that he had always enjoyed coming to the city as a child, and he found the university welcoming and accessible, stating that he was happy with his decision to study there. Mike was a man of few words, and often replied to prompts with nothing more than a one-word answer - this form of emailing was commonplace within this demographic group. However, when Mike answered questions more fully, he proved himself to be eloquent and insightful, although it was interesting to note that he generally used capital letters in emails.

After leaving college with 3 A levels (B,B,C), Mike spent a year working full-time in a job he did not enjoy, saying that this experience gave him the determination to apply to university, and to remain there when he found the studies hard. He came to university through UCAS, and studied for a Computer Science degree. Mike said that neither of his parents were graduates, and that he was the first in his extended family to attend university, adding that his family did not have the skills to influence his decisions about where or what to study, due to both their lack of experience, and also their lack of interest. His mother was a single parent, but Mike also enjoyed regular contact with his biological father. He described his socio-economic background as working class, with his father working for the local council in a 'desk job', and his mother employed at a care home for the elderly. Mike also described his relationship with his parents as poor, with little quality contact, and almost no emotional or financial support from them.

First year:

On arrival at [the university], Mike was placed in halls of residence, which he enjoyed from the outset, reporting that he liked living away from home, and felt that the standard of accommodation was more than adequate. He also stated that he had thrown himself into the social side of campus life fully, joining clubs and societies, and making many new friends quickly and easily. From the very start of his university career, his social life was full and took up a lot of his leisure time, and towards the end of the first term Mike claimed to be studying less than ten hours per week outside of contact time. He had started paid work in one of the campus bars within the first few weeks of arriving at university, and reported that he needed to get another job to support himself and his busy social life.

Alongside the focus on social activities, paid work and leisure time, Mike displayed a strong emphasis on the importance of friendships, discussing his friends, both on campus and at home regularly, and stating that his university friends had been pivotal to his positive experience there:

WITHOUT THE GOOD FRIENDS I HAVE MADE HERE, I BELIEVE THAT UNI WOULD BE ABSOLUTELY TERRIFYINGLY BORING AND WOULD SEEM TOTALLY WORTHLESS.

Mike stated that time spent on leisure activities and with friends did not distract from his academic work, and reported feeling on top of, what he described as a heavy workload, throughout his first year at university.

Mike was very confident about his academic abilities in the first year, did not describe any anxieties about coursework, and was confident he would finish the year with an impressive grade. His comments on exams illustrate this confidence:

SHOULD BE FINE, ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS ANSWER A FEW QUESTIONS...
IT REALLY SHOULDN'T BE A PROBLEM.

The information Mike provided about his attendance in class was contradictory. He stated that he attended regularly during his first year, but also made comments about missing a number of lectures and seminars and said:

I FORGOT WHICH I THINK IS VERY JUSTIFIABLE...I WANTED TO GO I
JUST FORGOT.

Mike did not express any preference for specific methods of assessment. He claimed that exams were unproblematic, as he felt that his excellent memory helped him succeed, while he described coursework as the best method of assessing his skills, as he had time to 'perfect' his work, while he had not been expected to present to his class, although he said he would be happy to do so if necessary.

The final comment elicited from students at the end of their first year, related to a question asking for the best piece of advice they could offer to incoming first years. Mike replied by saying:

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SOCIAL LIFE HERE. MAKE SURE YOU COME WITH
ENOUGH MONEY TO REALLY ENJOY YOURSELF AND JOIN AS MANY
CLUBS AS POSSIBLE.

This response illustrated Mike's priorities perfectly, as many of the comments received throughout the first year had talked of the focus of university life being social rather than academic. This lack of focus on studying may have impacted on Mike's results, as he ended the first year with a high 2:2, which he claimed was disappointing.

Second year:

Mike was happy to return to university at the start of his second year, claiming that living at home and working in 'a dead end job' over the summer had made him appreciate university life all the more. However, at the start of his second year, Mike reported having major concerns about the workload and how much more he was expected to produce. Despite this, he never appeared to lose confidence for any length

of time, and, although sometimes anxious, his anxiety was not specifically associated with concerns about failure or not being able to perform well. He simply noted, on several occasions in the second year, that the workload was high and the time needed to produce the volume of work was large.

Although rare, he periodically discussed a wavering confidence:

I FEEL CONFIDENT BEFORE THE ACTUAL PRESENTATION, EVEN WHEN I DO NO WORK FOR THE PRESENTATION I STILL FEEL CONFIDENT BEFORE HAND. FOR SOME REASON THOUGH, WHEN I AM SPEAKING I LOSE SOME CONFIDENCE AND FORGET WHAT I AM SUPPOSED TO SAY. YET SURE AS SURE, THE NEXT PRESENTATION COMES UP AND AGAIN I'M FEELING CONFIDENT. I DON'T KNOW WHY.

Regardless of this show of vulnerability, and honesty about sometimes feeling out of his depth and “doing no work”, Mike was intolerant of those with less academic confidence than him, and criticised them on several occasions. Comments such as this were not infrequent:

WE ALL PASSED AND ANYONE WHO THINKS THEY FAILED SHOULD BE MORE CONFIDENT AND STOP WHINING.

Mike continued his paid employment throughout his second year, and claimed that this allowed him to fund his active social life, which in turn, helped him to study, as he was happy and relaxed. During the second year, he reiterated his first year comments, stating that paid work and a large amount of time spent on his social life, was in no way detrimental to his ability to perform at university, even though he said that this sometimes meant he missed lectures and seminars. He said that:

WORKING IS GREAT. I GET PISSED AND HAVE A GREAT TIME AND I GET MONEY FOR DOING IT. WHAT MORE COULD A MAN WANT? IT MEANS THAT I SOMETIMES MISS CLASS BUT I DON'T THINK IT AFFECTS MY STUDYING COS I'M HAPPY WHEN I AM OUT AND ABOUT BUT IF I STAY IN STUDYING ALL THE TIME I'M MISERABLE SO CAN'T WORK ANYWAY.

Despite this apparent confidence, Mike obtained a low 2:2 in his second year, and reported being shocked and disappointed with this result, but confident that he could increase the mark in his final year.

Third year:

Mike made several confident comments early in the third year, related to his ability to lift his previous marks and succeed in his final exams:

THE EXAMS WILL BE OK AND I AM SURE I WILL GET A GOOD MARK THIS YEAR AND LEAVE THIS PLACE WITH A GOOD QUALIFICATION.

Mike continued working in paid employment, sometimes as much as twenty hours per week, throughout his final year, and his social life remained his primary focus. He expressed major concerns about his finances in his final year, but still maintained a busy social life. He claimed to be struggling to find the rent on his flat, reporting that he did not attend class on several occasions because he could not afford the bus fare to campus:

I DON'T HAVE THE BUS FARE TO COME ON CAMPUS SOMETIMES. IT'S AS SIMPLE AS THAT I JUST CAN'T COME TO LECTURES COS I CAN'T AFFORD IT.

Despite his financial difficulties, Mike did not utilise the university welfare services, and claimed that the only contact with them was because he had been contacted about his poor attendance, and that he had not felt the need to seek help or support, either personally or academically. His attendance continued to decrease as the third year progressed, and there were several conversations via email, where the university's support for students with financial need, was pointed out to Mike. Whilst Mike's reported financial crisis impacted on his attendance, he continued to describe an active social life, that included participation in several societies, and regular drinking sessions with friends, which may suggest a prioritisation of his financial outlay.

Mike had no career plan on completion of his studies, and could not give a response as to what he wanted to do after graduation. He said that he had 'no idea whatsoever', and when questioned about the possibility of postgraduate studies, he claimed that he was bored with studying, and could not afford to continue even if he wanted to. The final contact with Mike was after he got his results, by which time he had returned home to live with his mother, and was looking for paid employment in whatever area he could find:

I'LL DO WHATEVER I CAN. ANYTHING WILL DO I JUST NEED A JOB I DON'T CARE WHAT IT IS. REALLY ANYTHING AT ALL WITH A WAGE. UNTIL I DECIDE WHAT I WANT TO DO FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE I'LL TAKE ANYTHING I CAN GET.

By the end of his 3 years at university, Mike was somewhat less confident of his academic abilities, because his marks over the course of his degree had shown that he was not performing at the level he had hoped. His overall degree classification was a 2:2 (49%). Therefore he was not able to improve his mark sufficiently, to change the classification he obtained at the end of the first year.

4.3 Overall sample findings

Analysis of the data provided by this demographic group, revealed that one of the main issues to emerge concerned confidence, with traditional males tending to display an exaggerated confidence about exams and classroom discussion, and with very few showing any level of anxiety about failing or under-achieving in any way. Additional issues that emerged from the complete data set of all demographic groups comprised the following: social life; anxiety; career orientation; commitments; debt/paid work, and attendance/participation. These issues were merged into three distinct overarching themes: (i) confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation; (ii) friendships, social life and conflicts with family commitments, and (iii) finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career. Each theme will be discussed in turn, with quotes from participants used to illustrate the emergent themes. The impact that these themes have on students experiences and outcomes, will be examined in relation to the literature in the discussion Chapter, along with a detailed comparison of the 4 demographic groups.

4.3.1 Confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation

In line with issues raised by the literature reviewed previously in this thesis, and also illustrated through the case studies above, the whole sample of traditional male students often exhibited a confident and sometimes blasé attitude towards their studies. The majority (n=5) frequently displayed an exaggerated confidence about exams and classroom discussion, with very few (n=2) showing any level of anxiety about failing or under-achieving in any way. The group regularly claimed to be confident to participate in classroom discussion if they had done the necessary preparation for the topic, although for some, such as Richard, oral presentations were initially problematic. However, they often described undertaking no preparation at all for class, and therefore considered themselves to be quiet members of the group on these occasions. Although this may hint at a lack of confidence in some contexts, there was nothing within the data to confirm or refute this issue. Coursework assessment was

another area that appeared not to lead to anxiety for these students, and essays were explicitly described by some (n=3), including Mike, as 'easy' (interestingly Mike was the only lower achieving traditional male who described coursework in this way). When discussing exams, these students, once again, tended to consider them largely unproblematic, and preparation for them was almost invariably reported to have been conducted at the last minute, by cramming as much information as possible in the shortest time. As will be shown below, there was evidence within the data, indicating that this reported high confidence and low anxiety, tended to lead to these students having poor attendance, and to a lack of self motivated preparation for class and exams. The entire traditional male sample showed signs of exaggerated confidence in at least one area of their lives, typically (and most frequently) in relation to their studies, or their friendships, or money issues and paid work. The reportedly high academic confidence of both Mike and Richard is evidenced by their immersion in their social lives, and lack of focus on academic studies, whilst still expecting to achieve good grades.

(i) Confidence

The majority of the traditional male student sample, including the case studies above, overtly or implicitly indicated that they were highly confident about their academic abilities:

I don't want to sound arrogant but I knew practically any university would accept me. (P1)

I know I can get a first its easy I don't even have to try. Anyone who says this is hard is really thick and should probably not be here to be honest we are meant to be the clever elite not a bunch of thikos who can't even do this. (P55)

This level of arrogance was evident throughout the traditional male student data, but it is particularly noticeable when looking at this demographic group's general attitude to participating in classroom¹⁰ discussion:

Well happy [to contribute to classroom discussion] – no reservations at all. Its my right to question any subject matter, for myself, but also the benefit of my class mates. (P35)

I have always been happy to participate in discussions in class, even in the first year. I think my point is as valid as anyone else's so why not? It really annoys

¹⁰ As discussed below, participation in classroom discussion was sometimes limited by background preparation.

me when people don't speak cos I get fed up of them free loading off people like me who don't care if they look like a prat - girls usually sit there looking smart but haven't got a clue what's going on really. (P81)

On the rare occasion when traditional male students expressed concerns related to failure, these tended to be in a light hearted way, which superficially gives the impression that they were not genuinely anxious about it:

not very confident that i have passed but hey there are re takes! (P11)

However, the majority of the group expressed no such concerns.

(ii) Anxiety

Directly related to the theme of confidence is that of anxiety. As previously stated, this demographic group tended to display a lack of general anxiety, but there was evidence of some isolated instances of anxiety in the face of lack of preparation. The data revealed that, as a group, traditional male students appeared to be the least overtly anxious of the demographic groups. Neither the case studies, nor the sample in general, expressed anxiety in relation to taking exams, or of any other form of assessment method:

Exams are easy so are essays. It's all easy really I don't know what the fuss is about to be honest. People all moaning but if you just get on with it it's not hard at all. (P81)

This participant went on to elaborate further stating that:

um, regarding the exams, I'm rather worried in that I'm not worried. (If you see what I mean.) I have 3 courses in which I have exams this Summer, but to be honest I'm not worried at all. And I don't want to sound arrogant, I just want to sound a little foolish, because in not much caring about the exams, I know I am being a little foolish. It's probably because I got a good mark on a mock paper that we were given in one of the courses that I'm not overly fussed. Added to this, I know that I only require 40% to pass, and so, much as it's wrong for me to not revise or revise less than I should, I'd rather spend my time in employment. (P81)

Participant 81 was just one of many members of this group who were lacking in anxiety and overtly confident about exams:

I prefer exams(!!!) because I can show off & gain marks from my freakish ability to remember huge amounts of information with only the barest minimum of effort. Recent trends in education reformation could be argued by those of a paranoid disposition to be the attempts of (jealous) people lacking ability in this area to persecute the likes of me. (P13)

Coursework assessment elicited similar comments:

I should have worked harder on my essays at the beginning of the year as I am paying for it now – still they're easy enough. (P81)

My ability is not the problem so much as forcing myself to do the essays. (P1)

As was illustrated in the case studies, one area where traditional males did express some level of anxiety, was when they failed to complete work until close to a deadline. In other words, this refers to isolated instances of anxiety, when students were faced with their lack of preparation:

...and the main thing that affects how I feel in the seminar is whether or not I've done the prescribed reading. If I haven't done the reading, I'll usually stay rather quiet, because I'm not properly clued up on what the tutor is talking about and I don't want to make a comment that will blatantly show that I haven't read for it. (P13)

...the only think that influences my participation level is the amount of background reading i have done. (P35)

The data clearly highlights how this anxiety was not necessarily related to low self-confidence, but to the realisation that the student had not done the necessary preparation.

(iii) Attendance/Participation

In relation to the theme of high confidence, and an apparent general absence of anxiety, these students reported low class attendance and were often blasé about missing lectures and seminars:

I haven't really missed anything that I consider to be very important. I quite often miss mathematics because most of the work that we do I covered at A-level and can still remember how to do it...Occasionally I do just decide that I have had enough for one day and end up going home or to Grapevine (campus bar) to let of some steam with a few games of pool. (P55)

most of the time just thought i could get away with it so why bother. (P11)

It is clear from the comments above, that there was a strong tendency for the traditional male sample to divulge an overtly confident attitude towards their academic abilities; expressing almost no anxiety about participating in class; and being extremely confident about all aspects of classroom and exam assessments, along with describing a lack of concern in relation to their attendance at university.

(iv) Friendships, social life and conflicts with family commitments

The traditional male sample were a distinctly homogenous group in relation to their social lives, all, without exception, placing huge importance on the social side of university life, and, although an extreme example, at one point Richard stated that he attended university primarily for the social life. Extra-curricular social activities outside the university were also high on the agenda for many of this group indeed, social life along with confidence, were the overarching themes that emerged from the data for traditional males. Social life was described in very positive terms in relation to the university experiences of the group, with a large amount of time and money being spent on leisure activities. Although not illustrated in the case studies, despite the overwhelming importance placed on social activities, many students in this group (n=4) expressed concern at some point about the large amount of time they devoted to these pursuits. Concerns related to the potential negative impact on their learning experience, and ability to successfully complete their studies, although, despite these concerns, there was no evidence of attendant behaviour change, and many traditional males, including Richard and Mike, reported active social lives right throughout their university years. Thus a theme of prioritisation emerges amongst this group, whereby traditional males placed considerable emphasis and priority on the social aspects of university life, over all other areas of their lives.

(v) Social life and Friendships

All 4 demographic groups highlighted social activities as being a key factor in their university experience (with the definition of the activities varying greatly), but none more so than this group. As previously stated, these students generally reported spending a large amount of time (and money) on leisure activities:

No time to work – have too much drinking to do. (P13)

I will try to organise myself better so I don't have to do so many all nighters and hopefully get more marks for this. I usually party until the deadline and then panic so my marks are rubbish. (P11)

...I think I have probably taken on a little bit too much out of uni...and then there's my love life as well so my marks will be crap again this year! (P81)

In this way, as demonstrated by both case studies, traditional male students presented a homogenous group that was distinct from the remainder of the student body.

When discussing friendships, this group were also rather distinct from the remainder of the overall sample, generally mentioning friends in terms of drinking partners or leisurely nights in, but there was little mention of friends being involved in these students learning processes. This social side of learning, as distinct from a social life, will be shown in the following Chapters to be a gendered issue: the women in the study, particularly older women, mentioned learning with their peers, and using other students as support mechanisms. It would appear from the data collected in this study, that this is not a support mechanism or learning tool that male students utilised, and this could be an interesting area for future research to explore.

(vi) External commitments - dependent children:

Another interesting issue to emerge within this area for traditional male students, was the lack of comments, or attention paid to, any prompts asking about their external commitments and family relationships. Those students who did reply, generally reported low external commitments outside of the university setting, with the two case studies both reporting weak emotional ties with their families. The main commitment for this group was in paid employment, with little mention of any other activities, or relationships, which commanded their time and attention. Some students stated that family members had helped them maintain their study momentum, whilst others, including the case studies above, reported little family involvement in their academic studies.

Interestingly there was only 1 traditional aged male student who discussed having a dependent parent, and made little mention of this, other than to say it sometimes meant it was difficult for him to care for her and maintain his university commitments:

My Mum is sick so I go over there a couple of times a week. She's great my mum but it makes life a bit difficult cos she relies on me as there's no one else to take care of her. I used to do more for her but I'm just busy now with uni work and my busy social schedule ;-) (P11)

When asked if he thought caring for his mother impacted on his ability to study, he replied:

Yeah it's just time that could be spent studying really. It's also a real worry sometimes and a complete hassle most of the time. (P11)

No other students within this group discussed either dependent parents or children, hence it is impossible to make any assumptions about the impact this may have on the

demographic group, but it does highlight the variability and differences within this group, which otherwise tends to be depicted as fairly homogenous.

(vii) Finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career

Despite reporting almost no anxiety over their academic abilities, the traditional male student group reported the highest levels of anxiety around debt, also reporting long hours working in paid employment. This lack of finances, and long working hours, was described by 5 of the group as having a negative impact on their ability to study, as illustrated by both Richard and Mike, and in some cases (n=3), it was directly blamed for lower than expected academic grades. Interestingly, in contrast to other demographic groups, paid work was considered to take priority over studies for many of the group. This issue potentially links to the emphasis placed on social life, and the prioritisation of paid work over academic studies, may reflect the fact that the former provides the finances to perpetuate the active social lives enjoyed by the group.

(viii) Debt and Paid Work

All traditional male students within the sample reported high levels of financial debt, although this was more pronounced for some than others. This was despite many, including Richard, receiving financial support from their families. Just over half the group (n=4) exhibited serious levels of debt that caused them regular and severe concern:

Oh my God don't talk to me about money. I am sooooooooooooooooooooo broke it's a joke. I am working all the hours I can but I just can't seem to get on top of my debts at all. No f***** idea what I'm gonna do or how I'm gonna survive another year of this. (P46)

Yeah massively in debt. Not much I can do about it but yeah it really worries me and sometimes I can't concentrate because I'm so wound up about it. (P55)

Although it is clear that these students were concerned about their debt, they did not appear to take responsibility for this, as Mike clearly demonstrated when he missed classes due to lack of transport costs, despite maintaining an active social life. Some students reported feeling that debt was inevitable for students:

You do worry about being in debt, but being a student it is near impossible not to get in to debt. (P11)

All students are in debt. I don't know anyone here who isn't! there's not much we can do about it – it's written in the job description. (P1)

Traditional male students reported high levels of paid employment, and some commented on the negative impact this had on their academic performance:

Being back here, with no income, in debt, and with that old chestnut of Do-i-get-a-job-and-earn-money-at-the-expense-of-my-education-or-do-i-live-in-serious-debt-in-order-to-perhaps-get-a-better-degree hanging over me, I'm not enjoying being back at university that much. (P55)

If I worry about anything in life it always seems to be money related.....the main problem is when it gets to this time of year and you realise it is about time to start some serious studying, but your finances are also looking a bit grim. Therefore you have to do quite a lot of paid work, which WILL result in a drop in academic performance. (P46)

Another common theme in the group's responses, was that paid work took priority over their studies:

Well, without paid work I can't survive really – it's a bloody nightmare. Studying's all right but you can't live on no money can you – so I work first and study second. (P1)

However, it is worth remembering, that the traditional male group reported flourishing social lives throughout the course of their debt, which implies that the concerns around debt, and the detrimental effect of long hours in paid employment, expressed by many, did not appear to lead to any limitation of social activities, and once again raises the issue of prioritisation for this group.

(ix) Career orientation

In contrast to some other student groups, the traditional male student demographic, including Mike and Richard, appeared to be particularly unfocussed in terms of career aspirations, not seeming to make any overt links between paid work and future work goals:

My current job I do for money and I seriously hope there is no connection between this s*** job and what I will be doing for the next 40 odd years! I do this for money only and I hope I will be able to do a job I am passionate about when I leave here although I've got no idea what. (P81)

There also appeared to be no clear career motivation for many within the group:

Motivation??? Hrrrm wanting to be good at what I want, wanting to be looked up to and respected, I could mention doing mum and dad proud... (P13)

I still don't have a clue what job I want to do after my education, other than this vague 'helping someone' idea. (P55)

i have no idea what i want to do when i finish my course. Don't even know if I will work in an area related to the course so its probably a waste of time and energy. (P46)

These comments, relating to the prioritisation of social life, lack of motivation towards study, and poor career goals, offer potential explanations as to why this demographic group were so lacking in commitment to their studies, in terms of attendance and work ethic.

4.3.2 Conclusion

The issues that emerged from analysis of the experiences of the traditional male student group were: high confidence levels; low levels of anxiety; their poor attendance levels; the importance placed on social activities and social life; their almost complete lack of external commitments; the high levels of debt and paid work experienced by this group, and, their lack of career motivation.

It may be, that it was a combination of these issues, that led to the lack of importance placed on studies and academic attainment, by this group in general, as they had by far the highest levels of reported academic confidence, and lowest academic anxiety levels of all four demographic groups. For the majority, there appeared to be no external commitments other than paid work, and for the 1 student who had dependents, this was seen as a factor that impacted negatively, both on their experience, and academic success. Traditional male students reported high levels of financial debt and considerable anxiety about this, although this did not appear to lead them to minimise their extensive, and presumably expensive, social lives. Lack of attendance in class was often attributed to the amount of hours spent in paid work by this group, with the financial cost of their social lives, and the impact this had on their need for paid employment, appearing to be ignored.

The overriding theme that emerged from the traditional male student sample, was that they, as a group, all tended to be heavily engaged in the overall university experience, encompassing social life and personal development as a whole, however, they appeared to be less engaged with the academic side of university life. This was also evidenced by the group's relatively minimal participation in this research project (in terms of shorter responses overall). Many of the group participated regularly throughout the lifespan of the project, but their responses to the prompts and questions sent to them were often only one word. Most of the quotes that are used within the data

presentation, come from only a small number of particularly verbose traditional-aged male students, as the many single-line responses from others, are of little use to illustrate anything, other than the manner in which these young men appeared to express themselves over the Internet.

The impact that the issues examined in this Chapter have on other 'types' of students, will be studied in the following three Chapters, with comparisons of the 4 groups and links to the literature appearing in the discussion Chapter.

Chapter 5

Mature Male

5.1 Introduction

As with the previous Chapter, it was intended that there be fifteen participants from this demographic group, but unfortunately, only thirteen mature male students are included in the data presented. This Chapter focuses on the mature male student group, as, despite some clear differences, they are most similar to the traditional male student experience discussed in the previous Chapter. The Chapter will examine the experience of (n=13) mature males in the sample, and, as with the previous chapters, it will begin by presenting the case studies of 2 students: Charlie, a high achiever, and Billy, a lower achiever. These examples were chosen as they are illustrative of this demographic group as a whole, and highlight the similarities and differences evident between the 4 demographic groups. As in the preceding Chapter, illustrative quotes from each are used throughout, and then followed by the analysis of the data for the mature male sample as a whole. The chapter will then revisit the themes emergent in Chapter 5, revealing the themes relevant for this group, and will conclude that the mature males described slightly fluctuating confidence levels, but were generally overtly confident, and mirror the traditional males in many ways, however, having dependents (but not necessarily family commitments) moderated this.

5.2 Case Studies

5.2.1 Case Study 3: Charlie - Mature male student high achiever

Charlie was an overseas mature male student, who came to university having spent several years travelling after finishing his A levels, and he was twenty- three when he arrived at university. He and his family moved to the UK when he was fifteen, and his family resided in a 'not very affluent' part of London. Although he was not born in the UK, he was considered a UK student. He was unmarried and single, and so he decided to study away from home, but preferred to be close enough to visit home at weekends. He said that he had always known he would go to university, and that he enjoyed some 'time out' from studying before undertaking university. He was studying for a degree in Engineering, and his place on the programme was gained through clearing. Neither of his parents had been to university, but he had done well at school and college

(attaining 3 B grade A levels), therefore his attendance at university had been expected by those around him. He said that when he was young he was encouraged by his teachers, and was the first person in his entire family to go to university, and he stated that he felt under pressure to make his family proud of him.

First year:

Charlie's first impression of the university was that it was completely different from his previous learning experiences, and he felt nervous that he would find it hard to motivate himself, with all the 'personal study' that was expected of him. He commented that he found the standard of teaching high, and was pleased with his subject choice. When he first arrived on campus he was concerned that he would struggle to make friends, as he was several years older than the majority of his peers.

Charlie spent the first year living in university-managed accommodation in [the city], but unfortunately he found the travelling to campus difficult, and claimed that this led to him missing many early morning lectures and seminars, as well as regularly being late because of problems with public transport.

He was involved in paid employment during holidays but did not work during term time in his first year, as he was financially supported by his family, and had some savings from his time in employment prior to university.

Charlie's apprehension about being able to motivate himself, was borne out, when he reported struggling to settle into a work routine by the end of the first term, reporting that at that time he was working for approximately seven hours per week outside of contact time, and he recognised that this was not enough to reach his potential. He described the standard of work expected as 'challenging', and said that the workload was 'heavy'. He attributed his problems with the standard of work to the fact that he had previously undertaken a limited amount of science-based studying and, therefore, did not have an adequate background knowledge base to work from.

Despite his apprehensions concerning friendships, Charlie made a large number of friends in the first few weeks at university, and he enjoyed an active social life, writing of many nights out in [the city] with university friends. He also enjoyed spending time with his flatmates, and said that his friends 'made it all so much fun.....without them it would be really dull'. These friends remained with him throughout his time at university, and were mentioned frequently throughout the data collection.

Unlike the traditional males who generally remained confident, Charlie's confidence fluctuated wildly over the programme, and he sometimes admitted feeling totally overwhelmed, with little or no confidence that he would succeed, whilst at other times he appeared overly confident to the point of arrogance. On occasions, he expressed his own confusion over this:

Sometimes I feel less confident and others I feel ok I have never felt more confident! I don't get it either!

Exams were a significant stressor for Charlie, as his programme involved many exams over the year and he was not very confident about them:

the exams scare me a little as i have 8 of them.....I dont really know what to do to pass them.

Even after they were completed his confidence remained low:

not very confident that i have passed my exams but hey there are re takes!

Charlie failed two courses in his first year and had to undertake resits over the summer, both of which he passed.

Second year:

Charlie was pleased to return to his studies, confident that he would work hard enough to ensure no resits would be required that year. Despite this initial motivation to work hard, most of Charlie's second year correspondence highlighted his extremely active social life. He briefly had a girlfriend at this time, and discussed 'partying way too hard', and then when the short relationship ended, he then talked of 'drowning me sorrows'. He described a lack of work ethic towards his degree, and openly admitted that he was not really studying outside of lectures and seminars for the majority of the first and second terms of the year.

Lack of money became a significant issue for Charlie towards the end of the second year, and therefore he undertook paid part-time employment during term-time. He described occasions when the lack of money made him unsure that he would be able to remain at university, and he said that this distracted from his ability to study:

I don't know how I am gonna be able to stay to be honest. I'm totally skint. Not sure i'll be able to pay the rent next month but i'll give it a go. I need to work extra hours but I have got shed loads of course work to do too. It's not gonna be easy.

Charlie seriously considered intermitting between his second and third year, to enable him to work and reduce his amount of debt. He attributed the support of his university friends for preventing him from intermitting, and the thought of not graduating with his peers gave him the motivation to persevere with his studies in the face of financial and academic difficulties.

At the end of the second year, Charlie wrongly thought that he had failed the year, stating 'I've failed I know I have'. Interestingly, once he realised that he had progressed, Charlie had this to say:

I always knew i'd pass. I'm wicked good at this studying lark. I got a high 2:1 and I know I can get a first if I keep up the good work...god I'm good!

This ambiguous and widely fluctuating attitude towards his academic abilities was present throughout the data collection period.

Third year:

Charlie decided to continue on with his third and final year, and attempted to struggle through financially in order to complete his degree with his year group. He enjoyed the company of his fellow students and university friends, saying that the help and support they offered him at that time, influenced his decision to return after the summer holiday. He also stated at this time, that he had decided to work as hard as he could, in order to ensure he attained a good degree, as his family would be disappointed if he did not perform well. In this way, Charlie continued to highlight the role of his peers and family, in his motivation to complete his studies.

He complained bitterly throughout the third year that the amount of study and paid work required from him impacted negatively on the amount of leisure time he had, feeling that his university friendships suffered as a result of this lack of leisure time. He also discussed his relationship with friends outside university, and claimed that these relationships had changed since becoming a student, attributing this to the fact that many of his friends who attended university had done so straight from school, and were therefore in full-time work already, earning good salaries. It annoyed Charlie that he could not afford to participate in the kind of leisure pursuits they chose to undertake,

and, consequently felt they had grown apart. He found this situation, where finances impacted negatively on his leisure time pursuits, and his friendship networks frustrating, and noted this on several occasions.

The number of hours Charlie studied increased steadily over the 3 years of data collection and, in his final year, he reported studying approximately twenty-five hours per week outside of contact hours. His attendance also improved over his time at university, but he was still reporting non-attendance at some seminars and lectures in his third year, particularly if they began early in the morning. He claimed that:

It's not my (or my friends) fault really cos no one wants to get up early. We're students for god's sake who the hell thought of 9am lectures??

Charlie used the welfare systems at university to access financial help in his third year, reporting that the process had been lengthy and laborious, but worth it, as he was awarded a considerable sum of money. He also stated that he visited a counsellor whilst in his final year, as he was finding the stress of forthcoming exams unbearable:

The exams are killing me. I cant stop thinking about them. I'm losing weight and I feel like there taking over my life. I went to see a counsellor woman who was quite good....well at least she listened to me and let me have a good moan about it bless her.

Once again, this contradicts the overly confident message sent at the end of the second year, when he realised he had passed those exams. However, it clearly highlights that he was anxious at this time.

Once the degree was completed, Charlie described it as having been incredibly difficult, but also fun. The positive impact his friends had on him, and his student experience over the years, was acknowledged, as was the high standard of teaching he felt he had received. Charlie left university with a 2:1 degree, and was happy with his achievements, stating in his final correspondence, that he had worked as hard as he could, given his financial situation. His plans after graduation were to earn a good salary in a job that he enjoyed, although he was unsure what career that might be.

5.2.2 Case Study 4: Billy - Mature male student lower achiever

Billy was a mature male student aged thirty-one when he arrived at university. He was unmarried and had an array of girlfriends over the 3 years of data collection. He lived off campus throughout his degree in a house shared with other students. His elderly

and incapacitated mother also lived locally. Neither of Billy's parents went to university, but he felt that his mother was always keen for him to do so, and was very supportive of his decisions, as was a close male family friend, who had been a constant source of support and information, in relation to university life.

Billy came to university with three good A levels, and a history of success in marketing. He had lived in [the city] for many years, and had previously commenced a university programme at another institution, though quickly dropping out before attending this university to study for a degree in Computing. The reason given for deciding to go to university in his thirties was that he wanted to find a wife and start a family, which necessitated a career that would allow him to support them financially. He also described wanting to make new acquaintances, and earn some respect from his old network of friends. He began his computing degree having already received a formal diagnosis of dyspraxia, for which he received disabled students allowance.

First year:

Billy felt he could not comment on his first impressions of university, as he had previously studied for one year (on a different degree at a different university,) but had dropped out. However, he reported finding his previous programme to be 'incomprehensible and un-stimulating'.

From his very first response, Billy described a carefully planned schedule, which included study and paid work, as well as leisure time. The level of detail to which he planned his week was interesting, as it involved not only mapping out time to attend the gym, but also to wash out his gym clothes and the flask for his protein shake. These detailed plans covered every weekday, and he commented that at weekends he worked in a shop in [the city], therefore he had little time for anything else, including out of hours study. He stated that he undertook only 3 hours study time per week outside of lectures and seminars, mainly due to the other commitments in his life.

From the outset, Billy described a strong desire to be successful in life and to have good earning potential, but also described a serious lack of work ethic:

I have not been doing the work as I have put keeping myself afloat financially & spending time with the love of my life as higher priorities.

During his second term at university, Billy was in paid employment for twenty-four hours per week. The amount of time spent in paid work changed periodically, yet he always worked, and often described periods of full-time work during term-time as well as holidays. Money featured as Billy's primary cause for concern from year 1 until he completed his studies. Even during his first year, he often described not having enough money for his rent or food, and the emphasis on finances was consistent throughout:

I tell people I'm a student first and a temp second. Practically speaking, the reverse is true - My wages matter a lot more than the course because I've been in a very, very, very tight spot financially.

Despite the amount of time spent in paid work, Billy did not feel that his university work suffered, and reported that he would not have spent any additional free time he might have had studying anyway. He felt that it was mainly his leisure time that was negatively affected by his finances, restricting the kind of leisure activities he would have liked to do. During his first year, he described feeling isolated, as a result of this lack of finances and inability to join his peers in leisure pursuits, but despite this, there was a strong focus on leisure activities throughout Billy's responses, in spite of his reported financial concerns. He regularly described several nights a week getting drunk with his girlfriend and friends, in addition to an array of other leisure activities, such as: clubbing; dance lessons; several sports activities, and visits to a local casino.

Billy stated that the majority of his friends were from outside university, as he had lived in [the city] for some time, and built up networks through work. He was critical of his fellow students, and described their drinking and leisure behaviour as 'lazy and childish', and was particularly critical of his younger peers:

Younger students? Mostly though by no means exclusively a hopeless shower of f**kwits whom you'd have to tell what to do if their pubes were on fire, bless 'em.

The only university friends he did discuss were those he knew through his attendance at the gym, and these peers he described with affection.

At the end of the first year having spent his time partying hard, working, studying and in the gym, Billy started having seizures and was advised by his GP to rest. Billy's method of resting involved keeping all of his activities, both leisure and work, but sacrificing attendance at university lectures and seminars. He began to study at home, and alienated himself further from his university peers and the programme in general. Billy

was clearly deeply dissatisfied with the course at this stage, and described himself as disillusioned with the whole system:

I collapsed under the strain of trying to have a life, a girlfriend, a job AND a future through higher-and-very-pricey-particularly-if-your-mum-lives-within-'reasonable distance'- education. I therefore spent much of this term making & keeping appointments with doctors in & around [the city]....Stress related illness or no stress related illness, the rent still needed paying & I still had to eat, and I found having a fit at work a much easier prospect than having one in a lecture theatre crowded with 18-yr old strangers...find the course unstimulating & object to paying a grand out of my own pocket in fees...

Despite having no reason to be confident about his academic abilities, Billy regularly showed a very blasé approach to studying and assessment. Toward the end of the first year, he recognised that he needed to work hard to pass, but failed to do what was required, and, therefore, failed the year. Having admitted not submitting coursework for the year, Billy was then absent from one of his exams, and when questioned about missing the exam, he responded by saying:

it's all good cos everyone said the (multiple choice) exam was horrible & the resit's going to be essay based & I don't have to worry about it til september and in the meantime IT'S SUMMER AT L*NG F***ING L*ST!!!!!! This time next week I'll be in my new home & have 2 months of HHHHHHHHARDCORE entertainment in front of me, I can barely contain myself, my legs feel like they've been injected with a slow-building orgasm!

The university, being aware of his financial and health problems throughout the year, allowed Billy to undertake resits uncapped in September, which he subsequently passed.

Second year:

Billy described himself as happy to return to the second year, as it would be a 'skive' in comparison to the previous year. He said that he was now residing in his mother's house, and worked full-time over the summer to ease his financial situation. He had also separated from his girlfriend, which he described as a relief, as this would mean more time for 'sleeping socialising oh yeah and studying'.

Billy continued to undertake paid employment throughout his second year of study, stating that he enjoyed his time at work primarily because:

I'm not stuck in a room full of spotty teenagers stinking of booze from last night all thinking they've got something important to say.

Half way through the second year, Billy stated that his epileptic fits were under control, and his health was generally good, although he commented that the 'fitting' made him realise that he had limits, and needed to take more care of himself. For a short time during the first term of his second year, he described his social life as less hectic than he had in his previous emails. It was not long, however, before his leisure pursuits were back at the forefront of his correspondence.

Despite his lack of enthusiasm for his studies, Billy was confident that he would do well in his course and his second year exams. He claimed to be confident with all assessment methods, especially exams, and commented that his programme was mostly exam based, which made it easier for him as he had a 'fantastic' memory for facts and figures. Interestingly, he had stated in the previous year, that he was happy that his resit exams were essay-based, as he thought this would be an easier option for him to excel in. Despite this academic confidence regarding exams, Billy marginally passed several modules of the second year, and failed one other. He appealed to the university for entry to the third year despite this, and was eventually granted the right to progress, after a lengthy process, which culminated with a third class mark for the second year.

Third year:

Despite all Billy's problems with progression from year to year, his academic confidence remained high, and he was sure that he would leave the university with a 'respectable 2:2'. Despite this confidence, Billy described struggling with the workload in his final year, and regularly reported that the programme was the hardest thing he had ever done. This contradiction continued, and despite his confidence and recognition of course difficulty, he continued to demonstrate a blasé attitude towards his studies throughout his degree, but never more so than in his final few weeks of the course, when he made comments such as:

This s**t is boring and I can't wait to get the f**k out of here. Don't know why I've wasted me time doing this s**t cos it aint gonna get me anywhere. Everyone knows it's just a piece of paper and any dumb idiot can get it if he shows up and writes his name on the page.

Billy described using the full array of welfare support available on campus, including his Personal Tutor, University Counsellor and Careers Advisor, stating that those he had seen had helped him significantly, and been understanding of his situation. He

acknowledged that he would not have made it through his degree without university support services, in that he was given both academic and personal help by the university, with advice and financial support. He regularly received money from the Hardship Fund at the university, which he said 'helped ease the burden and allow more time in the pub'. Ultimately, he was pleased with all the services provided.

By the end of his time at university, Billy had decided that he wanted to teach English in the Far East for a few years, before embarking on 'some fancy job in computing', and achieving his future financial goals. He left university with a third class degree, and was working as a bouncer on the door of a nightclub in [the city], upon final data collection of the project, reporting that his finances prevented him from obtaining his immediate goal to teach English abroad.

5.3 Overall sample findings

For purposes of clarity, the findings presented below will use the same categories as in the previous and following two Chapters.

5.3.1 Confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation

In contrast to the sample in the previous Chapter (the traditional males), this demographic group had more fluctuations in confidence levels. Some mature male students, like Billy above, often over-estimated (and some vastly over-estimated) their academic abilities (when compared to reported performance on coursework and exams). At times, many of the mature male students (n=13) exhibited what could be termed as a blasé attitude to their studies, similar to the attitude of their younger male counterparts, and yet they failed to report the same levels of confidence as the traditional male sample, across the programme of study. To illustrate this, all mature males stated that they were nervous about one form of assessment or another, at some stage in their academic career, as illustrated previously by Billy's preference for an essay based exam over a multiple choice paper, or Charlie's level of apprehension with regard to his year 1 exam. However, the levels of anxiety for this group varied in 4 ways: between participants; according to the programme of study; year of study (for example, year 1 vs year 3), or even the time of year. Around exam time, several of the group were quite obviously anxious (n=6), whilst others were somewhat apprehensive (n=4), and the group as a whole claimed to be confident to participate in classroom discussion, irrespective of preparation for the lesson. This differs somewhat from the

traditional males, who stated that lack of preparation for class led to them being quieter members of that class.

Coursework assessment was an area that appeared to cause anxiety for some of the group (n=5), whilst others felt that essays were an easier mode than exams (n=4). The majority (n=12) of the mature male student group, reported poor/inconsistent attendance and often a lack of preparation for class, similar to those of their traditional counterparts, whilst in contrast, a minority (n=3) reported attending regularly and being clearly committed to their studies. Once again, in line with the traditional male sample, this demographic group reported enjoying a full and lively social life, and placed high emphasis on the importance of this for a positive university experience.

(i) Confidence

As illustrated by the case studies, most of the mature male sample studied reported fluctuations within their levels of confidence. However, generally they appeared neither overly anxious, nor as consistently over-confident as their traditional male colleagues appeared to be. In contrast to the case studies, some mature males presented a more realistic/ balanced approach to confidence, work effort and their expected outcomes:

I think I will be ok to be honest. As long as I work hard I generally get the marks I expect and it's only when I don't put the effort in that things go wrong. I think I'm clever enough to get this degree I'm just not one of those lucky buggers who can cruise and not put any work in but still get the grades. (P21)

Yeah I'll be ok, not gonna be the best but I'll get a good enough degree. (P30)

Despite the relatively high confidence expressed by the group over the 3 years, several comments were made (n=4) early in the project, about finding it difficult to return to studying after a long period out of the education system:

I am excited with a little trepidation.....it's been ages since I last studied and I'm worried it may take me a while to get back in the swing of how this studying thing works. I hope I can still do it. (P64)

I haven't done this for years so I think it's going to be a bit of a struggle at least for the first few months. (P6)

However, despite these concerns, those who had declared concerns about returning to studying after a prolonged period, described quickly finding their feet and settling in, and many showed increased confidence throughout the course of their study:

I thought it was going to be really hard having not studied for years but actually it was ok and I didn't find it that difficult at all. Either I'm really clever and just never knew it or this degree thing is going to be easier than I thought. (P64)

(ii) Anxiety

Directly related to the theme of confidence, is that of anxiety, and the levels of general anxiety expressed by these students fluctuated dramatically over the duration of their programme. On entry to the university, many expressed high anxiety as mentioned above, but throughout the programme this appeared to reduce and, in general, was often relatively low:

I'm anxious generally but nothing specific and certainly nothing serious. My anxiety levels are probably as low as they've ever been to be honest. (P6)

Yeah not really anxious about anything. Not much to be anxious about here really. Everything's good nothing life or death. (P21)

However, as we saw from Charlie's attitude to his finals, exam periods initiated high anxiety levels for him, and many of these students:

Exams- definitely force me to form an overview opinion of subject matter but BIG STRESS. Scared s***less about them. Don't know what to do to prepare myself but sure I'll be ok in the end – fingers crossed!!! (P30)

my Research Methods exam I'm not confident about at all, because, to be honest, I missed a lot of the lectures and the majority of the seminars. But we've been given a mock exam paper and it's open-book so I guess it can't be too hard or at least I hope it cant – I'm scared if I'm honest. (P21)

This was despite their often high levels of confidence that they would pass their exams, and perform well in their coursework assignments (particularly later in the programme):

Essays are just plain easy. What's hard about them? You read stuff re-write it and say what you think of it – nothing tricky about that. Exams are a little harder but again you just have to have listened all year and taken some notes then read the notes more recently – again nothing too tricky about that! (P30)

I think I'll do ok in me exams and me coursework marks will lift the overall mark so I'll be all good. (P6)

This group expressed high levels of determination to complete their programme, often because they felt they had given up a lot to be there, but sometimes also for external purposes (friends/ family expectations):

'I'm not enjoyin it it's shit to be honest but i lost everything for this poxy degree so im gonna finish it if it kills me! (P 6)

Since i came ere me mrs left and taken the kids so theres nothing else for me to do i might as well get it over with and see if i can get myself a new career. You never know I might even get a new woman if I do. I was well unhappy with her and me job anyway so i'm hoping for a new life and this degree is my way of getting it hopefully. I never think about giving it up it's how things are gonna change for me, get better for me. (P73)

(iii) Attendance/ Participation

Closely related to (and perhaps a cause for) the levels of confidence and anxiety, is the issue of attendance and classroom participation. As stated above, the mature male sample showed a gradual progression toward lower anxiety across the programme (with termly fluctuations within it). This gradual lack of anxiety could be attributed to the demographic group's high levels of classroom participation (despite inconsistent attendance and preparation):

I'm a real swot when it comes to turning up to scheduled stuff...the only week I did miss was spent in hospital so I think I'll let myself off...Yeah I contribute to discussion cos I've always done at least most of the reading so I've got something to say. (P31)

Don't miss nuffin think if I;m here I might as well get on with it. I like our classroom chats think they're cool and its nice to be able to say what you have and see what others fink about it really wouldn't miss it for the world! (P2)

As seems clear from the comments above, after an initial settling in period with fluctuations of confidence, preparation and attendance, there was a tendency for some to eventually reveal a realistically confident attitude towards their academic abilities.

Many mature male students continued to periodically express anxiety, but at a moderate level, and were confident about participating in class, often being quietly confident about all aspects of classroom and exam assessments.

(iv) Friendships, social life and conflicts with family commitments

Within the mature male sample, eleven of the total thirteen were similar to the traditional male sample and placed high levels of importance on the social side of university life. Social life, both within and outside university, was reported as being a key positive factor in many of these students experience of higher education. However, this group also noted the considerable time and money necessary for leisure pursuits, and acknowledged the frustration at this conflict between finances and social life.

Charlie, for one, found social life an integral part of his university experience, unlike a minority of the group (n=3) who reported finding the social side of university life and friendships more complicated and difficult. Billy is a good example of this, and at times appeared vitriolic towards the social life at university, and often alienated himself from his peers. Concern was expressed by 7 of those who placed high importance on the social side of university, about how these activities diverted their time and attention from their studies.

A minority of 'high achievers', particularly those with partner, family and dependent commitments, also highlighted social activities as putting pressure on their ability to successfully complete their studies. They reported having difficulty in juggling the importance placed on their social life, and the time and energy needed to maintain relationships with partners and families. This struggle to maintain a work/life balance, was related to factors such as finances, but importantly was more pronounced for those with dependents.

(v) Social life and friendships

In line with findings for the traditional male student sample, although not to the same extent, this group expressed spending considerable time and money on leisure activities:

I love the social side of things. I have loads of new and exciting things to do with my uni friends so studying is an annoying distraction really. (P31)

Am working loads cos we need the money and I'm tryin to keep the wife happy but at the same time I really want to be out with the lads in the bar – it's a hard life but a man's gotta have some fun or it aint worth it.....no matter what she says about the money I spend I need that time out with me mates to keep me sane. (P73)

The mature male sample discussed the practical need for university friends and the importance of friendships at university for success:

I get on well with most of the people on my course there are a few annoying ones but I have learnt to deal with them and their ways. Most are great though. Through our campus I have met loads of students and have lots of really supportive good friends. This is the best bit of being here really. (P2)

Some of the mature male sample disclosed meeting with friends and discussing their studies (n=6). However, they failed to describe study groups or any organised learning environments. There were only two comments about friends directly helping with their

studies in a formalised study group, and they were received from the same mature male student:

I meet with a couple of guys sometimes when one or more of us is finding something difficult. We bring our notes and sometimes swap articles. It's cool actually cos we all seem to get different things from the lectures so you end up with a better grip of what the hell you are supposed to know. It's one course in particular that we all find really complicated...it's really cool than and can be fun. (P37)

When discussing the importance of university friendships, this group was keen to express the value they placed on friendship networks for a positive student experience, as did the traditional male sample in the previous Chapter. However, there was less mention of alcohol-related activity in the way that their younger peers recounted friendship activities. For example, Billy found common ground with his gym buddies, whilst overtly despising the 'boozy activities' of the younger students (regardless of his own drinking habits outside the university setting).

(vi) External commitments - dependent children

The mature male student group, as a whole, reported low external commitments in terms of their care-giving responsibilities. However, those who did report children, and/or partners (n=7), claimed that they were having difficulty in juggling the importance placed on their social life, with the time and energy needed to maintain relationships with partners and families. This struggle to maintain a work/life balance, featured heavily for some, particularly high achieving, mature male students, throughout their time at university:

I haven't done my best by a long way as I honestly believe had I done this course become my life – without the s*** I have to contend with in terms of home life with wife kids and earning money I really think I would have excelled. I don't think I would have worked any harder but it would have been a hell of a lot easier. (P64)

It's not easy that's for bleeding shore! Maintenance payments for the kids. Rent. Beer money. It all gets on top sometimes. (P73)

Despite the experience of this sub-group of mature males of being parents, and who expressed that they were overtly glad to be so, little was said regarding these students day to day commitment to their children's care:

They're great the kids they keep me sane. Don't see much of them though cos the mrs takes care of them and they're usually either out with her or in bed when I'm home. Try to play with them for a bit each day but it's not always possible. (P30)

Don't see much of my children at the moment am too busy with this course and working to pay the bills. They're so lovely though and I miss them if I don't see them every day. (P2)

However, the issue of commitment to their partners (if they had one), and how difficult this could be, was a subject that was visited on many occasions by this sub-group of mature male students:

I have a mortgage, so I live in my own gaff....however, lack of investment inside, means that the paint it is due aint gonna happen, and the replacement needed for the guttering became a temp plastic bag effort. This means, ultimately, that due to insufficient funds, my property (family's home) will deteriorate during my educational pursuit. Me wife aint happy and boy does she ever let me know. sometimes think about leaving her cos she don't support me at all but I love me kids so I stick at it. (P30)

Well I've had the weekend... but I think I missed it. I ought to try and get out more to stop it flying by! What with my kids, work and uni there's never enough time...oh and there's the nagging wife to remember! (P21)

For some there was resentment towards their family commitments, and the impact they had on their ability to fully participate in the social side of university life:

I really wish I had done this degree thing before I got hitched and had kids. It would be so nice to have nothing to worry about other than going to a campus bar with the flatmates after school finished. (P2)

It's me own fault really silly b***** should never have messed around and waited so long to get here – would have been bleeding wicked to hang out with the youngsters. (P30)

It would seem from the data, that for mature male students without children (and/or partners), there were little external family commitments that gave cause for concern or even mention. For those with long-term partners, keeping them happy was often described as problematic, and for those with partners and children, the work/life balance could be particularly hard to obtain. The data appears to show that the problems experienced by those who had children (and to a lesser extent dependent partners), generally centred on the financial burden, rather than any day-to-day issues related to hands-on care and attention.

(vii) Finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career

As with the traditional male student group, there was considerable anxiety reported about the issue of debt, and most mature male students described many hours in paid work. Consistent with the case studies, the sample reported that long hours in paid

work negatively impacted on their ability to study (n=10) and, despite the emphasis for many of this group on paid work, most of them considered their studies to be a 'means to an end', and thus described them as more important than earning money. Their financial concerns were generally considered to be temporary and were of 'deferred gratification', as often future improved finances were described as a motivation to undertake study, leading to a strong belief among this group that the degree they were studying for would lead them to more financially rewarding ends:

I don't mind doing it really because I know that in the end it will help me get a better job and earn more money. (P2)

(viii) Debt and paid work

As stated above, finance was a cause of serious concern for the majority of this demographic group (n=12) with many expressing high levels of financial debt. Similar to the traditional male sample, some of the mature males (n=5) reported levels of debt that caused them regular and severe concern:

Money is a massive issue for me and my family now that I am a student. (P21)

It's causing me sleepless nights and I am really struggling to cope with the stress of it to be totally honest. I've been to see people here and i've asked for money from the fund that helps students who can't cope but I don't think there's any way they can give us enough – we are in serious financial dire straits! (P2)

Comments were made to this effect for most of the mature male cohort, despite family commitments. However those students with dependents felt guilty that they could not provide well for their families:

As a mature student with a family, I feel guilty about the lack of things I can get for my children, especially as they are teenagers and they just want to fit in with their friends. I sometimes wonder whether they would have just preferred me to work full time, and not to have become a student. (P30)

There were also regular comments that the levels of debt and paid work needed, not only to support families, but also simply for food and rent in order to survive (as reported by Billy in the case studies), negatively affected students ability to study:

I noticed that my grades this years dropped compared to my grades last year. this is mainly because I am now working 2 days/week to earn a living and to survive financialy. (P64)

I do think it affects my acedemic performance, because as well as being here five times a week, I also work at the weekend, this leads to me fitting any work I

have to do for my studies around this as well as family commitments. My health doesn't seem to be affected, I'm just seem to be continuously tired. I think being in dept has made the whole university experience a lot more stressful. (P30)

There were times when many mature male students considered dropping out of university, either temporarily or permanently, due to their anxiety over finances and the negative impact debt and paid work were having on their ability to complete their studies:

I'm not sure I want to carry on doing this its too much pressure. Kids wife work and studying, think I may take next year off and try and get some money behind us before I do the final year. (P21)

Think I'm done here. Can't be f***** with it any more. I just don't want the hassle. All this and I'm skint all the time it's s***. It just aint worth it. (P30)

This sub-group of mature male students clearly struggled to juggle their family responsibilities with their studies and high levels of paid employment. However, the majority of the group continued to describe regular leisure time activities, and put a high priority on their social lives, despite recurring financial issues. Comments such as this were commonplace:

Yeah we are skint but I would go nuts if I didn't get out. I'm working at uni working at work and working at home with my kids and wife. I need time out or it really would tip me over the edge. I know the family need the money but I need my sanity too. (P6)

F*** the responsibilities I love my new social life and I'm not letting it go for anyone! (P73)

It is clear from the data that the mature male group all referred to the issues of debt and paid work. However, this was moderated by the presence of dependents, and serious implications for finances arose for this sub-group. In other words, for the majority there was evidence of some anxiety related to financial concerns but, as with the traditional males, concerns expressed did not appear to lead to any limitation of their social activities. Conversely, for a small sub-sample of the group with dependents (and/or partners), there appeared to be major concerns over finances which caused difficulties with their perceived ability to successfully complete their studies.

(ix) Career Orientation

Again, the mature male group was similar to the traditional male group, in terms of career orientation, describing having little focus on which direction they wanted to progress for their careers.

Not sure why I came here or what I thought I would be when I finish. Not sure what you can do with a psychology degree really. Will find out next year I guess???? (P21)

No idea Lucy. None at all sorry. (P6)

Many mature male students (n=7) also described being very unhappy in their previous work lives, which was a possible motivation for their studies:

All I know is I am not ever going back on a building site. I don't care what I do when I finish the course but it won't involve being cold and wet for most of the year that's for sure. (P2)

I was an estate agent for 10 years and I hated at least 9 of em so I know whatever I do when I finish it's gonna be better than that. (P30)

However, this group differed from the traditional males, in that they reported being more ambitious in terms of their future potential earnings. When questioned about what motivated them to go to university and progress their careers through retraining/re-entering education, the key factor described was almost exclusively financial:

Money. (P2)

More money and maybe a bit of respect. (P64)

Pound notes and then some more pound notes. (P21)

When pushed further on the topic, the need for money was often expressed in terms of supporting a present, or future family, and wanting to be able to provide for them financially:

i need money to support the family. I want it so we can have a better life. (P2)

I want a family but I will need to be able to support them financially and I could never do that in my old job. (P73)

Many comments were received about the financial gains offered by having a degree, despite fewer clear career goals and objectives, which indicates that finances appear to have been the motivating factor for this group in returning to higher education. This may offer some insight on the levels of commitment to their studies, despite the many financial difficulties expressed by many within the group, and the pressures of social life and leisure time.

5.3.2 Conclusion

The main themes which emerged from this analysis of the mature male student group were: fluctuating confidence and anxiety levels; the importance placed on social activities and social life; high levels of debt and paid work, and a lack of career motivation despite a strong commitment to financial gain in their future employment. These themes are well illustrated by both Charlie's and Billy's case studies.

Additionally, a sub-group of mature male students indicated the impact of dependents, and the obvious struggle for these students to gain a work/life balance, with some students showing signs of resentment towards their dependents, partners and families, when social and financial conflicts occurred. This emerged, despite the fact that the sub-group of students indirectly indicated that they did not spend a large amount of time or energy in the day-to-day practical care of their dependents. Rather, the financial burden of caring for partners and/or children was felt heavily by many of these students, and related to this was the fact that many mature male students had to undertake long hours of paid work. For this sub-group it was seen as necessary to support their families, often leading to guilt at even embarking on higher education study, whilst they perceived their family was struggling for money. Nonetheless, even for mature male students with dependents, an emphasis was placed on the social side of university life, and this was clearly important for many within this group as a whole.

An additional theme that emerged from the mature male group as a whole, and differentiated them from their traditional counterparts, was that they felt they had invested heavily in returning to education as adults, both financially and socially. Many described having sacrificed careers, money, and even indirectly romantic relationships and friendships to become students. They stated that they were, therefore, committed to successfully completing their studies no matter what the financial or academic obstacles, which offers a potential explanation for the group's high(er) attendance and participation in class, compared to that of their traditional counterparts. It may also offer some insight into differing achievement levels between the groups, and this issue will be explored later in this thesis. The case studies and thematic analysis of female students will be examined in the following two Chapters. However, comparisons of the 4 groups with links to the literature will appear in the discussion Chapter.

Chapter 6

Traditional Female

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter will examine the student experience of the traditional females in the sample (n=18), and will begin by presenting the case studies of two 'typical' traditional female students, Ella and Shell, the former a high achiever, and the latter a low achiever. As with the previous Chapters, these students were chosen to illustrate the typical issues and patterns of behaviour for this demographic group.

The case studies below will illustrate the complexity of this demographic group, followed by an overall thematic analysis of the group as a whole. The key issues which emerged for this group were similar to those for the previous groups: academic confidence; social life; anxiety; career orientation; commitments; debt/paid work and attendance/participation. A group split in how these key factors are experienced will be highlighted and evidenced throughout the Chapter.

6.2 Case studies

6.2.1. Case Study 5: Ella - Traditional female student high achiever

The first 'typical' case study chosen for this demographic group was Ella, a traditional, eighteen-year old female student studying for a degree in Psychology. Ella came from what she described as a middle class background in the South West of England, and both her parents had been to university. The decision to attend university was, she claims, taken out of her hands, as she was always expected to succeed at school and go on to study at a higher level. Having completed her A Levels with 'unexpectedly excellent marks', she travelled with her partner in Europe for the summer, and they both moved to [the city] in anticipation of her forthcoming attendance at [the university].

Ella described her arrival at [the university] as 'safe' as she was relatively close to her home town, and her partner had moved with her. She and her partner had spent several weeks getting to know the city before she began her studies at the university, allowing her to feel comfortable, whilst also making several visits to the university

campus prior to the start of her first term. Ella was not concerned about living away from home, as she had been absent over the summer months and could easily visit at weekends if she wished to. She said that upon arrival at the university, staff and students seemed friendly and she was very excited about settling down to her programme and, overall, she was pleased with her programme choice and felt that the subject matter looked interesting.

First year:

Ella lived off campus throughout her degree as she felt that life on campus would be “claustrophobic” and offer too many distractions. However, she reported finding the journey to campus a distraction in its own right, leading to several missed lectures/seminars in the first year. This was particularly the case if she had a class in the morning, followed by a long gap until her next session, feeling that 'hanging around' on campus offered little opportunity for rest or successful study.

The number of hours spent studying outside of lectures and seminars, was stated by Ella as around twenty-five hours per week, and remained consistent throughout her time at university. She reported attending the majority of her classes in the first year, but also claimed that occasionally she just ‘couldn’t be bothered to go’.

Ella claimed she made few friends on campus, feeling that this was because she was not in halls of residence unlike most of her peers but, despite being lonely during her first year, she also felt that this lack of companionship was beneficial to her studies:

Feel a little isolated living away, but actually think my education will be better for it.

This lack of friends on campus featured regularly throughout the data collection period; however, she claimed that it was her choice not to have a wider circle of friends, and that she could have made more social connections at university had she wished to do so. In fact, Ella protested that this lack of close university friends was unproblematic, as she had friends from other areas of her life, stating that her first year was:

...not at all as I expected, mainly on the friend making front, but I reckon as long as I am picking up people I stick with from one place it doesn't matter if they are not coming from another.

Ella did not talk a great deal about the social side of her life whilst at university, there being no mention of clubs or societies, or any other activity either on or off campus.

During her first year, Ella was employed in paid work for approximately twenty hours per week, recounting that she enjoyed her paid work, and saying that the money and subsequent freedom to relax and not have to worry about paying the rent, enhanced her overall learning experience. She also stated that it was good to be self-sufficient and not rely on financial support from her parents or partner.

Ella's opinion of her academic abilities was contradictory, in that she was highly confident for the majority of the course of her studies, but there were some notable exceptions to this. In term 2, she described feeling nervous about exams, at a time when she felt the standard of teaching had been perceived to be poor, and claimed that she hated giving oral presentations in class:

Hate presentations. No matter how many times you do them, or how well you know the group I am still really nervous.

However, towards the end of her first year, she reported high levels of confidence in terms of her end of year exams:

Only have 2 exams at the end of term, one for Approaches to Psych and one for research methods, so not at all worried really as it doesn't feel like too much work. Have also got 1st's in both end of term exams so far.

Despite her confidence about the exams, Ella finished the first year by achieving a mid 2:1, with which she was bitterly disappointed:

I can't believe it – i worked hard and i should have done better than that. Think it was the research methods exam that really skewed me although f**k knows how cos it's open book. They should have warned us how hard it was going to be. I'm not happy!

Second year:

At the start of her second year, Ella confessed to not having given her university career a thought over the summer. She said that she could quite happily have not returned, this lack of enthusiasm clearly appearing not to be due to concerns about the workload, or how difficult the work would be, and rather about social concerns. She stated:

Am a bit apprehensive about the social side as uni is still a bit of an unsafe place... and i feel a bit lame for cutting myself off over the summer, I should make more of a concerted effort.

Ella talked extensively about the help and backing she received from her off campus friends, family and partner. It is worth noting that the support she received from her companions off campus may have impacted on her need to find friends within the

university setting, although this was not explicitly mentioned by Ella. However, once again, in her second year, she stated that she had made very few friends on campus:

Most strange thing for me has been where my new friends have come from - not from uni but thru my work. No real close mates on my course and as I don't live on campus they are all I really have contact with.

Ella continued to undertake paid employment for approximately twenty hours per week for the first term of her second year, but reduced these to around ten per week by the commencement of the final term of year 2. She claimed that the workload for university, combined with working 3 days per week had been too much of a struggle, commenting that she missed the money, but that it was better to be able to put the effort into her studies.

During her second year, Ella's attendance in class improved, and she claimed that she was confident and happy with the level of work she was expected to do, despite struggling with the increased workload on several occasions. Even given her concerns, there were no obvious signs of a lack of confidence academically and, in fact, the only doubts and difficulties she had in any area of her life at university centred on friendships. Ella finished the second year with a first class mark, with which she seemed satisfied, however, she was critical of her peers who had fared less well:

I worked hard all year so i got the mark i feel i deserve. All those moanin about their marks should try putting the work in and staying away from the pub!

Third year:

Ella reported that she really struggled to get herself motivated for her studies at the start of her final year. She said that she was lonely and bored at university, despite stating that the subjects she was studying were interesting, and that staff were helpful and friendly. However, within a few weeks she seemed to have 'settled' and was enthusiastic about her studies:

I'm really enjoying the subjects they're wicked. It's nearly over now so i'm making the most of it before i have to go out in to the real world. Yeah lovin it really!

Ella continued in paid work during her final year, but again reduced her hours, to only 5 hours per week, claiming that the money was 'handy', but said her main reason for staying was due to her friendship group at work (rather than university). Ella also reported increasing the number of hours she studied in her final term.

Throughout her final year, Ella was confident about her academic ability, with the only exception being when she described a lack of confidence about her final year project, though this was made within an overall context of knowing she would be fine:

My third year research project is by far and away the scariest thing I have ever had to do and that is taxing my confidence in a big way. Thing is that once I actually get cracking I am sure I will be fine its just the getting started that's scary.

Ella claimed that in contrast to previous years, where she had been more self-sufficient, her parents had been very helpful financially in her final year. Interestingly, she reported that her father had also helped her academically, and it transpired that he worked in the same field in which she wanted to develop her career- developmental psychology. However, when questioned further about her career aspirations, she specified nothing more than that she wanted to work in that general area, but not a specific career/ job.

When asked about the university support services on offer, she claimed that she had not made use of them, rather talking through any concerns she had with her family. Her father's support and guidance was described by Ella as a 'lifeline', also stating that her father had even offered to support her financially in her future postgraduate studies.

Friendships at university remained a major issue for Ella in the third year, when she reported (on more than one occasion), that she had not made close friends at university, and was also critical of the small network of friends she had spent time with over the course of her degree:

I realised half way thru last term that the people I hang about with I don't really like at all! - Can't believe it took me 2 yrs to work it out. They feel young, and really insecure - like not sure of themselves at all and as a result they are real pussys - sorry to be vile but I don't know how else to describe them - they are frustratingly weak and mat-like!

Despite her lack of university friends and obvious concerns around this, Ella performed well in her degree, gaining a first class mark. Upon reflecting on completing her exams, she stated that 'the course and exams were actually pretty easy' in retrospect.

6.2.2 Case Study 6: Shell – Traditional female lower achiever

The second 'typical' case study selected was Shell, a traditional eighteen year old student who described her family as 'upper working class', from the north of England, revealing no further details of her background. She was a first generation student, as neither of her parents had been to university and, as an only child, she had no siblings undertaking study. Apparently, there was much excitement within the extended family that she was the first of them to go to university. Shell reported that her parents were extremely supportive of her decision to attend university, and had always encouraged her to do her best at school and college. Shell came to university to study history in the Humanities, having completed a GNVQ in 'Health and Social Care'.

First year:

Shell relayed nothing of her first impressions of [the university] or [the city], nor of any issues related to living away from home, other than to say that she lived on campus throughout her first year. She seemed to mostly enjoy this, but found that living with noisy, untidy flat mates became less attractive as the year progressed.

By the end of the first term, Shell described the teaching as 'very good', and stated that she was enjoying her subject of study. She had settled into a work routine almost as soon as she arrived at university, claiming that she worked consistently throughout the week, but took the "weekends off", and describing her work habits as 'a full-time job'. Despite this, by the start of the second term she reported being unsure of what was expected of her in relation to standard and amount of academic work, which corresponded with fluctuations in confidence at this time.

For Shell, there was minimal discussion about the social side of university life during her first year, and at times she described feeling lonely. However, by the third term she had a small but close network of friends. Having not joined any university clubs or societies, any discussion of social activities she reported, involved mainly drinking with peers on campus. Towards the end of the first year she told of having a boyfriend, who subsequently featured highly throughout the remainder of the data collection period.

We had a few drinks on campus last night which was fun because we don't do it very often. It's nice to see my uni mates outside of class or essay writing sometimes!

At the start of the third term, Shell talked about nervousness with regard to exams, as she felt that the university staff had not told her what was expected of her. She also described feeling that she had not been supported with preparation for forthcoming coursework or exams. However, she had formed a study group with some of her peers where they helped each other to revise and, as a result, she was then not worried about the exams:

They'll be ok cos even though noone helps you get organized I think I've got it sorted. Me and me little group of study buddies have planned it out and we all help each other out with anything tricky. Would have been good to get some help from lecturers though!

During the academic year, Shell did not undertake paid work. However she worked full-time during the Easter and summer breaks, and commented on the fact that money was a concern for her, and that her parents were unable to assist her much financially. At this point, however, she claimed that she was 'managing'.

Immediately following the first year exams Shell felt confident that they had gone well, and that she had done enough to get a good grade for the year. She attained a low 2:1 with which she was very happy.

Second year:

Shell reported being pleased to return to university after the summer break, during which time she had undertaken temporary work on a full-time basis, which she claimed had made her 'brain go to sleep'. She reported that she had missed her friends from university, and was excited about the subjects she would be studying over the coming year, but was also sad to leave her family and friends from home, as spending time with them over the summer had made her realise how important they were to her.

At the start of the second year, Shell was nervous, but excited about the workload, and the fact that the work started to count towards her degree classification. Once the year started in earnest, Shell described it as 'harder' than the first year, but still felt confident that her work had improved, as she was confident that she knew what was expected of her. During her second year, Shell reported that she continued to study steadily throughout term and rarely missed any classes, but despite this, as the year progressed she perceived that the workload had become heavy, and struggled to meet the deadlines. She claimed that 'during term time I'm stuck with a permanent headache'.

However, at other times during the second year of data collection, Shell contradicted herself by saying that she spent a lot of time with friends, as well as her boyfriend, participating in leisure pursuits, describing on many occasions getting drunk and dancing in clubs in [the city], as well as 'romantic nights in front of the television with my boyfriend being compulsory at least four times a week'. At other times, she described studying ten hours a day, 6 days a week with little or no leisure time, and this yo-yo process of working hard, and then less so, continued throughout the second and into the third year of her programme, always prioritising her social life throughout:

I work hard on my course during week days so I think I deserve to have fun in the evenings and weekends – all work and no play makes jack a dull boy remember!

From the start of her second year Shell worked part-time in paid employment to supplement her income, which she felt had a detrimental effect on her studies, but claimed that it was a 'necessary evil' to combat the stress of her 'ever-increasing overdraft'. She said that her level of debt affected every aspect of her life, from studies to her social life:

I do envy some of my non uni friends as they have money to go out and buy luxuries, whereas my trainers are falling apart and the buttons on my coat don't match. Plus when it come to weekends or evenings out i feel like the poor relation as I count the pennies in my purse. I have stop buying recommended readings as there to expensive, especially when you only need a chapter. i do however walk round the bookshop longingly.

During her second year of her programme, as well as lack of money, Shell described lack of leisure time, and stated that she felt 'guilty' if she took a day off study, or spent too much time with her boyfriend. Again, this contradicts her previous statement of having a compulsory 4 nights a week in with her boyfriend.

As the second year exams approached, Shell anticipated them positively, and claimed that she thought they were a good way to assess her skills, and also wrote that she enjoyed working under exam pressure. Shell exuded confidence at this stage of her academic career.

Exams really don't worry me, I'm looking forward to them. I honestly don't know what all the fuss is about, do the readings and answer the questions, easy peasy.

She also reported being highly confident with her ability to present information orally, and enjoyed participating in class, and although she did not overly enjoy giving

presentations, she felt she performed them well. Despite her self-reported confidence, her second year exams went less well than anticipated, and she attained a low 2:2, with which she was very disappointed, and this 'under-performance' negatively affected Shell's academic confidence.

Third year:

By the start of the final year, Shell was disillusioned with her studies and stated that she was desperate to finish and get out in to 'the real world' of work. At the start of this year, she was confident of her ability to raise her mark to the 2:1 she was aiming for, though she seemed to feel that little work was required in order to achieve this goal. She said:

Most of the hard work is done now. Just need to put one foot in front of the other and it's over thank god. It's easy enough there's just loads of it. The exams'll be alright I think I've done enough to get me the marks I want.

However, towards the end of her degree, she became less confident and described this final year as 'hell'. Shell began the year confident that she could raise her performance, feeling that she had worked very hard throughout her programme, and that she should be confident of her success. But by the middle of the third year, she described the workload as getting bigger and harder 'by the minute'.

Shell continued to talk about her social life in her final year, but commented that the excessive workload, and need to work, had put a strain on her social activities. She claimed to be 'massively' in debt, and claimed that she was trying to minimise the amount of hours in paid employment, in order to concentrate on her studies. However, directly in contrast to this, were numerous comments about her going away for long weekends with her boyfriend, and descriptions of 'wild' party nights in [the city]. She wrote about her financial debt on numerous occasions in her final year, and mentioned that her family had even helped her by sending some money (despite being unable to do so in her first and second year).

Money, don't talk to me about money. Like I said before I am soooo broke it's ridiculous. I really don't know how I am going to last this term out, let alone the rest of this year.

When questioned about her career plans, Shell stated that she had no plans to progress to postgraduate study, mainly as she could not afford it, and that she wanted to enter 'some kind' of local politics work, and was seeking voluntary work towards the end of her final year in order to help her achieve this goal.

Shell did not make use of the student welfare and support systems on offer at the university, with any support received (financially and emotionally), reported to have come from her family, boyfriend and her 'supportive and encouraging' new friends on the course. She complained on several occasions about lack of contact time with academics, and the lack of perceived support from those teaching her, also complaining bitterly about her personal tutor who failed to make any unsolicited contact with her during her time at [the university]. Overall, Shell felt let down by the support offered by the university, saying that she was left very much on her own to 'fend for herself'.

After receiving the news that she obtained a 2:2 classification for her overall degree, rather than feeling this was a 'true reflection' of her academic ability, she attributed this disappointing result to the lack of contact and support from university staff. Ultimately, she described her final university experience as 'always feeling like nobody cares'.

6.3 Overall sample findings

Analysis of the data provided by this demographic group revealed that the key issues for this group were largely the same as those which emerged for the previous two demographic groups, namely: social life; anxiety; career orientation; commitments; debt/paid work, and attendance/participation. Therefore, a similar pattern has been used to present the thematic results by merging these issues into three distinct overarching themes: (i) confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation (ii) friendships, social life and (few) conflicts with family commitments and (iii) finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career. This Chapter will explore the ways in which this demographic group is similar to, as well as different from, the previous groups, in their expression/experience of each of these key factors and themes. In fact, revealing that part of the cohort is very much in line with the traditional male student experience, however, others are in direct contrast to it.

Interestingly, it will be shown in the overall analysis, that the traditional female group appeared to be inherently confident in relation to their academic abilities (much like the traditional male student group), but many experienced periods of low confidence occurring for a variety of reasons (and for some, high anxiety and confidence crises were more chronic). As with the previous Chapters, each theme will be discussed in turn, with quotes from participants used to illustrate the emergent themes, and

numbers to indicate the frequency with which participants expressed these views. The impact that these themes have on students experiences and outcomes, will be examined in relation to the literature in the discussion Chapter, along with a detailed comparison of the four demographic groups.

6.3.1 Confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation

As illustrated by the case studies, the thematic analysis revealed that this demographic group were particularly complex in relation to academic confidence. On initial investigation, there appeared to be a clear split between those with high and low confidence levels. However, on further investigation, this issue was more complex, there being some within the group who regularly expressed high levels of anxiety relating to their studies (n=5), and these students sometimes exhibited very low confidence in relation to classroom participation and the full array of assessment methods. Nevertheless, on some occasions, even these students appeared to be highly confident. In contrast, the majority of the traditional female group (n=10), including the case studies above, exhibited relatively high confidence in their academic abilities, but again even these students, on occasion, appeared nervous and apprehensive about succeeding at university.

(i) Confidence

As outlined above, the main theme to arise for this group was generally high confidence levels, with intermittent low-confidence periods. Some traditional female students illustrated what could be termed as 'extremely high' confidence (n=7) with comments such as:

It's ok, it's really not that hard, people keep moaning about it but to be honest it's easy. (P27)

I feel I am coping ok actually. The subject is interesting and the workload is about right. I really don't find it very difficult. (P108)

Also, there were several incidences of 'academic over-confidence', in line with the traditional male demographic group, and this extreme level of confidence is evident through a few members (n=3) of the group, with comments such as:

I don't really do much I just turn up smile sweetly and seem to get the marks I'm after. (P17)

I do about 5 mins prep for each seminar but no more than that I just blag it really. (P10)

In contrast, there was also the lack of confidence evident periodically for most traditional female students (n=14):

At the moment in fact, to be quite honest, I am feeling like I am too stupid to be at university and should perhaps give up... When I read texts, the information just doesn't stick in my brain, and I feel that where I am expected to know a lot of material, even having done the work, I am still clueless. (P4)

It seems like far too much for my poor little brain!! (P12)

At times some of the student group, (for example, Shell), reported feeling shocked and overwhelmed at the workload:

I have far more work to do than expected! (P126)

I am enjoying my courses.....although after a summer of doing nothing, the workload has been a bit of a shock to the system! (P27)

It is clear that the issue of confidence for this demographic group is complex and fluid, with the varying levels of confidence within the group seeming to be related to a number of factors. As illustrated in the case studies and through the thematic analysis, bouts of lack of confidence for some (as with Ella), were mainly attributed to upcoming assessments, particularly exams and oral presentations, whilst for others in the sample, the fluctuations were more linked with workload, work effort and outcomes (for example, Shell). The perceived heavy workload, and failing to achieve the high marks, led to periodic drops in confidence.

(ii) Anxiety

Directly related to the theme of confidence, is that of anxiety, and therefore it is even more difficult to separate the issues of confidence and anxiety for this demographic group, as the two appear inextricably linked. Again, the reported experience of anxiety is complex for these students and clear patterns are not obvious. There were those within the group who revealed very low anxiety levels fairly consistently, with rare exceptions. Conversely, there were those who exhibited extremely high levels of anxiety, but for all, this anxiety led to periods of low confidence, particularly with oncoming assessments, when workloads were perceived as high, and in the face of under-achievement in terms of marks.

As seen in the case study, Shell reported high confidence and low anxiety at times, and even stated that exams were unproblematic, being a good way of assessing her

abilities. It appears from the sample data as a whole, that many (n=7) of her colleagues had similarly high confidence relating to exams generally:

exams actually give me a bit of a buzz (how sad!). No other feeling quite matches opening your paper and knowing you can kill the q they are asking and write for 6 hours in laborious detail... (P12)

I like exams – I get a buzz out of it – and I find it easier to prepare for them than to sit and write an essay. (P17)

A lack of anxiety was equally evident generally among the sample as a whole, in relation to coursework assessments:

Essays are easy you just read a couple of articles and re-write what other people have said and then say anything random is your opinion and you get a good mark. (P62)

I'm not normally as overly confident as some of my mates here but come on essays are easy... (P10)

However, the thematic analysis reveals that there are exceptions (as we can see from Ella's case study), when the sample found exams stressful at particular times:

In the week running up to the exams I was really stressed and didn't feel or behave like I normally do. I didn't sleep or eat as well as I usually do and the night before my last exam I didn't sleep at all!!!! I'm normally really calm about deadlines , but there's something unnatural about being made to sit in a big room with all your peers and being asked to answer questions you cannot predict, with strict rules and toilet queues!!!) (P34)

As assessment goes I hate unseen exams as they cause a lot of stress, and in many cases they seem to test your memory rather than your ability. Sorry for the rant but I REALLY HATE AND FUNDAMENTALLY DISAGREE WITH EXAMS!!!! As I have said I think they are detrimental to health and education!!! I am therefore happy to end this rant by saying that, if I play my cards right, I NEVER have to do an exam again EVER! Next year, it's essays all the way!! (P62)

High levels of stress and anxiety were occasionally expressed in relation to coursework:

I feel like I am constantly working on a large piece of work and feel stressed for a large majority of the time. (P34)

I missed my essay deadline this week. I wrote one essay, badly, but put loads of effort in and it took me ages. When it came to writing the second one, I just cracked. I couldn't face it. Did some reading, got more confused and decided that I couldn't do it, that I was too stupid. I don't even know if I can get into trouble for it or not...I meant well but I just couldn't do it... (P62)

The relationship between high confidence and low anxiety, and vice versa, was the clear pattern to emerge from analysis of the traditional female students data. Feelings about both confidence and anxiety were generally of high confidence, and low anxiety. However, it was changeable for the majority of the group, with clear fluctuations shown throughout the data collection phase, particularly in the circumstances where the workload was perceived as high, and/or in the face of poorer than expected outcomes. That said, making definitive statements about the traditional female student group in relation to this aspect, is problematic.

(iii) Attendance/Participation

There were those within the group who reported lower attendance rates overall (in line with the traditional male group), and appeared to lack commitment and engagement with their studies (n=9), whilst others (n=6) appeared to be dedicated, had high rates of attendance, and participated fully in class (in direct contrast to the traditional male group). There was no obvious factor explaining the difference between these two types of traditional female students, despite extensive analysis of their data. However, attendance and participation generally was again somewhat changeable and fluctuated over time, appearing unrelated to motivations to study. This juxtaposition can be seen in the case studies (for example, Ella appeared to be committed to her studies but reported missing early morning classes, whilst Shell gave conflicting reports, stating that she was working extremely hard, but also emphasising her social life). Again, the sample as a whole showed two patterns of behaviour in terms of attendance/participation, one more in line with the traditional male group, despite higher reported motivations to study, and the other in direct contrast to this group.

Those traditional female students who had poor attendance were often blasé:

Sometimes its [non-attendance] because its too early and I a tired, or hung over, sometimes its because I've got other things to do.. or sometimes its just that I can't be bothered. (P4)

I have missed a few lectures etc, mainly due to laziness, or being hungover. (P12)

The main reason I have for missing seminars and lectures over the last two terms were either 1. Being away on holiday 2. Being lazy. (P108)

A particularly noticeable theme, also revealed in one of the case studies, was that some (n=5) felt their lectures and seminars were uninteresting and not very helpful, which could potentially have contributed to their low attendance in class for this sub-group of traditional females:

Sometimes the lectures are useless or mind numbingly boring and then it is difficult to motivate myself to go. (P34)

Sometimes I feel that my time can be put to better use by getting on with work on my own rather than going to a particularly bad lecture. (P17)

I have missed some politics lectures on the basis that I do not think that the lectures are worth attending. "HE" regurgitates (spelling!) the text book and adds little to it. I can read you know, I sometimes think. (P126)

In contrast, others within the group (n=8) appeared to be dedicated to their studies, and described very high attendance levels:

I have gone to 100% of lectures and seminars this year.....and almost that many last year too. I don't want to miss anything in case I can't catch up. (P62)

In the seminars people come even if they haven't prepared for the lesson. It really annoys me as I attend everything and prepare for every class because I don't think it's right to pay to be here, take a place that someone else could have, and not do the work – besides if I miss anything I just know I would fail and it all counts now so it's even more scary!! (P65)

Attendance levels within the group appear to have been largely polarised, with some attending the majority of classes (in line with the mature female students, to be discussed in the next Chapter), and others being uninterested and complacent about attendance (in line with the reported experience of the traditional male demographic group).

Responses received from the traditional female group as a whole regarding participation in class, were again mixed but appeared to be unrelated to reported attendance rates. The defining factor that led to the majority of traditional students participating in class, appeared to be influenced by whether or not they had done the necessary preparation (in line with the traditional male, but not mature male, experience):

It's ok. I've usually done the readings so I have something to say that won't make me sound completely stupid and sometimes I surprise myself and say something that sounds quite good. (P10)

If I do the readings then I know what I'm talking about so it's ok. (P62)

For a small minority (n=3), there were anxieties about participating in class irrespective of preparation:

I don't like it cos everyone looks at me. My mouth goes dry and I find it really hard to get my words to come out in the order I want them to.....doesn't matter how much I know about the topic I just can't seem to do it. (P65)

Hate it – whatever I say I sound stupid in comparison to everyone else. (P34)

It seems clear from the comments above, that for the majority of traditional female students, preparation for class positively impacted on their willingness to participate, whilst for a minority, the amount of preparation and knowledge of subject did not provide the students with the confidence and willingness to participate, leading to more generalised reluctance with regard to class contributions (as will be revisited in the next Chapter on the mature female student experience).

(iv) Friendships, social life and conflicts with family commitments

The traditional female sample was more unified in relation to this thematic area than any other. With the exception of a small minority of traditional female students (n=4 including Shell), most traditional-aged female students placed little emphasis on the social side of university life, this being in direct contrast to both the traditional and mature male student experiences.

There were some traditional female students within the group who expressed a desire to participate more with the social side of things, yet they gave no reason why they could not do so. Unfortunately, this area was not able to be investigated further within the project, but future research could elicit further data on why these students felt excluded, or indeed excluded themselves from this element of university life, described with such importance by their male counterparts.

(v) Social life and friendships

The importance placed upon social activities was an overarching issue for the traditional male student experience and, to a lesser extent the mature males, but a large portion of their female equivalents (n=11 including Ella), placed relatively little emphasis on their social activities:

Haven't really done anything social yet cos I've been busy with the work. (P17)

I didn't come here for the social side of things. I have a social life already. I came here to learn and get a good job. (P34)

However, as described in the summary above, this was not exclusively the case with a small minority (n=4) of traditional female students, who stated that their social life was highly important in their university experience (as with the traditional male group):

Yep. The social life here is fab. I wasn't expecting it to be as full on as it is but I;m loving it...loads of cool people here and cheap beer everynight of the week...wicked. (P108)

Busy busy bee...societies are great – I've joined half a dozen. (P17)

For this minority of traditional female students who placed high importance on their social lives, finances were also cited as a barrier to social activities:

The only thing that stops me doing more is money. It's expensive to do all the things I'd like to but I do what I can. (P27)

No monies...what a nightmare cos I'll have to stay in this weekend again. (P108)

It seems clear from the quotes above that, for this minority group, financial constraints negatively impacted on their social life. This is an interesting finding in line with the traditional and mature male student groups, both of whom stated high levels of concern over their finances, yet they did not allow this lack of money to hinder their social activities (particularly in the case of traditional males). Therefore, a small sub-group of the traditional females, including the case study of Shell, fits more closely with their male counterparts, rather than with the majority of the female sample. However, it is worth noting, as illustrated by the two quotes above, that they appear to differ in relation to prioritisation and management of their finances. This 'split' within this demographic group is visible to some extent, throughout the traditional female sample and across the themes of confidence/anxiety, attendance/participation and social life.

(vi) External commitments - dependent children:

Traditional female students, similar to the traditional and mature male student groups, reported low external commitments outside the university setting, and none of this sample reported having a duty of care over children or parents. For this group, the emphasis was on personal relationships with partners (again clearly demonstrated by both case studies), where studying appears to have led to problems for many traditional female students (n=4), particularly if their partner was not a student themselves.

He just doesn't understand the pressure of studying and trying to keep our life exactly as it was before I went to uni. I can't do everything, I'm just not wonder woman. (P17)

The issue of changing relationships with romantic partners featured regularly in discussions from this group of students, with some comments showing that partners were struggling to cope with the students new found role:

I don't know what the f*** is going on with him. Since I started uni he's lost it. Nothing I do is right and he never stops trying to mess things up for me here. What the hell??? (P17)

We have been together 3 years and everything's been great. I really love him loads. Just recently though he seems to be a bit jealous of me being a student. He weren't to college and has nearly finished his course to be a plumber and that's really cool but he keeps moaning that I'm at uni and not earning blah blah...he puts it down all the time and says that I probably won't make more money than him anyway so I'm wasting my time...it's really getting to me cos I am working really hard to do well at this and he's just making it more difficult than it already is. (P126)

For some of the sample attending, university was the end of their relationship (n=4) including the two participants quoted above.

It's over I've had enough. He just can't treat me like that anymore. Uni is important to me but he just never got his stupid little head round it. (P126)

We broke up over the summer. It's crazy cos we were so happy before I became a student. I really don't know what happened but he just said it wasn't working for him anymore...o be honest I felt the same. We both changed and drifted apart. (P17)

For some of these students, personal relationships appear to have been positive in terms of their social lives, but were often said to have had a negative impact on their academic lives:

Dan [her partner] loves coming to uni and meeting up with everyone. We have a blast. The only problem is that when we party and he stays over I get no work done...it's fun but it makes the rest of the week a bit of a nightmare. (P34)

For others, time spent with their partner took precedent over studies (in line with the case study of Shell), and this prioritising of relationships occurred for some in the group, despite protestations about heavy workload.

It is interesting to note that the problematic nature of relationships reported by this group differs substantially from those of the mature male student group, where relationship problems were often described as being an obstacle or financial burden, making life difficult for these students. However, in the case of the traditional female cohort, it appears that when problems arose, it was their partners who found the situation of study difficult rather than the students themselves.

(vii) Finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career

Debt featured heavily for the majority of students in the entire sample and the traditional female group was no exception, with half of the group (n=9) reporting having a lack of disposable cash and high concern over their levels of debt. However, unlike the male demographic groups previously discussed, the traditional female students appeared to have a real sense of control over their financial situation. The entire traditional female sample was employed either during term time or during university holidays. Unlike the traditional male sample, for most of this group the amount of paid work was not considered to be particularly detrimental to their studies and, in fact, some reported it as beneficial (in terms of social support, financial independence and work experience).

(viii) Debt and paid work

All traditional female students within the sample reported financial debt at some time during their time at university, leading to serious concern for over half the group (n=9). These students regularly discussed the lack of disposable cash available to them:

Skint – totally! (P108)

Not sure how I'll even eat till I get my next cheque...not a f***** bean in my pocket...(P12)

The traditional female group overall also reported high levels of paid employment:

I'm working about 25 hours a week term time and full-time in the holidays. (P4)

As many hours as I can fit in around my course so probably about 20 a week. (P27)

Whilst for the majority of traditional female students the amount of paid work was not considered to be detrimental to their studies, for a small minority it was considered by them to have a negative impact on their academic performance:

I work way too much. It's hard to work practically full time and do a degree. I'm always knackered...(P12)

I sometimes think that my job really makes studying difficult cos lets face it I get paid to sell s*** in the shop and I don't get paid to read the s*** they make us. I need the money so work always takes priority. (P34)

For the minority of the group who prioritised university-linked social lives (for example, Shell), financial concerns had a negative impact on their social life.

I never have enough money to go out much to be honest with you. It really gets me down (P10)

Bored of no money to play it sucks! (P17)

However, this group of students also seemed completely aware of their financial situation, most being prepared to change behaviours to minimise the negative impact of financial debt and paid work, in a way that their male peers did not disclose:

Yeah I'm really in debt and it's being doing my head in but I've cut down on the drinking and partying. I can't work anymore hours than I do already or I'll never get to study. Something had to give so it was my social life...it's not forever I'll be partying again as soon as my bank account has recovered. (P17)

Money's been really tight and I've been working loads to sort myself out. I asked my folks and they helped a bit but they don't have a lot to give. The only thing I can do is stay in and count my pennies...i don't need to eat out all the time and I've seen enough movies this year already. (P126)

Whilst debt is obviously of concern to this group, they all engaged in paid work, and for the majority of the sample this was considered as a positive activity, appearing to use paid work as a coping strategy for their debts, and being willing to change their lifestyles to minimise their financial concerns. For a small minority however, concerns over debt, and the negative impact of long hours in paid work, were pushed aside as their social lives remained a priority (in line with the traditional male cohort).

(ix) Career orientation

In the area of career orientation, the traditional female student group were once again diverse in their responses. There were some (n=7) with vague, or no career orientations (in line with their male counterparts):

Not sure what I'll do when I get out of here, suppose I ought to think about it soon as it's not far away really. I'll get a job somewhere – I'm smart enough ;) (P108)

Haven't given it a thought to be honest...something'll come up...i'll just have to see what happens...(P10)

However, a third (n=6) had high career orientations with quite clear career goals and knowing what was necessary to accomplish these:

I want to go on to be a lawyer. I initially thought about doing the law degree but wasn't sure I would be good enough to be accepted and someone told me I could do a conversion course once I had a degree. I've applied already and really hope I get in...fingers crossed! (P4)

I want to go on and be a psychologist. I've always wanted to work with kids with learning difficulties and now it looks like I might be able to. I was worried that I wasn't up to it but hopefully I'll get the marks I'm after and be able to reach my goals. (P27)

It appears that many of the sample had carefully thought about their future career (for example, Ella), whilst others (for example, Shell), had given it little, if any, thought at all. This is another area where the traditional female student group is polarised, with a sub-group clearly in line with the traditional male cohort, and the rest in direct contrast to their student experience (and will be shown to be more in line with the mature female experience).

6.3.2 Conclusion

It can be seen from the case studies and the overall thematic analysis, that the traditional female student group is very diverse in terms of their reported student experience, and key themes therein, making them less easily categorised than their male counterparts. Commonalities within the group have been difficult to identify in some areas, except largely for social life and external commitments (and lack of emphasis for both). Initially, the group appeared to be split into those with high versus low confidence and anxiety, but further analyses uncovered a unified group, in that they had high confidence combined with periods of low confidence when they were experiencing high anxiety.

Reported attendance was inconsistent for the group, and there were mixed feelings regarding motivation to study, and interest in the subject matter, with some students complaining of uninteresting and unstimulating classes leading to absence, whilst others reported attending all classes, and retaining high interest levels. There appeared to be no obvious relationship between attendance and participation, which is in line with the traditional male student group, and unlike the mature male group. Preparation for, and participation in, class were linked and these students described feeling most comfortable contributing when they well felt prepared.

Financial concerns were apparent for this group of students, as with all other demographic groups, all of them being involved in paid work at some time or another. For some students, the amount of paid employment was perceived to impact negatively on their academic career (and for a small minority, their social life), whilst for others paid work was considered positive, as it minimised their anxiety levels, increased

independence and social support, and enabled a well balanced 'all-round' university experience.

Comments about friendships were minimal within this group, and none of the traditional female students reported having dependents which impacted on their university experience in any way. However, issues of partners were prominent for this demographic group of students, with many describing difficulties and pressures placed on their personal relationships once entering the university setting, particularly from the partner's viewpoint. A small number mentioned the positive and supportive role of partners, and a few also mentioned partners as a priority over study. This was in contrast to the mature male students, who often spoke of relationships as social and financial obstacles.

Overall, the case study and thematic analyses of the data from the traditional female student group, identifies that this group, rather than having clear thematic patterns of its own, appears to be made up of fluctuations in confidence, anxiety and even attendance/participation. However in other ways, they are in line with their male counterparts, particularly in terms of high (and over) confidence, and the lack of participation when unprepared. A minority of the traditional female group, showed very clear thematic patterns, in line with the traditional males, for instance, in terms of the importance of social life, a blasé attitude to study, complacent attendance, and strong feelings of the negative impact of debt on study (and overall quality of life), combinations of characteristics found in the other demographic groups.

Chapter 7

Mature Female

7.1 Introduction

The final demographic group to be discussed is the mature female student group. This Chapter will examine the student experience of the mature females in the sample (n=23), and it is worth noting that the size of this sample is considerably larger than some of the others. Whilst no reason for this was provided by the participants, this large sample size may be linked to the levels of conscientiousness demonstrated by the mature females, in terms of their attendance in class, and their reported general commitment to their studies. It will begin by presenting the case studies of two 'typical' mature female students - Yasmin and Sophie; the former is a high achiever, the latter a lower achiever. As with the previous Chapters, these students were chosen to illustrate the typical issues and patterns of behaviour for this demographic group.

The illustrative case studies below will highlight the complexity of this demographic group, and will be followed by an overall thematic analysis of this sample. This Chapter will highlight the ways in which the university experience of these students is distinct from those previously discussed, it will also illustrate several similarities between the groups.

7.2 Case Studies

7.2.1 Case Study 7: Yasmin - younger mature female student high achiever (no children)

Yasmin was a mature woman of twenty-four, studying for a degree in Economics in the School of Social Sciences. She lived in [the city] before going to university, and remained living off campus throughout her degree. She was familiar with the campus before attending university, as her ex-partner worked there. Yasmin came from what she described as a 'poor working class council estate background', and she was a first generation student with neither parent attending university, although her brother and her ex-partner both had degrees. She stated that both her brother and ex-partner had encouraged her to give up her short, but successful career in finance, and go to university. Yasmin had gained three good A levels when she was younger, and at eighteen had started a degree, but dropped out very quickly, mostly due to financial

pressures. She had subsequently successfully completed several short courses, which she had enjoyed, but felt that getting a degree was something she had always known she was capable of, but had never really been given the chance to complete.

First year:

On arrival at university, Yasmin rated the teaching staff as 'brilliant', and said that the standard of teaching, and the academic support offered by staff in her subject, was first class. Her initial impressions of being a university student, were that everyone was helpful and friendly, and that the programme looked exciting and stimulating, although the administration was 'in chaos'! She said that she had made friends of all ages quickly and easily during the first weeks, and that she was very happy with her choices, in terms of both subject and institution.

Yasmin did not undertake paid employment in her first year, as she was financially secure with savings accumulated prior to becoming a student. She lived off campus in a house she co-owned with her previous partner, and, although he no longer lived there, he still paid half the expenses for the house.

Yasmin settled into a work routine almost immediately, and described how she had carefully thought out her work routine to ensure a work/life balance:

I have a fairly good routine, although I constantly seek to improve it. I have a regular weekly timetable that builds in regular amounts of study, gym and my home life. The study time is spread out over the week, although it does tend to be more intense on some days than others due to my timetable. I have one complete day off (generally Saturday) and two/three evenings off. I'm studying about 15-20 hours a week at the moment and this includes extra reading and work.

Yasmin also described studying throughout the holidays, to ensure that on returning every term, she was ahead of the required reading. Her study routine during term time involved planned sessions of study with others from her programme, and Yasmin took responsibility for organising these, watching over the others in the group carefully, so that if they started missing sessions and falling behind, she would chase them up and try to get them back to taking part in the group.

Though the students Yasmin studied with were described with affection, and she had initially mentioned making friends easily, there was little subsequent reference to friends for the remainder of her first year. When questioned about the social side of university life, she said that apart from her study friends and some acquaintances from

the gym, she had little contact with anyone from university, which she attributed to living off campus and not being interested in 'getting pissed every night'. She had not joined any clubs or societies, claiming that there was nothing on offer that interested her.

Comments on fellow students featured highly in Yasmin's responses throughout her time at university. She criticised other students lack of work ethic, in relation to absenteeism and preparation for class and exams, particularly criticising the men on her course:

The men in the group are much more prone to miss seminars on a regular basis (some group members were seen once/twice throughout the term!). They rarely prepare for the seminars and often don't have the sheets with them. They tend to be very boisterous and disruptive and interrupt/don't listen to others. Many refuse to do work on the board or answer questions.

She was also very vocal about students attitudes and behaviour:

Students, can't stand them!! In general, I can't stand the species. Loud, self obsessed and self important, obnoxious, 'up their own arses' and not particularly interested in studying.....They think that they're the centre of the universe and that gives them the right to: talk loudly in lectures; chat in seminars; interrupt in seminars even though they haven't prepared; make snide comments about people who are at the board; brag lie and cheat about deadlines; and insist on the right to copy other people's work.

This was in light of her reported excellent attendance and dedication to her studies, as she claimed that she had not missed a single lecture or seminar throughout the first year. She submitted every possible piece of work, both assessed and non-assessed, throughout the year, and she also reported visiting many tutors during office hours, and asking them to help her with anything she did not understand or was finding difficult.

Yasmin was consistently confident throughout her first year that she would succeed at university, saying that she found studying exciting and interesting, and that she enjoyed the challenge of presenting to class as well as the pressure of exams. She also stated that working in the financial field prior to university had given her experience and knowledge that others on the course did not have. She said that she was completely determined to succeed, and when the work was difficult she just studied harder to ensure total understanding of all subject materials. This work ethic resulted in her completing the year with an impressive first class mark.

Second year:

Yasmin was very excited to return to her second year of study, saying that she had relaxed completely over the summer months, working only 2 or 3 days a week to keep herself financially buoyant. She reported having obtained the reading lists for several of her second year courses, and having completed that and other related reading, making her confident that the year would be manageable.

However, soon after returning to the second year, Yasmin stated that the workload had increased massively, and that the standard of work required was much higher, resulting in her having to work much harder than in the first year. She described being slightly overwhelmed, but said that the hard work she had done in the first year was paying dividends in the second, as the foundations of her knowledge were good. She reported feeling the implications of not performing strongly, and said that her confidence was taking a knock as her marks had dropped from her impressive previous year's first class marks.

In relation to academic confidence, Yasmin was inconsistent in her second year, mainly appearing overtly confident, claiming that she felt academically capable and had no confidence issues in relation to participating in class, or giving oral presentations to the group. However, the content of her emails suggested that she struggled to maintain this confidence if she got a mark that she was not happy with or received any form of criticism about her work. Comments such as this were not uncommon:

In the end my first degree essay (equivalent to 2% of my degree) turned out badly (for me) , 61%, the lowest mark that I've ever had.....It did upset me and significantly demotivate me.....Also, the feedback was critical of my structuring which is normally my strong point.

Yasmin largely attributed her high confidence to her age and life experience:

I do think that some of my confidence comes from being a mature student and being less bothered about many things in life. I've no great fear of getting things wrong or making a fool of myself.

Later still discussing age and confidence levels, she contradicted herself somewhat by saying:

I know that age helps me avoid some of the teenage angst issues and if I don't understand something I will always ask BUT at the same time I don't

necessarily feel more confident in my answers or anything and I don't want to look stupid in front of everyone any more than they do.

Yasmin reported feeling that living off campus, and being older than most of her peers, had a detrimental effect on the social side of her university life during the first year. She claimed that she had rarely attended any of the social activities organised within the subject group, and had only rarely been to the bars on campus. However during her second year, her social life off campus was thriving, and she stated that she had a wide network of friends, many from university, with whom she went out for dinner, to the cinema, to pubs, for walks, and engaged in a wide range of other activities. When questioned about leisure time Yasmin responded:

Yes I feel that I have leisure time. I'm used to working full time, going to the gym, studying part time and having a life so I'm almost overburdened with leisure, so much that I don't tend to make the most of it.

Towards the middle of the second year Yasmin talked of some financial concerns. She was worried about money because of a financial dispute with her ex-partner, forcing Yasmin to return to work 2 days a week. During this time she reported feeling stressed about the lack of time she had for leisure activities, commenting on the pressure she felt because she had less time to study, and indicating that she was missing her university friends. Fortunately for Yasmin, the dispute was soon resolved, and she ceased working, enabling her to focus on her studies, enjoy more leisure time, and catch up with her friends.

She said that her coursework marks had improved throughout the second year, and Yasmin entered the exam period feeling well prepared and confident that she would successfully complete the exams. She had also started revising for the exams early, and felt that she would manage them without too many difficulties. Yasmin's hard work paid off, and she concluded the second year with a solid first class mark, but despite this she was unhappy, claiming that she would have liked to have done better in order to secure the overall first class degree she wanted.

Third year:

Yasmin was pleased to return to her final year of study, saying that she had really missed the 'buzz' of studying over the summer. She described working in a 'mundane low paid job' over the vacation, and said that this had refuelled her desire to succeed at university. Once again she had obtained reading lists and done some pre-emptive

study over the summer months, leaving her confident that she would manage the year well.

Yasmin did not feel that the workload had increased in the final year, describing the level of study as being easier than it had been in the second year. Yasmin talked of her study group of friends frequently in the final year, recalling very detailed study plans and routines which they followed together. She said that this network had worked well during the first 2 years, but that they had increased the amount of support they offered each other and the time they studied together during the final year. Specifically, she stated:

The course is mostly men but my study group is all women. I can't imagine how I – or they – would have done this without each other. We spend at least a couple of hours together studying every day. We meet after lectures and compare notes. We talk about issues we want covered in seminars. We have made revision notes together. They have all been great, really great.

During the final year there was some contradiction in relation to confidence, Yasmin saying that she often needed 'hand holding' due to lack of confidence in many areas of her life, both inside and outside of her studies. She reported using the university support services regularly, and said these services were invaluable to her, and that without them she would have struggled to get through her degree. As well as seeking help with her personal problems through the support services, Yasmin regularly saw her personal tutor for academic support and also describes this as invaluable.

Yasmin did not undertake paid work during term time in her final year as, on the whole, debt was not really a concern to Yasmin, since during this time she appeared to manage her finances well. As previously mentioned, she had saved some money before going to university, and her ex-partner helped with the cost of her mortgage as he co-owned the property for the first year. She took out a student loan to help with general living costs. However by the end of her degree, she said that money was 'tight', but that she was managing to:

keep my social life alive albeit only just. Gone are the days of the cinema and expensive restaurants. Now it's more about a take-away in front of a DVD. But hey it's all good. I'm happy - everyone else is poor too so we keep each other entertained.

Yasmin had a clear career path that she wanted to follow from the outset of her studies: she planned to get her degree, do a Masters and then PhD and work in the public sector on public policy and public funding issues. She came to university

knowing what she wanted, and what she needed to do to get there, and never wavered from this, even during the times when she described herself as demotivated with her studies.

On completing her degree and obtaining a first class mark (72%) Yasmin progressed on to a Masters degree at the London School of Economics.

7.2.2 Case Study 8: Sophie - mature female student lower achiever (with children)

Sophie was a mature female student of thirty four, studying for a degree in English. At the outset of her studies she was a single parent of two young children with a live-out partner. However she married him towards the end of the second year. Sophie was a first generation student with neither parents nor siblings having attended university. She described her background as being 'semi-middle class', stating that her father had owned a shop in her home town of Birmingham. After Sophie completed her A levels she had studied to be a nurse, and had worked as such until she had her children in her late twenties. Her decision to go to university was based on it being a long-term ambition, her unhappiness in her previous career, and the long gap in her employment since having children. She came to [the university] through clearing, as she made the decision to apply very late in the year, after successfully completing an Access Course, and she selected her subject because she was interested in it, her choice of institution being influenced by the fact she had lived locally for some years, and ultimately because 'it was what I got accepted into'.

First year:

Sophie was already familiar with the university and city, and therefore had few comments on her first impressions. She said that the university staff were friendly and helpful, but that she found her fellow students distant. Despite this, she described excitement at the prospect of being an undergraduate student and said that she was looking forward to the work as she was confident it would be interesting. She also stated that after several years at home, taking care of her children, it would be good to have something else to focus on.

Sophie reported a lack of contact hours in her first year, citing this as having had a negative impact on her motivation and organisation. In her first term at university, Sophie described studying weekdays for between 4 and 6 hours a day, including contact time, and initially stated that she did not study at weekends, as this time was

dedicated to her children. However, by the middle of the first year Sophie was working in paid employment at weekends, as she was struggling financially. She remarked that having to undertake paid employment was having a negative impact on her ability to study. Specifically, as the decision to go to university had been hers, she felt she could not let studying distract her from the quantity or quality of time spent with her children. Accordingly, by the middle of the first year, the number of hours she spent studying had reduced significantly, although she never explicitly quantified by how much.

Sophie regularly alluded to financial problems throughout the programme of her first year, and consistently referred to the cost of childcare throughout her degree. Despite working in paid employment for between 6 and 10 hours per week during term time, and for a greater number of hours in the holidays, she appeared to be constantly struggling financially.

Sophie lived off campus with her children, although she regularly stated that she would have liked to have been able to live on campus, because living off campus made her an outsider, and she described feeling that she had missed out on the social side of university life. The topic of friends appeared regularly in Sophie's emails, and she described difficulties making friends on her programme in the first year, saying that this caused her considerable frustration, impacting negatively on both her studying and her general first year experience at university. In the quote below, Sophie describes problems she had with fellow students, and states that she was not alone in this:

I have frequently thought that it is more usual for [the university] students to be bordering on rude than friendly. For example I have learned to ignore people that I know from seminar groups unless they greet me - I have been embarrassed by receiving no acknowledgement from people that I know from seminar groups too often.....Perhaps this might be just down to my personality but I know that other students both mature and younger students have commented on the lack of friendliness in many seminar groups...

Sophie discussed a small group of mature students in her subject group who regularly met to offer each other support and encouragement. She said that this group of students were not her friends, but as she was generally uncertain of her academic abilities, their support helped her confidence grow. Her responses pertaining to academic confidence varied during her first (and subsequent) years. During the first term she described believing that she could obtain a first class degree, but by the start of the summer term she thought that she might not be able to meet the standards required to obtain a degree of any classification.

When questioned about methods of assessment, she said that she found exams hard, but that she enjoyed speaking in class and presenting orally to the group, reasoning that this was because she always prepared for class by doing a substantial amount of reading. When presenting, she did even more preparatory work and thus knew that she would be able to talk authoritatively on the subject and answer any questions that arose. Her comments on coursework essays varied, at times they were described as 'easy' but on other occasions she commented that they caused high levels of anxiety. Sophie was critical of her fellow students, and stated that they (particularly younger students) were lazy in preparing for seminars if someone else was presenting. As a result, she felt confident that she was better informed than her peers. She also said that being older and having more general life skills, helped her to feel confident with public speaking.

Sophie reported massive anxiety regarding her first year exams, stating that she lacked confidence about her knowledge of the subject area and that she was uncertain what was expected of her in order to pass. Despite this, once the exams were completed, Sophie commented:

I actually enjoyed the exam on the day and i think that i preferred it to coursework although i'll have to wait and see how i got on!

In her first term at university, Sophie was pleased with the marks she got in her coursework. However, by the end of this period she indicated that her levels of tiredness were making it hard for her to stay focused, and commented that she was looking forward to the holidays. On returning after the Christmas vacation, she described herself as 'delighted to be back'. This pattern of losing motivation throughout the term, and then returning after a break revived and excited, was repeated throughout the 3 years of her studying, and seemed to directly relate to her confidence levels.

Sophie was bitterly disappointed with her performance in her end of year exams, where she obtained a low 2:2, which knocked her confidence, leading her to feel nervous about starting the following year:

i didn't get on very well in my exams so i am apprehensive about being able to produce the standard of written work required...because of this i did most of my summer reading so I didn't take a complete break from the course.

Second year:

Despite her anxieties and reported lack of summer break, Sophie returned to the second year, stating that she felt refreshed and invigorated. When asked about the workload and the fact that her work now counted towards her final degree classification, Sophie claimed that she was confident about managing the workload, but nervous about the fact that the marks counted towards her degree classification. Consequently, she reported having increased the amount of time she spent studying. In spite of her early optimism, Sophie reported finding the workload excessive within weeks of returning from the holiday.

Sophie often discussed feeling guilty that her studies distracted from her family life, and these concerns became very clear during the early part of the second year when she married her new partner, also a student. They were unable to afford a lavish wedding which she said her partner would have liked, and there was no honeymoon due to lack of time to organise it. However, despite this, Sophie was proud of her status as a student, regardless of other people's opinions, and the lack of support received from friends and family outside of university:

i love being a student and i love my major subject. i think that most of my family and friends think that i am being a bit irresponsible but for me uni is a realization of a personal ambition and i am delighted to be here.

Sophie's comments relating to her confidence levels continued to vary throughout her second year, vacillating between feeling highly confident, and insecure, as reflected in her responses in the second year.

Keeping on top of her studies, her family life and her paid employment, was reported as being difficult, and Sophie indicated that leisure time was something that was missing in her life at this time, mostly because of a lack of time, but also because of a lack of finances. However, by the end of the second year, Sophie had a small group of close friends with whom she studied with on a regular basis, and maintained contact with over the university holidays. Whilst her lack of available leisure time and funds impacted on her relationships with her peers, she stated that it had a positive effect on her studies:

i think with a young family the pressures of work/money are always there in varying degrees . in some ways the lack of funds means i can't go out to much and i feel in an odd way this benefits my studies! during easter holidays i am going to have to work most days to keep myself from drowning in debt.

Sophie was clearly struggling with all her commitments by the end of the year, and talked about dropping out of the programme and going to work, in order to ease the family's financial situation. She was unhappy that friends and family expected her to leave her programme whilst her new husband was not expected to return to work and discontinue his studies:

I know they are my children and i want to support them myself but we are supposed to be a family so how come there is no discussion of Chris leaving his course to work and pay the bills. Why does it have to be me and my course that suffers? I know i'm being mean but that's how i feel. His course won't change our circumstances massively but mine will and i feel like mine is more important than his but everyone ignores and belittles my studies. It really hacks me off!

Sophie completed the year, but offered few comments on how she was feeling emotionally, or how the programme was progressing. She did, however, state that she was in contact with the counselling services at the university at this time, and was feeling lonely and depressed. After completion of the year she simply said:

I am knackered. I'm glad the year is over.

On receiving her marks for the year she reported being surprised and disappointed at the 2:2 she gained. She claimed that she had worked much harder at her studies during the second year and felt that she deserved better.

Third year:

Despite her obvious struggle at the end of the second year, Sophie was pleased to return after the summer break, and said that she was looking forward to improving her grades in the final year. However, within weeks she described the level of work expected as 'crazy', and the workload as 'really crazy'. After taking a couple more weeks to 'get back in the swing of it', she commented that she was enjoying the challenge and looking forward to the final year, and that her contact hours had increased, resulting in her finding it easier to maintain her motivation and manage the workload as a result. As the year progressed, Sophie appeared to struggle to maintain momentum and regularly stated that she was tired of studying and was eagerly anticipating finishing the programme.

By the end of the final year Sophie described studying:

pretty much as if i had a full-time job. You know kind of 9-5'ish. It's not easy but i've always tried to do it that way so i can have some time with the kids in the evenings. If i'm not working that is. Having Chris there helps in one way cos he

helps sort the house out while i put them to bed but then i should study in the evenings but don't cos he's there.

When asked about the social side of university life, Sophie stated that she had no social life, remarking that she was too tired to consider one, and that even if she had the energy, she had no money to support a social life. She claimed that she continued to meet with the small group of friends with whom she studied, and that the friendship and support these people offered was valuable in terms of keeping her at university. She continued to work part-time during her final year, saying that her family could not manage without the money, and that it eased the pressure she felt from family and friends to contribute financially.

Sophie said her main contact with the support services at the university had been related to asking for financial assistance throughout her degree. Despite the significant support of this fund, she continued to struggle with increasing debt and the negative effect this had on her ability to study:

As my time at uni goes on, i am becoming more and more in debt. i applied for the hardship fund and received money to go towards childcare but even with this and working part time, it is still difficult to manage our money. these holidays, i can't do much work because the children are off nursery for five weeks and i have to work. next week chris (her partner) will have to take a week off college as i think that i have to do a full week of nights just to pay the bills. it is easier during term time. because i have had to work so much or mind the children, i have gotten very little work done so far and so yes it is affecting my performance.

Interestingly, the contact she discussed in the second year with a university counsellor, was not mentioned in the final year when specifically asked about this service.

Sophie's confidence in her academic capabilities again varied in her final year, but she appeared to become less interested in her studies as the course of her degree progressed. She claimed that the workload was heavy, and felt nervous about the end of year exams, however, she was less verbose about such issues than in previous years, usually commenting in short emails stating simply that she was tired:

Don't know what to say Lucy. Advice to new students – be prepared to fight with family and be tired – very tired.

Sophie's marks were consistent throughout her three years, and she obtained an overall 2:2 degree (56%) classification. Her aspirations in terms of potential career changed during her time at [the university], as initially, she wanted to continue in further study to become a school teacher. However, by the end of the second year she stated

that she wanted a career in publishing, but by the end of her degree programme she planned to return to her original career in nursing.

7.3 Overall sample findings

Analysis of the data provided by this demographic group revealed the emergence of key issues, which were largely the same as those for the previous three demographic groups, but with a very distinct twist. The themes of social life; confidence and anxiety; career orientation; commitments; debt/paid work and attendance/participation were all pertinent to this group. However, despite the similarities, there were substantial differences in the way in which these themes were reported and experienced by this group as compared to the previous groups discussed. A similar pattern has been used to present the thematic results by merging these issues into three distinct overarching themes: (i) confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation; (ii) friendships, social life and (few) conflicts with family commitments and (iii) finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career. This Chapter will explore the ways in which this demographic group is similar to, as well as different from, the previous groups, in their expression/ experience of each of these key factors and themes. It will reveal how this demographic group have minimal similarities to the other groups, and illustrate how their student experience is distinct from the others in many ways.

As with the previous Chapters, each theme will be discussed in turn, with quotes from participants used to illustrate the emergent themes, and numbers to indicate the frequency with which participants expressed these views. The impact that these themes have on students experiences and outcomes will be examined in relation to the literature in the discussion Chapter, along with a detailed comparison of the 4 demographic groups.

7.3.1 Confidence, academic anxiety and effects on participation

One of the major and most complex themes to emerge with regard to the mature female student experience, was that of confidence. More specifically, and as evidenced in the case studies above, this demographic group generally reported lower confidence levels than the other student groups in the study. However, it is worth noting that confidence levels fluctuated dramatically within, and between students, and, in particular, in accordance with the time of the academic year. This is illustrated by Sophie's reports of struggling at the end of each term, yet returning refreshed and keen after each holiday. Such fluctuations in confidence were reported by the majority (n=13) of the sample. Exams appeared to cause excessive anxiety to some within the

sample (n=11), with the remainder exhibiting relatively high, albeit not obviously excessive, levels of stress. The group reported mixed feelings about participating in classroom discussions. For many (n=13) this was at times problematic, particularly initially, whilst for the remainder this was not something which caused them anxiety. The majority of this demographic group (n=14) reported clear and consistent commitment to their studies, as exemplified by Yasmin. They reported high levels of preparation for class, excellent attendance levels, and claimed to submit all assignments unless there was a very good reason for their not doing so. For a number of mature female students, confidence was directly linked with factors such as multiple commitments to family, children and relationships. As a result, the complexities and themes for this demographic group are more difficult to separate, and the themes appear more intertwined than for the groups previously discussed.

(i) Confidence

For all students, but particularly for this demographic group, the theme of confidence heavily influenced other key themes, such as anxiety, particularly with regard to assessment and increased attendance and participation.

One of the first things to become evident from this group's data, was that some (n=8) mature female students reported negative school experiences, and stated that this had adversely impacted upon their academic confidence:

I HATED school and it hated me! I never thought i would be any good at this...(P68)

My school years were the very worst of my life and i failed miserably so i can't believe I'm getting such great marks! (P33)

Many mature students attributed their low confidence to the fact that they had been away from the education system for some time, some for as many as twenty plus years:

Coming to university for me, as a mature student was a very hard decision to make, and even now I wonder if it was the right one. I started studying at evening classes (over 20 years after leaving school), at the local adult education college, after leaving school with hardly any qualifications. I found I really enjoyed expanding my education, even though it wasn't always easy. I then went on to do an Access to Science course at the college in my area. (P109)

Some (n=6) mature female students had been out of the workplace and centred in the home for a considerable amount of time, due to their family commitments. This was

said to negatively impact on their confidence, and for some, led to feelings of being overwhelmed:

Completely out of my depth. I've been at home with the kids for years and now this, I've no idea what the hell I'm doing most of the time. I bake cakes and go to mother toddler groups, that's my life. (P26)

It is worth noting here that the varying confidence of mature women appeared to be influenced by context and situations external to their university life. A small minority (n=3) including Yasmin, acknowledged their own high confidence, putting it down to age or life experience. The impact this initial lack of confidence experienced by students had on anxiety levels is addressed below.

(ii) Anxiety

Analysis of the data uncovered that many (n=11) of the mature female demographic group reported being 'scared' of the university challenge, and this was an issue raised consistently throughout the study by the majority of the sample. It is noticeable that all the mature female group discussed feelings of being scared, overwhelmed, or out of control at some point during the project, and for many (n=11) anxieties centred on methods of assessment. The prospect of taking exams appeared to cause huge stress for many, including Sophie, but all assessment methods were problematic for some within the group.

There was general anxiety about exam preparation:

i dont feel at all prepared for these exams. im not stressed (yet!) but i am dreading them more than even my a-levels or my driving test. (P15)

I would have preferred to have my degree less exam based, it would have been better as 50% coursework (essays, research project and presentation included in this) and 50% exam, as not everyone is strong at exams....i dread them...can't eat or sleep...(P33)

There was also considerable concern expressed around failing or underperforming in exams:

I dread exams so much I am not holding my breath for a good grade. You are more than welcome to have a laugh and look at my final grade, but if I do fail, you may not hear from me again as I slope back into the world of estate agency admitting defeat. (P24)

I do not feel prepared at all for my exams and I am petrified I am going to fail. (P109)

Coursework assessments elicited minimal anxiety from some of the group, indeed several (n=5) students stated that their coursework grades would prop up their marks if they did not perform well in their unseen exams:

I have got a pretty good average for my coursework so that should lighten the exams a little bit (I hope). (P24)

Well after just finishing the second of three exams I feel pretty naff, and wonder why I spent hours over books trying to make sense of everything. It makes me feel a whole lot better knowing that the marks are not solely based on exams this year, as I tend to go blank on the day. I do prefer essays and presentations as you can prepare and present what you know to be correct rather than panic in an exam situation. (P15)

Despite the reported lack of confidence and the high levels of anxiety, as a whole this demographic group generally revealed very few thoughts of dropping out or failing at university. This could be taken to reflect deeper underlying confidence, indeed it may be that self-presentation issues result in mature female students being less likely to report themselves in a positive light than other demographic groups, as discussed further in relation to self-report data in the methodology Chapter. Alternatively, as illustrated by the quote below, it could be that this group of students were determined to finish what they started. Thus, they may be resolved to progress through the programme, but simultaneously be unsure and anxious of their ability to perform well.

Despite all the distractions and obstacles i am determined to finish this bloody course. Its murder sometimes but i never surrender...(P3)

This concept might be more accurately described as determination rather than academic confidence.

(iii) Attendance/Participation

Mature female students reported extremely high levels of attendance in class. It can be inferred from the data that there may be a relationship between the elevated anxiety reported above, and the high levels of attendance in class, as illustrated by both case studies. These students generally only claim to miss class when they have a legitimate reason, and when this happens, their anxiety levels increase:

I hate missing anything because I'm afraid that if I don't go I may miss the point completely...I think I have been off once this term, I missed a media seminar and lecture but I was SO ill, I'm not usually sick but I was then. I don't think I have been that ill for years, it was that horrible flu bug and I could do NOTHING. (P28)

So far i have only missed one lecture and that was because i was suffering from concussion after a fall the day before. I was devastated to break my good attendance record and also worried about what i would miss and whether I would be able to pick it up ok from other students notes! If it weren't for the fact that i was vomiting constantly and had a very sore head then i would have dragged myself to class. I have never been tempted to 'skive' as i do really enjoy the lectures and even when the kids have been ill, i have pulled out all the stops to get to Uni, i hope that my enthusiasm lasts! (P24)

As well as claiming high levels of attendance, many students claimed to submit all assignments, both formative and summative:

I do everything and I go to everything – very dull! Don't care if it's assessed or not – too scared not to do it as I may well need the feedback. (P66)

Classroom participation was another area where confidence, or lack of confidence, impacted on mature female students university experience. Some mature female students (n=7) initially lacked the confidence to speak in class:

I don't really talk in class unless I'm forced to by the tutor and even then I say as little as possible. (P15)

I feel that my only downfall this year is that I am very quiet in group seminars, i just don't yet have the confidence to air my views and as i think i have said before, i feel that this may go against me. I do hope that in time my confidence will grow alongside my knowledge and i will feel my views and opinions are valid enough to be aired aloud! (P24)

However, it would seem that as their programme progressed, some of them became more willing to speak in class and had enough confidence to air their views:

When I first came here I felt a bit of a fraud, and thought that people would soon realise that I was really as thick as two short planks, but the longer I've been here the more my confidence has grown, and that with a lot of hard work and background reading I'm not as bas as I thought I was. (P15)

Am much more confident this year and quite happy to express myself in class as long as I have done all the reading and seminar prep. (P24)

As with other demographic groups, and as clearly illustrated by both case studies, confidence to express thoughts in class were often influenced by the amount of preparation:

I will contribute, but I'm nervous of making an idiot of myself if I think that my reading for that week hasn't been as in-depth as everyone else's. (P3)

Mostly ok but I sometimes find it difficult to participate fully in class discussions, mainly through lack of confidence, and preparation on that day. (P28)

The data reveals that mature students generally perceive themselves to be reserved in terms of classroom participation, but interestingly this was not always the opinion of the younger members of the study, with comments about mature students such as this being common:

There are a couple of very 'loud' and opinionated members of the class (both mature women) who at times can hog the limelight and argue with others, this does deter me from saying much as I would hate for them to argue with me and me not be prepared with a good enough response. (P39)

The older students tend to be more vocal, more self-confidence I guess. Also think they are probably more focused on work as coming back to uni is a bigger sacrifice (?) – life change etc. (P49)

The disparity between what the mature students report as their experience, and how other, younger, students perceive them, once again highlights the potential problems of self reporting. This methodological issue has been addressed in the methods Chapter.

(iv) Friendships, social life and conflicts with family commitments

The majority of the students in this demographic group (unlike their other student group counterparts) tended to have high levels of commitments outside the university setting, as seen in the case study of Sophie, who had a partner, was responsible for two children, and participated in paid work. Many others within the sample were also combining university studies with childcare; part-time work and the needs of a partner. These students unanimously found these mixed roles difficult to negotiate, reporting added stress and anxiety throughout their student experience:

I sympathise with anyone who decides to give up, it is hard work and time consuming and when we all lead busy lives with work and family commitments it does feel like there are never enough hours in a day, dasy in a week etc. (P24)

I work 2 days a week as a project manager for a multimedia company. I find this really mucks up my week at Uni and quite often I go to lectures in the morning, then do a full days work then come home in the evening and have to get on with more study (THIS DOES MY HEAD IN BADLY !!!!!)...i also find it quite tiring constantly having to change from my student head to my work head (if you know what I mean). (P36)

As with other demographic groups previously discussed, mature female students highlighted the importance of friendships at university. However, unlike their peers (particularly the traditional male students), many mature females (n=11) highlighted a lack of time for their social life. With the mature females, unlike the other groups, the important factor around friendships was not in relation to their social lives, but more in

terms of study related friend networks. Yasmin was not only a member, but actively led one of these groups. Comments around the social side of university life centred on a lack of time to participate due to external commitments, and many of this group (n=12) described difficulty striking a work/life balance.

(v) Social life and friendships

Whereas for the students in the previous demographic groups social activities have been important, and for some pivotal in defining their university career, the interesting factor for mature female students is the lack of participation in social activities. Interestingly, despite Yasmin's lack of family commitments, she and Sophie shared a lack of involvement in social activities other than their study groups. Although some mature females reported this to be more problematic than others, this demographic group all reported a lack of free time to enjoy leisure activities at some point during their time at university:

I don't have a social life lucy don't be silly! (P26)

When exactly can I fit any social activities in. I am on campus every day either in class or studying in the library. I finish at 3 so I can get the kids from school then I am cooking cleaning helping with homework blah blah blah. Then my man comes home from work tired and grumpy so I sit with him for a while. Then after all that I need to work on my essays. No I haven't joined any clubs or societies!!! (P15)

Very little else emerged from the data directly pertaining to the social lives and social activities of this group, this absence is notable in its own right. There was much discussion about other aspects of these students external and non-university lives, as discussed below.

Many of the mature female student sample (n=6) stated that attending university had led to their developing new friendships and that these friendships led to mutual academic support with their peers:

I have made new friends and they are people I would never normally have met if I hadn't been here. The friends I have made since I have been here have been invaluable in helping to make the workload more bearable. (P60)

We [students on the same course] have been a close and supportive group of friends and this has been a big advantage, it's good to share problems and worries with others going through the same thing. We help each other with the academic rollercoaster. (P19)

Very few of the group (n=2) discussed university friendships in any other capacity than in terms of study companions, and it would appear that again there is little free time for these students to focus on the social aspects of friendships.

(vi) External commitments - dependent children

Unsurprisingly, this group reported most often that they were the primary carers of children, nine of the group having children of school age, and these commitments often resulted in the time constraints mentioned above. For many of the sample (n=9) a conflict in the division of time for studying, partners and family was evident, and concerns and guilt about studying featured highly in these students narratives, which is illustrated in the case study of Sophie above. There were claims that studying detracted from the amount of time spent with family, children, partners, or all three:

For me the worst thing about this year has been trying to find a happy compromise between family and work commitments and study time. It is hard to juggle this without feelings of guilt (as I think I have mentioned to you on numerous occasions before...) (P24)

My feelings of stress and time pressure and the guilt attached put massive strain on my relationship and my partner felt pushed out. Something had to give – him the kids or the degree – it was him! (P63)

Comments about children and families suffering because the student had chosen to study were common. Ironically, it would appear that these negative emotions positively contributed to this demographic student group's motivation to do well in their studies:

As a mature student with a family, I feel guilty about the lack of things I can get for my children...I sometimes wonder whether they would have preferred me to work full time, and not have become a student...ultimately though this makes me all the more determined to do well and make them proud and reap the benefits for their suffering. (P60)

As noted above, students, particularly those with children, described having many diverse external commitments, and reported feelings of being pulled in multiple directions:

I have found it hard to adjust to the heavy workload of reading expected especially as i work part time and have young twins to look after. (P24)

Some weeks i can cope and seem to clear the work quite quickly and still 'have a life' and other weeks, like at present, it completely takes over and i just cannot find enough hours to work, study, play mum and eat and sleep!! (P33)

For some this stretched them to breaking point:

Sometimes I feel like the only way out is to throw myself over a cliff – teachers get pissed off cos I haven't done enough reading – kids are pissed off cos it's another crap dinner and I can't help with their homework – husband is offering ultimatums it's either that bloody degree or me – yep the cliff sounds inviting! (P127)

These students described not having enough time to complete their studies, and when they could snatch some time to study, it had to fit around their external commitments. This was seen to negatively impact on their ability to maximise their academic potential, as well as their pleasure in studying:

I do think it [having a family] affects my academic performance, because as well as being here five times a week, I also work at the weekend, this leads to me fitting any work I have to do for my studies around this as well as family commitments. (P15)

However, i do feel much more focused this year and less panicky although i am sure that come Christmas, with kids home, family to entertain, pressies to buy and essay to write, i will be extremely stressed! (P26)

I have now completed year two and have put in all my work towards my degree this year, but have struggled with time to revise as other commitments i.e. kids on half term and 4000 word essay to be submitted took priority. (P60)

The issue of children and problematic childcare featured heavily in all those students with family commitments, whilst lack of leisure time and feelings of anxiety about minimal free time to study, were endemic throughout the discourse of these students.

Another prominent topic for mature female students, both those with, and those without children, was the complication of managing relationships whilst at university. Eleven of the mature female students were living with partners for at least part of their time at university, and all of these women reported relatively traditional gender roles within their family. As a result, they described being responsible for housework, cleaning, cooking, childcare, and the 'emotional work' involved in running their household:

I tend to do a moderate amount of [university] work mon-fri rather than cram. Having children has made me more organised as I have to do my work in good time just in case one of the girls become ill and I have to stay home and look after them...i'm still trying to iron everything and cook wholesome meals like I used to oh yeah and make sure they are not being bullied and are generally happy but it's becoming harder than ever...(P60)

Also expressed by this group, and illustrated by Sophie's comments on the expectations of her friends and family, was the feeling that others expected them to follow this traditional role, and ensure that they fulfilled these family obligations above all others:

My family have been fairly supportive although my parents always refer to it irritatingly as my 'college' course (much to my dismay) and my mum actually said the other day that she thought I had finished the degree course already! Whenever I look tired they always say 'you are doing too much' and always blame my studying rather than working or family commitments etc, so I know they would expect me to give the course up above anything else. (P24)

Many mature female students discussed the role that university played in their own personal development, but more often with regard to changing relationships with their current partners:

He hates me being at uni. Hates everything about it including the lack of time to cook and clean for him as well as my newly found confidence about arguing my point and not playing happy families when I'm really not happy! (P33)

Its' good to be single now (after 7 years being in a couple) as during term time I can't focus on anything but uni work and holding together my family. I found having a boyfriend too much of a drain with him demanding time and energy that I just don't have at the moment. (P60)

With regard to these students personal development, they often reported an increased focus of control, and increased personal confidence, in terms of knowing what they wanted, and not being prepared to go along with others wishes. This sometimes led to marital conflict:

i think my husband has found it hard to come to terms with and it has certainly put more pressure on us as a couple. I am no longer just the good little wife at home, I have much stronger opinions on most things these days and I think, again, he has just had to adjust to the 'new me'. (P24)

My feelings of stress and time pressure from the course put massive strain on my relationship and my partner feels pushed out, it can be hard work keeping all the balls in the air and everyone happy, everyone except me that is I've never been more stressed or felt that I have less time to myself. (P60)

For some, these changes led to the end of their relationship:

My husband needed to adapt to our new circumstances with me not working anymore and him needing to rise to the challenge of being one half of this 'partnership' which surprisingly for him included washing ironing cooking helping with homework and dealing with my stress and the kids teenage angst. Unfortunately for us he did not rise to the challenge. (P60)

Others chose to let their studies suffer rather than their relationship:

My husband has found it hard to come to terms with [her studying] and it has certainly put more pressure on us as a couple...his has worried me slightly to

the point of considering giving up, after all, as much as I really want this degree I don't want to be a divorced woman in order to achieve my aims! (P24)

It appears likely from the data that no matter what course of action these students take, being in a relationship impacts on their ability to study.

(vii) Finances, engagement with paid work and links to future career

Debt featured heavily for the majority of students in the entire sample, and the mature female group was no exception. A proportion of the group (n=9) reported having a lack of disposable cash, and high concern over their levels of debt. What was interesting to note, and what set this group and the traditional female group aside from both the male samples, was that the students appeared to have a real sense of control over their financial situation. All the mature female sample were employed either during term time or during university holidays, with a surprising number (n=4) working continuously. Unlike many of the traditional male sample however, most of the mature females did not report that conducting paid work was considered to be particularly detrimental to their studies.

(viii) Debt and paid work

Concerns related to debt and paid work were not as prominent for mature female students as other demographic groups. The majority of the mature female sample (n=13) mentioned money as an issue at one time or another during the study. However for many, financial concerns were described as relatively minor. Nevertheless, for 4 of the sample, including Sophie, their financial situation was described as a serious problem that had a major detrimental impact on their experience at university, and ability to successfully complete their programme:

because i have had to work so much or mind the children, I have gotten very little work done so far and so yes it is affecting my performance. (P29)

I really don't think i would like to do this again, if I did then i would have to have all the bills taken care of so i had more time to concentrate on the reading that never gets done, instead of working most days to pay the bills..... I have to work as much as pos to pay any bills, leaving little time to do uni work. It got too much a month ago working 4 days a week, so i quit work, but its the lesser of two evils having no money rather than not doing uni work. (P39)

Others described paid employment in positive terms, because it meant time away from family commitments and studies:

When I'm at work I don't have to worry about all the family stuff – who needs to be where when; what's for dinner; who's fighting with who blah blah...I can forget about essays that need doing and deadlines and exams and just be plain

old me...it's also the only time in my life I get paid for doing something, everything else I do I do for free! (P 29)

Overall, responses about paid work and debt for the mature female sample were generally minor in comparison to the other demographic groups, and it would appear from the data that, for the majority of this group, debt is there but it is manageable. Although a minority had serious problems with paid employment, most managed to fit this activity in alongside their other roles without too much difficulty.

(ix) Career orientation

In stark contrast to some other groups of students, the mature female students appeared to be well focussed in terms of career aspirations:

I want to be a teacher, this is nonnegotiable as I need the convenience of the holidays because of the kids. When I find the course hard I remember that this is a means to an end – I know where I want to get to and I have to survive this in order to achieve it. (P49)

I have an ok job with ok money and ok prospects but I want a great job with great money and great prospects so I'm here...i don't want to be an assistant I want to be the boss, the one who gives out the orders...when I get there I know it will all have been worth it. (P68)

This may be an explanation for why this demographic group as a whole was so committed to their studies in terms of attendance and work ethic:

i know where i am going so i work hard and stay focussed because i know where i want to be. i always knew i was going to have to get a degree and a masters but i am prepared to do that to achieve my lifetime ambition of being a speech therapist. (P33)

i really loved year 1 and 2 but this year has been hard work – overall thought i feel as if i've reclaimed my life! The best things were new knowledge, new friends and achieving a lifetime goal of getting myself an education. (P26)

Education was generally considered by this group to be a concrete and focussed 'end', with learning as a key step in their long term life plan.

7.3.2 Conclusion

One particularly complex theme that emerged from the data for this group throughout the 3 years, was that many students reported fluctuating levels of academic confidence and high levels of anxiety. Whilst exams caused stress for many within the entire sample, this trend was clearly exacerbated for the mature female student group. These students, unlike most others, also reported some stress and anxiety over many

methods of assessment, but despite this, the group as a whole performed consistently well throughout their time at university, and remained committed to their studies.

Mature women were heavily invested in their studies and most had well defined career goals, evidenced not only through comments relating to their career aspirations, but also through their excellent attendance rates and submission of all assignments whether assessed or non-assessed. Many of these students reported being reserved in class, particularly at the start of their programme, however the younger students claimed that mature students were very vocal.

The majority of the mature female students were employed in paid work, but this was largely unproblematic. However, for those who reported financial difficulties, these were typically severe and caused serious problems. The group discussed very little about their social lives other than their university study groups, most of them having little or no free time to enjoy social activities.

Perhaps the overarching theme that emerged from the mature female student sample, was that of the impact that external commitments had on their ability to successfully experience and complete their studies. The role of children was pivotal in this, but for some students (with or without children), partners also had an impact on this, with the time and effort involved in maintaining relationships causing stress for many of the participants. For some students this negatively impacted on their studies, whilst for others their studies led to the end of their relationships. These issues appear to be almost exclusive to the female demographic groups, as the traditional female students also reported personal relationship problems. Further in-depth comparisons of the four groups with links to the literature will appear in the following Chapter.

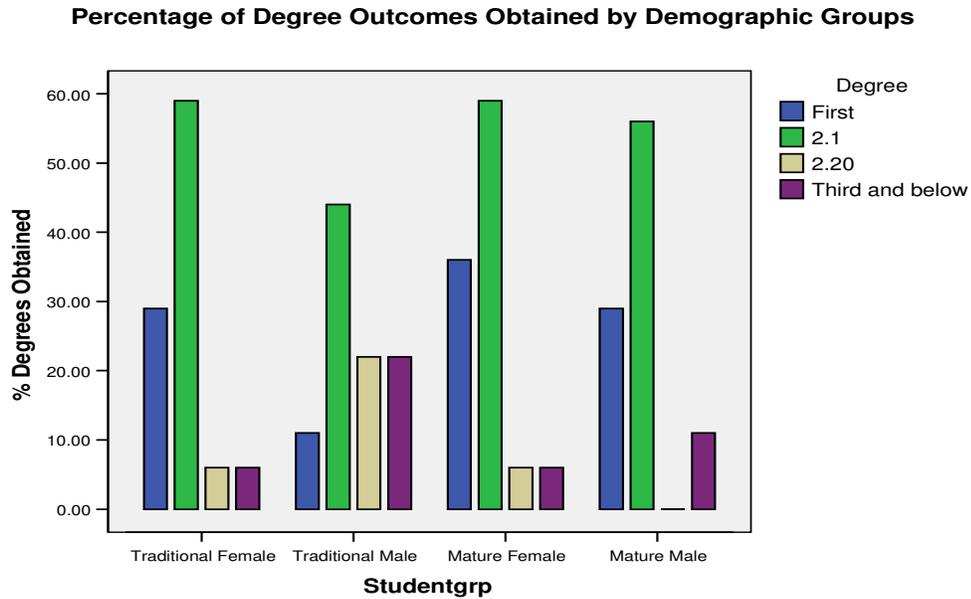
Chapter 8

Degree Outcomes

The final degree results for all participants within the study were obtained from the University's Student Services Office. For some participants, a specific percentage number was provided, whilst for others there was simply an overall degree classification. All marks were converted into final degree classifications and analysed by the 4 demographic groups, in order to assess how reported differences in the student experience, might, or might not, be associated with actual differences in academic outcomes. The purpose of the quantitative analysis of academic outcomes was to provide an independent variable, to triangulate some of the qualitative data presented in the previous Chapters. This Chapter will quantitatively analyse the outcomes across the 4 demographic groups, and then summarise any significant findings of interest.

The overall picture of academic results, in terms of good degrees 2:1s or 1sts, (presented below in Figure 8.1) is that the traditional female and the mature male groups were very similar in terms of performance, with the mature female sample outcomes securing marginally higher. The traditional male student sample secured poorer results than each of the other demographic groups. Despite their reported substantial external pressures and obstacles to study, therefore, mature women performed the highest overall (obtaining the most 1sts and 2.1s) in this sample of students. The traditional males who reported the highest levels of academic confidence, actually performed lowest of the 4 groups.

Figure 8.1



According to HESA (2010), in 2003/4 (the year that this sample graduated) UK women obtained more good¹¹ degrees than men, this is illustrated in Table 8.1 below.

Table 8.1

2003/4 Number of students achieving degree awards according to gender

	1sts	2:1	% 2:1 & above	2:2	3 rd	Unclassified	% 2:2 & below
Female	13140	64705	60.35	37845	5810	7485	39.64
Male	10840	42105	52.80	32705	7805	6810	47.19

In this research sample, of the 52 participants who completed their degree, there were 33 women and 19 men. Table 8.2 below highlights that 29/33 (88%) women and 13/19 (68%) of the men obtained a good degree. It is therefore clear that this sample is in line with the national picture.

¹¹ Good degrees are defined as 2:1 and above.

Table 8.2**Degree Outcomes (Excluding Withdrawals) for the Student Groups**

		Degree outcome				Total
		First	2.1	2.2	Third below or	
Student group	Traditional Male	1	3	3	2	9
	Mature Male	4	5	0	1	10
	Male total	5	8	3	3	19
	Traditional Female	4	10	1	1	16
	Mature Female	5	10	1	1	17
	Female total	9	20	2	2	33
Total		14	28	5	5	52
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 8.2 above excludes all students who failed to complete their degree. However, within this sample, there was a clear pattern amongst the students of mature versus traditional age, and male versus female, in attrition rates. There were a total of 9 students who permanently withdrew from the university before the end of their programme, with 7/9 withdrawing during the first year. It is interesting to note that only 3 of the 9 were male, and that there were no traditional male students who withdrew. Withdrawing students came from across the university; most disappeared relatively early in the project with no real explanation as to why they chose to withdraw from their programme. However, 3 of the students had identified themselves as coming from low SES backgrounds, and had mentioned financial concerns. HESA statistics from the relevant year (2003/4) state that 15.6% of mature students and 7.7% of traditional age students in the UK failed to continue after the first year (*Sourced from Table T3a of the Performance Indicators*). This shows that a disproportionate number of the sample withdrew from their studies. Reasons for this are unclear within the data. Of the 9 who withdrew, 7 were mature students and the remaining 2 were of traditional age.

The previous data presentation Chapters have highlighted fluctuations in student confidence levels. Although there were fluctuations for many participants over the course of their degree, there was also a tendency for students to be either generally confident or generally less confident, and the longitudinal design of this study allowed for these differences to be uncovered. During analysis of the outcomes data, it became apparent that for some students there were ambiguities between their reported

confidence levels and their actual performance outcomes, whilst others seemed to know exactly the level they were performing at, and this became an area that was further investigated with some interesting results.

The case study of Richard (traditional male), is a good example of someone who reported consistently high confidence levels and was generally positive that he would obtain a good overall degree. He was correct, and obtained a first class degree. A snapshot study of Richard at almost any stage of his degree would have given a good picture of expected and actual performance at university:

First year comment:

I am gonna smash them (exams)

Final year comment:

Easy really, glad it's over but it's been easy enough to be honest

Richard finished his first year with a very high 2:1 and finished his degree with an impressive first class degree.

However, not all students were as consistently confident as Richard, or as realistic about the level at which they were performing academically. For example, Charlie (mature male) exhibited huge fluctuations in both his confidence and academic levels across all 3 years of his degree. At times, Charlie described feeling overwhelmed and unsure that he was capable of getting a degree at all, whilst on other occasions he was overtly confident about his abilities. As highlighted in his case study, Charlie had resits in his first year, barely passed his second year, but substantially improved his results in the final year. Therefore, despite these ambiguities in confidence and performance, he managed to complete his studies with a 2:1 degree. A snapshot of Charlie's student experience may, or may not, have given a good indication of his view of his potential and actual outcome from university:

First year comment:

Not very confident that I have passed my exams

Final year comment:

I reckon if I keep this up I will walk away with a first – no problem.

In the first year Charlie failed two of his exams and had to undertake resits which he subsequently passed.

Other students reported fluctuating confidence levels, and sometimes underplayed their academic abilities. Yasmin (mature female) was one of these. Despite her insecurities however, Yasmin scored an impressive first class mark throughout every year of her studies, although her comments were contradictory:

First year comment:

I work hard so I think I will be ok, I don't see any reason why not really. If you do the work and are relatively intelligent (which I am of course) you should get a good grade.

Final year comment:

It doesn't matter how hard I try it's just impossible to do well on this course. I really wish I had chosen another one cos I'm just no good at this.....think I might do really badly actually.

These comments illustrate the strength of the longitudinal study, and demonstrate how people narrated their abilities, how this related to their actual achievement patterns, and how this changed over time.

8.1 Gender Differences in Academic Outcomes

As previously discussed in the literature review, women outperform men in the HE system and, according to HESA statistics for the year 2008/2009, the total number of women who attained 'good' degrees was 64%, whilst for men it was 59% (HESA, 2010). There is a large body of literature focussing on why it may be that men obtain more first class degrees than women (for example, Chapman, (1996); Richardson & Woodley, (2003). However, the picture is complex and Woodfield & Earl-Novell (2006) found that men tend to study in the natural sciences and other 'first rich' subject areas, resulting in a tendency to gain more firsts than their female peers. However, despite this, and as we have seen from the literature review, women still outperform men overall. Current UK literature might predict that female students academic outcomes would be higher than their male counterparts (for example, Woodfield & Earl-Novell, (2006; Richardson, (2004; 2008b), and the data within the thesis supports this. The widely reported pattern of school age girls outperforming boys (for example, Francis, (2000) is also borne out in larger studies of HE comparing degree outcomes by gender, Farsides & Woodfield, (2007). The comparative underperformance of the traditional

male group, as well as the clear gender divide, can be seen in the raw frequency counts, as well as the percentages for degrees within the male versus the female achievement overall. Therefore, the present study data replicates national findings, and highlights that women are gaining more 'good' degrees than men in HE (although sample sizes were not large enough to analyse by subject of study).

There is research on reasons for, and modelling of, attrition overall (for example, Johnes & Johnes, (2004), and there appears to be consensus that mature students have higher levels of drop-out. This thesis has addressed the literature and findings surrounding the student experience. However, it is also important to look at those students who do not complete their course of study. Whilst it was intended that this thesis would investigate the issue of attrition, unfortunately there is minimal evidence of why these students withdrew. What was uncovered, and in line with national trends, is that of the 9 students who permanently withdrew from the university, 7 were mature and 6 were female; 3 identified themselves as coming from lower SES backgrounds and no traditional male students withdrew from the sample. Metzner & Bean (1987) stated that at that time, most research had focused on the attrition of traditional age students only and, furthermore, Bean & Metzner (1985) found that the reasons for attrition of non-traditional students was often due to external factors. However for traditional students, issues tended to centre around fitting in and social networks, that contributed to attrition rates. Most recent research focuses on the role of distance and e-learning for mature students (for example, Buerck *et al*, (2003). However Laing & Robinson (2003) have developed an explanatory model, specifically examining the drop-out rates of non-traditional students, given that HEIs with high proportions of non-traditional students have high (and rising) attrition rates. The effect of age on degree outcomes will be further discussed below, as there is a clear interaction with gender. With regard to the mature student sample in this thesis, regardless of sex, they are achieving a higher percentage of firsts and 'good degrees' overall, and a clear pattern of mature versus traditional outcomes, again regardless of gender, can be quantitatively seen in attrition rates.

8.2 Discussion of degree outcomes

The academic outcome data, indicates self-reported confidence is not necessarily a good predictor of actual academic outcomes. In fact the group who reported the highest levels of academic confidence (i.e. the traditional males), were those that performed least well in terms of degree outcomes. It may be that the greater emphasis on social life reported by the traditional males lowered their work ethic, potentially

making them less likely to attend and prepare for classes. Therefore, it could be argued that traditional aged men are not as focused on their studies, or academically engaged, as other groups of students. It is also worth taking into account that traditional aged men reported higher levels of personal debt and paid work, both of which could be factors that negatively influence students ability to study, and ultimately their academic performance and outcomes.

It is interesting to note that both the mature and traditional male groups, reported what might be described as a somewhat blasé attitude to their studies. Despite this, it is also worth highlighting that mature males reported higher levels of class attendance and participation, as well as less of an emphasis on social activities, than the traditional male group. If this self-reported high attendance in class is indicative of actual attendance, this could reinforce the argument that emphasis on social life can be detrimental to academic performance. Unfortunately no independent measures of attendance were collected for this group of students, however, other research (for example, Farsides & Woodfield, (2007); Yorke, (2004) which did use independent measures of attendance support the idea that emphasis on social activities are detrimental to performance outcomes, and show that attendance and participation in class are indeed predictors of academic outcomes and completion. Therefore, it is suggested that there is a need for more empirical research, seeking to causally analyse key variables of the self-reported student experience (for example, friendships, social life engagement, family commitments, paid work, confidence/ anxiety, attendance and engagement), as well as actual student behaviours (for example, attendance, extra-curricular activities), in order to better predict students degree outcomes.

Chapter 9

Discussion of Findings

This Chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the findings presented in the five preceding Chapters. Initially, this chapter will outline the experiences of the 4 'ideal type' student groups, and then go on to explore similarities and differences both within, and across, these groups. This thesis contributes to existing research by seeking to understand student experiences over time, using a longitudinal approach. The insights from the longitudinal analysis will be presented, and it will be shown, in particular, that students' confidence, defined as both academic and personal confidence, did fluctuate and change over the course of time. Above all, mature women generally reported feeling increasing self-belief and control over their lives during their time at university which, in some cases, resulted in conflicts in personal and familial relationships. Following this, the key research question will be addressed: firstly how does the student experience differ according to age and gender? Subsequently, what is the impact of this on academic performance and outcomes?

A series of inter-linked arguments will be made, namely, that the data indicates that the student experience mainly differs according to age and gender. Indeed, these demographic factors have an additive effect and the resulting differences will be revisited below. This will firstly be illustrated by a Table summary and verbal discussion of the 'ideal types' identified during the data analysis stage: traditional male; traditional female; mature male, and mature female (Table 9.1). Secondly, by a newly developed 'student experience continuum' (Figure 9.1), and finally by discussion of the longitudinal experience of the demographic groups with regard to debt/paid work and engagement (section 9.2.2), the academic work/life balance (section 9.2.3), romantic relationships and friendships (sections 9.2.4 & 9.2.5), confidence and anxiety over time (section 9.2.6), engagement, climate and attendance (section 9.2.7) and career goals (section 9.2.8). These will be examined with regard to self-reported experience, actual outcomes and finally, the mediating effects of SES.

Again, no two student experiences are identical, and variations can be seen between participants experiences in each of these groups. This chapter will nonetheless identify distinctive characteristics of experience that differentiate these groups from one another, and examine the longitudinal importance of key aspects of the student

experience for each group (for example, mature females confidence over time). The discussion of findings will further demonstrate that, of the two demographic factors, it appears to be gender that exerted a stronger and more defining influence on the patterns which emerged, particularly in terms of the male student experience. Specifically, the research found that the mature male student group shared more commonalities of experience with their traditional male counterparts, than with female students of either traditional or mature age. This is an interesting finding, given that both mature male and female students had a similar range of commitments outside of university (for example, family and home life), which might be expected to shape their experience in similar ways. These findings will be explored by relevant theme following the overall ideal type differences (Figure 9.1) and student experience continuum (Figure 9.2).

9.1 How different demographic student groups experience university - findings, implications and future directions

As previously discussed in the methods Chapter, Weber, (1904) introduced the conceptual tool of 'ideal types'. Weber clearly recognised that no system was able to reproduce 'reality', and that no concept could reproduce the entire diversity of any particular phenomenon. However, he developed ideal types to use as a conceptual tool, to enable the move from analysis at the level of individuals, to analysis at the level of social groups. As this thesis aimed to explore differences in experiences by both age and gender, 'ideal type' groups were developed to allow the capture of the complexity of the students narratives, whilst enabling comparative analysis of such diverse data. Consequently, this thesis used a review of the literature (discussed below) to develop 'ideal types' of the 4 demographic groups, in order to aggregate student responses into meaningful units of analysis, and once the 'ideal types' were identified, the similarities and differences between the groups were explored.

Table 9.1 below introduces the 4 ideal type groups developed within this research project:

Table 9.1 Four 'Ideal Types'**Traditional-male**

This demographic group described the most stereotypical student experience. The typical traditional male student:

- was heavily focussed on the overall university 'student experience' and particularly the social side of university life
- generally reported high confidence and low anxiety levels
- inferred weak work ethic with a lack of focus on academic studies, low participation rates and minimal self-directed study
- had high levels of debt and paid work

Mature –male

The mature male sample mirrored that of the traditional male sample in many ways. The typical mature male student:

- was heavily focussed on the social aspects of university life
- reported a relatively blasé attitude to study but described fluctuating confidence levels
- had high levels of external commitments which led to some internal struggles relating to the work/life balance
- inferred high levels of debt and paid work

Traditional-female

The traditional female student group was a heterogeneous group comprising aspects of all other groups. This made it more complex to identify the typical student. However, the typical traditional female student:

- was generally high in confidence but with periods of low confidence related to high anxiety
- reported low attendance rates and appeared to lack commitment and engagement with their studies
- placed little emphasis on the social side of university life
- described personal relationships as detrimental to their ability to study
- participated in paid work but did not report high levels of debt

Mature-female

The mature female student group described the stereotypical 'non-traditional' 'student experience'. The typical mature female student:

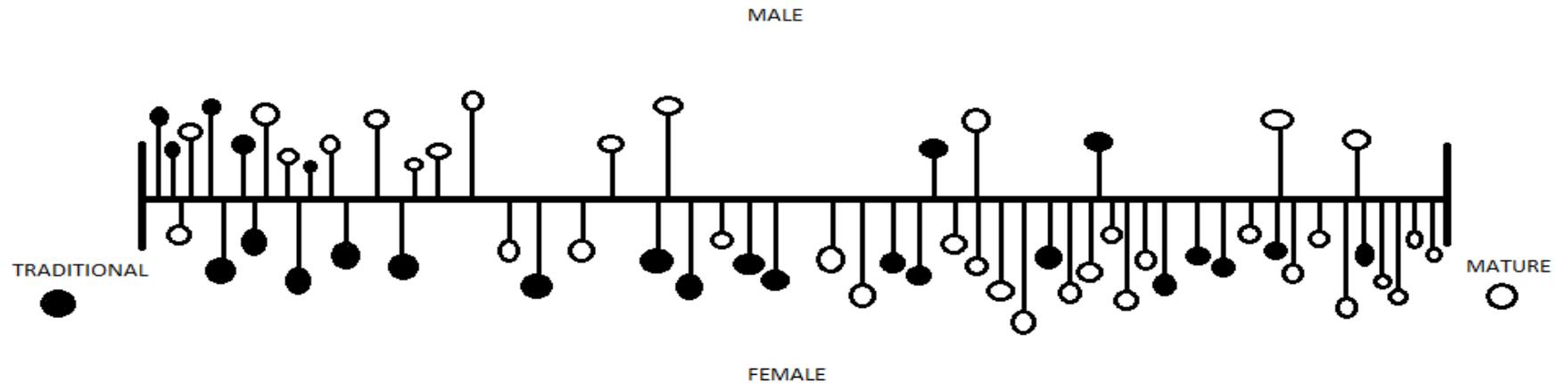
- was highly anxious about assessment and reported fluctuating confidence levels according to time of year
- described constant commitment to their studies with high attendance and work ethic
- placed very little emphasis on the social aspects of university life
- had extensive external commitments, notably partners and children, which negatively impacted on their time and ability to successfully complete their studies

As previously mentioned these ideal types were developed from the review of relevant literature which broadly describes a set of 'traditional' and 'mature' student characteristics. Traditional students have been described in past research as having a generally weaker work ethic and low attendance rates Edmonds & Richardson, (2009), as well as a lack of goal direction, Eppler & Harju, (1997); Pintrich & Zusho, (2007), fewer external commitments, Bowl, (2001); Gorard *et al*, (2006), but with a strong emphasis on social life, Tinto, (1997); Stuart, (2009). Mature students conversely are often reported within the literature as strongly focused on their studies, Woodley, Wagner, Slowey, Hamilton & Fulton, (1987); Edwards, (1993); West, (1996), having high external commitments, McIntish *et al*, (1994); Tett, (2000); Winn, (2002) generally being lower in confidence levels, Howard, Clark & Short, (1996); Tett, (2004) but higher in attendance rates, Bowl, (2001); Woodfield & Earl-Novell, (2005).

The data collected in this project does not sit completely comfortably within these two opposing groups, of traditional versus mature. Rather, a more complex picture emerges when gender is taken into account. The diagram below displays a continuum, with the characteristics that are commonly presented in the literature, as being 'traditional' or 'mature' used to define the two poles (traditional student experience on the left and mature student on the right). Each individual student has been plotted along this continuum (each 'lollipop'¹² indicates one student, with male students above the line and each female student being 1 lollipop below the line below), according to the typicality of their reported experiences. The students were colour-coded in order to indicate their actual demographic features (mature students are the black lollipops and traditional students are the white lollipops).

¹² The length of 'lollipops' has no significance as a range of sizes were used to allow all 61 participants to be recorded within the confines of the space available.

Figure 9.1 Continuum of student experiences



- Traditional characteristics included: poor work ethic; high confidence; high levels of paid work.
- Mature student characteristics included: high levels of external commitments; little emphasis on the social side of university life; and high anxiety

This continuum clearly illustrates that student experiences cluster not only according to age (traditional versus mature), but also according to gender. Furthermore this classification is more clearly defined for some of the student groups (for example, the traditional males appear to be the most homogenous as they are clustered closely together on the far left above the line), whereas other groups were not as well defined in terms of their experience (for example, the traditional female being the most heterogeneous as they are spread out along the full length of the continuum below the line). In addition, there appear to be varied differences between the groups, in that some groups have a more similar experience. For instance, the plotting of most mature males appeared to fall close to the plotting of most traditional males, this is visible from the fact that most lollipops above the line (i.e. male participants) are clustered to the left of the continuum. Other groups had a more diverse student experience, for instance the mature females appeared to cluster further away from the other demographic groups (to the right of the continuum below the line).

This continuum also highlights issues surrounding the diversity of the traditional female student experience, as they are spread out across the entire spectrum, whereas the mature female group seems to have a very distinctive experience, with far less overlap with the experience of the other groups. The traditional female group have the most overlap with each of the other groups (the continuum also clearly demonstrates the fact that there is much greater diversity within the traditional female group which makes it harder to compare them to others). This finding is interesting, given that both mature male and female students have similar extensive commitments outside of university (for example, family and home life), that may have been expected to shape their experience in similar ways.

9.2 Key themes and the longitudinal student experience

It is worth noting at this point the tension between the ideal types previously discussed and the nature of the longitudinal data presented in this thesis. The ideal types and continuum are an abstraction from the data which include, but do not explore, the fluctuations presented by participants throughout their time at university. Rather, the ideal types are comprised of trends within the data. The following section will explore the student experience by key theme or student experience 'factor' as they were experienced over time by the various demographic groups.

As previously identified, a large proportion of literature available on the issue of student experiences is short term research, which offers a snapshot of students lives at a particular point in time (for example, Jessop *et al*, (2005); Stuart *et al*, (2009). There is a gap in the literature in terms of the timescales of research which this study addresses, by offering insights longitudinally into how experiences may change over time. Many factors fluctuated greatly, and differentially, for the 4 student demographic groups, for example paid work; study routines; friendships and social life.

In comparison to the self-reported longitudinal student experience data, a different picture emerges from the student outcomes data (when compared with that of the student experience), which shows a similar pattern of results for the mature male, mature female and traditional female groups. Substantially poorer outcomes, however, are seen among the traditional male group, a pattern which is borne out by larger scale studies comparing university degree outcomes by gender (for example, Farsides & Woodfield, (2007). While the purpose of this thesis is not to causally analyse relationships between student experience and outcomes, the qualitative data does provide some potential insights into factors that may be responsible for the lower performance of this group. In particular, these include the higher emphasis placed by traditional males on social life and paid employment, together with the lower attendance and participation (in lectures and seminars) reported by this group. The conclusions drawn below on the relationship between experience and outcomes for this sample are tentative, and the need for research which explores this issue in detail (using appropriate methods of causal analysis) is emphasised in the concluding Chapter.

9.2.1 Thematic discussion of findings

Despite the areas of demographic group differences discussed above, there were also a number of themes that emerged as being central to the experiences of some or all of the groups – including fluctuations of confidence levels, the importance of social life, self-reported attendance rates, the impact of paid work and debt. However, it is interesting to note, that some of the issues raised by more than one of the demographic groups were, after deeper analysis of the data, far more complex than they initially appeared to be. The analysis revealed that certain themes had multiple meanings, and impacts (for example, positive and/or negative), which differed across the 4 groups. A key illustration of this was paid work. On the surface, paid work seemed universally important to all 4 groups, but deeper analysis showed that paid work was seen as having a positive impact for some groups on their student

experience (for example, mature females describing work as complementary to their studies) and as a negative factor for others (for example, traditional males and females stating that paid work had a negative impact on time available to study). This demographic split around age, appears to shed light on recent research, which finds conflicting evidence of both positive and negative impacts of part-time (and even full-time) work on the student experience and outcomes (for example, Stuart *et al*, (2010). For instance, the impact of work on the student experience appears to be primarily age dependent, but also influenced by gender and SES. This will be explored as the first thematic area below.

With regard to group differences it is important to reiterate that, of the 4 groups, the traditional female group was more difficult to categorise in terms of an 'ideal type'. This group was far more 'mixed' than the others in terms of their reported experience. For instance, the ideal type traditional female student reported fluctuating confidence levels similar to the mature male ideal type, low attendance rates similar to the traditional male, and little emphasis on the social side of university life, similar to the mature female group. The similarities with the other demographic groups highlight the internal group diversity of the traditional female student sample. This finding has at least 2 important implications. First, it demonstrates that a particular value of using an ideal type approach is that it enables an analysis of the extent of homogeneity and heterogeneity *within* groups. Only in attempting to develop ideal types, did the diversity of this group emerge. Secondly, it suggests that initiatives and interventions to improve the student experience, may be particularly difficult to develop and implement for the traditional female group, as traditional females, least of all, can be treated as a 'group' with shared characteristics and experience. It is interesting to note that the academic outcomes for the traditional female group did not appear to be any more variable than for any other group.

9.2.2 Debt/paid work and effect on engagement

The first theme, regarding debt and paid work, revealed some significant overlap in terms of experience and behaviour across the groups. For example, when prompted regarding issues of finance and paid work, although these issues may have impacted differently on their paid work, engagement/academic effort and personal and social life, all demographic groups indicated experiencing similar processes negotiating the negative impact of debt. This was not unexpected, given that the students were

experiencing the same process, at the same time, in the same institution and were asked the same questions within this project.

For the traditional male group, a type of external commitment, namely paid work, emerged as the main reported barrier to study. This group, however, also placed the strongest emphasis on having an active social life, and the possibility that this also negatively affected their ability to focus on their studies cannot be ruled out. Despite all groups describing different challenges to fully engaging in their academic work, it was mature students who were far more likely to drop out of university altogether. Seven out of the 9 students who permanently withdrew were mature, a finding which is in line with national statistics (HESA, 2010). Thus there were key areas of difference between the 4 groups. Mature students, particularly mature female students within this study, were more likely to report struggling with external commitments, which bears out previous research by Tett, (2000) and Bowl, (2001).

9.2.3 Work/life balance and social life

A key finding revealed that mature women generally considered themselves to be more constrained by their family situations and responsibilities, than mature men reported to be. Whereas, mature men reported being, for the most part, able to create and maintain 'separate worlds', in terms of university and home life, mature women claimed that these worlds constantly seeped into, and came into conflict with, one another. Drawing on feminist literature, it is argued that these findings provide further evidence of the (potentially negative) impact, arising from how women are defined by gender roles and social norms, especially within the context of the family. For these women there is a need to manage competing demands from their home, work *and* academic lives. In contrast, mature males described finding it easier to separate, or compartmentalise, their domestic and university lives, and this enabled them to more easily construct a 'traditional' student experience, more akin to the younger students in the sample. Although it is difficult to identify a single defining variable which drives the key differences for either age or gender, nonetheless, external commitments do appear to be a key driving factor, and will be discussed extensively. In addition, confidence and fluctuations in confidence also clearly exemplify these differences (and will be further explored below).

Female students generally placed relatively little emphasis on the social aspects of university life. This bears out the findings of research by Winn, (2002), whose study concluded that the lower priority given to social life occurred because of the array of

other competing external commitments faced by female students in HE. These findings also extend existing literature about the additional demands placed on women as they take on new roles outside of family life. Feminists in the 1980s used the term, the 'double shift', to describe the fact that women entering the workplace, were, in effect, doing day 'shifts' in their paid work, and morning/evening 'shifts' in their unpaid work in the home, Hochschild, (1983). For mature women entering university, this double shift has become a 'triple shift' as women attempt to manage the (often competing) demands of personal relationships/family life, paid work and academic study. Despite these complex challenges, while mature women are performing well in terms of academic outcomes, the relatively higher number of mature women dropping out of university may reveal the more negative implications of combining multiple roles and responsibilities. Given this, it is interesting that mature women also reported the strongest work ethic of any of the groups, and reported being very goal-orientated. The success and motivation of female students has been noted in multiple studies (for example, Smith & Naylor, (2001); Richardson & Woodley, (2003); Farsides & Woodfield, (2007). This study suggests that motivations for (and the meanings of) success differ across groups of students, according to factors including age, gender and SES.

9.2.4 Romantic relationships

Another illustration of competing roles was the pressure placed on relationships. The mature female, traditional female and mature male groups all discussed difficulties in maintaining personal relationships whilst studying. Gorard *et al*, (2006) described the potentially negative impact of long-term relationships on students ability to study. In this sample, traditional female students in particular talked extensively about difficulties with personal relationships. For the mature men, these problems were generally reported in terms of their wives/partners making their university study and life difficult. Alternatively, for the traditional females, it was the participants partners who were finding the fact of their university study difficult. The experiences of mature women appeared to be almost a combination of both types of problem. Their partners found their study 'annoying', and 'difficult', and the women found their external commitments problematic in terms of finding time to study. All of these findings confirm results of previous studies such as the double burden/second shift literature (for example, Hochschild, (1983), as well as sociological and education research (for example, Tett, (2000); Hinton-Smith, (2009) as well as the fact that for many women, having family commitments substantially reduces the amount of time available to study, Stratton *et al*, (2006); Smithers & Griffin, (1986). As in this study mature females were most likely to express

concerns about juggling home and student lives, Tett, (2000); Bowl, (2001), and found it harder than mature male students to manage and maintain their personal relationships whilst at university, Clark & Rieker, (1986); McIntosh *et al*, (1994); Gorard *et al*, (2006). These issues have been described as distracting from mature female students ability to fully engage in the student experience, Brown, (2000); Thomas, (2002), to maximise their academic potential and, on occasion, to complete their studies, Yorke, (1999), all of which are once again confirmed in this research.

Further evidence in support of this argument comes from differences that can be seen within the mature male and mature female groups, according to whether or not students had families. So, for example, mature men differed, according to whether they had a family, in terms of their stated motivation for undertaking a university degree. Only mature men with families described their motivation as a perceived need to support their family financially (for example, by getting a better salary). For mature men without family commitments, their reported motivation for study still related to financial gains, but tended to be more about their chosen lifestyle in terms of increasing their disposable income. A key difference between mature women with/ without families was in terms of barriers to study, only mature women with families reported ongoing difficulties finding dedicated time for study. This often created role conflict that could play out in feelings of guilt.

9.2.5 Friendships

Another area highlighted within the literature was the importance of friendships for some student groups (for example, Thomas, (2002); Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, (2005); Stuart, (2006: 2009). Descriptions of non-traditional students struggling to settle in to university have been expressed in previous research (for example, Holley & Dobson, (2008). The impact of friendships on student experiences and academic success, and the impact of age and gender on these friendships emerged. The findings suggest that university friendships are an important part of the majority student body's experience, but that this area is of particular importance to mature female students. As seen, social life and engagement with peers was of key importance to the male student experience, both traditional and mature, likewise for some of the traditional female students. However, for the mature female student cohort, the role of peers was more significant in terms of academic support, social capital and social support needs. Stuart, (2006) clearly evidence the key role of peers in student success for first generation students. However, findings from this thesis again suggest the primacy of gender in that it is the mature females alone who repeatedly reference the role of peers

for their academic success. For instance, only the mature female sub-group who made repeated reference to the role of study groups in assisting their personal and academic development throughout their degrees. This is also in line with the work by Brown, (2000), Thomas, (2002) who both identified the importance of positive in-group identification, particularly under circumstances where ones self-esteem might be threatened, i.e. for mature students many of whom identified themselves as experiencing crises in confidence. These fluctuations in confidence will be explored below.

9.2.6 Confidence and anxiety over time

Confidence is perhaps the best illustration of the developmental process of university experiences, in that it changed greatly across the course of study, and changed differentially for the various student demographic groups. With regard to the issues of confidence vs anxiety, a snapshot of this sample of students at any given time may well have shown that traditional aged males are overtly, and in many cases overly confident in their academic abilities. Alternatively, within a 'snapshot' of mature women at any given time, they may have appeared less confident and more anxious about their abilities. However, the longitudinal design of this study allows an insight into how these reported experiences are not static, but fluctuate over the course of a degree and are related differentially to outcomes. For instance, confidence varies across the timeline of the course for the majority of the students, with some systematic differences evident. Across the categories there appeared to be a general 'settling in' process, especially in the first year. In the first term, students started to get a better understanding of what study meant, what was expected of them as students, the environment and changed lifestyle facing them, and of what else was on offer at university that they might want to be involved in. This process of 'settling in' was reflected in the responses seen in the first term in the case studies in previous Chapters, and had many commonalities for all groups.

In addition to overall fluctuations in confidence, students also expressed a variety of confidence 'types', which extend beyond previous literature and its conceptions of confidence, Leathwood & O'Connell, (2003); Redmond, (2003); Tett, (2004). Although the present study aimed to elicit responses in relation to academic confidence, in fact the participants experiences opened up another meaning of confidence: 'personal confidence'. This type of confidence was about self-worth, about being in control of their lives and destiny, and about self-determination.

In relation to academic confidence, participants generally narrated their own confidence 'type' fairly consistently, for example they described themselves as being 'confident' or 'not so confident'. Deeper analysis of answers on this issue highlighted confidence levels actually fluctuated over time, sometimes quite considerably. This was particularly clear amongst mature women. The case study of Sophie is a good example of this, where she vacillated constantly throughout her degree, at times stating that she was extremely anxious about her forthcoming exams, and then retrospectively stating that she had enjoyed the exams and was confident of her results. The data suggests that this fluctuation was linked to both the time of year (for example, confidence falls, fairly consistently amongst the groups, at exam time), and to specific events such as a sudden intensification of external commitments. Confidence also appeared to be linked to academic performance, both positively and negatively, so it was therefore linked in both an upward and downward way.

Personal confidence was an issue raised specifically by the mature female student sample. Many of them reported feeling they had increased control over their own lives during the time that they had been at university, and claimed that they had increased personal confidence. Many also described feeling a clearer sense of what they wanted, and said that they were less willing to accept behaviour and futures prescribed for them by their roles, partners and families. These issues very clearly changed over time, and developed as the years continued. This development in personal confidence particularly played out in terms of personal relationships (as explored above), and a number of the mature women (and also some of the traditional females who had live-in partners) reported marital conflict. Some reported breaking up with a long-term partner during the course of their study. An illustration of this was clearly seen by a mature female participant who stated:

He hates me being at uni. Hates everything about it including the lack of time to cook and clean for him as well as my newly found confidence about arguing my point and not playing happy families when I'm really not happy! (33)

The identification of two different aspects of confidence only became clear as a result of the richer longitudinal study. This was able to explore complex meanings and attributions as reported over the university career, and also linked to actual degree outcomes. In this way, the present data illustrates the complex and longitudinal picture of the nature of confidence, and identifies a personal dimension to confidence that emerged, particularly when women, especially mature women, narrated their university experiences. The details of these confidence types and their fluctuations over time for these demographic groups, would be a fruitful area for future research. More

specifically it would have been interesting to know how women felt, and what the nature of their relationships was, prior to studying, in order to try and clarify the sequencing of different experiences and events. For example, women may have been experiencing dissatisfaction at home, or a desire to live life differently and to change their domestic situation, before going to university, and indeed this could have been their motivation for going to university in the first place. Alternatively, perhaps university attendance brought about dissatisfaction at home, or a desire to live life differently and to change their domestic situation.

9.2.7 Engagement, climate and attendance

Hall & Sandler, (1982) introduced the idea that there was a 'chilly climate' for women in the classroom, and that the college/university climate was dominated by men. They argued that this led to female students feeling marginalised, being less assertive, less likely to participate in classroom discussions, and to perform less well than male students. Findings from other studies have been ambiguous with some confirming Hall & Sandler's findings, Karp & Yoels, (1974); Constantinople, Cornelius & Gray, (1988); Crawford & Macleod, (1990); and Fassinger, (1995), whilst others disagreed, Boersma, Gay, Jones, Morrison & Remick, (1981); Heller, Puff & Mills, (1985); and Cornelius, Gray & Constantinople (1990). More recently Holley & Dobson, (2008) highlighted that some non-traditional students, irrespective of gender, found it hard to engage with the university as a whole as they found it unwelcoming and impersonal. Stuart *et al*, (2009) also discussed the importance of all students engaging with their university environment and peers.

The self-report data of the students within this study varied according to the demographic groups. Generally the men within the study, both traditional and mature, and the traditional females, did not report any serious concerns about fitting in with other students (although some described difficulty making friends). Some of the mature women however, described difficulties in finding their place within the classroom and issues around confidence in participating in class in a way that the other groups did not. This goes some way to supporting the 'chilly climate' debate whilst the fact that traditional females reported no such difficulties challenges it. This dichotomy reinforces the importance of the gender split for mature students.

9.2.8 Career goals

As previously stated, there were several areas where student experiences were relatively static throughout students degrees; for example students reported attendance

rates, their career goals and the number and importance of, friendships. A key example of a static student experience factor is that of career goals. While female students of both age groups were generally quite driven by career goals, mature female students reported being extremely goal directed. Indeed, the majority of the mature females reported a strong (and in some cases extreme) work ethic that was not evident to the same extent in any of the other groups. Previous research (for example, Woodley, Wagner, Slowey, Hamilton & Fulton, (1987); Edwards, (1993); West, (1996); Bowl, (2001) have found that age is the key factor in students goal directed approach to learning. Certainly both mature groups in this sample appeared to have a stronger work ethic than their traditional gender counterparts, but this study adds further insights by showing that gender also shapes students work orientation and commitment.

The majority of the traditional male participants reported having little or no goals throughout their time at university. Most mature male students discussed goals in terms of financial gain, with almost no clear focus on what they might want to do to obtain this desired end goal. Traditional, in line with the mature, women were much more focussed on explicit career goals, and although there was sometimes change in their career pathway, they were generally very clear about what they wanted in terms of career goals, and how to go about achieving them. Interestingly, however, there was remarkably little change expressed in goal orientation by any of the demographic groups throughout the data collection phase.

9.2.9 Summary of themes

To summarise the themes above, it is clear that age as well as gender impact longitudinally upon: debt; paid work; work/life balance; romantic relationships and peer friendships; confidence and anxiety; student engagement/attendance and overall sense of belonging. This extends previous research on mature students reported within the literature as reporting strong emphasis on their studies, Woodley, Wagner, Slowey, Hamilton & Fulton, (1987); Edwards, (1993); West, (1996), having high external commitments, McIntish *et al*, (1994); Tett, (2000); Winn, (2002) generally being lower in confidence levels, Howard, Clark & Short, (1996); Tett, (2004) but higher in attendance rates, Bowl, (2001); Woodfield & Earl-Novell, (2005). However, the data collected in this project does not sit completely comfortably with dichotomising a traditional versus mature student split. Instead it has offered a representation of ideal types as well as a student experience continuum to illustrate the student experience for traditional and mature students compounded by gender (over the full course of their studies). In order to further explore the complexity of the student experience as affected by demographic

characteristics, this thesis also considers the role of SES.

9.3 Socio-economic status on themes

Around the time that this data was collected, Layer argued that ‘25% of young people entering full-time HE come from lower socio-economic groups’, Layer, (2002: 4). More recently, according to HESA, approximately 30% of full-time students in HE come from the bottom three socio-economic groups, HESA, (2008). It was not an express aim of this thesis to investigate the effect of SES on the student experience or academic outcomes. However, SES is a shadow issue in the thesis, age and gender are the salient focus, but class appears to be a further issue which affects the experience of all demographic groups. Unfortunately, information to classify participants to UK Government categories was not gathered during the data collection process, and an exact figure of how many of the sample fit in to the HESA categories is not available. Despite the researcher’s best efforts, due to university regulations, access was denied to this information. The researcher was also not granted permission to directly ask participants’ for these details. However two prompts were developed that asked students about their social class, and several others that elicited information on the topic even though it was not explicitly asked for. Initially participants were asked if their parents had attended university (Prompt 3 of year 1). They were also asked at the end of their time at university, if those who had described themselves as working class felt that this had changed since they became students in HE (Prompt 5 in year 3). Participants were also asked about their involvement in paid work (Prompt 8 of year 1), which led to several students discussing the lack of financial help available to them from family members. They were also asked about relationships that existed before university, and how they had been affected since arriving at university (Prompt 16 of year 1), and this elicited a lot of discussion about social class and changes in friendships and family relationships. The responses from these prompts relating to SES were interesting and important. They have been analysed, and are presented below, because they add a further dimension to the understanding of what patterns university experiences.

Students who identified themselves as coming from a lower SES group were identified, and their data was then analysed for similarity of themes and patterns. The findings were unexpected and clearly showed that there were common themes for this group irrespective of age or gender. Given the location and student demographic of the university, the lower SES sub-sample was relatively small (n=6), there were 3

traditional males; 1 mature male and 2 traditional females. However, regardless of the demographic types, students who reported themselves to be lower in SES, expressed increased difficulties of various types during their time at university.

There were several practical issues that were reported throughout the data collection period, and 4 of the sub-sample discussed having difficulty in attending university, due to excessive paid work and financial constraints:

I just don't have the money to get there at the mo. I know it sounds terrible but the grant doesn't go far and I have spent it all on just surviving so far this term. I will try and get work in the xmas holidays but I don't hold out much hope of getting out of my f***** overdraft! (P1)

Social life and the lack of finances to spend on social activities were also mentioned regularly by the group:

I want to go out like everyone else I just can't afford it. (P13)

Skint so no fun for me this weekend – or next – or the week after blah blah. (P33)

As well as these practical issues, the group expressed serious concerns related to confidence; friendships and settling in at university. Five of the sample discussed having difficulties making friends:

....they're all so posh here. I really don't find it easy to mingle and make friends which is weird because I've never had any trouble with that back home. (P21)

Settling in at university was described as problematic by 4 of the group. Interestingly 3 of those were the traditional males:

Just feel a bit different to everyone else. (P13)

They all seem to have settled in and made friends and know what they're doing but I haven't got a clue. (P81)

A lack of confidence was described by all members of the group at some stage, but was described in detail over a period of time by both the mature male student and the 2 traditional female students:

I don't know what it is Lucy I just can't ever seem to feel on top of the workload and like I know what I am doing here. I feel like a fraud and that they'll find out soon that I just am not up to the job. I have actually got some good grades but I think that's just luck really. (P27)

Although the sample size in this study is small, these findings that SES impacts on the student experience, irrespective of age or gender, are in line with the recent work of Stuart *et al*, (2008; 2009; 2010), which statistically confirmed SES as a moderator of students sex, age and ethnic differences in the student experience, engagement with extra-curricular activities, and even in (self-reported) marks.

9.4 General Conclusions

The extent to which experiences were patterned by gender, appeared to be stronger for male students than female students, as the similarities between the 2 male groups were much greater than those for the 2 female groups. It would appear that the key thing that sets apart the traditional from the mature students in both gender groups, is that mature students have a host of external commitments, particularly family, which they have to combine with their academic study. While many mature male and female students report a host of external family/life commitments which they have to balance with academic study, these commitments appear to impact more strongly on the mature female student experience.

What the data showed is that mature male students were able to create a divide between these home commitments and their study. These students reported finding it relatively easy to switch between 'father/husband' and 'student' roles when they needed to. This division between the 'home' and 'university' worlds, and ability to change roles when needed, meant that the mature males could have a student experience which was more like their traditional male counterparts. Moreover, the family commitments that mature males reported having to manage were often 'bigger picture' things (i.e. money). This is not to trivialise this aspect of male experience as it is possible that issues about the emotional burden felt by mature males were substantial, and impacted on their more general experience and academic outcomes, but these issues were not discussed by the group. What became clear from the data, was that mature female students reported having problems trying to manage their time, their commitments, and their priorities, in a fashion not reported by their male peers.

Many of the mature females reported not being able to create a strong divide between home and university life, and claimed they were not able to establish a work/life balance like that described by the mature males. The demands and expectations on mature females appeared to make it more difficult for them to switch roles between 'mother/wife' and 'student'. This finding resonates with the literature discussed in the

literature review, on the constraint of gender roles, and the way in which women are far more constrained by gender roles, especially within a family context, and the 'double shift' that women describe when they enter the workplace. In fact, what can be seen within this thesis, is that the majority of students across all 4 demographic groups experience a double shift of their own, whereby they are combining at least academic work and paid employment. In addition to this, many mature female students describe experiencing a 'triple shift', where they are combining family life, paid work and academic study. These findings are both consistent with, and extend, the literature discussed, highlighting the fact that for many women, having family commitments substantially reduces the amount of time available to study (for example, Smithers & Griffin, (1986); Tett, (2000), Bowl, (2001); Stratton *et al*, (2006); Hinton-Smith, (2009). It also highlights the links between both gender and age, as well as the compounding issues of finance and SES, and makes the move from the widely experienced 'double shift' to the 'triple shift' for many mature women. Interestingly, this 'triple shift' was described as detrimental to their university experience. However, it is worth noting that this demographic group as a whole performed particularly well in terms of their academic outcomes.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

As outlined in the previous discussion, this research identifies a number of key findings regarding longitudinal and developmental changes across the student experience, and is likely to be of practical interest to the development of future HE provision and student interventions across the sector. The findings highlight the roles of age, and especially gender, both interacting to produce varying experience 'types.' Particular weight was given to information gathered with regard to commitments outside of university (for example, family and home life) which, although expected to shape students experience in similar ways, differed according to age and gender demographic groupings. Finally, the influence of SES across the findings is of potential importance for policy makers and future HE provision.

It is worth noting that with the forthcoming introduction of variable fees in 2012, students will be paying considerably more money to study at university. It is probable that the implications of fee increases, will mean that universities will need to further develop a business model, to ensure success in an increasingly competitive environment. Recent media commentaries on the impact of variable fees, suggest that this will lead to higher student expectations, with students and parents looking to universities to meet not only their learning needs, but also their social and self-development needs, as well as employment/career goal outcomes. Moreover, students may expect universities to tailor teaching and learning delivery to their specific needs, and ensure that their experience is a positive one. It is suggested that an electronic platform such as email needs further exploration in terms of its potential role in supporting students, monitoring their experience and satisfaction rates. A major contribution of this thesis is that it has evidenced the possibility of obtaining impressive response rates and details of student experiences via email. Unlike most formats for data collection, participation in this research project was available to an entire cohort over the full duration of their studies. It is suggested that offering pastoral support via email could be beneficial to both HEIs and students, as many participants reported (upon completion) the value of the 'personalised support' and attention offered by the project, as key to their overall university experience.

It is expected that the conclusions of the research will be of interest to policy makers, key widening participation practitioners, and researchers, perhaps contributing to the understanding of the student experience. With significant changes in the funding arrangements for higher education students, this research in student 'types' offers insights which could support interventions to increase retention which will become ever more important.

The previous Chapter reviewed the thesis findings in detail with links to relevant literature. However, the bullet points below reiterate the overarching 'story' that emerged from the data.

10.1 Key findings

- It is not possible to talk about a universal student experience – findings highlight the roles of age and gender both interacting to produce varying 'experience types'.
- Students identified different aspects of confidence – longitudinal research design highlighted the complex and divergent meanings attached to confidence by different groups of students.
- Student experiences pattern by age and gender, but gender exerts a stronger affect – students cluster more closely by gender than age.
- For certain groups in particular, family commitments can be perceived to be challenging to study – such commitments are particularly troublesome for mature females.
- Romantic relationships can have a negative effect on study for female students of all ages.
- Reported levels of academic confidence are not a good predictor of degree outcomes – some students were unable to accurately judge their academic ability or, perhaps, over-reported their anxiety levels.
- Commitments beyond the classroom have a real impact on learning and the HE experience that a student has.

10.2 The implications of the findings for policy and practice

The forthcoming introduction of fees covering the whole cost of teaching means that understanding what creates success for students is becoming more important than ever before. Therefore the findings of this research are significant for all HEIs and HE policy makers. It is expected that a number of different stakeholder groups may be

interested in the findings of this research, and may be able to use them to develop practical interventions to promote student satisfaction, progression, retention and ultimately achievement (both at university and within the workplace). For example: institutional managers will be interested in how they manage the learning and teaching, and other elements of the student experience, to support diverse student groups. A comprehensive understanding of student experiences could help managers to implement policies which could minimise attrition and non-submission/completion. HE practitioners such as learning and teaching and curriculum development staff will be interested in how the student experience unfolds for different student groups, enabling them to support all students including those from non-traditional and WP backgrounds. Academics and lecturers will want to specifically identify how they could support all students to maximise their achievements and highlight effective teaching and learning strategies to support student success. Students, and student union groups, may simply wish to be informed as to the nature of student support initiatives, and the benefits (academically, socially and even professionally) that engaging with a project such as the one reported in this thesis, might have for them personally.

10.3 The proposed SEEN project:

This thesis proposes that the research carried out here is essentially developed into an action-learning style project. This could be a means by which universities engage their staff and students to gain insight into, and where possible improve, the students experiences in 'real time'. The Student Email Engagement Network (SEEN) would aim to promote student satisfaction, and minimise attrition and non-submission in an increasingly financially strained environment. The project could be implemented to increase pastoral support, and learning and teaching engagement across the students programme of study, and it is recommended that it be integrated into induction activities via a top-down approach, whereby it is overseen/evaluated by senior management within the institution. The Student Advisors, Counsellors, Personal Tutors and any other staff involved in pastoral activities should be enlisted to 'roll out' the programme with designated students. HEIs may wish to pilot the project with a small number of programmes/and student samples, before launching the project at an institutional level.

Following induction, students could be offered the opportunity to continue engagement with the SEEN project, allowing them to be 'seen and heard' across their course of study in terms of meeting their learning and pastoral needs. Prompts in Appendix 1

could be a useful guide to be adapted for regular contact and promoting student engagement. However, given the limitations outlined below, it is suggested that the implementing staff adjust prompts in an iterative manner, so they are appropriate to their specific student body needs.

It is advised that the SEEN project is approved by faculty and/or university ethics, and essential that the pastoral staff member leading the direct student contact has the appropriate skills and training for monitoring student experience, and offering appropriate student advice. It is suggested that each HEI implement SEEN training sessions with an experienced Counsellor, to ensure the member of staff with student contact, has skills to manage the potentially difficult personal problems which students may share with them, as outlined in the previous Chapters. It is essential that students retain their anonymity and confidentiality, where possible, engaging via their student e-mail, identified by student number only, or via the anonymised email of their choosing, with students always being emailed utilising the 'blind copy' option.

In conclusion, developing the present research into a project such as SEEN would be cost effective, requiring no additional staff, and minimal existing staff hours, whilst at the same time offering a support system to students, who demand high person-centred learning expectations in a service-led university model. Additionally, it could facilitate anonymous and unhindered engagement with staff, allowing an unfiltered insight into 'what works' for students and what does not. This kind of project would mean that universities could easily diagnose problems, with curriculum delivery, student satisfaction, progression and attainment, and also increase overall student satisfaction and minimise attrition.

10.4 Strengths and weaknesses of the research

10.4.1 Strengths:

The longitudinal and qualitative nature of the project, and interactive e-measures of data collection, gather a naturalistic and ecologically valid dataset, allowed the researcher to really assess the underlying factors that produce student dissatisfaction and disengagement throughout the student life-cycle. Also the triangulation of qualitative methods used to identify student experiences, combined with actual quantitative outcomes, is a key source of monitoring where student progression and retention might fail by highlighting problematic times and issues for different student groups. More importantly, the utility of online methods of data collection has been shown here to present a rich picture of the overall student experience, arguably more

detailed than traditional student experience measures, such as induction questionnaires, module evaluations and the National Student Survey. Findings from this research project highlight issues of key importance to students throughout their undergraduate career.

In sum, this research methodology of interactive, iterative, qualitative email prompts with students, across their course of study, may indeed be essential for identifying the correlation, and causes and consequences, of negative student experiences and outcomes.

10.4.2 Weaknesses:

It should be noted that a major weakness of this thesis is that the students studying at this small southern, campus based, research-intensive university are remarkably similar in terms of social class, ethnic origin and academic background. One area in which it was hypothesised that there may be more variance between students related to mode of entry. Therefore, during analysis the data was investigated for disparities between students who came to the university through the usual application process and those who came through clearing. However, no significant differences in either experience or academic outcomes were uncovered. This again highlights the homogeneity of students within this institution.

It would be of key interest to investigate 'ideal student types' and thematic findings from London, Northern England, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish institutions, which might go further (particularly in light of fee differences as well as pedagogical differences), in elucidating institution-specific strategies for student retention, progression and satisfaction. At present there would be difficulty generalising the findings from this research project to other university types, for instance, 'post-92' universities, and/or those with city and non-campus based university environments, where there may be a different overall student demographic, as well as other, and perhaps more limited, campus-based social activities. This is not to say that the research methodology would not be useful at such locations for providing pastoral support. However, if the 'iterative nature' of the research was to be continued, it may be that the project would need to incorporate more focus on community, religious or voluntary engagement, and perhaps even further focus on those who reside with/have carer roles, for family members. These limitations to generalisation provide further support for the establishment of this research into a practical intervention, which is rolled out across the HE sector

nationally. Such an intervention could help to provide the student-centred, business-model provision of teaching and learning, that may well be required post-2012.

Another limitation may be seen as sample demographics and size, namely that within this research, participants were largely middle-class, almost exclusively white, and over-represented by mature females, yet under-represented in terms of traditional males. However, part of the skew within the sample analysed is attributed to 'natural attrition' of certain student groups within the project. It is interesting to note that the highest attrition from participation in the project was amongst the traditional males, supporting the thematic findings, of lack of commitment and disengagement from their studies and the university in general. It would also have been interesting to observe any differences in performance and/or academic outcomes according to subject of study. Unfortunately samples within each subject area were too small for individual analyses within this thesis.

10.5 Areas for future research:

As previously stated, during the current economic climate HEIs must examine what they can do to support diverse students, particularly those who have been highlighted in this, and other, research as struggling and/or underperforming. From the outset this research has primarily focussed on experience, and arguably this should be valued in its own right. Nevertheless, it is suggested that as well as the experience, there is a need to investigate ways of improving academic outcomes for all students. In order to do this, more detailed information relating to academic outcomes would need to be gathered. This may include information on student engagement with all areas of university life, including collecting information on issues such as attendance and participation in class. This would allow more detailed analysis of the impact of these on students academic performance.

One implication of this research, is that those investigating student experiences and outcomes, should think in terms of a diverse student group, enabling a better ability to identify, and deliver differing, perhaps tailored, support for these divergent demographic groups. The 4 groups within this research describe a range of experiences, but in terms of outcomes only the traditional male group performed significantly less well than the others in terms of degree outcome. This research does not provide enough insight into why this group of students in particular are underperforming, compared to the other groups. Future research could therefore aim to illicit a deeper understanding of the experience of this particular group, and to uncover

the reasons for their lower outcomes, to allow more concrete and appropriate recommendations to be made.

Future investigation may also focus on the comparison between mature male and female students, who have similarly extensive commitments outside of university (for example, family and home life) and yet illustrate student experiences in divergent themes. This again illustrates the need to move away from a generic 'student experience', even when examining groups of students within the same gender or age category, and the need to look at a more nuanced picture of student demographic groups and 'types' of experience. Further study might also focus on the negotiation of romantic relationships with academic and career aims. The findings from this research extend existing literature in this area, by highlighting a 'third shift' interplay between maintaining personal relationships, paid work and academic performance. It is interesting to note, that this effect is gender-specific and not related to age, as both the mature and traditional females expressed concerns in this sphere. Future research is needed to measure the impact of a variety of external commitments, which would allow an assessment of any positive, and negative, impacts of these commitments on students' personal and academic self-esteem, career motivations and personal relationships.

Use of technologies could help to facilitate student interaction, both with staff and fellow students. Universities should ensure that they offer suitable methods of teaching and engaging students by utilising the most popular technical tools available. The possibility of alternative methods of programme delivery (for example, distance or blended learning - such as with Blackboard), personal development (for example, online diaries such as Pebblepad) and other ways of fostering relationships and peer support (for example, using online technologies, social networking sites), could also be investigated.

Future research needs to investigate the concept of building in time within the curriculum, to encourage friendships to develop and grow. The possibility of including more group-based learning, either within seminars, or as independent learning sessions (for example, allocated slots in the timetable when students get together to work on a specific issue independently) should be investigated. Future research could also investigate the usefulness of students being encouraged to self-organise, and the benefits of being given the opportunity to build supportive peer relations.

Further longitudinal and qualitative research might explore confidence levels of any demographic group prior to studying (for example, mature women), and monitor confidence levels and the impact they have on students' self-worth and self-actualisation. For some students, particularly females, confidence is impacted on by personal relationships, with factors such as experiencing dissatisfaction at home or a desire to live life differently and to change their domestic situation, before, during and post university, would be of interest to researchers in both an empirical and qualitative domain. Indeed, differing motivations for initial uptake of university could emerge as useful for HEI marketers and senior managers, in terms of targeting the correct student populations, and the role that self-esteem and self-actualisation play (in addition to more practical career goals) as a motivation for mature students returning to study.

10.6 Summary

This thesis has sought to illuminate the range of experiences of demographically different student types. Age and gender were both found to influence the student experience with gender exerting the stronger influence. Similarities and differences across and between the groups were identified and explored, with issues including confidence; friendships; social life, and paid work being described by all groups, but analysis of the longitudinal data uncovered the different meanings and importance attached to them.

Areas for future research have been identified, and a continuum and ideal type approach have been presented as a framework for taking forward further research in this area. Finally a practical project has been advocated for implementation across the HE sector.

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APPENDIX 1: LIST OF PROMPTS

Year 1

PROMPT 1: We would first like to welcome you to [the university]! We are writing to ask you, as a relatively new student to this university, to take part in a research survey that seeks to get a true picture of what it is like to be studying here in the new century. Over the next year, we will be emailing a series of questions to you - probably an average of one per 10 days or so. These questions will focus on a whole range of topics: how you cope with the pressures of study, whether the need to undertake paid work interferes with your study, whether you think there are differences between the way various groups of students (e.g. male and female, school-leavers and mature students) approach study and student life in general, how clear you are about what constitutes a 'good' piece of work, how safe you feel on campus etc.

Your answers will be treated confidentially, and will be made anonymous before they are analysed. Once analysed, however, they will be used as the basis of a report that will be submitted to the university's managers and that will hopefully inform future policy discussions and decisions. A copy of the report will also be made available to you.

You can write as much or as little as you want in each of your answers, and, because we are using email, you can answer at a time that is convenient for you. Alternatively, if you do not want to take part, you can simply delete the questions in your inbox when they arrive. They will all be headed with the prefix 'Survey Question'.

Our first question to you is:

Now that you have been at [the university] for a month or so, what are your first impressions?

PROMPT 2: The next area we would like to hear from you about is your work habits. It's early days and many of you are no doubt working as well as studying, but have you managed to settle into a work routine at this stage? Do you work steadily, arranging set times evenly throughout the week, or do you tend to work more on some days than others? How many hours do you think you are studying per week at this stage?

PROMPT 3: This time we are interested in hearing about your decision to come to [the university] and to do the course you have now spent a term doing. Did your parents go to university? Who influenced your decision to come here and to study what you're studying? Were the opinions of former teachers or tutors, careers guidance counselors or perhaps your partner or friends more influential? Have you studied your chosen subject before and was that experience important, or is it a new subject? If so, what made you choose it?

PROMPT 4: Thanks again for your replies. This time we are interested in hearing about how you think this first term of your new course has progressed academically. Are you pleased with the standard of

teaching and/or supervision you have received? Is the standard of the work required of you about what you expected? Do you feel you are coping with the standard required? Has the academic experience so far made you feel either more or less confident about your abilities?

PROMPT 5: Welcome back and Happy New Year (any resolutions you'd like to share with us?). Thanks for all your replies to the previous questions. This time we want to ask you about your thoughts regarding your return to University. Are you pleased to be back or were you thinking of not returning? If you have thought about leaving, why is that and what made you change your mind? Do you know anyone who has decided not to come back? If you do, do you know why and do you sympathise with their reasons?

PROMPT 6: Thanks for all your answers to the previous question, hope the term is going OK so far. This time we are looking for information on your housing. For those of you who live in university housing, what standard of housing is it? Do you enjoy living with many of your peers or do you miss the relative quiet of family life? How important are your housing conditions to your ability to study successfully, and to your quality of life? For those of you living off campus, do you feel that the difficulty getting to and from campus is worth the effort, or would you rather be closer?

PROMPT 7: Thanks for all your replies to the last question and we hope the term is going well for you. This week we are interested in your views on whether there are noticeable gender differences between students. Some of the literature on this subject claims that men and women at university both work and play differently. Do you think this is true? Have you noticed different behaviour between the male and female students in your seminars/lectures/labs? If you share your accommodation with members of the opposite sex have you noticed differences between the way you and they study and/or spend leisure time?

Thanks for taking the time to participate and we are looking forward to hearing any other comments you may have on this area.

PROMPT 8: Thanks for all your previous emails. This week we want to know about your paid work habits. Are you in paid employment or do you do any voluntary work? If so, how many hours a week do you work? Do you think this is affecting your experience as a student in a positive or negative way? Does the amount that you work impinge on your study time? Or, does it compliment your university experience?

PROMPT 9: Thanks for all you responses to the last question. This time we want to ask you about your leisure time. Do you feel you have periods of leisure? Or do you feel the pressure of academic and paid work always 'sitting on your shoulder'? What do you do to unwind? Who do you socialise with and what do you do together? Have you joined any societies or clubs? Or do you use any leisure facilities on campus?

PROMPT 10: As usual we would like to thank you all for your previous responses to our questions. Now that you are coming to the end of your second term here we would like to ask you about absences. Don't forget that the answers you give will only be seen by Ruth and myself so you can be quite honest without worrying that anyone else will read what you have to say! Have you missed many lectures/seminars? For those that you did miss did you have an easily justifiable reason for not being there (e.g. too ill to get out of bed)? Or, did you just not feel like it? Do you have periods when you

don't do academic work at all? If so, what is the main reason? Or, have you worked consistently throughout the course so far?

PROMPT 11: As usual we would like to thank for all your previous emails. This time we are asking questions about how well represented you feel as a student. You will all be members of the students' union. Do you know what facilities and services the union has to offer? Do you use those available? Are you satisfied with the representation that the union offers you? How do you feel about the way the union deals with prominent issues, such as fees? Do you feel represented through other student-related bodies on campus? If so, what are they?

PROMPT 12: Welcome back! I hope you had a good break. This time we would like to ask you about how you feel about being a student rather than, say, a full-time paid worker. Do you feel proud of your student status? When you meet people, are you always pleased to say that you are a student? For those of you that are in employment as well, do you put more emphasis on one role rather than the other? What do you think the public perception of students is at the moment?

PROMPT 13: This time we are interested in how you feel about your forthcoming examinations. Do you feel prepared for them – both in academic and personal terms? Do you feel like you know what is required to pass them? Have you started revising?

PROMPT 14: Thanks for your answers to the previous questions, I'm grateful. This time we are interested in issues of safety and security. Whether you live on campus or just come on during the day, how safe and secure do you feel at [the university]? Have you experienced or witnessed any incidents which made you feel less safe? If so, were these satisfactorily dealt with by security staff? Do you think there are specific security issues for some groups of students, such as women, those with disabilities and those from an ethnic minority?

PROMPT 15: Thank you for last set of replies. This time we are interested in how well the university's welfare system is working for you. If you have had cause to seek advice from someone, who was it: your personal tutor, sub-dean, counselling services, or someone else (such as a course tutor)? Was it easy to find out who you should approach? Were you satisfied with the kind of treatment and advice you received from them? Did it help resolve matters for you? If you have any special needs, have these been met to your satisfaction?

If you have not used the welfare facilities, is this because you haven't felt the need or because you find support elsewhere (friends, family, agencies off campus etc.)?

PROMPT 16: Thanks for all your replies last time. This time we are interested in how you think becoming a student and your year here has affected your friendships and relationships. Are you still in touch with friends you knew before you came, or do you feel like your circle of friends has changed? How important have friendships been in general in determining the quality of your experience here? In terms of relationships with family, friends and partners that you had before you came, have these changed at all as a result of you being here?

PROMPT 17: Thank you for your previous replies. They really are appreciated. Now that we are coming towards the end of this year's survey, we are interested in your experience of taking part in it. Have you enjoyed it, or has it felt like an extra chore? Has it enhanced your experience – made you think about it more reflectively, been an outlet for your frustrations etc.? – or has it made no difference at all? What was your experience of communicating over email? Did you feel like it allowed you to say things

you might not have done face-to-face? Or, were there things you didn't say because it wasn't face-to-face? Would you have preferred to be interviewed?

Please feel free to express yourselves without fear of upsetting us – we've enjoyed it, but that doesn't mean you have to have enjoyed it too! And, constructive criticism is always useful!

PROMPT 18: Thanks again for all your replies. You should now all be coming to the end of your first year, and in the middle of its final examination period. How are you coping? On balance, which mode of assessment do you prefer – coursework, unseen examinations, presentations, etc. – and why? Do you think different modes of assessment test different things and which, in your opinion, is the best way to test your particular capabilities?

PROMPT 19: This is the last but one question. Thanks for hanging in there! We would like to know how you think you've done on this year's assessments. Do you feel confident that you've passed? If so, what kind of pass do you think you've achieved? If you don't feel confident that you have passed, what would you say is the main reason why you might not have? It would be great if you could all let us know how you do once you've received your results. If you have no objections, we will check ourselves. If you'd rather we didn't, please let us know.
We are keeping our fingers crossed for you all!

PROMPT 20: This is our final question of this year*. We would like to ask you about your overall impressions of your time here so far. What, in your opinion, have been the best things about your first year experience? What have been the worst? What could [the university] have done to improve your time here? Would you recommend the university and your course to other people? If you could give just one piece of advice to next year's new students, what would it be?

*If you find yourselves here over the summer for whatever reasons – working, re-sitting etc. – and want to carry on contacting us, please feel free to do so because we'll be here all summer and would love to hear from you.

Year 2

PROMPT 1: Assuming that you will, would you please let me know how you feel about returning to university and entering your second year here? Are you apprehensive or excited? Maybe a bit of both? What, if anything, are you most concerned/excited about? Have you visited the university and/or been in contact with your university friends over the summer or have you taken a complete break and not really given [the university] or the people in it another thought?

PROMPT 2: Thanks for all your replies. I hope you have all settled back in to university life and now that we are half way through the first term of your second year I wondered how you felt things were going academically? Are you finding the work harder/easier/about the same as last year? How do you feel about the fact that this years marks count towards your final degree classification? Has this made you work harder than you did last year?

PROMPT 3: Thanks for all your previous replies. Hope you are all coping OK with the term so far? This week I want to ask you about seminar participation. Are you happy to contribute to classroom discussion or do you have reservations? If so, what are they? Do you think anything influences your decision to participate or not? Do men and

women seem to participate equally or is discussion dominated by one sex or the other? Are the dynamics of the group different if the tutor is male or female? Or if there are more men than women in the room? What about presentations, how do you feel about giving them? Do you think giving a presentation is distinct from classroom discussion? Do you think they are of any value to your learning process?

PROMPT 4: Thanks for your previous answers. Hope you are all coping with the end of term rush. Following on from my questions about classroom participation I would like to fill in some gaps that were pointed out. Do you think age affects students' participation and studying techniques? Many respondents said that their primary reason for not participating in class was because they had not done the necessary reading and they did not want to make fools of themselves. Is it the other students' or the tutors' opinion of you that you are concerned about?

PROMPT 5: Thanks for your previous answers. This week I would be interested to hear how you all feel about the current climate with the conflict in Afghanistan. Have you experienced any changes - these can include things that are difficult to describe such as changes in atmosphere, or more specific events - that you believe are related to the fact that race, religion and ethnicity are particularly prominent issues at present? What are your views on the conflict and how it's been conducted? Does this feel like an issue that is central to your life at the moment, or one that is marginal?

PROMPT 6: Welcome back and Happy New Year to you all. Thank you for all your previous replies. To start the new year I thought I would ask you about your plans after graduation. Do you know at this stage what you want to do when you leave? Have your career aspirations changed over the time that you've been here? If you know what you want to do, what is it that motivates you? Is it finances, status, helping people etc? If you are still unsure about your future career, what do you think you might like to do? How will you go about finding out how to get where you might like to be? For all of you, how do you think your first few months after your finals will pan out?

PROMPT 7: I'm sorry I haven't contacted you all for ages but as you know I've been poorly. Thank you all for your get well messages, I am much better now, they certainly cheered me up! As I am sure you are all aware, you are now half-way through your degree. How do you feel about that? Has your time at [the university] gone quickly or has it felt like an eternity? Has it been a good time for you or have things not gone as you planned? If you had the time again, work wise, would you do it differently or do you think you've done your best so far?

PROMPT 8: Thanks for all your previous responses. This week I would like to ask about your finances and how they affect your university experience if at all. If you are in debt do you worry about it and to what extent? Do you think being in debt affects your academic performance and if so, how? Do you think being in debt affects your health and/or other areas of your life and if so, how? If you're not in debt do you think this has helped your academic performance at university? How much difference do you think being in debt would make to your university experience?

PROMPT 9: Welcome back. To start the new term I thought I would ask you about the support and advice you have been offered by the university. If your school has one have you seen the Student Advisor, if so how satisfactory was the service you received? If you do not have a Student Advisor in your school who did you go and see for help? How satisfactory was the service you received from them? Have you had much contact with your Personal Tutor? What so you think are the pros and cons of having a Personal Tutor? Have you used the Mentors in your School? If so how useful have you found them? How easy was it to get hold of these people?

PROMPT 10: Thanks for all your replies they are much appreciated. I hope the term is going OK so far? This week I want to ask you all about your accommodation because when I asked last year many of you were unhappy with where you were living. How does your housing this year compare to last year? How do you feel about last year's housing in retrospect? Presumably most of you have now moved in to town so how do you find travelling to and from campus? Is it worth the time and money or would you rather still be living within the university grounds? Has it affected your social life in any way?

PROMPT 11: Thanks for all your previous replies, if I haven't answered yet it's because I'm not in work for a couple of weeks but I will as soon as I get back! This week I want to ask you how you feel about your fellow students. How do you get on with them? Have you met a lot of people, or made a few really good friends, or not really hooked up with many people at all? Do you tend to get on with most of your fellow students or do some of your peers really irritate you or behave in a way that you find offensive? If it's the latter, what is it that you find offensive and why?

PROMPT 12: Anyway, back to business.....exams! How are they going? How have you felt about them this year? Have you worked harder revising for them as you know that they count towards your final degree classification? If so/not please let me know why. Do you feel these exams will give an accurate indication of how you are progressing academically. What percentage of your final degree have you completed this year?

If there is anything about your experiences this year that you would like to share with me, either because you want to or because you want it included in my final report for the year, please let me know.....

PROMPT 13: This is the last question of the year so thanks for hanging in there! I would like to know how you think you've done on this year's assessments, if you already know your marks how do they compare to those you were expecting? It would be great if you could all let me know how you do once you've received your results. If you have no objections, I will check myself in a couple of weeks but if you'd rather I didn't, please let me know. Is there anything about your results you don't understand or are not quite sure about that you want me to clarify?

Year 3

PROMPT 1: To start the new academic year I thought I would ask how you gained your place at [the university]. Did you come the traditional route with A levels? An Access course or foundation year or maybe some other route? Do you think that the qualifications you gained before entering university have an effect on your ability to successfully complete your degree? What about your confidence, has that been effected by your A level grades or because you don't have A levels? Has your experience of being a university student increased your confidence levels? Is academic success dependent on confidence in any way?

PROMPT 2: For this week I thought I might ask how you feel about entering your third year. For most of you this is the final year of study, how do you feel about that? You've all managed to make it this far in whatever subject you're studying, are you pleased with your subject choice or do you think maybe a different subject would have been better? Do you have any regrets about your subject or School choice? How about your choice of university? Do you think that the style of teaching at [the university] suits your needs?

PROMPT 3: This time i want to get your impression on different age students, i'm interested in any thoughts you have about how age affects the university experience. Here are some questions that may help:

Do you think mature students have a different experience of university than traditional entry students? Have you noticed any mature students being treated differently by tutors or fellow students? Have you made friends with students not in your age group or do you tend to stick with peers closer to your own age? If you are not a mature student what are your impressions of mature students? Do you think that they work harder than your age group? If you are mature how do you feel about younger students?

PROMPT 4: To start the term i thought i might ask how many hours outside contact time do you spend on academic work? Have you increased the amount of studying you do this year because you are finishing your degree? Are you finding the work harder this year? Has your academic workload increased greatly? If you have been in paid employment during your time here at [the university] have you given up or reduced your working hours because of academic pressures?

PROMPT 5: Thanks for all your answers last time. Hope the term is going well and that you're on top of things? I'm trying to keep my prompts short and sweet as I know you're all really busy. This time I'm interested in your aspirations and whether they've changed since you came to [the university]? Do you now feel capable of striving for things that would have seemed impossible at the start of your university career or are you still aspiring to the same goals as you were then? For those of you who described yourselves as working class, do you still feel working class or has university changed that?

APPENDIX 2

Student total responses table

Student	Year responses (out of 20)	Year responses (out of 13)	Year responses (out of 7)	Total responses (out of 40)
1.	6	11	4	21
2.	7	5	0	13
3.	5	4	0	9
4.	16	10	5	31
5.	4	9	0	13
6.	4	4	5	13
7.	5	1	0	6
8.	16	12	4	32
9.	11	2	3	16
10.	11	7	2	20
11.	17	2	4	23
12.	10	4	0	14
13.	14	10	0	24
14.	0	1	3	4
15.	5	0	4	9
16.	14	1	3	18
17.	6	6	1	13
18.	9	1	4	14
19.	13	3	3	19
20.	9	1	1	11
21.	3	1	3	7
22.	8	2	4	14
23.	14	13	5	32
24.	1	9	6	16
25.	0	3	3	6
26.	9	3	5	17
27.	1	1	4	6
28.	13	1	2	16
29.	1	2	2	5
30.	10	11	4	25
31.	20	8	3	31
32.	0	3	4	7
33.	12	7	1	20
34.	13	8	3	24
35.	14	11	3	28
36.	14	9	1	24
37.	15	6	4	25
38.	16	11	5	32
39.	16	11	2	29
40.	11	10	2	23
41.	18	9	5	32
42.	12	13	0	25
43.	13	10	4	27
44.	20	12	6	38

45.	11	12	3	26
46.	12	13	3	28
47.	11	10	5	26
48.	16	6	2	34
49.	14	13	5	32
50.	13	12	6	31
51.	18	12	5	35
52.	14	12	4	30
53.	13	11	2	26
54.	12	9	4	25
55.	16	9	5	30
56.	13	10	4	27
57.	11	7	0	18
58.	14	13	5	32
59.	16	12	6	34
60.	17	10	5	32
61.	10	6	3	19